



Bridging the Gap: Foster Children and the Faith-Based Community

By Judge Glenda A. Hatchett

Two popular biblical sayings, “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is older, he shall not depart from those ways” and “Honor thy mother and father” found in Proverbs 22:6 and Exodus 20:12 respectively, focus on the importance of child rearing and parent-child relationships. The faith-based community has always encouraged parents to instill morals and values in their children so that they will hold to those teachings as they become adults. In addition, children are warned to show their parents honor and respect. These scriptures have long served as important principles for parents and children in the church.

Although these passages have been widely accepted by many parents and children alike, they both assume that parents are in the picture. Now, consider a situation where there are no parents involved... who is there to raise up the child and teach them the principles to live the way God desires them to? Who is that child supposed to honor, when there is no one there to respect? For more than 500,000 children across the United States who are in the foster care system as a result of abuse or neglect, they don't have to imagine this because it is their reality.

For many years, the church has been a pillar in the community and stood at the forefront in tackling many issues that plague communities across the country. From civil rights to voting rights, the church has always taken a stand in changing statistics and making a difference. The church deemed these issues important and has taken on the responsibility of doing something about them. One issue however that has not gotten as much attention is that of foster care and the welfare of children who are placed in the system. It's not because it is not as prevalent as other issues we face today because it indeed is. Most of us know of a child who is living in a foster home or a group home, but we don't always see the effect it has on not only the child involved, but also the overall impact on the well-being of the community.

As with the other issues the church has addressed, I encourage the faith-based community to get involved in the issue of child welfare, and there are many ways to help. First, it is important to build awareness. In addition to the more than 500,000 children who are currently in the foster care system, each year three million children are reported abused and neglected in the United States – that's nearly 9,000 children every single day. Nationally, 39 percent of those children are African American – a disproportionate rate compared to the African-American U.S. population.

Once you are aware, you can then act. One way is to get involved with the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association. There are currently more than 50,000 CASA volunteers – everyday heroes who are advocating in court on the behalf of abused and neglected children to help ensure they grow up securely in permanent and loving homes. There are over 940 local CASA or Guardian ad Litem (GAL) programs throughout the country so there is probably one near you. As a church, you can work with a CASA/GAL program to host events or have a CASA representative speak to your congregation about the issue of foster care. As individual members in the church, you can make a difference by becoming a CASA volunteer. Last year, CASA volunteers helped over 225,000 children however, with more than 500,000 children in foster care, more than half of these vulnerable children still don't have anyone to help “train them in the way they should go.”

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I pray that the issue of foster care will be taken on by the faith-based community so that the lives of children in communities across the country can be changed and positively impacted for generations. When a child has no permanent home, it is hard for them to have a permanent church home as well. Just think, by standing up for a child in the foster care system, not only can you help them find a church home where they can grow and develop spiritually, but also help them find a home to live where they can be safe, loved, nurtured and encouraged to become all that God has planned for them to be.

For more information about National CASA or the local CASA program in your area, call 1-888-805-8457 visit online at www.nationalcasa.org.

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