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Supporting Foster Parents in Order to Prevent Burnout

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SUPPORTING FOSTER PARENTS IN ORDER TO PREVENT BURNOUT

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ABSTRACT

The researcher sought to understand how to effectively support foster parents in order to prevent burnout. As a result, the researcher explored a theology of foster care, reviewed current literature on how foster parents develop family life, face unique stressors, experience burnout, and benefit from support strategies, and conducted a qualitative case study to learn how foster parents described their personal experiences with these phenomena in order to identify best practices for how to effectively support foster parents.

The researcher implemented a qualitative mixed-methods design in order to identify the essence of foster parents' experiences. Participants were identified by contacting leaders of foster parent support groups that met in Minnesota churches. Thirty-nine individuals completed the online survey.

Family life was described with a wide variety of phrases which accentuated the complex nature of foster parenting. Responses emphasized the need for family life to be flexible or adaptable and characterized by patience, unconditional love, and resiliency. Participants agreed that caring for foster children was harder or more complex than normative experiences of parenting due to multiple parties' involvement and the child's history of trauma, abuse, or neglect.

The average participant struggled to prioritize self-care. They were grateful for community support and ranked trainings, mentorship, respite care, and support groups as most helpful. They reported a need for more respite caregivers, support groups, retreats, mentorship, and therapy. Support strategies were perceived as most valuable when the volunteer came to them because it was difficult to add more into their busy schedule. Also, support was most appreciated when it emerged from consistent, trusted relationship.

The researcher recommended that churches listen to participants' requests for increased education and awareness around foster care issues within the church. Churches should also continue hosting support groups. Other recommendations included meals, donations, childcare, encouragement, mentorship, and prayer.

GLOSSARY

At-Risk Children: In this context, at-risk children are those who have been removed from their family of origin by social workers due to abuse or neglect and placed in the protective care of foster parents. These children come from families who are unable to maintain a safe, stable household; therefore, they rely on social systems to provide the resources, safeguards, and care necessary for healthy development.[1]

Best Practices: Best practices are the behaviors that are shown to produce the most effective and efficient outcomes according to evidence-based research done by experts, authorities, and leaders in the field.[2]

Burnout: Burnout is the combination of physical and emotional exhaustion due to extreme stress which is often attributed to "a perceived or real lack of support."[3] Symptoms include "anger, frustration, hopelessness, depression, and feeling inefficient in [the] job."[4]

Carer: In this context, a carer is someone who is a foster father or foster mother.

Foster Care: A system which entails temporary guardianship of children who have been neglected or abused by their family of origin; it provides a safe place for children until the child can be reunited with their family or the parental rights are terminated and a different permanent care plan is established for the child.

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[1] Bryan Brooks, "Fostering Hope: Covenant Discipleship as a Vehicle to Connect Congregations and Young Adults Aging Out of Foster Care" (DMin diss., Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington D.C., 2018), 20-21, Theological Research Exchange Network.

[2] Joe Osborn, Guy Caruso, and Wolf Wolfensberger, "The Concept of 'Best Practice': A Brief Overview of Its Meanings, Scope, Uses, and Shortcomings," *International Journal of Disability Development and Education* 58, no. 3 (September 2011): 213, https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2011.598387.

[3] Heather Ottaway and Julie Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This: Compassion Fatigue and Foster Carers," University of Bristol, 2016, 9.

[4] Heather Ottaway and Julie Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This: Compassion Fatigue and Foster Carers," University of Bristol, 2016, 9.

Support Strategies: In this context, support strategies are the resources necessary to equip a foster parent to meet the needs of their foster child(ren) (e.g., therapeutic/counseling services, school supports/individualized education plans, medical care, child care, emotional support, mentoring, and trauma-informed parenting resources/training).

CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Presenting the Problem

An alarming percentage of foster parents quit within the first year due to burnout. The problem this project will address is the understanding of how to effectively support foster parents in order to avoid burnout. In response to this problem, the researcher will (a) explore a theology of foster families based on God's call to care for at-risk children, (b) review the current literature on how foster parents develop family life, face unique stressors, experience burnout, and benefit from support strategies, (c) conduct a qualitative case study to learn about what foster parents say about their personal experiences with these phenomenon, and (d) identify best practices for how to effectively support foster parents in order to prevent burnout.

A traditional nuclear family is defined by clear, closed boundaries. A foster family has permeable boundaries where non-related children are welcomed and there is a regular "stream of visitors [including the foster child's] biological family members, agency and county social workers, correction officers, school personnel, and child advocates."[5] Establishing renewed homeostasis within the home and family life is key for

[5] Lyn Starr, "How Foster Parents Experience and Cope with the Losses Associated with Providing Treatment Foster Care" (MSW diss., College of St. Catherine University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, 2000), 9-10.

foster families to have a stable foundation to offer effective parenting for foster children. This abnormal family system leaves many foster parents to struggle with role ambiguity and leaves them with a shortage of role models for what it means to be a good foster parent.[6] Moreover, any stability is often temporary due to the fluid nature of new foster children coming and leaving the home. Therefore, understanding how family life looks and functions differently for foster parents is critical for those looking to journey alongside them well.

Foster parents face numerous unique stressors due to the foster child's background of neglect and/or trauma. "A child with a history of trauma comes… with a negative balance in the trust bank" and potential behavioral issues or psychological triggers.[7] Typically, it takes time to grasp the full extent of what the child has experienced in their 'former' life and understand how the previous trauma impacts the way in which they respond to challenges they face today.[8] Many foster parents feel unprepared and insufficiently trained to address the child's behavioral issues, emotional outbursts, mental health needs, or other trauma responses. There is work to do to help parents set appropriate expectations, increase awareness of trauma and its impact on children, and teach coping mechanisms, reframing, and effective discipline strategies.

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[6] Jenn Ranther Hook, Joshua N. Hook, and Mike Berry, *Replanted: Faith-Based Support for Adoptive and Foster Families* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2019), chap. 2, Kindle.

[7] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 5.

[8] John DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School: A Guide for Foster Parents, Social Workers, and Teachers* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 61.

Unfortunately, when the excitement of a new placement fades away, churches and community members often no longer view the foster family with patience, compassion, and understanding.[9] Instead, they see them as another family struggling to keep their kids under control.[10] Studies have shown that "within three months, ninety percent of the support [for foster parents] had stopped."[11] Foster parents step into foster parenting with bravery, trust, love, and faithfulness; in return, their community ought to surround them with emotional, informational, and tangible support for the long-haul.[12]

This project was significant because between 30 to 60 percent of foster parents stop accepting placements within the first year and the urgent need for additional foster homes and parents persists. [13] Moreover, the mission of foster care is critical to the ongoing development and wellbeing of children in foster care and offers the potential for holistic family rehabilitation which can break unhealthy cycles of generational trauma.

Delimitations of the Project

The researcher recognized the foster care ecosystem is an extremely complex web of individuals that may include the birth parent(s), the foster child's family of origin, the foster parents' biological children and extended family, a social worker, and a myriad of other people who should be collaboratively working together toward the child's best

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[9] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 7.

[10] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 7.

[11] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 7.

[12] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 8.

[13] Michael Howell-Moroney, "Faith-Based Partnerships and Foster Parent Satisfaction," *Journal of Health and Human Services* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 230.

interests. Therefore, for the purposes of this project, it was important to narrow the focus to a particular segment: non-relative foster parents who are participants of a Christian faith-based support group.

The researcher chose to focus on foster parents, assuming them to be the nucleus of this ecosystem. Foster parents serve as the role model for the birth parents, the intermediary between the child and the family of origin, the decision-maker for all children in the household, and the advocate with the social worker. Therefore, this research focused exclusively on the foster parent experience and what they revealed about implications for how foster families develop family life, effectively care for at-risk children, and strive to prevent burnout.

There are several types of foster care. It is assumed that triggers for stress and ideal support strategies will vary depending on the kind of temporary guardianship arrangement.[14] Therefore, this project focused exclusively on non-relative foster parents. Exclusions were not made to differentiate between short-term and long-term fostering. However, this study did not include relative-based kinship fostering or respite fostering (which this study considered to be a support for the primary foster parents and was not the focus of this research). In addition, this project only studied home-based foster care and did not include foster caregivers for children placed in group home situations.

The scriptural section proposed a theology of foster care based on Bible principles for how to develop family life, care for at-risk children, and avoid burnout. Special

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[14] Kate Wilson, Ian Sinclair, and Ian Gibbs, *Foster Carers: Why They Stay and Why They Leave* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004), 32.

attention was given to family life within the book of Ruth, Moses and Esther as examples of at-risk children, and how Moses and Jesus avoided burnout.

Finally, participants from this study were selected from Christian-based foster parent support groups. This limitation was imposed because the researcher's goal was to offer recommendations for how Christian churches foster health or lack support for foster parents. The literature review also suggested that faith plays a significant role in foster parents' coping strategies, satisfaction, support system, and longevity of service.

Researcher Assumptions

It is important for all qualitative researchers to be aware of and disclose the assumptions that may inform, guide, or influence the project. The first assumption was that some family systems have developed a lifestyle that is better-suited or more adaptable to the challenges of foster care. This family lifestyle enabled them to persist and continue serving as foster parents for several years, compared to the significant percentage that quit within the first year. It was assumed that these long-haul foster families could serve as a model that other foster families could learn from. Developing sustainable foster family life patterns was assumed to be teachable, not an inherent personality trait.

The second assumption of this study was that foster parents face unique stressors that contribute to high rates of burnout. At a high level, it was assumed that foster parents face these unique stressors because they have opted into temporarily parenting a child who has endured trauma while they were not responsible for the child's care. In contrast, biological parenting typically entails being the primary decision makers and overseeing

the child's care for their entire childhood. Additional context about these unique stressors is detailed in the literature review.

The third assumption was that support strategies can offer helpful interventions to mitigate these unique stressors and help prevent burnout. Ultimately, the researcher assumed that burnout among foster parents is a problem that may not be able to be eliminated but it can be alleviated or reduced. Related, the researcher assumed that external, community-based support systems will be most effective. While internal factors such as self-talk, motivation, and reframing techniques may be important, this research focused on the need for an external resource to teach these internal stress management, self-regulation, or parenting techniques and offer tangible and emotional support.

The fourth assumption was that the Christian church is called to play an active role in serving and supporting foster parents. The researcher studied specific passages in Scripture that led to a personal conviction that believers are called to actively participate in care for at-risk children. Study of theological implications compelled the researcher to believe foster parents are worthy of support as missionaries in their local communities.

The fifth assumption was that participants will answer questions honestly. The researcher assumed that participants who have personally experienced the lived phenomenon of foster care are the individuals who can most accurately convey the reality of such lived experiences. Since the project sought to alleviate the foster parents' feelings of burnout, even inaccurate details of specific scenarios are assumed to be valuable insight into the participants' feelings.

The sixth assumption was that Scripture is an accurate source of knowledge that can be drawn upon to identify descriptive truths about the human condition, differentiate

between good and evil, offer corrective action, and set the standard for the ideal community. It is assumed that Christian churches will use Scripture to inform their mission, vision, values, and programming to make Christ known in their communities.

Subproblems

The problem this project addressed was the burnout among foster parents due to the lack of support resources. The researcher broke this large theme into four smaller subproblems to help guide and inform the research for the project.

The first subproblem was to explore a theology of foster care in the Bible including how to develop family life, care for at-risk children, and avoid burnout. Special attention was given to family life within the book of Ruth, Moses and Esther as examples of at-risk children, and how Moses and Jesus avoided burnout.

The second subproblem was to review current literature to understand the unique factors that cause foster parents to experience burnout and identify support strategies that can be used by the church. The researcher engaged with studies from a variety of academic disciplines. Special attention was given to studies that considered faith-based resources. Implications from the literature review were used to guide the creation of the survey questions.

The third subproblem was to conduct a qualitative study using surveys to learn what foster parents had to say about their burnout experiences, what has contributed to their stress, and what has or would have helped. The researcher reached out to local Christian-based support groups affiliated with churches to solicit participants for the study who were caring for non-relative foster children.

The fourth subproblem was to identify best practices for how churches can effectively support foster parents in order to prevent burnout. The researcher sought to summarize a variety of techniques that could be utilized by churches regardless of their family ministry approach.

Setting of the Project

According to the Minnesota Department of Human Services, "approximately 12,400 children and young adults experienced out-of-home care during 2021" and "on an average day, there were approximately 7,700" individuals in foster care within the state.[15] The state also expresses an urgent need for additional foster families to be licensed to care for foster children. In particular, there is a need for foster parents who are willing to welcome teenage foster children because teenagers comprise over one-quarter of the children in foster care.[16] In addition, there is a need for more foster families who are willing to accept teenage parents as their foster children so that the teenager can stay with their child in a safe and supportive environment.[17] People can choose to become foster parents at various life stages, whether they are single or married, are renters or homeowners, already have children or not.[18]

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[15] "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children," MN Department of Human Services, last modified October 2021, https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-4760-ENG

[16] MN Department of Human Services, "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children."

[17] MN Department of Human Services, "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children."

[18] MN Department of Human Services, "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children."

In 2021, the most common reasons for removing the child from the home were caretaker drug abuse (34%), allegations of neglect (14%), and child mental health needs (9%).[19] Minnesota also recognizes that a disproportionate percentage of foster children come from rural counties (64%) and are disproportionately children of color and American Indian descent (i.e., "American Indian children were approximately 16 times more likely than their white counterparts to experience out-of-home-care; those of two or more races were seven times more likely; and Black children were approximately twice as likely.")[20] Foster parents step in to help foster children recover from the trauma they have experienced and facilitate healthy development in a structured, nurturing, stable, and safe environment.[21]

The setting of this project included volunteer participants from foster parent support groups. The researcher scoured public secular websites for listings of foster parent support groups in Minnesota and searched for parachurch or church websites with foster care related ministries. Then, the researcher contacted leaders from the foster parent support groups she identified that met in churches in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota to solicit participants.

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[19] MN Department of Human Services, "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children."

[20] MN Department of Human Services, "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children."

[21] MN Department of Human Services, "Foster Care: Temporary Out-of-Home Care for Children."

Importance of the Project

Importance of the Project to the Researcher

This researcher developed a passionate interest in foster care after going on a mission trip and serving at Roblealto's group residential foster care setting in Costa Rica in 2004. Over the last eighteen years, this researcher has continued to partner with Roblealto and witness their strategy, struggles, techniques, and impact. The researcher observed built-in support systems and community within Roblealto's programming which included strategic attempts to encourage foster parents and prevent burnout.

Preserving relationships with both alumni who were previously children in the program, Roblealto foster parents, and Roblealto staff has highlighted the great need, value, and challenges faced in foster care and family reunification programs. This sparked a desire to invest further in foster care ministry both domestically and internationally as a practical expression and implementation of the researcher's faith and commitment to live out those faith principles.

The researcher was also touched by hearing a personal testimony of a friend who grew up in foster care in Minnesota. She described her experience in less than ideal foster home environments and how she wished she had foster parents like those she witnessed at Roblealto. Her former foster youth perspective emphasized the need to invest in supporting and recruiting healthy foster parents.

The Importance of the Project to the Ministry Context

This researcher assumes that identifying and implementing effective support strategies will reduce foster parent burnout and increase foster parents' longevity of caregiving years. Overall, foster parents do critical kingdom work as they invest in the

holistic wellbeing of children, prevent further maltreatment or exploitation, and minimize the harmful baggage foster children may carry into adulthood through the redemptive, healing work of effective foster parenting.[22] The transformation within the lives of foster children and their families is clear testimony to the effectiveness of the gospel and God's desire for the flourishing of all people.

Research findings also suggest that the church and spirituality can be helpful coping mechanisms for foster parents. Literature research shows that 67% of foster parents agreed or strongly agreed that their spiritual community offered crucial support which helped them effectively cope with the stressors of foster parenting.[23] Similarly, foster parents reported spirituality "as a survival tool that kept foster families intact and was related to their longevity" in serving as foster parents.[24]

Unfortunately, many churches would not be missed by their surrounding community if they closed. Investing in foster parents and foster care is a practical way for churches to make Jesus known through community impact. It is a hands-on expression of a theology of care that seeks to support foster parents by comforting them through challenges, celebrating with them in the good times, rejuvinating their wellbeing, and empowering them to live out the character of Christ. This research offered recommendations for immediate relief and long-term wherewithal.

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[22] Susan Hayes Greener, "Children-at-Risk and the Whole Gospel: Integral Mission 'To, For, and With' Vulnerable Agents of God," *Transformation (Exeter)* 33, no. 3 (2016): 167.

[23] Debra Salmon, "Spirituality and Treatment Foster Care" (MSW research paper, College of St. Catherine and University of St. Thomas, Saint Paul, 2007), 29.

[24] Salmon, "Spirituality and Treatment Foster Care," 29.

At the moment, very few Christian ministries or churches put foster care at the center of their family ministry or missions' focus. Speakers like Jamie Finn, Jason Johnson, and Mike and Kristin Berry are prominent leaders of Christian parachurch ministries serving foster families. Searches for local churches with a reputation for investing in foster families produce slim to no results. Implementing these strategies will make more churches a welcoming place for foster families who are desperate for a sense of belonging.

The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large

Furthermore, all Christians have a responsibility to actively participate in the holy, kingdom work of caring for at-risk and vulnerable children.[25] Sometimes churches are tempted by the appeal of international mission trips and prioritize serving those who are far away rather than to the vulnerable within their own community.[26] The church needs to be challenged to embrace the messiness of local ministry and reframe foster parents as "missionaries in their own homes."[27] Moreover, the church ought to pay attention to the needs of foster parents because Christians tend to "foster at a higher rate than the general population."[28]

Foster care sits at the intersection of the sacred and the secular, the holy and the mundane, the church and the home. It is a recognition that God's purposes are fulfilled

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[25] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

[26] Eugene Roop. *Ruth, Jonah, Esther*. Believers Church Bible Commentary, ed. Elmer A. Martens (Scottdale: MennoMedia, 2002), 32.

[27] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 7.

[28] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 3.

through human agency.[29] Foster parents follow in the footsteps of Boaz who generously provided security for Ruth and Naomi in the midst of regular, day-to-day life as an expression of faith and love, not obligation.

Most importantly, the church is invited into the ministry of foster care because, in the midst of brokenness, the Church offers hope and good news through a holistic gospel response that steps in to bring about transformation "of sinful systems, societal brokenness, and our inherent bias," so that the world can see God's sovereignty and His power to bring hope, healing, and reconciliation to every broken space. [30] When foster care effectively restores and transforms families, it becomes evidence of and testimony to the effectiveness of Christ's transformational power.

As agents of God's kingdom which is both already and not yet, Christians pray that God's kingdom would be present on earth as it is in heaven. They can put feet to this prayer by becoming agents of change within the foster care ecosystem who seek to prevent the maltreatment and exploitation of children, break cycles of generational trauma, and promote the wellbeing of healthy family systems.[31]

Importance to the Academic Community

The academic community is increasing their awareness of and attention to the impact of trauma on individuals and family systems. This research detailed how the trauma of removing a child from their first family creates unique stressors for foster

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[29] Alicia Besa Panganiban, "Theology of Resilience Amidst Vulnerability in the Book of Ruth," *Feminist Theology* 28, no. 2 (2020): 185-186, https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735019886077.

[30] Greener, "Children-at-Risk and the Whole Gospel," 163.

[31] Greener, "Children-at-Risk and the Whole Gospel," 163.

parents. This project also offered strategies to mitigate burnout and increase the longevity of foster parents' years of service which should decrease the number of placement disruptions and prevent additional trauma for foster children.

In the literature review, this researcher only found one peer-reviewed journal article that clearly addressed the church's role in serving foster families.[32] However, a limitation of this study is that it focused exclusively on the Black church. The present study will help address the limited literature on how churches can best serve foster parents and help them prevent burnout.

In their book *Replanted,* Hook, Hook, and Berry sought to encourage foster parents by affirming the importance of their caregiving and celebrating the hard, transformative work of serving at-risk kids. Their work combined their practical experiences as foster parents, a therapist, and ministry leader with an informative literature review and thoughtful theological engagement. Although this resource does not contain its own independent research study, it most closely parallels the topics and questions of this current thesis project and was heavily consulted.

Overall, this project illuminated the unique role and challenges of foster parents within the foster care ecosystem. Looking ahead, this project sought to encourage further research to enhance the support for others within the foster care ecosystem, including surrogate siblings, biological family members, social workers, agency members, and school personnel.

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[32] Sharron M. Singleton and Fay Roseman, "Ministers' Perception of Foster Care, Adoptions, and the Role of the Black Church." *Adoption Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2004), https://doi.org/10.1300/J145v07n03_04.

Summary

This chapter presented the problem that this project sought to address, why this problem is important, and how this project went about addressing the problem. It stated that the focus of this research is to identify effective support strategies to alleviate the burnout commonly experienced amongst foster parents. The next chapter examines a biblical basis for foster care engagement by exploring family life, God's call to care for at-risk children, and avoiding burnout.

CHAPTER TWO: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF FOSTER CARE

The Barna Group conducted a survey in 2013 which revealed three percent of practicing Christians have fostered, compared to two percent of the general American public. [33] The study also showed that practicing Christians were nearly three times more likely to have seriously considered fostering (31%), compared to just eleven percent of all Americans.[34] Higher rates of fostering and consideration of being foster parents among Christians compared to the general population implies that there is a biblical and theological grounding that compels believers to participate more actively in foster care.

How to Develop Family Life

Kinship terminology is used throughout scripture to express how political and social relations were derived from familiar household relationships.[35] While the family unit was central within biblical culture, Scripture avoids prescribing one standard for how to develop family life but it promotes many family values, such as modeling covenant, exhibiting hospitality, and living resiliently, among many others. Likewise, the Bible fails to pinpoint 'the perfect biblical family,' for there is no perfect family and only one

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[33] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap.3.

[34] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap.3.

[35] Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries Series (London: Yale University Press, 1975), sec. Introduction, Bloomsbury Theology and Religion Online.

perfect person, Jesus Christ. Therefore, this section espouses three biblical family values which are suggested to be particularly relevant for foster parents developing family life.

Modeling Covenant

Covenant is a binding promise between two partners who are working together toward a common goal, such as in marriage. In Scripture, we also see God repeatedly making covenants between Himself and His people. God made four key covenants with biblical leaders to accomplish God's redemptive plan to restore humanity: Noah (Gen. 8:20-9:17 [NIV]), Abraham (Gen. 12, 15, 17), Moses (Exod. 19-24), and David (2 Sam. 7). Ultimately, the prophets foretold a new covenant that entailed redemption, blessing, and forgiveness of sin, which was fulfilled through Jesus (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-32; Heb. 7:22). The Bible also contains examples of interpersonal covenants, such as the one formed by David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 23. When foster parents accept a new placement, they generally make a promise to care for that child to the best of their ability for as long as that child needs them. This agreement is an informal covenant between the foster parent and child, and frequently between the foster parent and God, to serve as a means of God's redemption within His plan for the foster child's life.

Moreover, within Scripture, the family is the instrument that most commonly illustrates the covenant, modeled based on God's parental and covenantal relationship with Israel.[36] God demonstrates His unconditional, covenantal love toward Israel through radical pursuit, abundant kindness, extreme grace, constant forgiveness, wise discipline,

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[36] C. Reeder, "Family," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 263.

and close relationship.[37] Being agents of the covenant entails demonstrating this covenantal love and pursuing shared mission together. Christian foster parents are assumed to exhibit this kind of unconditional, covenantal love to their children.

Unconditional love is the bedrock of covenant and the foundation of healthy families. It can be defined as the "kind of love that remains faithful, honorable, and predictable even when differences threaten to endanger the relationship."[38] This unconditional love is the prerequisite to open family communication where individuals can share honestly without fear of shame or rejection.[39] It is the assumed family context that creates a safe place where individuals can express and meet needs and find a deep sense of belonging. [40] Unconditional love orients one's posture toward the loved one to be based on responsiveness and accessibility. Such love compels them to eagerly share one another's burdens, and counts it as a privilege, not a burden, to do so.

Grace, mercy, and forgiveness naturally flow out of such unconditional love. Ideally, family rules and should be formulated according to developmentally appropriate expectations and applied consistently, while leaving enough room for grace. Grace entails the freedom to reflect and adapt the rules or expectations due to seeing the larger picture which takes the unique child's needs, background, learning style, and the particular

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[37] Jack O. Balswick, Judith K. Balswick, and Thomas Frederick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 24.

[38] Balswick, Balswick, and Frederick, *The Family*, 33.

[39] Balswick, Balswick, and Frederick, *The Family*, 35.

[40] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 36.

circumstance.[41] For God did not intend an atmosphere of law, but of discipleship to permeate the family home. Practically speaking, the family is the dominant "proving ground for Christian discipleship and a vineyard for the fruits of the spirit" as the values of "love, forgiveness, patience, kindness and self-sacrifice are often learned and lived out most profoundly" at home.[42]

As covenant people, family members want the best for one another and seek to empower one another to realize their fullest potential. Christian parents, in particular, have a responsibility to nurture their children in such a way that enables them to fulfill their God-given purpose and potential.[43] Likewise, foster parents aim to send their foster child back into the world as an empowered person who has been discipled, equipped, poured into, and built up through the ongoing encouragement, support, and mentorship. [44] As a result, they are prepared to be in healthier relationships and primed to make a difference in the world. Ultimately, as 'agents of the covenant,' families are called to serve God together by regularly serving those around them in small ways through activities of daily living which may expand into folding others into their chosen family, such as foster children.[45]

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[41] Balswick, Balswick, and Fredrick, *The Family*, 30.

[42] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 91.

[43] Balswick, Balswick, and Fredrick, *The Family*, 31.

[44] Balswick, Balswick, and Fredrick, *The Family*, 31.

[45] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 138.

Together, "covenant love and empowerment lead to a mature interdependency in which there is both freedom and a continued sense of belonging."[46] Foster families inherently recognize this tension as they hold loosely to the temporariness of their time with the foster child (i.e., freedom for circumstances to change) and hold tightly to the child's current role within the family and lasting mark (i.e., sense of belonging). Families are full of flawed people who will fall short of true, unconditional love and often fail to uphold their end of the covenant. Yet Christian families are instructed to continue to pursue relationships as God relentlessly pursued the Israelites, offering reconciliation and restitution to restore intimacy and renew their shared mission. Likewise, parents and foster parents are frequently called to offer children grace when they do not deserve it and kindness instead of wrath because it models the way God unconditionally loved Israel and refused to give up on the covenant between them regardless of their disobedience.

Mary & Joseph: Family's Covenantal Love

Joseph lives out this idea of family as covenant with Mary and Jesus. While Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary, Mary was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18).[47] Initially, Joseph intended to divorce her quietly but he remained steadfast after receiving a message from an angel of the Lord in a dream (Matt. 1:19-25). Obediently and out of covenantal love, Joseph willingly accepted Mary as his

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[46] Balswick, Balswick, and Fredrick, *The Family*, 33.

[47] Unless otherwise noted, all scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version,* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984).

wife and Jesus as his son. Together, they developed as a family unit and matured into deeper unconditional love.

As Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, Joseph and Mary help encourage and empower Him to live out His calling that had been appointed since before He was born—to save the people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). When He was only twelve years old, Jesus began teaching in the synagogue amongst the other teachers (Lk. 2:46). It became clear that God's grace and favor was upon Him (Lk. 2:40, 52). Nevertheless, like every other family, Jesus' family had constant opportunities to practice grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Initially, Jesus' parents were upset when they found Him in the temple because they did not know that He had stayed behind in Jerusalem. They had assumed that He was within their company as they returned home from the Festival of Passover. This miscommunication caused panic and fear for Joseph and Mary (Lk. 2:42-48).

Jesus' parents also fulfilled their covenantal responsibility to support Jesus in realizing His fullest potential. Mary's encouragement is particularly prominent in John 2, where Jesus does His first miracle. They are together at a wedding when the event runs out of wine. Mary looks to her son for miraculous intervention but Jesus responds that His time has not yet come (Jn. 2:3-4). Then, Mary encourages Jesus to do whatever the Lord tells Him to do (Jn. 2:5). Shortly after, Jesus orchestrates a miracle that turned six large water jars into the best testing wine (Jn. 2:6-11). Mary continued to be a steadfast disciple of Jesus and stood by His side through the highs and lows of His ministry.

Even in the early account of the wedding at Cana, tension begins to surface between obedience or loyalty to biological family and obedience to the heavenly father. Jesus simultaneously abides by the Deuteronomic law that commands children to honor

their parents while maintaining supreme allegiance to God.[48] Therefore, Jesus' initial rebuff, "Woman, why do you involve me?... My hour has not yet come," was not an expression of disrespect but an acknowledgment that Jesus has higher allegiance to God and His perfectly ordained plan than to His mother (Jn. 2:4).[49] Moreover, the symbolism in which the stone jars, Judaism's vessels of purification, were filled with wine instead of water mirrors how Jesus came to fulfill the law and improve clarity on what it meant to truly follow God, often by inverting historical understandings.[50] In this manner, we find Jesus upending the definition of family as well.

Jesus: Redefining Family

Ultimately, Jesus also redefined family by radically folding others into His family. In Matthew 12, Jesus defines family as those who do the will of God (Matt. 12:50). It is implied that Jesus' true family is His church, more so than His biological family.[51] Earlier, Jesus had already foreshadowed the common tension that can occur among family members when a believer becomes radically committed to Christ (Matt. 10:34-39).[52] Now, Mark reports that Jesus' family "heard reports of the commotion that

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[48] Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew,* The NIV Application Commentary Series, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 455.

[49] Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary Series, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). 91.

[50] Burge, *John,* 99.

[51] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, Hermeneia Commentary Series, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 225.

[52] Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary Series, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 455.

Jesus' ministry was causing [and] wanted to take control of Jesus and alter His ministry, because they thought He was out of His mind" (Mk. 3:21).[53] Nevertheless, Jesus refuses to allow anything, including His biological family, from getting in the way of accomplishing His messianic mission.[54] The society may have expected Jesus to fulfill His obligation as the eldest son by taking care of His mother and siblings after the likely death of Joseph, but Jesus understood that He was destined for something of greater importance.[55]

This inclusive understanding of family is seen throughout Jesus' ministry but again very prominently in His final moments. Jesus saw His mother and His beloved disciple from upon the cross and said to them, "'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother' (Jn. 19:26-27)."

The covenantal family of believers is seen within Jesus' family, through His disciples, and surrounding His ongoing ministry. The family of origin and church family are not to be antagonistic to one another, but comparatively, the family of believers is to be centered due to their core shared mission.[56] Overall, the Bible expands the boundaries of the family from a limited and narrow perspective to become a more comprehensive and radically inclusive picture.[57] The biblical understanding of family is much wider than

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[53] Wilkins, *Matthew*, 454-455.

[54] Wilkins, *Matthew*, 455.

[55] Wilkins, *Matthew*, 454-455.

[56] Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 227.

[57] A.E. McGrath, "Family," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson and David F. Field (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 372.

the nuclear family. Ultimately, Jesus' definition of family is those who do the will of the Father.[58]

Likewise, foster families regularly redefine family in light of their ongoing inclusive practice of welcoming new foster children. They choose to center the mission of serving at-risk children above the option of focusing exclusively on their nuclear family. The boundaries of their family ebb and flow, regularly growing larger, to welcome additional foster children and their biological family, friends and community members who offer ongoing and consistent support, agency and county social workers, and so on. Foster families may further expand their concept of family to fellow support group attendees of fellow foster families who share a similar lifestyle, view of family, and sense of mission.

Exhibiting Hospitality

Throughout Scripture, authors consistently equate righteousness with radical hospitality and welcoming the marginalized and hopeless into one's household.[59] Oded Borowski, a scholar on what daily life was like in the Old Testament, identifies hospitality as a vital central element woven throughout Israelite culture.[60] Christian hospitality entails more than entertaining guests for one-off occasions. Biblical hospitality involves inviting marginalized strangers "into the heart of the family as a valued representative of Christ's presence" and transforming the guest from a stranger

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[58] Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 227.

[59] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 26.

[60] Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*. 261.

into an insider.[61] Hospitality is an act of resilience that accentuates the inherent worth of those society overlooks and empowers the marginalized to realize their potential contributions to the larger society.[62] Foster parents embody this kind of biblical hospitality and infuse it into their daily life and family structure. Ultimately, the Christian household is intended to look like the kingdom of God in which all are welcome and all are equal.

Biblical hospitality is rare because it is inconvenient and vulnerable.[63] Hospitality is vulnerable because it entails living in close proximity with a stranger, where the host exposes his or her strengths and weaknesses. It is inconvenient because it often entails unpredictably stopping, abandoning one's schedule, and dedicating time to focus on serving the person in need. This kind of generous welcome typically requires the flexibility, adaptability, and intentionality commonly exhibited by foster parents. Moreover, hospitality is inconvenient because it is self-sacrificial. In the Old Testament, hosts welcomed guests by washing their feet and providing the best meal they were able to provide.[64]

Abraham exhibited this kind of hospitality by serving his angelic guests the choice calf, curds, and milk (Gn. 18:1-8). In addition, hosts were responsible to ensure

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[61] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Inside Out Families: Living the Faith Together* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 104-105.

[62] Pohl, *Making Room,* 61.

[63] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 104.

[64] "Hospitality," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, eds. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 403.

that their guests were protected from harm (Gn. 23:7-9; Jo. 2:1-6; 2 Kgs. 6:22-23). Beyond that, generous hosts would ensure that their guests were provided with enough food and supplies for the next leg of their journey.[65] Hospitality involved caring for the others' physical and emotional needs, just as foster parents are expected to provide. Such hospitality makes virtually no designation between the family's given household and the household of God.

It is vulnerable to invite someone into one's home along with their messiness in the midst of one's own frailties and failures. Hospitality entails living alongside those at-risk and becoming a first-hand witness to the injustice and indignities they face, and sometimes getting caught in the crosshairs.[66] Foster parents willingly walk alongside their foster child through the mess, occasionally experiencing primary or secondary trauma as a result, and inevitably discover the imperfections and brokenness of the foster care system along the way. Ultimately, Christians take the risks associated with hospitality because they prioritize obedience to Christ and the future of the family of God ahead of their own immediate pleasure.

Widow at Zerephath

This kind of hospitality trusts God to meet one's daily needs. Generous hospitality despite one's resources is personified by the widow at Zerephath who uses her last handful of flour and drops of olive oil to make a small loaf for Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:8-16).

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[65] "Hospitality," 403.

[66] Pohl, *Making Room,* 77.

She had planned to use these ingredients to make a final meal for herself and her son before they died (1 Kgs. 17:12). The widow serves as a representative of those who are impoverished, powerless, underprivileged, and hopeless, and yet she becomes a benevolent host who offers hospitality to Elijah.[67] God blessed the woman's generosity and miraculously ensured that the flour never ran out and the small jug of olive oil never went dry (1 Kgs. 17:15-16). A common misconception about hospitality is that its benefits are limited to the guest. On the contrary, true hospitality "nourishes, challenges, and transforms guests, hosts, and sometimes, the larger community."[68] It may not look like an endless supply of flour and olive oil but along with great risk often comes great reward. Biblical hospitality flows from an abundance mindset, which trusts the reality of God's generous and faithful provision, in spite of culture that trains people to have a scarcity mindset, which fears there will never be enough.[69]

Hospitality as Caring for God

In Genesis 18:1-15, God appears in a theophany to Abraham in the form of three strangers. Abraham is initially confused, for this is not how he anticipated seeing God.[70] Nevertheless, he immediately jumps into action and offers elaborate hospitality to the three men (Gn. 18:2). The Israelite value of hospitality meant welcoming anyone and

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[67] Walter Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series, ed. Mark L. McElroy (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2000), 210.

[68] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 11.

[69] Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings,* 216.

[70] Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 210.

everyone, regardless of how broken and damaged or healthy and beautiful they are because everyone is created in the image of God and strangers "might carry the light of God to us." [71] In this spirit, Abraham orchestrates exemplary hospitality to ensure every aspect of the guests' needs is met.[72] In a holy reversal, three heavenly visitors arrive to request nourishment from him, but it is Abraham who gains refreshment and a renewed hope for an heir from them.[73]

Hospitality as Modeled After God

Humanity's existence is dependent upon God's extreme hospitality. It began when God spoke creation into existence and spent three days creating the perfect habitat for all living things.[74] God provided the perfect setting in the garden of Eden, plus He was hospitable to Adam by creating company to join in their holy communion together. Due to the fall, this reality is temporarily distorted. Yet believers faithfully wait for the future because Jesus promised that He was preparing a place for His disciples (Jn. 14:2-3). And God makes it clear that every taste of hospitality on earth is but a foretaste. The hospitality of this world can only temporarily satisfy whereas God offers eternal hospitality and rest (Is. 55:1-3).

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[71] Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 261-263.

[72] Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 261-263.

[73] Bruggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, 262.

[74] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1-25A.* Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series, (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2018), 34.

Ruth

The story of Ruth exemplifies the transformative kingdom impact of hospitality. Trouble struck without warning. A famine and the death of the three patriarchs leave their widows incredibly vulnerable (Ru. 1:1-4). Desperate and hopeful for the Lord's provision, Ruth and Naomi venture to Bethlehem. God is at work through Levitical law and a series of coincidences as Ruth gathers grain in Boaz's field, where she happens to catch his eye. Boaz ensures her food needs are met by encouraging her to stay and glean his field and go get a drink if she is thirsty (Ru. 2:9). Then, he offers her bread with wine vinegar to dip it in (Ru. 2:14). He also ensures her need for safety is met as he commands others not to lay a hand on her (Ru. 2:9, 15-16, 22). Yet, Boaz's hospitality is most clearly displayed by his willingness to assume the role of kinsman redeemer when others, who were first in line, did not want to (Ru. 3:12-13; 4:3-11). Welcoming Ruth into his family came at great personal risk to Boaz's social standing because she was a Moabite, not a Jew. Nevertheless, becoming Boaz's wife gave Ruth social standing in the community again, she was no longer an outsider but a permanent member of the Judahite household.[75]

Boaz understood that offering hospitality meant going beyond meeting individuals' physical needs. In Hebrew, Boaz's name *(b'z)* forms a consonantal anagram with the word 'abandon' *('zb)* which is fitting since Boaz does the opposite of abandon Ruth and Naomi.[76] His generosity far exceeded the societal expectations of a kinsman

[75] Schipper, *Ruth,* sec. The Birth of Obed.

[76] Schipper, *Ruth,* sec. Introduction.

redeemer based upon the Torah.[77] His interactions surpassed the legalese and emphasized the inherent value, worth, and dignity of Ruth as a person created in the image of God. Boaz prioritized radical hospitality, valuing the family of God above personal convenience. In doing so, he became part of the direct ancestry of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all humanity (Ru. 4:18-22).

At the end of the story, there is a reversal of the devastating circumstances in which the story began. Naomi's prayer becomes answered. When Naomi asked the Lord to grant Ruth a husband, she prayed that God would grant to her 'rest' (menuha) (Ru. 1:9).[78] This Hebrew word means the kind of Sabbath rest that the Israelites discovered upon their arrival to the promised land.[79] In terms of hospitality, "it is the 'rest' that comes with belonging, with the deep sense of security that comes with finding 'home.'"[80] When Ruth chose to stay loyal to Naomi and follow her to Bethlehem, she left home and chose a life of impermanence and severe transition. The remainder of Ruth narrates their progress from instability to a predictable routine as a field worker to stability and safety when enveloped into Boaz's family.[81] Boaz sees past their cultural, ethnic, and economical differences, recognizes their potential to become a mutual blessing to one

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[77] Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther,* 76.

[78] Kandy Queen-Sutherland, *Ruth and Esther*. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series, ed. Scott Nash (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2016) 55-56.

[79] Queen-Sutherland, *Ruth and Esther*, 55-56.

[80] Queen-Sutherland, *Ruth and Esther*, 55-56.

[81] Queen-Sutherland, *Ruth and Esther*, 112.

another, and generously offers her increased radical hospitality, eventually folding her into his own immediate family.[82]

Living Resiliently

Life inevitably contains numerous challenges and Jesus did not promise that Christians' lives would be easier, but perhaps even more challenging (Matt. 7:13-14; Jn. 16:33). Likewise, parenting requires endurance but foster parenting demands even more grit. As His disciples, believers are called to take up their cross and follow His lifestyle of self-sacrificial service to others (Mk. 8:34, 9:35). Obedience to this calling will look different for everyone but for some parents it may compel them to become foster parents. Regardless of one's mission or ministry, it is tempting to grow weary of doing good (2 Thess. 3:13; 1 Pet. 3:8-9). Yet Scripture repeatedly encourages faithfulness, perseverance, and resilience, trusting that God will work all things out for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). Ministry and parenting require resiliency and daily devotion to the cause, watering seeds and pulling weeds, hoping that one's long-term patience to will eventually bear fruit.

Paul & Timothy

Paul writes that believers should "glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope." (Rom. 5:3-5). Paul's testimony speaks to the power and importance of resiliency. He was repeatedly imprisoned, flogged, beaten with rods, stoned, and shipwrecked (2 Cor. 11:23-

[82] Queen-Sutherland, *Ruth and Esther*, 125.

25). Paul intentionally chooses to boast in these weaknesses because he recognizes that these events are when God was most evident and glorified. Paul recognizes that the characteristics of his life that gave him privilege in his in society (i.e., being Hebrew, Israelite, a direct descendent of Abraham, or his years of service as a servant to Christ) are meaningless in the grand scheme (2 Cor. 11:21-23). In response, Paul chooses to dedicate his life to the relentless pursuit of things with eternal value, regardless of the numerous obstacles.

In addition to his physical suffering, Paul experienced the pangs of betrayal and loneliness when many of the majority of his friends abandoned him due to his decision to stay faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ.[83] Onesiphorus and Timothy are his rare friends. Scripture emphasizes the importance of being surrounded by a supportive community, where one is nourished and supported in the faith.[84] Paul and Timothy are vital community to one another. Therefore, Paul offers his testimony as encouragement to Timothy because the Lord rescued him from all his trials and served as an ever-present help to sustain him through the numerous difficulties.[85] Resilience is a dominant theme in Paul's life because he comes to understand God's deliverance as protection *through* such trials, rather than escape *from* hardship.[86]

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[83] W. Hulitt Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series, ed. Leslie Andres (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2010), 242.

[84] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 246.

[85] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 285.

[86] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 285.

Paul believes this resiliency ought to be characteristic of all believers, "for the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love, and self-discipline" (2 Tm. 1:7). For Paul, this power is the Holy Spirit's strength that empowers believers to persevere through trials and temptations, this love empowers disciples to embody the radical transforming care of Christ, and this self-discipline instills the mindset of self-sacrifice and commitment to necessary to make Jesus known throughout the world.[87] Nevertheless, believers and Paul himself grow weary and need this spirit to be rekindled within them (2 Tm. 1:6). Even in lament, biblical writers demonstrate a discipline of intentionally recalling, reciting, and praising God for how He has been faithful before because it rekindles hope that God is present even when it is hard to see Him and He will be faithful again. Praise and thanksgiving refuel the believer and enables him or her to continue persevering.[88]

Believers are resilient when they rely on God's power rather than their own. Scripture recognizes that "our own strength will only get us so far, and dependence on it alone will eventually lead to 'burnout.'"[89] Paul would advise disciples to never underestimate the steadfast power of God to uphold and sustain them regardless of difficult circumstances because that is when His strength is most evident.[90] When people feel their weakest, the conditions are commonly ripe for the most dramatic and profound

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[87] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 232.

[88] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 226, 255.

[89] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 246.

[90] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 226.

personal transformations and community revival. Therefore, Paul is not promoting suffering for the sake of suffering but rather suffering for the gospel which meant remaining committed to fulfilling his God-appointed destiny and steadfastly devoted to those he was serving.[91]

Suffering for Christ becomes a theme in Paul's letters, including 2 Timothy. He portrays himself as an example and role model to Timothy as someone who is not ashamed of his suffering, perseverant, steadfast, and single-minded.[92] Paul's message is that shame surrounding one's inadequacies or limitations should be "replaced by trust and confidence [in God]."[93] Paul exhorts Timothy to embody this resilience and endure suffering by drawing on analogies from military life, athletics, and agriculture to emphasize having a single-minded focus on remaining obedient to God's calling on his life.

Foster parents overcome numerous challenges throughout their foster care journey, commonly driven by the hope of healing and family redemption. Scripture also implies that this kind of resiliency and faith can be passed down through the generations as it did from Timothy's grandmother Lois, to his mother Eunice, and onto him (2 Tm. 1:5). Likewise, the hope of foster care is to instill coping mechanisms and prevent further harm in order to stop cycles of generational trauma so that the transformational impact of foster care lives on for generations to come. Such stories of how God was faithful in the

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[91] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 226.

[92] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 232.

[93] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 232, 235.

midst of the most challenging circumstances are passed along from generation to generation (Ps. 145:4). The community of faith declares that God was faithful before and He will be faithful again. This hope gives the family of God hope and strength to be resilient and faithful today.

Care for At-Risk Children

A Christian worldview recognizes that sin has the potential to distort or corrupt every relationship and social structure. As evidenced by the need for a foster care system, even the bond between parent and child can be disrupted and become a source of trauma and neglect.[94] Therefore, the church has a responsibility to equip parents and empower caregivers in their role. Ideally, foster care becomes not only a way to invest in the child but also a way to support and build up their parents. "In the absence or dysfunction of the birth family, the extended family of God" bears a critical responsibility to fill the gap and make sure children are well cared for.[95] The Bible recognizes children as especially vulnerable to the effects of sin in the world. Believers have an explicit responsibility to invest in the wholistic wellbeing of children as they grow, including character formation, discipline, and training in social responsibility.[96]

Throughout Scripture, children are valued in high-regard and Jesus says that the kingdom belongs to those who are like children. Children are so central to the heart of

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[94] C.D. McConnell, "Children At Risk," in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, eds. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 155.

[95] C.D. McConnell, "Children At Risk," 158.

[96] C.D. McConnell, "Children At Risk," 156.

God that Garland suggests, "If you want to know God, to see Jesus, bring one of God's needy children to the center of what you do."[97] For Jesus himself equates serving at-risk children with ministering directly to Christ himself (Matt. 25:40).

Scripture encourages holistic intervention on behalf of at-risk children. Where brokenness exists, the gospel offers a healing response. Although foster care is a government-based operation, believers have the opportunity to partner with the child welfare system because they have shared interest in meeting the needs of at-risk children. Whether intervening through interpersonal relationships, self-reflection upon inherent biases, or advocacy to correct the sinful systems and societal brokenness, God is sovereign, at work through human means, and watching over at-risk children.[98]

Moses

In the narrative of Moses' early life, we see God actively intervene on behalf of the at-risk infant who had been condemned to die and work through a variety of women to save his life so that he could fulfill his God-appointed purpose to deliver the Israelites (Ex. 1:8-2:8, 2:23-14:31).[99] At birth, circumstances were dire and God seemed absent; Pharaoh had ordered the death of all newborn Hebrew boys. Thanks to the midwives' creativity and his mother's secretiveness, he survived the first few months. Then, thanks

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[97] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 34.

[98] Susan Hayes Greener, "Children-at-Risk and the Whole Gospel: Integral Mission 'To, For, and With' Vulnerable Agents of God," *Transformation (Exeter)* 33, no. 3 (2016): 163, https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378816631256.

[99] Kayla Ann Molnar, "Caring for Foster Youth in Christian Higher Education: Called from Among the Reeds," *Christian Higher Education* 19, no. 5 (2020): 337, https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2020.1712562.

to a chance encounter with Pharaoh's daughter, he is adopted into Pharaoh's household and escaped death. His sister bravely suggested that Moses' biological mother serve as the wet nurse for Pharaoh's daughter. This enabled the birth family's continued involvement from approximately three months, when he was placed in the basket, to three years, which was the average age children were weaned.[100] Yet there are indications that he was primarily raised within Pharaoh's household because he was mistaken as an Egyptian by the Midianites (Ex. 2:19).[101] Moreover, the language in Exodus 2:10, 'he became her son,' probably refers to adoption based on biblical parallels (i.e., Ru. 4:16-17; Est. 2:7, 15) and the princess' role in naming the child.[102] Regardless, all these women worked, knowingly or unknowingly, in collaboration with God to bring deliverance and fulfill God's plan.[103] Moses is one practical, narrative example that exemplifies statements about God's character throughout scripture as loving and caring for vulnerable children and uniquely concerned about their wellbeing.

Esther

In the book of Esther, we learn that she was a particularly vulnerable girl because (a) she was an orphan "in a culture where family provides protection and identity," (b) in

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[100] William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18,* Anchor Yale Bible Commentary Series (London: Yale University Press, 1999), sec. Part I, Bloomsbury Theology and Religion Online.

[101] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, sec. Part I.

[102] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, sec. Part I.

[103] Scott M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries, eds. John Sawyer, Christopher Rowland, Judith Kovacs, and David M. Gunn (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 22.

a paternalistic culture, she was female, and (c) in the Persian controlled empire, she was Jewish.[104] She was raised in kinship care by her cousin Mordecai, who loved her as his own daughter. This is further evidenced by the participle 'he reared' (*'âman*) used in Esther 2:7 which is understood to mean 'foster father' (cf. Nm. 11:12, Is. 49:23).[105] Nevertheless, the defining moments of her life were not of her own choosing due to her social and cultural vulnerabilities. The king declared that all the beautiful virgins be brought to Susa for twelve months of beauty treatments in order for him to select a new wife, where she immediately caught the king's attention (Est. 2:9). Palace life seems to have been challenging while she hid her nationality and family background, plus consent was never part of the equation in her selection as queen. Even after her appointment as queen, Esther remained in a vulnerable position. She was not allowed to reign or exercise authority as queen and was to be submissive to the invitation of the king. Furthermore, as a Jew, she found herself in a perilous position when the king agreed to issue an edict to annihilate all the Jews.[106] Though vulnerable, Esther did not lack agency nor standby passively; she took initiative in order to earn the favor of the king, call the people to fast, and advocate for her people.[107] Again, God is never explicitly mentioned in the

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[104] Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther*, 160.

[105] Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentary Series, ed. David Noel Freedman (London: Yale University Press, 1971), chap. 2, Bloomsbury Theology and Religion Online.

[106] Moore, *Esther*, chap. 2.

[107] Moore, *Esther*, chap. 2.

redemptive story of Esther yet it is clear that He is working behind-the-scenes to care for at-risk children.[108]

Avoiding Burnout

It is easy for believers to fall into the trap of burnout. It is hard to stop, pause, and rest when the work left to be done seems urgent and endless. Believers can begin to prioritize care for others over creating rhythms of self-care and investing in preserving their relationship with God. Burnout is the experience when overcommitment to a cause upsets the balance in one's life and fails to bring about its anticipated result.[109] Believers are committed to a cause, to make disciples of all nations; foster parents are devoted to offering a safe environment for at-risk children to heal and thrive. Both are lofty, worthwhile, Christ-centered goals which can be attempted based on our own strength but only achieved through partnership with God, together in Christian community, with disciplines of self-care, and by resting in His provision.

My Burden is Light

Jesus instructed His disciples, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29-30). God does not intend for Christians to become

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[108] Moore, *Esther*, sec. Introduction and chap. 5

[109] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 34.

overburdened and burnt out while ministering to others. Instead, "it is Yahweh's design that His servants take practical measures to reduce the risk of being overburdened."[110]

We all have our role to play, whether as a pastor, teacher, nurse, or foster parent, but our role is not to play God. God intentionally created humanity with limits and these limits are good.[111] Deborah Beth Creamer highlights how limits inspire creativity, perseverance, humility, and strength.[112] Limits also enable vulnerability, which is where humanity encounters deepest intimacy with others and God.[113] As both fully God and fully human, Jesus was also limited by His embodiment, deliberately giving up His divine privileges such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence to take on human form. Even His energies were limited as He often withdrew to spend time alone with God. Ignoring human limitations assumes a Savior complex that places unreasonable responsibility on the individual and inevitably leads to burnout. Humanity was not intended to be alone, nor accomplish God's desires alone. God's plan is a holy interplay in which God works through humanity and believers share one another's burdens. Believers will experience "a wonderful freedom in recognizing that our families are only called to serve in ways that we are able, using the resources we have."[114] We may be

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[110] Hartness Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero: God on Burnout and Self-Care," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 31, no. 1 (2021): 12, https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2020.1748919.

[111] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

[112] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 93.

[113] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 94.

[114] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 67.

limited, but God is not. When the boy in John 6 offered a measly five loaves of barley and two fish because it was all that he had, Jesus blessed and multiplied the limited resources into more than enough to serve over 5,000 people.[115] A foster family may only be able to accept one placement, but God has the capacity to multiply the impact and create generational and wide-spread community change.

Moses

For years, Moses managed to lead the Israelites through numerous challenges despite their constant complaining. In Numbers 11:11-15, Moses appears to have reached a breaking point.[116] Moses cries out to God, questioning his calling and declaring, "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me" (Nm. 11:14). Moses was beyond exhausted; he was extremely burnout and asserted that he would rather die than continue carrying this burden (Nm. 11:15). Another sign that Moses was burnout is his characteristic concern for others and typical intercession on behalf of the people is notably absent in this prayer.[117] He displays symptoms of compassion fatigue as he apparently runs out of empathy for the people and begins to loathe the responsibility and overwhelming weight of trying to meet the needs of the Israelites, who constantly complain despite his best intentions.[118]

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[115] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 64-65.

[116] Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero," 10.

[117] Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero," 10.

[118] Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero," 11.

Moses questions God's "decision to place him in the parental role of providing for the nation [when] it was not he who gave birth to the nation, and hence it was not he who bore the responsibility of its welfare."[119] During the tough times, many foster parents can likely relate to Moses' sentiments here. In this section, Moses has lost hope and forgotten God's greatness, grace, trustworthiness, and reliability to meet the needs of His people.[120] The good news is that even though Moses blames God and seems faithless, God remains faithful.[121]

In response to Moses' desperate plea, Yahweh offers a practical solution to ease Moses' burden. God instructs Moses to find seventy of Israel's elders whom Yahweh would anoint with the power of the Holy Spirit to come alongside Moses so he would not need to carry the burdens of his people alone (Nm. 11:16-17). Therefore, when burdens become overwhelming, individuals ought to have a robust support system around them that they can rely on to support carrying the burden with them.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Both the Old and New Testaments instruct believers to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mk. 12:31; Lv. 19:18). Olson, Skovholt, and Trotter-Mathison suggest that this commandment offers a corrective perspective to a theology of self-care that is neither

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[119] Dennis R. Cole, *Numbers: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary Series, ed. Ray Clendenen (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 185.

[120] Cole, *Numbers*, 185.

[121] Cole, *Numbers,* 185-186.

self-indulgent nor negligent.[122] Christians are encouraged to treat themselves with the same kindness and care that they would offer to any loved one or other person who might be struggling under similar circumstances.[123]

In this context, self-care is a spiritual process "that begins when one considers their life as a precious gift from God and take the God-given responsibility over it, which involves continuously identifying factors that threaten their health and wellbeing and respond to them by taking actions" that invest in the individual's holistic wellbeing.[124] Self-care is part of what it means to steward the resources that God has given to the individual: one's body, soul, spirit, energy, and time.[125]

Jesus

In the midst of Jesus' remarkable ministry, He was bombarded an onslaught of requests from His disciples and the crowds and occasionally disheartened by their lack of faith or understanding.[126] Word of all that Jesus had done and taught spread quickly and Jesus became in high demand. In Mark 6:31, Jesus and His disciples were so busy that they did not even have a chance to eat. Overall, Christ was abundantly compassionate and empathetic, adjusting His plans to serve others in need (Mk. 6:30-34). Yet there is

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[122] Richard P. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care: Negotiating Today's Challenges with Resilience and Grace* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 71.

[123] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 70.

[124] Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero," 12.

[125] Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero," 13.

[126] Gallagher, "A Theology of Rest," 141-142.

evidence of potential compassion fatigue in Matthew 17:17 when a man approached Jesus seeking healing for his son and Jesus responded, “You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?” Jesus’ extremely high calling and relatively short time on earth could have been the perfect recipe for burnout but Jesus knew the antidote.

Overall, Jesus’ perseverance and effectiveness in ministry were rooted in how He prioritized self-care by investing in His relationship with God. Jesus recognized that there will always be more people who need His help so He could not wait until everyone else was satisfied or healed before pausing for self-care. [127] Jesus would regularly stop and re-center himself by going off to a quiet place to pray. Jesus modeled self-care as the essential soul nourishment that enables a believer to continue loving and serving others well for the long haul. Jesus also specifically addresses Sabbath rest as the epitome of self-care.

Jesus commonly withdrew from the crowds in order to re-center himself on God’s calling and direction. As Jesus’ popularity grew, He felt increased pressure from the large crowds who wanted to force Him to become king and “to *force* Jesus to define His mission and work politically, to become a king who will rival the Herodians or the Romans.”[128] Before the crowds could seize him, Jesus fled with His disciples in order to protect His mission from becoming warped by political ambitions and safeguard His

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[127] Muller, *Sabbath*, 25.

[128] Burge, *John*, 91.

heart from temptations of power or prestige.[129] Jesus cared extravagantly for others but He refused to lose Himself in the process; He remained rooted in His calling as the Messiah.

Sabbath Rest

The Lord commanded His followers to "remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Ex. 20:8). Jesus clarified, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27). Rest is a divine gift from a loving Savior who does not like to see His people suffer. It would be foolish to stubbornly press on in work with mere mortal strength; Christ's rest is necessary to refuel one's body and rehydrate one's spirit. Sabbath rest is intended to be holistic—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual rest and renewal.[130]

Pausing for sabbath rest expresses deep trust in Jesus, acknowledging the work that has already been done and recognizing humanity's work would be fruitless without Christ working in and through each person. Sabbath serves as a powerful reminder to refocus one's heart and realign it with the will of God, reorienting it to focus on things of eternal value: first and foremost a thriving personal relationship with the living God.[131] Practicing sabbath is a powerful countercultural tradition that emphasizes the correct prioritization of rest and work.[132] Sabbath rest is crucial for resilience and perseverance

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[129] Burge, *John,* 91.

[130] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 82.

[131] Gallagher, Luisa J., "A Theology of Rest: Sabbath Principles for Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 16, no. 1 (2019): 142, https://doi.org/10.1177/0739891318821124.

[132] Gallagher, "A Theology of Rest," 142.

in service. Even nature demonstrates the spiritual and biological necessity for a period of rest; some plant species must lie dormant during the winter season or they will not produce fruit in the spring.[133] Sabbath rest is counter-cultural because it does not prioritize quick profit or efficiency. Sabbath rest offers the fertilizing conditions for stamina, endurance, and "an abundance over eternity."[134] Again, nature testifies to the truth of this principle as winter dormancy has been found to increase many seeds' hardiness and enable its survival despite the climatic extremes.[135] Western culture longs to measure worth by productivity; Sabbath says to stop counting because it would be impossible to quantify the value of friendship, laughter, the pleasure of a meal with good company, or the beauty of a sunrise.[136]

Sabbath rhythms are intended to be practiced throughout day-to-day tasks by recognizing God's presence with and work among us. Just as God paused after He completed creation to look over all that He created, families need to make time to reflect on how God was at work in, through, and among them.[137] It is important for families, especially foster families, to take time to celebrate and remember why they serve, especially in seasons where the service is less than satisfying. Daily activities such as sharing meals together, singing songs, sharing stories, and connecting with friends are the

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[133] Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 7.

[134] Muller, *Sabbath*, 57-58.

[135] Muller, *Sabbath*, 57-58.

[136] Muller, *Sabbath*, 112.

[137] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 72.

kind of simple, life-giving disciplines that join the people of God together and exhibit the life of abundant freedom that God offers.[138] Another simple sabbath practice is a posture of listening to God and seeking His wisdom and discernment for how to move forward throughout the week and keep one's priorities in proper order. Without rest, busyness impairs one's hearing; "sabbath is an incubator for wisdom."[139] Sabbath rest compels participants' hearts to pursue the kingdom work and serve the margins of society throughout the week by addressing injustices.[140]

Ancient rabbis believe that on the seventh day, "God created *menuha*—tranquility, serenity, peace, and repose—rest, in the deepest possible sense of fertile healing stillness."[141] Western culture has caused many people to feel guilt or shame about taking time to rest. This perspective misinterprets rest as laziness rather than understanding shalom rest as rejuvenating, restorative, and healing. People's willingness to prioritize rest depends on their perception of its benefits.[142] Many are afraid they will only encounter silence and emptiness in the stillness of Sabbath. On the contrary, Sabbath invites humanity to experience complete satisfaction and a renewed sense of wholeness. Pausing for Sabbath urges one's spirit to delight in the inherent beauty and goodness that surrounds him or her, appreciate his or her inner strength, wisdom, and resiliency, and

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[138] Gallagher, "A Theology of Rest," 146.

[139] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 82.

[140] Gallagher, "A Theology of Rest," 146.

[141] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 82.

[142] Muller, *Sabbath*, 40.

celebrate the gift of life, fellowship, and interdependent community.[143] Sabbath can be a reminder of what is constant and unchangeable regardless of the ebbs and flows of good or bad days throughout life.

The Israelites

Observing the Sabbath has essentially always been countercultural.[144] In Exodus 16, the Israelites began to complain about the lack of food in the wilderness. They begin to wish that they had never left Egypt because, "as far as they can see, the result in either case is the same: death, only this time through the torment of starvation."[145] Their immediate need for food exposes the underlying, fundamental issue: Will they trust God in their need, exhaustion, and fatigue?[146]

In response, God provided the Israelites with manna each day and tested them to see if they would follow His instructions (Ex. 16:4). They were instructed to gather an *omer* for each person in their family, only what was needed for that day (Ex. 16:16). For five days, they were not to keep any leftovers until the morning. If they did not listen, the leftover manna would be full of maggots the next morning (Ex. 16:20). But on the sixth day, they were instructed to gather twice as much to prepare for the seventh day of sabbath rest when no new manna would be provided (Ex. 16:29). This time, the leftovers

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[143] Muller, *Sabbath*, 42.

[144] Gallagher, "A Theology of Rest," 142.

[145] William Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series, ed. Leslie Andres (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 2014), 330.

[146] Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19*, 328.

did not go bad (Ex. 16:24). Yet some people still went out to gather new manna on the Sabbath and found none (Ex. 16:27). Trusting God for sabbath rest and provision is not easy or natural. Yet, God remained faithful despite their disobedience and the Israelites continued to eat manna for forty years (Ex. 16:35).

The act of gathering manna served as a sacred activity of daily living that cycled according to sabbath rhythms.[147] Sabbath days offered rest from work and were intended to be set aside as holy. Johnstone helpfully connects these functions by explaining that "the ability to rest from labor is the mark of a free people… but Israel owes its freedom to YHWH."[148] Therefore, the Sabbath day is more than a day off of work, but a day to recall, remember, and celebrate God's goodness, provision, and protection in their lives. In the Old Testament, remembering entailed more than keeping something in mind; it involved physical participation in an activity as an act of honoring that truth.[149] Deuteronomy 6:8 encouraged the Israelites to tie the commandments of the Shema as a symbol on their hands, bind them on their foreheads, and write them on the doorframes of their houses as physical acts of remembrance. Likewise, Sabbath is an embodied act of remembering God as the ultimate provider for daily needs and ultimate deliverance.

The Israelites developed traditions and symbols to help them remember the Sabbath (Ex. 16:33). Eventually, the Israelites forgot how miraculous the gift of manna

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[147] Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19*, 331.

[148] William Johnstone, *Exodus 20-40*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series, ed. Leslie Andres (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2014), 34.

[149] Johnstone, *Exodus 20-40*, 34.

was and overlooked God's presence among them. Scripture invites families to consider creating Sabbath rhythms within their context in order to discover true rest and remember God's good presence with them.

Summary

The researcher has highlighted foundational biblical principles that undergird a theology of foster care, including how to develop inclusive family life, care for at-risk children, and avoid burnout. These values not only compel some individuals to serve as foster parents but call the church to surround foster families with support.

Scripture describes family life as rooted in covenantal love and hospitality. Covenantal love remains faithful even when the other is faithless. Foster parents exhibit this virtue because they refuse to let the foster child's misbehavior, mistrust, or anger get in the way of their radical pursuit of the child's best interests. Christian covenantal love is missional. The Bible advocates for respect among family members and obedience toward parents but Jesus emphasizes that believers cannot let family get in the way of the individual's calling and purpose from God. Sometimes, family members may not be supportive of the foster parent's calling toward foster care. Nevertheless, those who obediently persist in the calling that God has placed on their lives toward foster care and graciously expand their definition of family accordingly are following the example that Christ modeled.

The Bible presents care for at-risk children as rooted in resiliency, hope, and redemption. Scripture encourages believers to be resilient and pursue God's calling on

their life regardless of the obstacles or opposition.[150] Christians persevere in spite of these obstacles with the memory of how God has been faithful before and hope that He will be faithful again. There is uncertainty about what challenges lie ahead, but there is certainty that they will come. Thankfully, God also has the power to redeem suffering so that it can be used to bless others and strengthen one's faith in Him.[151] Meanwhile, believers will find themselves increasingly dependent upon Christ's power to sustain them with endurance and resilience for the walk of faith. Readers can find hope in the stories of Moses and Esther which illustrate vulnerable children should never be underestimated in terms of potential for redemption and kingdom impact.

The theological review asserted that avoiding burnout is key to sustainable ministry and an expression of trust and obedience in God. It highlighted how Jesus declared His burden as light and how God intentionally created humanity with limits. Acknowledging one's inherent limitations, partnering with others, and depending upon God's strength is all part of God's plan for humanity. Caring for one's wellbeing is an expression of stewardship for one's body, heart, and soul. Abiding in Sabbath rest recognizes humanity's place within creation and resets and realigns one's heart with the will of God.

Yahweh is the ultimate role model that Christians strive to emulate in daily life. He embodied all of these principles: inclusive family life, care for those at-risk, and avoiding burnout. Jesus demonstrated covenantal love and radical hospitality by

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[150] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 297.

[151] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 297.

becoming flesh. He lived resiliently on earth and remained without sin despite countless temptations. He gave special attention to the marginalized, at-risk, and children. He offered hope for a meaningful, purposeful, and freeing life. Jesus simultaneously modeled carrying others' burdens and how to prevent burnout by living out rhythms of sabbatical rest and depending upon God's strength rather than His own. The following chapter explores how foster families follow in Jesus' footsteps and embody this theology of foster care by embodying these values of covenantal love, radical hospitality, resilient living, welcome embrace of the vulnerable, and intentional self-care.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Characteristics of Healthy Families

Healthy families are bonded by unconditional love, united through service together, and sustained through resilience despite any stresses, conflicts, or challenges. These bonding factors are consistent across all families yet uniquely expressed in foster families where foster parents love unconditionally regardless of the length of the placement, immediate and extended family are forced to serve together in wrap around foster child support, and together navigate the unique stressors of the foster care system.

Unconditional Love

Family life is healthiest when characterized by a deep, unconditional love that transcends concerns of reciprocity. Mateo studied unconditional love within the context of families caring for a disabled child. This researcher believes Mateo's conclusions about unconditional love are generalizable to most families and particularly relevant to foster families who are also caring for a demanding and needy child without sufficient state support.[152] She emphasizes how unconditional love is expressed through consistent care, especially during difficult and challenging circumstances.[153] It means accepting

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[152] Marina Mateo, "The Duty of Love: Kinship and Identity in the Face of Disability in Madrid," *The Journal for Undergraduate Ethnography* 12, no. 1 (2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.15273/jue.v12i1.11310.

[153] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 2-13.

family members for who they are, including their strengths, weaknesses, past traumas, and uncertain futures.[154] It entails treating others with dignity and celebrating what makes each person special.[155] Choosing to welcome a foster child invites the frustrations and challenges of the foster care system, messiness and complexity of the foster child's childhood trauma, and unique personality of a stranger into one's home, which clearly exhibits unconditional love. Such love requires growth, adaptation, and intentionality to care for the other in the way that they need, even self-sacrificially.[156]

Out of unconditional love, foster parents routinely "naturalize the extra weight" of the foster care system "as part of what it means to be family."[157] Unconditional love shapes who the carer is as a person, making them more generous, kind, and giving.[158] It is assumed that foster parents primarily motivated by money or those who view foster parenting primarily as a job are more likely to see caregiving as a burden rather than see caregiving as a moral duty or expression of love.[159] Yet, Doyle and Melville highlight how difficult it is for researchers to receive honest and accurate self-reporting from foster parents about the influence of economic motives on their decision to start or sustain foster care because participants want to avoid the cultural taboo or risk of being seen as doing it

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[154] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 11.

[155] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 6.

[156] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 6, 11.

[157] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 3.

[158] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 10-13.

[159] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 10.

for the money.[160] Moreover, Doyle and Melville argue that foster care motivation research can set up a false dichotomy between altruism and carer pay because financial compensation and genuine love are not mutually exclusive.[161] They suggest a more nuanced investigation into whether the foster care allowance is viewed primarily as income for caregiving or reimbursement for the expenditures of caring for the foster child.[162]

Foster parents demonstrate unconditional love as they willingly alter their family structure and adapt their everyday life in order to incorporate a foster child and cultivate a sense of belonging.[163] Within this perspective, even the burdens of foster care become a blessing as the family is abundantly grateful for the relationship developed during their time together and how they have all changed as people because of the experience. Their commitment to unconditional love remains steadfast through personal grief and loss and regardless of society's embrace.[164] Overall, when families are bonded through unconditional love, they can more readily face the challenges of the world. Unconditional love is a messy, durable, and engaged kind of love that perseveres and persists regardless of the circumstances.[165]

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[160] Rose Melville and Jennifer Doyle, "Good Caring and Vocabularies of Motive Among Foster Carers," *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2013): 77.

[161] Melville and Doyle, "Good Caring," 77.

[162] Melville and Doyle, "Good Caring," 78.

[163] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 9, 11.

[164] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 3.

[165] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Inside Out Families: Living the Faith Together* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 101.

Family Resilience

Adding a new member to the family, such as a foster child, inevitably causes "a period of instability and disequilibrium for the family unit" as it adjusts to new relationships and roles and integrates the new family member into family life, patterns, and rules of behavior.[166] This disequilibrium causes stress for the family system as it navigates the multitude of changes and challenges. Different individuals and family systems commonly perceive the same stressor differently, which has led to various studies of what makes some families more resilient than others.[167] Therefore, the researcher chose to study family resilience in hopes that such insights might be taught to current and prospective foster parents to potentially increase their longevity as foster parents or predict which families may more naturally adjust to the stressors of fostering.

A family resilience perspective focuses on a strengths-based approach to family systems that assumes family members are trying to do their best for one another (albeit in sometimes misguided ways), "engages distressed families with respect and compassion for their struggles, affirms their reparative potential,"[168] and seeks to surround them with protective factors in order to equip them with the strategies and resources to emerge

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[166] Jane D. Lanigan and Elizabeth Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives Regarding the Transition of a New Placement into Their Home: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 26, no. 3 (2016): 906, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0597-0.

[167] Bruce E. Compas, Lexa K. Murphy, Janet Yarboi, Meredith A. Gruhn, and Kelly H. Watson, "Stress and Coping in Families," in *APA Handbook of Contemporary Family Psychology: Foundations, Methods, and Contemporary Issues Across the Lifespan,* (Washington: American Psychological Association), 37.

[168] Froma Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework: Innovative Practice Applications," *Family Relations* 51, no. 2 (2002): 130, 133, https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12239.

stronger after facing stressful challenges.[169] Since foster families navigate such family transitions with higher frequency and more unpredictable stressors as they welcome each new placement, this framework is particularly helpful.[170] Depending on the degree of natural fit, it can take days to months for the foster family to re-establish homeostasis within and cohesion of the foster family unit.[171]

The following discussion is structured around the framework for family resilience proposed in Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Piel's study of how foster families cope and adapt over time.[172] Their model was informed by previous studies from Brown and Campbell, Marcellus, and Rolland.[173] Their study corroborated previous research by affirming family resilience as "a transactional process of coping and adaptation that evolves overtime" that is marked by shared family strengths.[174] Figure 1.1 offers hope for foster families struggling to adjust by creating language to normalize and describe the journey and offering a clear pathway to help families navigate the challenges of foster care and strive for potential growth and improvement.[175]

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[169] Froma Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework: Innovative Practice Applications," 130, 133.

[170] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663.

[171] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 906.

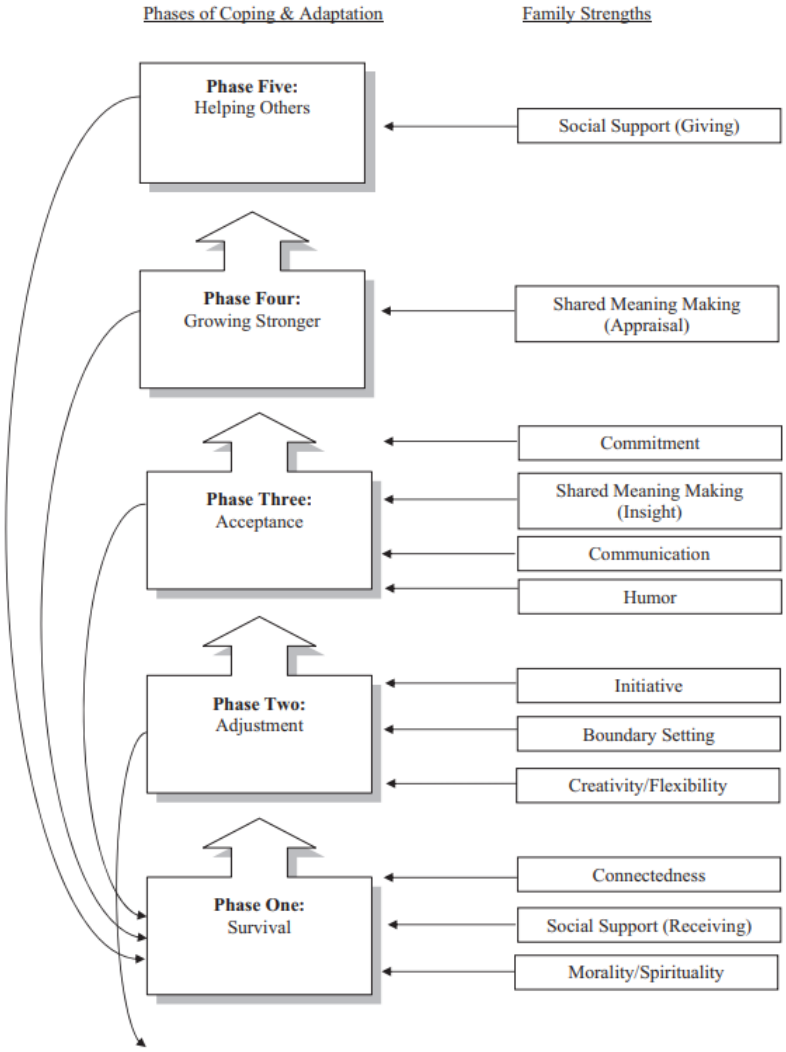
[172] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 664.

[173] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 663.

[174] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 660.

[175] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 671.

Figure 1.1: The Process of Family Resilience



Source: Figure from Cynthia A. Lietz, Francie J. Julien-Chinn, Jennifer M. Geiger, and Megan Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster: Understanding How Families Cope and Adapt Over Time," *Family Process* 55, no. 4 (2016), figure 1.

Phase One: Survival

During the initial stage of family resilience, families focus on coping with the multitude of disruptive changes, just trying to get through the day.[176] For foster families, this survival period starts when a new placement enters the home, especially if it is the

[176] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 665.

family's first placement after being licensed but is frequently revisited with the entrance of each new foster child.[177] The foundational pillars supporting families during the survival stage are "connectedness and mutuality, social support, and the family's sense of morality/spirituality."[178]

Walsh views connectedness as the interpersonal affective bonding and natural kinship among family members that develops through ongoing proximity and shared activities.[179] Emotionally, foster parents' first priority is creating a sense of safety and belonging for the foster child through responsive and reliable care.[180] Foster parents may plan a special event to introduce the foster child to extended family and close community members to help the child feel included in the family.[181]

Lanigan and Burleson suggest that a variety of social supports are also key to foster family wellbeing during the initial weeks in order to support the family through transition (i.e., offering meal trains, resource closets, emotional support, and mentoring.)[182] Close partnership with the child welfare agency is also essential for receiving informational support such as critical background information on the child and

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[177] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 665.

[178] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 665.

[179] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 665.

[180] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 908.

[181] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 908.

[182] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 908.

crises resources.[183] Moreover, the family relies on connecting with a network of professional support (i.e., doctors, dentists, therapists, and teachers) within the transition period to collaborate and partner together on supporting the foster child's holistic wellbeing and healthy development.[184]

Throughout the survival phase, foster families rely upon an underlying set of core principles and beliefs which help determine the righteousness and worthwhileness of actions during difficult decision making.[185] Many foster parent testimonials emphasize their dependence upon spirituality, faith practices, and God in order to overcome the challenges of foster care.[186] Salmon's literature review found that "67% of foster parents agreed or strongly [agreed] that being part of a spiritual community helped them cope with the high demands of fostering."[187] She also states that foster parents described their spirituality as a life raft that helps keep foster families afloat and able to continue on in their foster parenting journey.[188]

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[183] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 906.

[184] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 908.

[185] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666.

[186] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666.

[187] Salmon, "Spirituality and Treatment Foster Care," 29.

[188] Salmon, "Spirituality and Treatment Foster Care," 29.

Phase Two: Adjustment

Adjustment entails creating change to family systems to accommodate and make room for the new family member.[189] Families require initiative, boundaries, creativity and flexibility to adjust smoothly in this stage.[190]

In this phase, initiative means that the family believes they have the capacity to influence the outcomes of stressors through their actions and interventions.[191] Foster parents emphasize the importance of an internal locus of control, intentionally planning, deliberately organizing, and strategically acting to reshape the family's daily functioning toward greater harmony.[192]

Within families, boundaries define who is in the family unit, what behavior is appropriate, and what individual responsibilities entail.[193] For foster families, the definition of who is in the family unit is permeable and in flux—"expanding with the entry of a foster child, contracting as a child leaves, and shifting again" to account for the potential of child welfare workers, biological family members, and other community members supporting the foster family.[194] Enforcing healthy boundaries also requires honoring individual and family limits by "using respite, taking a break between

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[189] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666.

[190] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666.

[191] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666.

[192] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 7.

[193] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666-667; Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 909; Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents, 5.

[194] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666-667.

placements, and being realistic about the number and age of [foster] children" that the family can manage and sustain.[195] It is also important to set emotional boundaries by eliminating the tendency toward having a savior complex and refusing to take responsibility for the outcomes of others' choices.[196]

Creativity and flexibility allow families to resourcefully problem solve and try new things.[197] It entails finding ways to respond creatively, patiently, and empathetically to daily and ongoing stressors, especially when these stressors threaten to disrupt the clear and consistent structures established within the family's boundaries. During this phase, family members commonly need to be adaptable enough to shift roles, take on new responsibilities, share their parents' attention, and adjust to new discipline strategies.[198]

Phase Three: Acceptance

Acceptance is epitomized by a sense of deep commitment, ideally mutually, between the parent and child dyad and amongst each individual family member.[199] This commitment commonly compels foster parents to go above and beyond the call of duty

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[195] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 667; Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents Through Mentoring," 5.

[196] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 5.

[197] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 667.

[198] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 913.

[199] Nicholas Oke, Helen Rostill-Brookes, and Michael Larkin, "Against the Odds: Foster Carers' Perceptions of Family, Commitment and Belonging in Successful Placements," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 18, no. 1 (2013): 13, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104511426398.

for their foster children.[200] In this stage, foster families have learned to naturalize the unique challenges of parenting a child who has a history of abuse or neglect.[201] In this phase, the growth of the emotional bond has reached the point in which foster parents refer to the foster child as 'theirs.'[202] This level of commitment may entail proactive grief knowing that the foster child's place in their home is temporary and there will be deep sorrow when the child returns to their biological family.[203]

Communication is always critical in family systems, but especially so for foster families in this phase.[204] Without the natural biological ties and shared history of traditional families to define belonging, "foster families must rely on communication to build and sustain feelings of family inclusion and family ingroup membership."[205] Overall, the ideal tone for family communication is clear and empathetic in order to encourage healthy emotional expression and foster collaborative problem solving.[206] Warm and open communication can encourage and model healthy coping strategies to children.[207] Family meetings are one way families foster closeness and open

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[200] Oke, Rostill-Brookes, and Larkin, "Against the Odds," 12.

[201] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 4.

[202] Oke, Rostill-Brookes, and Larkin, "Against the Odds," 14.

[203] Marcellus, "Supporting Resilience in Foster Families," 18.

[204] Nelson and Colaner, "Fostering 'Family,'" 477.

[205] Leslie R. Nelson and Colleen W. Colander, "'Fostering 'Family': Communication Orientations in the Foster Parent-Child Relationship," *Western Journal of Communication* 84, no. 4 (2020): 479, https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2020.1734231.

[206] Compas, Murphy, Yarboi, Gruhn, and Watson, "Stress and Coping in Families," 46.

[207] Compas, Murphy, Yarboi, Gruhn, and Watson, "Stress and Coping in Families," 47.

communication. [208] These meetings can communicate the importance of each member by creating space for them to raise and discuss important issues or emphasize other family values by reflecting on how to respond to a situation.[209]

Family values and their ability to create shared meaning are key components in predicting whether family crises will be traumatic or positively reinterpreted as an opportunity for family teamwork and bonding.[210] In such family meetings, foster parents can help promote resilience by "recasting a crisis as a shared challenge that is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful to tackle."[211] Facilitating a positive, hopeful outlook by focusing on predicting possible positive outcomes in the face of challenges decreases anxiety and increases resilience.[212] Family values like hope, optimism, hardiness, coherence, and perseverance sustain families in the midst of stress.[213] Family worldviews and spirituality allow families to envision how their current circumstances and challenges fit into the larger scope of life and perceive a larger purpose. Ultimately, resilient families share a belief that overcoming adversity is

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[208] Harrist, Henry, Liu, and Sherffield Morris, "Family Resilience," 235.

[209] Harrist, Henry, Liu, and Sherffield Morris, "Family Resilience," 235.

[210] Amanda W. Harrist, Carolyn S. Henry, Chao Liu, and Amanda Sheffield Morris, "Family Resilience: The Powers of Rituals and Routines in Family Adaptive Systems," in *APA Handbook of Contemporary Family Psychology: Foundations, Methods, and Contemporary Issues Across the Lifespan*, (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2019), 230.

[211] Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework," 132.

[212] Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework," 132.

[213] Henry, Sheffield Morris, and Harrist, "Family Resilience," 34-35.

rewarding because they will emerge on the other side of adversity as a stronger and wiser family, with their values intact.[214]

Phase Four: Growing Stronger

In the fourth phase, the family has regained stability and emerged from the crisis, stress, or challenge even stronger and more unified.[215] They are able to reflect on and recognize how persevering through the first three stages has developed unique character, deep empathy, increased patience, and renewed appreciation for their family and life circumstances.[216] This phase defines resilience: "Families report that through weathering a crisis together their relationships were enriched and more loving than they might have been otherwise;" families did not just survive, they thrived.[217]

Phase Five: Helping Others

Helping others is the final phase in this framework of family resilience.[218] At this stage, families want to become the benevolent giver of support to pay it forward as an expression of gratitude for all the ways they have experienced support throughout their own journey.[219] After reunification, foster families may continue to serve as a source of

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[214] Henry, Morris, and Harrist, "Family Resilience," 34-35.

[215] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 669-670.

[216] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 670.

[217] Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework," 131.

[218] Leitz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 670.

[219] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 670.

support to the biological family or foster child.[220] Veteran foster parents may also serve as trainers, mentors, or informal support to other foster parents who are still acclimating to the child welfare system or the unique challenges of a new placement.[221]

Overall, introducing foster parents to family systems theory and the process of family resilience during training can normalize and explain the foster transition period.[222] Families are simultaneously the most common sources of significant stress and the most dominant context for learning, developing, and supporting healthy coping strategies and resilience.[223] Understanding the core process of family resilience will also assist those in surrounding ecosystems (such as extended family members, neighborhoods, social services, education, therapists, and others) to provide effective social support.[224] Ideally, this process of family resilience can serve as a roadmap to facilitate the creation of more healthy, resilient, and effective foster families.

Unique Stressors for Foster Parents

Caring for at-risk children entails identifying what is within one's capacity or responsibility to accomplish, change, or influence.[225] The responsibilities of offering

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[220] Nuria Fuentes-Peláez, M. Angels Balsells, Josefina Fernández, Eduard Vaquero, and Pere Amorós, "The Social Support in Kinship Foster Care: A Way to Enhance Resilience," *Child and Family Social Work* 21, no. 4 (2016): 587, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12182.

[221] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 2; Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 1.

[222] Lanigan and Burlson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 914.

[223] Compas, Murphy, Yarboi, Gruhn, and Watson, "Stress and Coping in Families," 37.

[224] Harrist, Henry, Liu, and Sheffield Morris, "Family Resilience," 230-231.

[225] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2

consistent sensitive care for foster children "go well beyond the normative experiences of parenting."[226] For example, in addition to family relationships, foster parents must navigate systemic pressures from the child welfare system, increased role expectations, decreased authority and privacy, and limited information.[227] Many foster parents wrestle with role ambiguity and are missing good role models for what it means to be an effective foster parent.[228] Typically, there is an overwhelming 'cost to caring' which is difficult to fully understand until it has been personally experienced.[229]

Many foster parents feel alone when facing the unique stressors of foster care, as those raising biological children cannot fully relate or empathize.[230] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France conducted a study which compared parents' degree of stress on the Parental Stress Indictor test and discovered that the child domain stress score for foster parents, across various aged children, is about two standard deviations above the normative mean score, equating to about the ninety-ninth percentile.[231] In addition, the life domain stress score on the Parental Stress Indicator test was elevated at around the

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[226] Lyn Murray, Michael Tarren-Sweeney, and Karyn France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support and Training in the Context of High Burden of Care," Child and Family Social Work 16, no. 2 (2011): 149, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00722.x.

[227] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 149-150.

[228] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2

[229] Kimberly Bradford McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction on Foster Parenting" (Doctor of Philosophy diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, Buffalo, 2008), 3.

[230] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

[231] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 153.

seventy-fifth percentile.[232] Overall, the study found that foster parents had more difficulty caring for foster children than do parents at large.[233]

Within the literature review of stressors for foster parents, three categories emerged: developmental, sociocultural, and sociopolitical. *Developmental or psychological* stressors include (a) handling trauma responses and secondary traumatic stress, [234] (b) overcoming attachment issues, [235] (c) creating a sense of belonging and safety, [236] (d) adapting to reduced privacy, [237] (e) responding to potential allegations and (f) keeping the faith. [238] *Sociocultural or family system stressors* include (a) managing different racial or cultural backgrounds between the parent and child, [239] (b) disciplining effectively, [240] (c) understanding and coping with disruptive behavior, [241] (d) teaching

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[232] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 153.

[233] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 153.

[234] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1; McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 3.

[235] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

[236] DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School*, 31.

[237] Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill, "Foster Carers Who Cease to Foster," 57; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support and Training," 149-150.

[238] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 1.

[239] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

[240] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 1, 2.

[241] DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School,* 31; Brown and Calder, "Concept-Mapping," 481; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663; Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill, "Foster Carers Who Cease to Foster," 57.

healthy coping mechanisms and self-regulation, (e) retaining strong support systems, [242] and (f) reorganizing nuclear and extended family systems. [243] Finally, *sociopolitical and child welfare system stressors* include (a) receiving incomplete to no information about the child's background, [244] (b) promoting trust, [245] (c) sharing authority in decision making, [246] (d) partnering with various service providers, [247] (e) working with the social worker, [248] (f) interacting with birth family members, [249] (g) navigating grief and loss, [250]

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[242] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 1.

[243] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 1; Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 77; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663.

[244] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 910; Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 206; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663; Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar, "What Can Agencies Do," 213.

[245] Brown and Calder, "Concept-Mapping," 481.

[246] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 206-207.

[247] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1; Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 206-207; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663.

[248] DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School*, 31; Brown and Calder, "Concept-Mapping," 481; Favela and Velazquez, "Factors that Contribute to Foster Parent Turnover," 10; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 351, 353, 359; Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill, "Foster Carers Who Cease to Foster," 57, 60; Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar, "What Can Agencies Do," 213-214; Piel, Geiger, Julien-Chinn, and Lietz, "An Ecological Systems Approach," 1039; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support and Training," 153.

[249] Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 136; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support and Training," 154.

[250] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 206; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support and Training," 149-150.

(h) receiving little to no advanced warning of changes, [251] and (i) qualifying for licensure.[252]

This chapter focuses on three specific stressors that are present when caring for foster children: trauma, discipline, and grief. These stressors are the most researched, well-documented, and often revisited with each new placement. New foster parents tend to utilized task-oriented coping or direct actions to address the immediate stressor whereas long-term foster parents develop more robust emotional coping skills to better manage some of the other stressors listed below over their years of service.[253]

Trauma

Child welfare workers intervene when there are allegations of neglect (i.e., failing to meet the child's basic safety and emotional needs) or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.[254] When it reaches the threshold of severity in which the child is removed, the transition can take place with little to no advanced warning.[255] This intervention effort seeks to rescue the child from trauma but the removal from their birth family creates yet another traumatic event for the foster child.[256] Losing their home and parents can stir up

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[251] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 1.

[252] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 206.

[253] Jay Miller, Morgan Cooley, Larry Owens, Jessica Day Fletcher, and Shannon Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents: An Exploratory Study," *Children and Youth Services Review* 98 (2019): 207, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.002.

[254] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 5.

[255] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 1.

[256] Adrianna Welchsler-Zimring, Christopher A. Kearney, Harpreet Kaur, and Timothy Day, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Removal from Home as a Primary, Secondary, or Disclaimed Trauma

intense anxiety, cause depression, provoke disruptive behaviors, spur dissociation, and precipitate a PTSD diagnosis. [257] Interestingly, Welchsler-Zimring, Kearney, Kaur, and Day found that PTSD symptoms such as "re-experiencing, avoidance and numbing, and arousal" were most prominent among adolescents who reported the removal from home as a secondary traumatic event.[258] Their findings suggest that the trauma of being removed from home and separated from one's parents is perceived differently by various individuals but is often less traumatic when compared to the history of abuse and neglect that led to the removal. When accepting a new placement, foster parents assume the responsibility of seeking to bring the child to a place of healing where they can overcome their traumatic past and thrive.[259]

Unfortunately, many parents report being ill-equipped and poorly trained to do so. Children who have experienced trauma exhibit many of the same symptoms as people who are diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[260] It can take extensive time for foster parents to uncover the full extent of the child's trauma history and more fully understand how prior events from their childhood are dramatically influencing the way in which he or she approaches life today.[261] For example, foster children's disruptive

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in Maltreated Adolescents," *Journal of Family Violence* 27, no. 8 (2012): 813-814, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-012-9467-8.

[257] Welchsler-Zimring, Kearney, Kaur, Day, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 813-814.

[258] Welchsler-Zimring, Kearney, Kaur, Day, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," 816.

[259] MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 354.

[260] McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 2.

[261] John DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School: A Guide for Foster Parents, Social Workers, and Teachers* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015), 61.

behavior can be addressed more empathetically after learning that neglect and abuse impact the same parts of the brain that are primarily responsible for regulating self-control.[262] Furthermore, some behaviors can be normalized, such as sensory processing difficulties, which are atypical for the child's developmental age but common among children with a history of trauma.[263] Other common symptoms include: sleep disorders, decreased affect and intellectual functioning, a constant state of anxiety or arousal, irritability, argumentativeness, rage, shame, feelings of betrayal, delinquency, eating disorders, intrusive memories, and depression.[264]

Foster children are more likely to have insecure attachment with parents than children raised by biological parents.[265] The underlying factors are twofold. First, the foster child typically enters the foster family "with a negative balance in the trust bank."[266] Their previous trauma, abuse, or distrust with caregivers developmentally leads to insecure attachment which means they have trouble forming an emotional connection with their foster family and difficulty trusting their foster parents' reliability.[267] Second, it takes time to rewire one's brain so that the head knowledge of safety translates to the

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[262] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 204.

[263] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 5.

[264] McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 2-3.

[265] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2.

[266] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 5.

[267] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2.

actual embodied, felt reality that one is truly safe.[268] Caring for foster children requires offering consistent, compassionate care for a child "who instinctively mistrusts one's good intentions" and responding empathetically when the child is defensive or disruptive.[269] Simple strategies to prioritize felt safety include validating feelings, offering comfort items, eliminating irritants, and empowering the child with choices to increase self-efficacy.

In the process of helping foster children overcome their own trauma, foster parents commonly experience primary trauma themselves. Examples include physical assaults on themselves or other family members, assaults on family pets, and emotional or psychological abuse.[270] Moreover, the optimism to engage in foster care ministry and the empathy needed to compassionately address troublesome behavior make foster parents increasingly susceptible to secondary trauma because empathy increases the likelihood a foster parent will internalize the child's trauma.[271] Secondary traumatic stress is the personal distress experienced when hearing of the trauma a loved one has experienced and the desire to help, which, like primary trauma, commonly causes PTSD-

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[268] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2.

[269] Jonathan Baylin, "Social Buffering and Compassionate Stories: The Neuroscience of Trust Building with Children in Care," Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy 38, no. 4 (2017): 607, https://doi.org/0.1002/anzf.1272.

[270] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 15.

[271] David Conrad and Yvonne Kellar-Guenther, "Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction Among Colorado Child Protection Workers," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 30, no. 10 (2006): 1072.

like symptoms.[272] In addition, experiencing trauma may lead to "changes to worldview and spirituality, decreased self-esteem and self-efficacy, a reduced sense of accomplishment and achievement, an erosion of idealistic views," burnout, dissociation, mood swings, and physical health deterioration which can threaten foster parents' longevity of service.[273] Secondary traumatic stress is more prevalent among foster parents than the general parent population due to their proximity to and responsibility to care for traumatized children.[274] They are at even greater risk if they are female, younger, have a personal trauma history, or have served as a foster parent for an extended period of time.[275]

Many foster parents also live with anxiety and fear of potential allegations of maltreatment due to the increased oversight of the child welfare system and disruptive behavior of the foster children.[276] Child abuse investigations are perceived as traumatic

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[272] Jason M. Newell and Gordon A. MacNeil, "Professional Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Compassion Fatigue," *Best Practices in Mental Health* 6, no. 2 (2010): 60.

[273] McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 3.

[274] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 207.

[275] Katharina L. Star, "The Relationship Between Self-Care, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction Among Professional Counselors and Counselors-In-Training" (PhD diss., Kent State University, Kent, 2013), 11, OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

[276] Francie J. Juline-Chinn, Katie L. Cotter, Megan Hayes Piel, Jennifer M. Geiger, and Cynthia A. Lietz, "Examining Risk, Strengths, and Functioning of Foster Families: Implications of Strengths-Based Practice," Journal of Family Social Work 20, no. 4 (2017): 307, https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2017.1348111.

for foster parents and their children.[277] Foster parents feel the investigation questions their integrity, overlooks their effort and contributions toward the child's healing, and breeds mistrust.[278] Meanwhile, foster parents worry about the impact of the investigation's questioning on their children and how it may disrupt their sense of safety and stability.[279]

Discipline

Hook, Hook, and Berry describe discipline as a common stressor for foster parents. They explain how foster parents quickly discover that many foster children react poorly to traditional parenting discipline methods (e.g., enforcing consequences and removing privileges) because punishment-based discipline styles are believed to trigger the child's trauma responses which can cause them to spiral further.[280] Instead, parents ought to consider emphasizing re-do opportunities that promote learning, healing, and practice forming new neural pathways for better decision making and problem solving.

First, discipline can cause stress for foster parents by requiring creative thinking in high-stress environments in order to maintain self-regulation and implement alternate discipline approaches that "[combine] firmness, kindness, and retraining."[281] For

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[277] Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 136; Julien-Chinn, Cotter, Hayes Piel, Geiger, and Lietz, "Examining Risk, Strengths and Functioning of Foster Families," 307; DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School*, 77.

[278] MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 359.

[279] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 5.

[280] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1-2; Karyn B. Purvis, David R. Cross, and Wendy Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), chap. 6, Kindle.

[281] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child*, chap. 6.

example, implementing a time-in rather than a time-out enables the foster parent to stay connected to the foster child, teach them coping strategies, and have open communication about what happened, its impact, and how to approach similar situations differently in the future.[282] Overall, Purvis recommends that foster parents (a) intervene promptly, (b) state expectations clearly, (c) give explicit options, (d) explain how the child's actions affect themselves and others, (e) stay close to avoid exacerbating feelings of abandonment, (f) offer clear feedback on better alternate choices for behavior, (g) provide the opportunity to try again, and (h) openly praise the child for their improvements.[283] She considers it important to give the child an opportunity to physically try again or physically act out a similar social story because developing and utilizing the child's muscle memory "can trump cognitive, thought-based memory for very young children [and] enhance comprehension and recall for older children."[284] Finally, Purvis encourages parents to not take it personally and reframe misconduct as a teaching moment and growth opportunity which may also help reduce the stress of the situation for the foster parent.[285]

Second, it creates stress within the family as biological children may complain due to the felt inequity when comparing how boundaries are enforced, grace is extended, and consequences are applied between foster and non-foster kids. During transition periods, especially, expectations and discipline may not look the same for all children in

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[282] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 5; Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child*, chap. 6.

[283] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child,* chap. 6.

[284] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child,* chap. 6.

[285] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child,* chap. 6.

the household.[286] Foster children also commonly struggle in the transition period because they are stepping into an established family system where others are familiar with and accustomed to the family's expectations, rules, and relationship dynamics which may look very different than their birth families' norms.[287] Regardless, it is important for both caregivers in a two-parent household to present a united front around discipline issues by saying what one means and meaning what one says.[288]

Third, foster parents experience stress due to the perceived judgment from family or community members who grow weary of disruptive behavior or critical of non-traditional discipline techniques. Purvis encourages others to remember "that acting out can mask a variety of traumas and heartaches, as well as keen loneliness and real sadness."[289] Therefore, the child's acting out is not a reflection on his or her character but a behavioral pattern developed out of necessity, a survival technique or defense mechanism formed in their trauma history.[290] Foster parents long for the wider community to adopt this kind of compassionate response in which others recognize that discipline is not a one-size fits all approach and bad behavior is often an expression of the

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[286] Lanigan and Burlson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 909.

[287] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted,* chap. 2.

[288] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child,* chap. 6.

[289] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child,* chap. 6.

[290] Purvis, Cross, Lyons Sunshine, *The Connected Child,* chap. 6.

child's trauma history and not necessarily the result of poor foster parenting or discipline.[291]

Grief and Loss

It is often challenging for individuals to properly grieve the numerous non-death, ambiguous losses inevitable in foster care.[292] American culture largely lacks the vocabulary to articulate or express foster children's ambiguous physical losses (i.e., the loss of family and friends, home, community) and symbolic or psychosocial losses (i.e., the loss of identity, normalcy, a pre-conceived vision of the future, a sense of stability, agency, belonging).[293] Likewise, foster parents also experience the emotional distress from ambiguous loss, especially when a foster child leaves their home.[294] Sometimes, foster parents lose all connection with the foster child after the placement ends which creates heavy ambiguous grief over the loss of relationship with the child because this loss can feel like the death of a family member, even though the child is still living.[295] The cycle of coming to know and care for a foster child while they are in one's home and then "[learning] to disengage and let go of personal investment… only to go through the process again with a new [foster child]… can weigh heavily on the [foster parent's]

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[291] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 204, 393.

[292] Monique B. Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt: Non-Death Loss, Grief, and Trauma in Foster Care," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 35, no. 1 (2017): 2-5, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-017-0502-8.

[293] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 2-3.

[294] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 207.

[295] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 207.

spirit."[296] Foster parents must also cope with psychosocial losses (i.e., the loss of control, stability, predictability, authority) which are taxing. Foster parents have reported that their lack of input or involvement in case planning for their foster children is fatiguing and frustrating.[297]

Without language and awareness, well-meaning people make disenfranchising comments to foster kids like, "You're better off" or "You should be grateful that you're in foster care" which overlook and demean their natural grief.[298] Likewise, community members might assume that the placement disruption and re-homing of a disruptive foster child would come as a relief to foster parents. In doing so, they overlook the grief of separation and loss of perceived competency as an effective foster parent. In contrast, foster family members need those within the family unit and larger support network to fully validate their grief. Likewise, supportive individuals never underestimate a disabled or young child's capacity for grief.[299] Instead, they intentionally give freedom and make space to allow the individual to fully grieve in their own way, offering support, comfort, encouragement, and validation along the way.[300]

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[296] Star, "The Relationship Between Self-Care, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 39.

[297] Tricia M. Favela and Cristina Valezques, "Factors that Contribute to Foster Parent Turnover" (Masters of Social Work diss., California State University, San Bernardino, 2016), 14, Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations.

[298] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 5.

[299] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 5.

[300] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 2.

Throughout the placement, foster parents must cope with the unpredictability of the future by both developing personal attachment to the foster child to foster a sense of belonging and facilitating connection with biological family to promote and facilitate reunification. It's an atypical family structure. Megan Ottoboni asserts that sociologists have coined the terminology of 'muted group' theory which explains the phenomenon in which members of a subgroup, such as foster parents, are still expected to see themselves within the normative language, which fails to account for their unique experiences, grief, or family structure.[301]

Overall, ambiguous loss is considered one of the most traumatic yet overlooked sources of trauma.[302] Agencies might consider adjusting transition policies to be more sensitive to foster children's and foster families' needs.[303] Nevertheless, grief is an inherent component of the fostering experience. In one study, many participants reported experiencing significant loss within the first six month of being licensed as a foster parent due to reunification, unexpected placement disruptions, or challenging responses from their own birth children.[304] Foster parents speak to the need for increased awareness,

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[301] Megan Ottoboni, "Family Language Labels: Effects on Students with Non-Parental Caregivers" (Master of Science diss., Dominican University of California, San Rafael, 2007), 8.

[302] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 3.

[303] Cheryl Buehler, Mary Ellen Cox, and Gary Cuddeback, "Foster Parents' Perceptions of Factors That Promote or Inhibit Successful Fostering," *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2003): 70, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325003002001281.

[304] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 2.

training, social support, mentorship, and respite as they navigate the inherent ambiguous grief.[305]

Avoiding Burnout

The nature and demands of foster parenting inevitably drain foster carers' emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical energy reserve.[306] Three terms have been utilized across different sources to describe the fall-out from foster parent stress, anxiety, and exhaustion: burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. Scholars like Hill, Ottoway, Selwyn, Samushonga, McLain, Newell and MacNeil make intentional differentiations regarding the uniqueness of each phenomenon while simultaneously recognizing that they commonly coexist.[307]

Maslach and Leiter offer a helpful definition of *burnout*: "Burnout is the index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do" which "spreads gradually and continuously over time, putting people into a downward spiral from which it's hard to recover."[308] Similarly, Herbert Freudenberger describes burnout as "a state of

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[305] MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 362; Kathryn W. Rhodes, John G. Orme, and Cheryl Buehler, "A Comparison of Family Foster Parents Who Quit, Consider Quitting, and Plan to Continue Fostering," *Social Service Review* 75, no. 1 (2001): 109, https://doi.org/10.1086/591883; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support and Training," 154-155; Piel, Geiger, Julien-Chinn, and Lietz, "An Ecological Systems Approach," 1035, 1040.

[306] Hartness M. Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between Pastor and Superhero: God on Burnout and Self-Care," Journal of Pastoral Theology 31, no. 1 (2021): 6, https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2020.1748919.

[307] Olson, *A Guide to Self Care*, 35; Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 9; Samushonga, "Distinguishing Between the Pastor and the Superhero," 6-7; McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction;" Newell and MacNeil, "Professional Burnout," 57-68.

[308] Richard P. Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 34.

fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause, a way of life, or relationship that failed to produce its expected reward" within the anticipated timeline.[309] The chronic family stress of burnout reduces the family's capacity to handle additional stressors or hardships because it depletes their flexibility and creative problem solving.[310]

Meanwhile, *secondary traumatic stress* encapsulates the mental "strain on a caregiver that comes from involvement and emotional identification with a person" who has experienced trauma.[311] This condition closely parallels Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).[312] However, PTSD can only be experienced by the direct victim whereas secondary traumatic stress is experienced by the caregivers who are trying to help the individual recover from the trauma.[313] Studies have identified up to 37% of child protective service workers were "experiencing clinical levels of emotional distress associated with secondary traumatic stress" and it would be reasonable to expect similar percentages amongst foster parents.[314]

Chris Marchan identifies *compassion fatigue* as the result of secondary traumatic stress.[315] Denise Hill clarifies additional distinctions: "compassion fatigue can occur

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[309] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 34.

[310] Garland, *Family Ministry,* 262.

[311] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 35.

[312] Newell and MacNeil, "Professional Burnout," 60.

[313] McLain, "The Impact of Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 2-3; Newell and MacNeil, "Professional Burnout," 60.

[314] Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, "Compassion Fatigue, Burnout, and Compassion Satisfaction," 1073.

[315] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care,* 35.

quickly, while burnout tends to be cumulative" and compassion fatigue results from overexertion of empathy whereas burnout results from the heavy burden of ongoing demands of daily living.[316] Compassion fatigue can be understood as the inverse of compassion satisfaction. Compassion satisfaction is a measure of the degree of fulfillment and joy an individual receives from their helping. On the other hand, compassion fatigue is the degree of apathy, disconnection, and emotional exhaustion resulting from their service. Compassion fatigue is a natural, self-protective response. For example, foster parents exhibiting blocked care suppress feelings of love or care for the foster child to protect themselves from the pain of rejection or grief.[317] In general terms, compassion fatigue entails shutting down personal emotions just to get through the day and having decreased capacity to respond sensitively and empathetically to the needs of others.[318]

Cumulatively, these phenomenon result in a conglomeration of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, spiritual, and somatic symptoms (i.e., lowered concentration, apathy, powerlessness, anxiety, guilt, anger, numbness, fear, helplessness, moodiness, poor sleep, nightmares, hopelessness, loss of purpose, sweating, rapid heartbeat, and difficulty breathing).[319] Likewise, all conditions typically result in a reduced capacity for empathy and personal accomplishment. Unfortunately, all three syndromes are especially

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[316] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 35.

[317] Baylin, "Social Buffering and Compassionate Stories," 607.

[318] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 14.

[319] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 36.

prevalent in foster parents. Ottaway and Selwyn explained that when compared with other helping professionals, foster parents have reported "slightly higher levels of burn out, lower levels of compassion satisfaction, and similar levels of traumatic stress."[320]

Triggers for Burnout

It is sometimes difficult for foster parents to articulate what led to their breakdown.[321] One foster parent recalled telling their social worker various reasons, only to have the social worker respond, "Oh, that's not a big thing, and that's not a big thing."[322] Exasperated and unvalidated, the foster parent thought, "This is relentless… it's 300 small things."[323] Nevertheless, Maslach and Leiter have identified the following generic categories of factors that lead to burnout: "workload overload, insufficient reward, unfairness, lack of control, little sense of community, and value conflicts."[324]

Foster parents easily relate to burden of high workload demands.[325] Many have reported difficulty managing "the high number of initial appointments required when a child first enters foster care including doctor's visits, dentist's visits, and other testing as

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[320] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 13.

[321] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 15.

[322] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 15.

[323] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 15.

[324] Star, "Relationship Between Self-Care, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 37.

[325] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 207; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 352; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 150.

required by the courts,"[326] not to mention the ongoing obligations of daily parenting, therapy appointments, coordinating parental visits, and other support services. Coupled with the sometimes unrealistic expectation that foster parents can heal the child from their trauma history, reverse problematic behaviors, maintain or improve the child's relationship with their family of origin, and continue to serve their own family of origin, foster parents lifestyle can only be described as high intensity living.[327]

Common complaints related to insufficient rewards of foster parenting include compassion fatigue, inadequate financial compensation and insufficient involvement in decision making for the foster child. Compassion fatigue, described above, means that the inherent intrinsic rewards or emotional satisfaction have run dry. Foster families can struggle when the financial compensation is insufficient to cover the added expenses of welcoming the foster child into the home.[328] For example, accessing funding resources for respite care was challenging and if funding was identified, the amount was regarded as insufficient and unrealistic.[329] Participants from Rhodes, Orme, and Cox's study specifically reported that they were also looking for funding assistance to cover day care, clothing, transportation, and annual cost of living increases.[330] In the same study, Rhodes,

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[326] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 910.

[327] Vanderfaille, Van Hollen, De Maeyer, Gypen, and Belenger, "Support Needs and Satisfaction in Foster Care," 1515.

[328] Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 144-145; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 155

[329] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 155.

[330] Melanie Randle, Leonie Miller, and Sara Dolnicar, "What Can Agencies Do to Increase Foster Carer Satisfaction?," *Child and Family Social Work* 23, no. 2 (2018): 220, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12402; Kathryn W. Rhodes, John G. Orme, and Mary Ellen Cox, "Foster Family

Orme, and Cox found that families with incomes below the median are at high risk of dropping out due to the expense of non-reimbursed costs.[331] More broadly, foster parents reported feeling de-valued when they felt their feedback or opinion was unheard or de-valued by the child welfare interdisciplinary team.[332] Some foster parents feel the child welfare system lacks respect for the foster carer role.[333]

Foster parents express other additional frustrations with the unfairness and lack of control within the child welfare system.[334] Common complaints include insufficient background information on the child's history, social worker turnover, staff responsiveness, inconsistent application of procedures, and an overall lack of support from the agency.[335] Whiting and Huhner conducted a mixed methods study which revealed 71.7% of foster parents chose to cease fostering due to negative experiences

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Resources, Psychosocial Functioning, and Retention," *Social Work Research* 27, no. 3 (2003): 144, https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/27.3.135.

[331] Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 144-145.

[332] Megan Hayes Piel, Jennifer M. Geiger, Francie J. Julien-Chinn, and Cynthia A. Lietz, "An Ecological Systems Approach to Understanding Social Support in Foster Family Resilience," Child and Family Social Work 22, no. 2 (2017): 1035, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12323.

[333] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 153.

[334] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 910; DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School*, 31; Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 206-207; Jason Brown and Peter Calder, "Concept-Mapping the Challenges Faced by Foster Parents," *Children and Youth Services Review* 21, no. 6 (1999): 481, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0190-7409(99)00034-1; Favela and Velazquez, "Factors that Contribute to Foster Parent Turnover," 10-12; Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families who Foster," 663; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 359; John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, "Foster Carers Who Cease to Foster," *Adoption and Fostering* 22, no. 2 (1998): 57, https://doi.org/10.1177/030857599802200208; Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 136.

[335] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 153.

with agency workers and staff.[336] Similarly, Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill report up to 60% of all carers cease to foster due to dissatisfaction with the foster care agency.[337]

Lack of community is another common cause of burnout for foster parents who feel alone in their journey.[338] As described earlier, it is difficult for foster families to find community members who understand the unique challenges, daily stressors, and the challenging behavior of their foster kids. Many foster parents self-report that the like-minded community discovered through support groups or mentorship from other foster parents is critical to sustaining their service as foster parents.[339]

Finally, value conflicts can also cause burnout among foster parents. This might look like a value in caring well for biological children and at-risk children. In this case, it presents a problem when conflict arises between the two or the foster child introduces new primary or secondary trauma into the home. It might also look like the value of unconditional love and attachment within the foster family and the value of family preservation and family reunification.[340] Foster parent values or beliefs may also struggle to withstand the realities of foster care. In particular, Christian foster parents may burnout due to what Olson calls "theological amnesia," or forgetting why they were called to

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[336] Favela and Velazquez, "Factors that Contribute to Foster Parent Turnover." 11.

[337] Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar, "What Can Agencies Do?," 214.

[338] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

[339] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 119; Garland, *Family Ministry*, 136; Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 89; Star, "The Relationship Between Self-Care," 54-55; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 361.

[340] Marcellus, "Supporting Resilience in Foster Families," 18.

foster care ministry in the first place and ignoring the theological resources available to sustain and renew them throughout the difficult work they are called to do.[341]

Self-Care

Research found that many helping professionals struggle to prioritize or invest in self-care while simultaneously serving the needs of their clients.[342] It is assumed that foster parents fall within this neglectful category, although, this researcher was only able to identify one study and one conceptual model related specifically to self-care among foster parents. Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody conducted a study using the Self-Care Practices Scale test which found that foster dads were more likely to score higher self-care scores than foster moms and married or partnered foster parents were more likely to score higher self-care scores than single foster parents.[343] Miller, Duren Green, and Lambros also recognize the impact of social factors on self-care by emphasizing how one's ability to prioritize self-care is heavily influenced by both internal and external factors.[344] Evaluating self-care amongst foster parents is important because current research suggests that "a lack of self-care is correlated with risk for compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compromised quality of

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[341] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 42.

[342] Jacquelyn Lee and Shari E. Miller, "A Self-Care Framework for Social Workers: Building a Strong Foundation for Practice," Families in Society 94, no. 2 (2013): 96, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12323.

[343] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 208.

[344] Arianne E. Miller, Tonika Duren Green, and Katina M. Lambros, "Foster Parent Self-Care: A Conceptual Model," *Children and Youth Services Review* 99 (2019): 107, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.01.014.

care for clients."[345] Helpfully, Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody do not endorse an indulgent means of self-care which would be inaccessible to the average foster parent; instead, they validate both task-oriented coping and emotional coping as vital self-care strategies.[346]

Ideally, self-care is a holistic and multidimensional phenomenon where the individual invests care in the following areas: physical, psychosocial and emotional, social, spiritual, leisure, and professional.[347] Notably, self-care is most effective when implemented as a proactive, intentional, and regular discipline because it will enable individuals to respond out of a reservoir of sustained energy with sharper problem-solving skills.[348] Self-care also entails a variety of coping strategies, including both task-oriented coping (e.g., direct actions to address or prevent stress) and emotional coping (e.g., mechanisms to better cope with stress).[349]

Self-care is the strategic counterbalance to triggers for burnout. It is actualized when the individual regains a sense of homeostasis, balance, and wellbeing. According to Martin Seligman, such wellbeing looks like an individual with (a) positive emotion, (b) engagement in daily life and challenging activities, (c) a sense of meaning that one's

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[345] Lee and Miller, "A Self-Care Framework for Social Workers," 97.

[346] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 207.

[347] Lee and Miller, "A Self-Care Framework for Social Workers," 97.

[348] Lee and Miller, "A Self-Care Framework for Social Workers," 98.

[349] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 207.

contributions serve a greater purpose, (d) a sense of accomplishment, and (e) a supportive network of encouraging, positive relationships.[350]

Wellbeing and resilience are strongly positively correlated because resilience is derived from internal and external motivators, deep core values and inner strength, plus community support.[351] Resilience looks like maintaining a positive attitude and perspective in the midst of challenging life circumstances.[352] Like self-care, resilience is now thought of as a skill one can develop more so than an individual characteristic or personality trait.[353] For foster families, developing resilience can also be an important form of self-care because resilience improves individuals' ability to "cope well with high levels of ongoing disruptive change, sustain good health and energy when under constant pressure, bounce back easily from setbacks, overcome adversities, [and adapt] to a new way of working and living when the old way is no longer possible."[354]

Support Strategies

Research has shown that a support system comprised of a combination of family, friends, community members, and professionals offers foster parents critical and

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[350] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care,* 63-64.

[351] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 68.

[352] Lenora Marcellus, "Supporting Resilience in Foster Families: A Model for Program Design That Supports Recruitment, Retention, and Satisfaction of Foster Families Who Care for Infants with Prenatal Substance Exposure," *Child Welfare* 89, no. 1 (2010): 10.

[353] Marcellus, "Supporting Resilience in Foster Families," 10.

[354] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 64.

necessary resources that can sustain them through the journey of fostering.[355] The literature suggests that techniques are as diverse as individuals and the most effective strategies are individualized and customized to the unique stage and circumstances of each foster family. This literature review highlights a variety of strategies aimed at strengthening parenting skills, reinforcing family resilience, and improving foster parent wellbeing.

Events

Support groups are regularly scheduled events typically offer as a structured program that combines mentorship, educational opportunities, and open conversation. Since participants commonly tackle life experiences that are atypical within the groups of people with whom they normally associate, support groups offer a uniquely safe space to share common struggles and support one another.[356] Discovering such like-minded community offers shared identity, deep friendship, social support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging.[357] Overall, support groups are believed to be a critical support for "cushioning the impacts of burnout, compassion fatigue, and stress" amongst foster parents.[358]

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[355] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents Through Mentoring," 2.

[356] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 119.

[357] Star, "Relationship Between Self-Care, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 55.

[358] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 89.

Trainings are a prerequisite to becoming licensed as a foster parent.[359] Nevertheless, many foster parents report that agencies do not provide sufficient training so additional educational opportunities are also an important ongoing support strategy.[360] Although there is recognition that no amount of training could sufficiently prepare a foster family for the unique challenges of their individualized circumstances, foster parents requested more specialized and realistic training topics.[361] In addition to a diverse range of topics, Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France argue that foster parents appreciate when trainings are offered in diverse formats (i.e., in-person, online, on-demand videos, consulting within the home) because it can be difficult to find or afford childcare or find a time that works within their busy schedule.[362] Overall, increased post-licensure training is correlated with longevity of service as a foster carer.[363] Sometimes these trainings are incorporated into camps and retreats specifically geared toward foster families.[364] These

[359] "The Foster Care Licensing Process," Foster Care Process, MN Adopt, accessed October 30, 2022, https://www.mnadopt.org/fostering-network/foster-care-process/; "Steps to Become a Foster Parent," Programs and Services, MN Department of Human Services, accessed October 30, 2022, https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/children-and-families/services/foster-care/programs-services/steps-to-become-a-foster-parent.jsp.

[360] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2.

[361] Tracy E. MacGregor, Susan Rodger, Anne L. Cummings, and Alan W. Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents: A Qualitative Study of Motivation, Support, and Retention," *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice* 5, no. 3 (2006): 361, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325006067365.

[362] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 155.

[363] Rhodes, Orme, and Buehler, "A Comparison of Family Foster Parents," 84.

[364] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 4.

events may enable the entire family to attend together, with developmentally appropriate activities than can be both fun and educational for all.[365]

A variety of foster parent requested training topics have surfaced within this literature review that warrant additional attention, frequency, or depth from community organizers who are planning trainings for foster parents in order to meet their felt needs. Ideas related to the foster family make-up include: (a) parenting teenagers, (b) fostering children of a different race or culture, (c) navigating transitions, (d) preparing for grief, (e) resilience, (f) coping mechanisms, and (g) family communication styles. Topics related to training foster parents on how to address issues with the foster child include (a) trauma and trauma-informed parenting, (b) disruptive or aggressive behavior, (c) anxiety, (d) depression, (e) hyperactivity, (f) specialized training for a certain condition, (g) attachment, (h) coregulation, and (i) teaching life skills. Additionally, foster parents have requested additional training to learn more about the foster care system and understand (a) how to access funding resources, (b) what kind of questions to ask before accepting a new placement, (c) how to manage relationships with birth family members, and (d) how to set appropriate expectations.

Garland encourages churches to consider how to make Sunday mornings a source of support for foster parents. She says that it might look like inviting a foster parent to share their testimony and calling to foster care ministry or asking permission to integrate one of their stories into the sermon as an illustration.[366] Sharing such stories affirms the

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[365] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 4.

[366] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 117.

value of foster care ministry, encourages a sense of belonging for foster families within the church, and it can have a powerful motivating effect that encourages others to find their place in service.[367] Garland continues by advocating that children's ministries, in particular, need to be prepared as a welcoming place for foster children by training volunteers on trauma-informed care.[368] Knowing that there is a safe, welcoming place to bring their kids on Sunday mornings can also provide much-needed respite to foster parents.[369]

Resources

Reliable babysitters and respite caregivers are vital resources that offer foster parents a necessary break to recharge their batteries.[370] Yet finding these caregivers is challenging for two primary reasons: the lack of providers who complete the necessary training or licensure and hesitancy to introduce more change and potentially further disrupt attachment or trust. For example, babysitters of foster children must be trained on life saving medical equipment, car seat safety, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and Shaken Baby Syndrome, approved discipline techniques, and privacy requirements.[371] In addition, Murray, Tareen-Sweeney, and France explain that it is beneficial to inform the

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[367] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 120.

[368] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 141.

[369] Garland, *Inside Out Families,* 121.

[370] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 19; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 354, 360.

[371] "Hennepin County Foster Parent Guide," Hennepin County Human Services, last modified May 2022, https://www.hennepin.us/-/media/hennepinus/residents/human-services/foster-parents/foster-parent-guide.pdf

caregiver of the child's trauma history, set realistic expectations, and prepare them to handle any potential disruptive events. When foster parents have more than one child with difficult behaviors, it is extremely challenging and often costlier to find a sitter willing to rise to the challenge.[372] As a result, foster parents frequently rely on other foster parents for respite care which may lead them to burn each other out.[373] Ideally, the foster child would have a pre-existing relationship with the temporary caregiver because they are an ongoing part of the family's support network. Supportive community members can volunteer to become a qualified temporary caregiver, facilitate training opportunities for those interested in providing respite care, and developing a list or pool of reliable respite caregivers.[374]

Assistance through financial support is a practical way to reduce stress among foster carers, who widely report that state compensation rates are low and insufficient to cover the incurred expenses.[375] In response, supportive community members can create a supply closet, where people donate supplies like diapers, clothing, hygiene items, toys, furniture, and other basic necessities. A supply closet equips foster parents with practical resources at no cost as they adapt their home to fit a new or different aged foster child. Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar also suggest the possibility of partnering with local

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[372] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 155.

[373] MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 361.

[374] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 6; Garland, *Family Ministry*, 141; Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 146.

[375] MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leshied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 354; Rhodes, Orme, and Cox, "Foster Family Resources," 144-145; Rhodes, Orme, and Buehler, "A Comparison of Family Foster Parents," 84.

businesses to gather donations or shopping vouchers.[376] Some agencies require one parent to be at home full time to meet the foster child's needs which has a significant impact on the family's income.[377] Research from Compas, Murphy, Yarboi, Gruhn, and Watson suggests that lower socioeconomic status makes families more vulnerable to the effects of stress than those with greater financial resources.[378] Financial support for foster parents serves not only as practical support, "but also as emotional support because it enables activities that counter social isolation."[379] Organizations like One Simple Wish recognize the value in financing activities that restore happiness, encourage dreams, foster love, and promote connection for foster families.[380]

Researchers including Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller have invested time studying the potential benefits of pairing new foster parents with experienced foster parents. Such mentorship offers unique knowledge from hands-on experience, social capital, and emotional support.[381] Thoughtful consideration should be made to match pairings based on factors such as "family goals in fostering/adopting, age, geographic

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[376] Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar, "What Can Agencies Do?," 220.

[377] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 17.

[378] Compas, Murphy, Yarboi, Gruhn, and Watson, "Stress and Coping in Families," 43.

[379] Johan Vanderfaeillie, Frank Van Holen, Skrallan De Maeyer, Laura Gypen, and Laurence Belenger, "Support Needs and Satisfaction in Foster Care: Differences Between Foster Mothers and Foster Fathers," Journal of Child and Family Studies 25, no. 5 (2015): 1516, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-015-0320-6.

[380] "About," About, One Simple Wish, accessed October 22, 2022, https://www.onesimplewish.org/site/about/.

[381] Natalie D. Pope, Stephanie Ratliff, Shannon Moody, Kalea Benner, and Jay Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents: A Case Study of the Kentucky Foster Parent Mentoring Program," Children and Youth Services Review 113 (2022): 2, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106358.

location, family make-up (e.g., presence of birth parents in the home), and vocation."[382] Together, the mentor-mentee duo establishes a regular rhythm and setting (i.e., synchronous/asynchronous) that works for them, striving for consistency while flexibly adapting as needed.[383] Mentors offered value by asking purposeful questions that draw attention to the novice's blind spots and reinforcing training topics by helping contextualize the education to real-life scenarios.[384] Mentees were especially grateful for this real-time, responsive, and personalized advice. Mentees got the most out of the mentorship when they could clearly identify and communicate their needs to the mentor and establish mutually agreed upon boundaries for the relationship.[385] As a result of the mentorship, new foster parents report increased confidence and skill necessary to address the challenges inherent in foster care.[386]

Foster families also benefit when therapy resources are made readily available for themselves, their children, and the family as a whole.[387] Newell and MacNeil argue that obtaining access to therapy can be challenging due to the scarcity of specialized therapists, caseworkers failing to follow through with referrals, a lack of funding, or long

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[382] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 2.

[383] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 4.

[384] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 8.

[385] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 4.

[386] Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 2.

[387] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 4; Garland, *Family Ministry*, 137.

waitlists.[388] Targeted therapy can be proactively offered to foster parents based on results from various evaluations such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale, and the Professional Quality of Life scale.[389] Ideally, "counseling is like tutoring in an educational setting, preparing people who need help overcoming obstacles" before a crisis strikes.[390] Counselors can help foster parents debrief difficult circumstances and equip them with new coping mechanisms before an issue snowballs further out of control.[391] Therapists can also offer a helpful handbook of important crisis intervention hotlines that can be utilized outside of typical business hours, when agency staff or counselors can be hard to reach.[392]

Encouragement

Encouragement is predominantly found in friend groups. Unfortunately, foster care commonly has a detrimental effect on foster parents' social activities and frequently reduces their circle of close friends.[393] Foster parents usually spend less time socializing due to fatigue, burnout, or worry about potentially disruptive behavior from their foster children.[394] Nevertheless, every person needs diverse forms of friendship in their life for

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[388] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 154.

[389] Newell and MacNeil, "Professional Burnout," 63.

[390] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 137.

[391] Piel, Geiger, Julien-Chinn, and Lietz, "An Ecological Systems Approach," 1042; Garland, *Family Ministry,* 137.

[392] MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, and Leschied, "The Needs of Foster Parents," 360.

[393] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 16.

[394] Ottaway and Selwyn, "No-One Told Us It Was Going to be Like This," 16.

encouragement, including a prophet, cheerleader, and guide.[395] A prophet-friend encourages with promptings to live a bold, courageous life characterized by truth and compassion. [396] A cheerleader-friend encourages by calling out the strengths and giftedness in their friends. [397] A guide-friend encourages by listening well, reminding friends of their core values, and offering wise advice for the next steps on one's journey.[398]

In particular, the church needs to affirm the importance of foster care ministry and encourage foster parents by "reminding them that they are 'missionaries in their own homes'" [399] and actively reflecting the redemptive gospel of reconciliation through their service to foster children and their first families. This might look like the formal commissioning of a foster family after they have been licensed as a blessing for them before receiving their first placement or as casual as a note of encouragement or phone call.[400] It might also look like reminders that the congregation is regularly praying for the foster family.[401]

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[395] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 92-94.

[396] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 92.

[397] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 92.

[398] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 92.

[399] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 7.

[400] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 139.

[401] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 121.

Star suggests that encouragement might look like helping foster parents set realistic expectations about the rate at which to set change and calling out specific examples to highlight the small steps of progress observed from an outside perspective.[402] Garland adds the importance of emphasizing consistency and redefining success as faithfulness, more than measurable progress.[403] Encourage foster parents to remain rooted in their desire to care for children in need so that they can see a greater purpose in the midst of stressful situations.[404] Prioritize loving at-risk children by offering grace rather than punishment, isolation, or judgment for misbehavior.[405] Celebrate vulnerability, create space for open conversation, and value authenticity.

Overall, leaders of supportive communities must get to know each foster parent individually to learn about the kind of recognition that will be most validating and the type of encouragement that will sink deepest to renew them at a soul-level.[406]

Engagement

After engaging in one-off opportunities to support foster families, some individuals will be compelled to go deeper. Eventually, they may transform from a volunteer to an advocate. Some individuals will feel compelled to participate in

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[402] Star, "Relationship Between Self-Care, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Compassion Satisfaction," 58.

[403] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 45.

[404] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 261.

[405] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 8.

[406] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 117.

preventative measures. It takes the strategic, collective effort to advocate for change in the social and cultural systems to enable family preservation among at-risk families.[407] DeGarmo suggests that it may look like contacting lawmakers, politicians, and publicity agents through a variety of communication channels to draw attention to necessary policy changes, introduce new laws, and increase accessibility of information to the public.[408] It might also look like running for posts on the local school board or other government positions to have a direct voice in shaping community policies. Otherwise, volunteers can go deeper by increasing their commitment and involvement with local family preservation and child welfare agencies or ministries, such as Safe Families for Children.[409]

Churches become an integral part of community life by engaging in culturally relevant issues, like foster care. Overall, the church can cast a rich, "powerful vision of human society" and serve as "the leaven that raises the consciousness of the whole neighborhood or larger society about the needs and vulnerabilities of families."[410]

Summary

Through this literature review, the researcher gained greater awareness of the existing research surrounding how foster parents develop family life, encounter unique stressors when caring for at-risk kids, are vulnerable to burnout, and are sustained by

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[407] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 268.

[408] DeGarmo, *Helping Foster Children in School*, 110.

[409] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

[410] Garland, *Family Ministry,* 136.

various support strategies. It suggests the family resilience framework is a helpful schema for understanding foster family systems and their adaptability or flexibility to the stressors of foster care. The literature also supported unconditional love and serving together as foundational values that permeate foster families. Next, the literature review expanded upon the unique stressors foster parents face when caring for foster children with a focus on trauma, discipline, and grief. In the final section, it described foster parents' tendency toward burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. Then, it highlighted key self-care principles and evidence-based community support strategies to combat burnout.

CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS AND RESEARCH METHODS

This research utilized a qualitative, phenomenological research approach in order to identify the essence of foster parents' experiences surrounding family life, care for children in foster care, and strategies churches might implement to provide support for foster parents.[411] Data included biblical, theological, and secular resources related to the foster parent experience. To answer the research question and gain insight about how to better support foster parents, the project used an online survey to gain insights from participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon.[412]

Research Design

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research explore "interpretive/theoretical frameworks [and] address the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem."[413] Data collection occurs in participants' natural settings and focuses on listening to and accurately representing the voices of the participants.[414] Qualitative research is

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[411] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 3rd. ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013), 74, 76.

[412] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research (4th Edition)* (Sage Publications, Inc., 2011) 3.

[413] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 8.

[414] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 8.

particularly useful for exploring issues faced by marginalized people groups.[415]

Qualitative research commonly employs a transformative framework, emphasizing that "knowledge is not neutral and it reflects the power and social relationships within society" so research can be utilized to aid people, improve society, and call for social change.[416]

This methodology was selected for the current study on foster parents' experiences because it is not easy to measure or quantify family life experiences or support strategies.[417] The goal of the project was to gain a clearer understanding of these complex phenomenon, accurately report participants' lived experiences, and issue a call for change in order to increase the support strategies available to help foster parents. The researcher also felt it was important to empower foster parents to share their first-hand experiences based on the assumption that they are a minority group within the larger parent population.

Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach seeks to identify the common, shared meaning of a concept based on feedback from a variety of individuals' lived experiences with the phenomenon.[418] In this case, the researcher focused on identifying the shared meaning of the foster parent experience and what was most meaningful to them in terms of support

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[415] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 24-25.

[416] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 24-25.

[417] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 44.

[418] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 75.

strategies. Phenomenological research emphasizes how insight is derived primarily through thoughtful questioning, musing, and investigating into the meaning of individuals' lived experiences.[419]

Phenomenological research is approached from a perspective of awe and "wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself." [420] In this case, the research explored how foster parents give of themselves in order to love, nurture, and care for kids in foster care and how they rely on self-care disciplines and community support strategies to sustain themselves in this giving process.[421]

Research Instrument

Survey

An online survey was chosen as the research instrument for this project because it is a quick and efficient means of collecting data from participants. Surveys enable the researcher to gather information from a subset or sample population using strategic questions related to their research question with the aim of analyzing the data in order to draw a conclusion about the larger population or phenomenon. In light of the high demands of foster parenting and their frequently busy schedules, utilizing an online survey offered participants "the time and flexibility that allows them more time to consider and respond to requests for information [and] provide deeper reflection on the

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[419] Max van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 27.

[420] van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice,* 27.

[421] van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice*, 27.

discussed topics."[422] Creswell also argues that quantitative surveys are particularly effective for data collection in ethnographic studies.[423]

The survey utilized a mixed-methods design. It opened with some demographic questions related to their family structure, years of experience as a foster parent, and age of the foster children they have or were carrying for at the time of response. The following sections each contained some statements with a sliding scale response for participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement and a variety of open response questions. Each section of the survey and the corresponding questions were guided by the subproblems and themes of this project (i.e., family life, unique parenting experiences, community support strategies, and church-based support strategies) and informed by the research that emerged in the literature review. The researcher also gathered feedback from a peer, thesis advisor, and research design reader on the preliminary drafts of the survey.

The *Informed Consent* form accompanying the survey notified participants of the purpose of the study, the anticipated time commitment, their freedom to choose not to participate or withdraw from the study, the ability to skip questions if desired, and the researcher's commitment to confidentiality. The online survey included a question asking participants to give consent and volunteer to participate in the study. The online survey invitations were sent by email and included the purpose of the study, a deadline to

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[422] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 160.

[423] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 162.

respond, and a link to the Qualtrics online survey form. The form did not ask for participants to identify themselves by name in order to help ensure anonymity.

Qualtrics electronically stored the results of the survey in a non-personally-identifiable manner. Built-in reporting was also available within Qualtrics which displayed some summary information for non-open-response questions (i.e., minimum score, maximum score, mean, standard deviation, variance, count, percentages) and presented results in visual charts. Open response feedback was able to be displayed in a paginated table or word count visualization.

Research Participants

Participants were chosen using a criteria sampling approach. Criterion sampling was essential in order to ensure that all participants had personal, lived experience as a foster parent in order to speak into the phenomenon this research project is addressing.[424] This strategy is commonly utilized among ethnographic researchers who "rely on their judgment to select members of the subculture or unit based on their research questions."[425] Homogeneous sampling was also utilized to focus on participants from support groups that met in churches since the researcher was specifically interested in exploring how churches could increase and expand the support group strategies they offer to foster parents.[426]

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[424] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 157.

[425] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 159.

[426] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 159.

The researcher searched for any foster parent-specific support groups that met in church buildings in Minnesota by scouring public secular websites for listings of foster parent support groups and parachurch or church websites with foster care related ministries. The researcher began by contacting six support group leaders who were each asked if they would be willing to invite the foster parents in their support groups to participate in the study. The group leaders who agreed did not know the identity of those who completed the survey and the survey did not incorporate disclosure of personal identification through the questions which were asked. These choices were made to ensure the anonymity of each participant. In addition, opportunistic sampling will occur in order to take advantage of any new leads that emerge to increase the sample size.[427] The researcher did not inquire as to which church respondents attended on the survey to further secure the identity of the participants.

The researcher's goal was to solicit between 20-30 participants for the study in order to conduct cross-case analysis and identify consistent experiences and themes which would increase the validity of the project's findings and conclusions.[428]

Overall, purposeful sampling was utilized to ensure individuals can reliably speak to their lived experience and "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study." [429]

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[427] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 159.

[428] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 100.

[429] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 158.

Research Steps

First Step: Biblical and Theological Research

The first step in this process was to consult biblical and theological resources and identify scriptural themes around foster care and family. This included a study of how family is intended to model the covenantal, unconditional love between God and His people (Matt. 1, 10; Mk. 3; Lk. 2; Jn. 2, 19). Then, it addressed God's call for families to exhibit radical hospitality to those in need (Gen. 1, 18; 1 Kgs. 17; Ru. 1-4; Jn. 14). Further study focused on how believers will inevitably face challenges, yet they are called to be resilient and faithful in the midst of difficulty (Rom. 5, 2 Cor. 11, 2 Tim. 1). Subsequently, it recognized God's call to care for those who are at-risk or vulnerable and utilized the stories of Moses (Exod. 2) and Esther to illustrate this theme. Finally, it explored a biblical perspective on burnout by recognizing that Jesus wants His disciples' burden to be light (Matt. 11:29-30), identifying how believers are called to self-care (Mk. 12:31, Lev. 19:18), and emphasizing God's gift of Sabbath rest (Exod. 20:8, Mk. 2:27).

Second Step: Literature Review

The second step was to conduct a thorough literature review on the characteristics of healthy families, unique stressors for foster parents, and burnout. The researcher sought to understand what the literature presented as unique about the foster parenting experience in developing family, parenting stress or burnout, and receiving support. It was helpful to examine a secular perspective on unconditional love and discover Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Piel's model for the process of family resilience. This led to a deeper dive into why foster parents must be resilient due to the unique stressors they commonly experience. A variety of developmental, sociocultural, and sociopolitical

stressors were identified. Specific attention was given to the stressors of trauma, discipline, and grief and loss. The study of these topics led to an exploration of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue and their common triggers. This was followed by a review of existing literature regarding self-care techniques and external support strategies that may help foster parents avoid burnout. Data-informed community support strategies were categorized as events, resources, encouragement, and engagement opportunities.

Third Step: Access to Participants

The third step was to identify foster parents to complete online surveys in order for the researcher to gain insight from the participants' lived experiences. The researcher identified online, public listings of foster parent support groups that met in churches and reached out to the coordinators to invite their members who were active foster parents to participate in the study. Willing leaders were asked to share an email invitation to participate in the study with the relevant group members. All participants were notified that their participation was voluntary, gave informed consent, and agreed to complete the survey for this research study.

Fourth Step: Instrumentation

The fourth step was to create an online survey. The researcher created her own custom survey based on the sub-questions from this project and informed by the research gathered in the literature review. The survey included demographic questions, sliding scale responses, and open response questions. Data collection occurred through Qualtrics.

Fifth Step: Analysis of the Data

The fifth step was to collect, analyze, and summarize the data to communicate the insights gained from the online survey responses. The researcher was responsible for coding the open response survey questions in order to identify categorical themes and commonalities. The goal was to identify principles and techniques that could be implemented and utilized by churches and other community supports to more effectively support and encourage foster parents. The survey results are included in Chapter 5. Comparisons were made between the results of this particular study and the previous results and findings encountered in the literature review. Attention is given to the similarities, new discoveries, and contradictory results when compared with prior studies.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify best practices with foster parents in terms of developing family life, caring for at-risk children, and offering support to foster parents. A qualitative methodology and a phenomenological qualitative method of data research was utilized. Primary data included online survey results and secondary data included a review of existing biblical and secular literature on foster families and foster parents. The findings from this project can be used by churches and other support systems to more effectively support foster parents.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The research design for this study used a qualitative mixed-methods design in order to identify the essence of foster parents' experiences surrounding family life, care for children in foster care, and strategies churches might implement to provide better support for foster parents. The research process included the collection of data through an online survey. This instrument was chosen to make participation easily accessible to participants and has been commonly utilized in other ethnographic studies.[430] This approach was selected because the goal of the project was to identify the common, shared meaning of support among foster parents and share the result with the hope of transforming the social framework surrounding support for foster parents.

The information in this chapter shows the findings of the research based on the data collected from the 39 participants who engaged in the online survey. The criteria used for the selection of participants began with homogenous criterion sampling by contacting the leaders of foster parent support groups that met in Minnesota churches and expanded with opportunistic sampling. Then, the data was reviewed, analyzed, and organized around common themes. The qualitative data is presented in this chapter, along with the survey results.

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[430] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 162.

Research Questions

The online survey questions were designed around four themes: family life, unique foster parent experiences, community support strategies, and church support strategies. After the demographic questions, each section began with sliding scale questions followed by open response questions. All of the survey questions were informed by previous research discovered in the biblical and theological resources and literature review on related foster parent research.

Presentation of Results

In total, there were 39 participants. All of the questions on the online survey were optional. While all questions were answered by some participants, no question received a full 39 responses. Throughout the presentation of the results, it was important for the researcher to provide quotes that shared the direct voice of the participants in their own words. The findings and implications of these results are discussed in Chapter 6.

Demographics

The demographic information collected in the survey provides a brief profile of the participants who contributed to the research. Although data collection allowed the participant to be anonymous, brief demographic question responses gave a glimpse into the participants' family life and structure, as well as the length of time they have served as a foster parent.

Of the 39 participants, 32 were foster moms, five were foster dads, and two chose not to respond. Similarly, 33 participants reported that they were married, four reported that they were single, and two chose not to answer.

The researcher also asked how many children in foster care were currently in the participants' home. Twenty-two did not currently have a foster child in their home, seven had one foster child in the home, six had two foster children, two had three foster children, and two chose not to respond. This means the average among the participants was approximately 0.68 foster children currently in the home.

Although over half of the participants did not have a current placement, all have cared for at least one foster child. The researcher asked participants how many children in foster care they have cared for in total. The 37 responses ranged from experience caring for one to 58 foster children. The average of participants' responses was approximately 10.02 with a median response of 6. Detailed responses are displayed in Figure 5.1

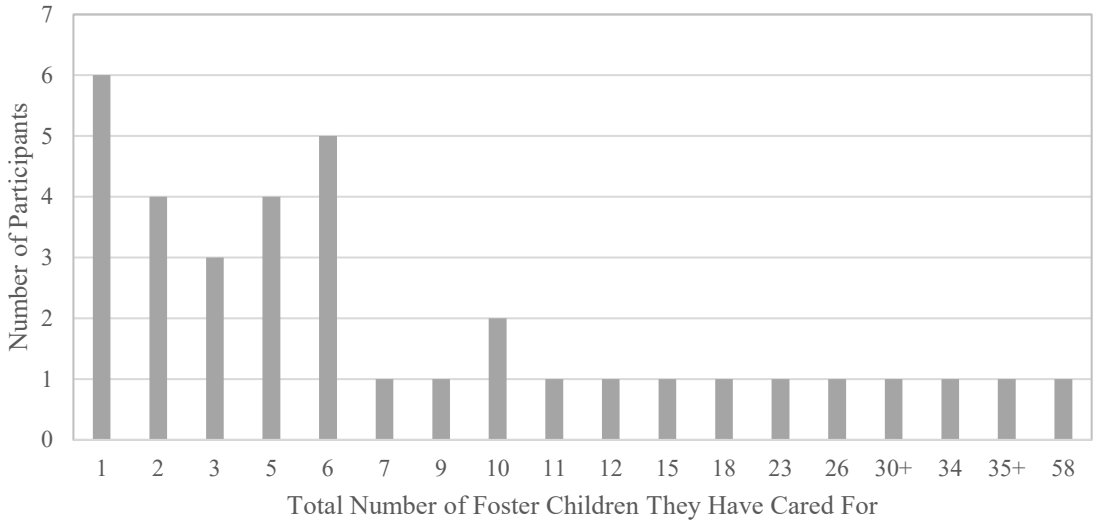

Figure 5.1: Total Number of Children Participants Have Cared For

The researcher also asked about what age children the participants had fostered. The 37 responses ranged from birth to 18. Some participants listed specific ages while others listed ranges. These responses were combined in Figure 5.2 to illustrate the

frequency participants had in fostering each age. Participants had more experience fostering children who were young and their experience generally declined as the age of the foster child increased.

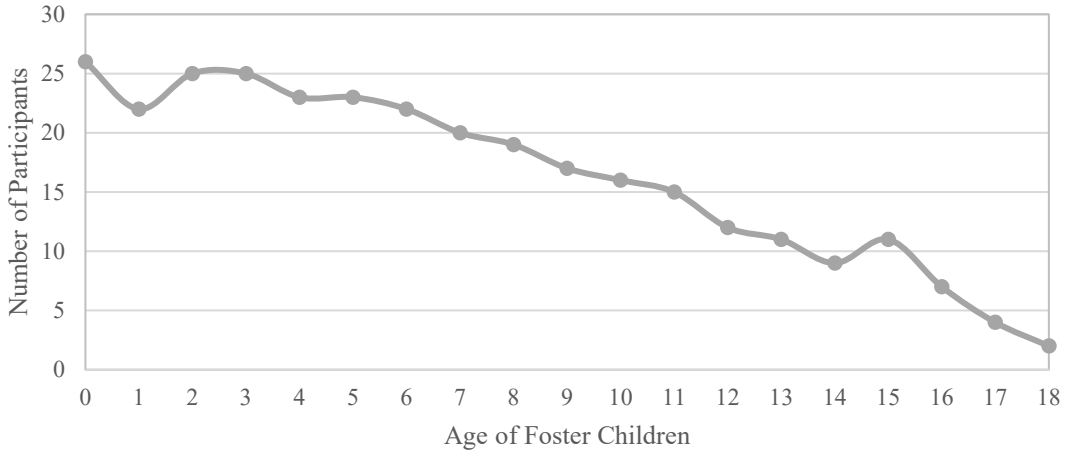

Figure 5.2: Participants' Experience Caring for Foster Children Across Ages

In addition, the researcher asked participants how long they had served as a foster parent. The 37 responses ranged from 7 months to 15 years, with the average length of service as a foster parent being 4.39 years.

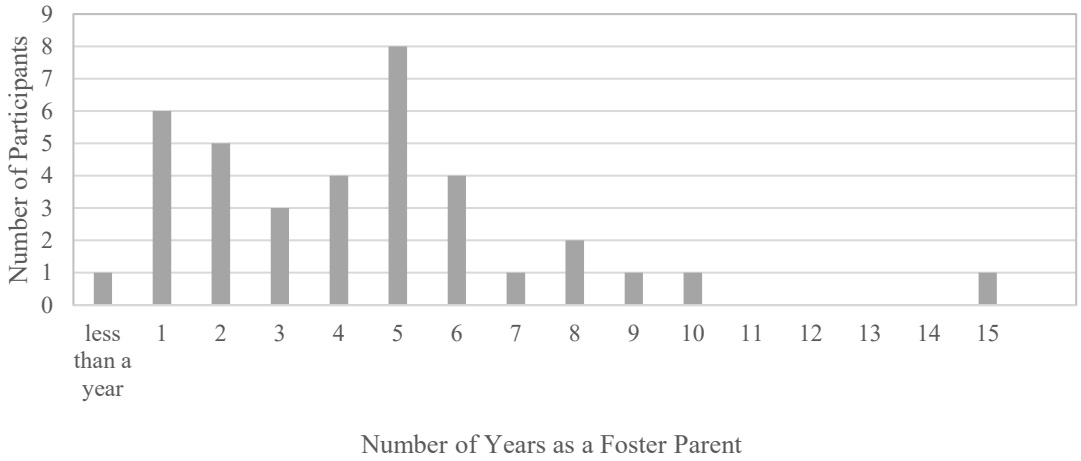

Figure 5.3: How Many Years Have You Served as a Foster Parent?

The final demographic question asked how many forever children (i.e., biological and adopted children) were in the participant's home. Thirty-seven participants answered the question. Responses ranged from zero to six forever children. The average of the participants' responses was 2.37 forever children currently in their home.

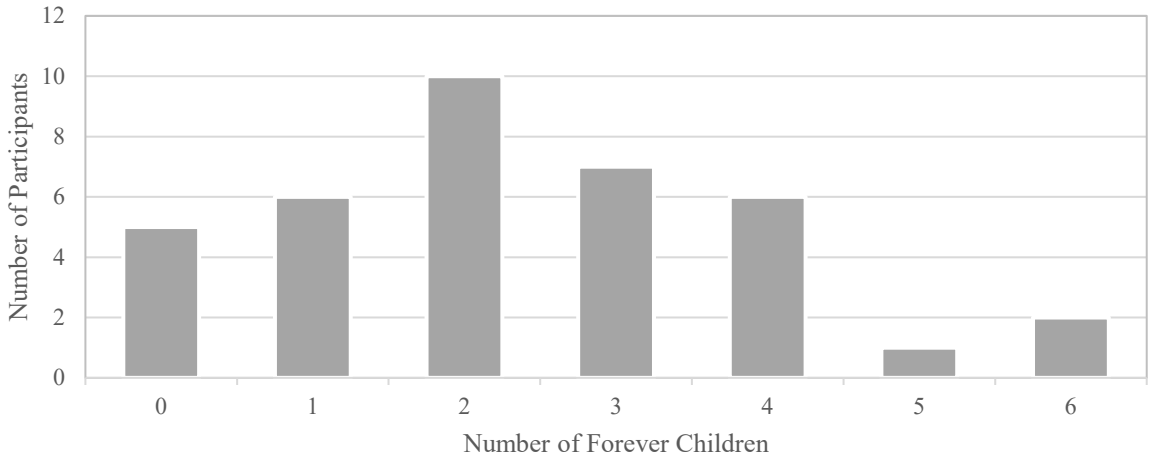

Figure 5.4: How Many Forever Children are in Your Home?

Family Life

Family Life: Question 1

The researcher asked each participant to use a sliding scale to represent how accurately each statement represented his or her family where zero meant not accurate at all and 100 meant extremely accurate. Results are displayed in Table 5.1. The average participant agreed that their family was flexible and resilient. Likewise, the average respondent felt that being a foster parent brought their family closer together and described their parenting style as characterized by unconditional love. Similarly, the average participant agreed that being a foster family is an expression of how they serve Christ together.

Table 5.1: Family System Sliding Scale Questions

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
My family is highly flexible.	38	100	75.00	14.34	205.72	36
My family is very resilient.	41	100	78.27	14.75	217.44	37
Being a foster family has brought our family closer together.	20	100	71.82	21.34	455.56	34
My parenting style is characterized by unconditional love (i.e., my love for the child is unrelated to their love toward me in return and unchanged by their behavior or misbehavior)	20	100	86.47	17.37	301.80	36
Being a foster family is how we serve Christ together.	0	100	77.09	30.47	982.14	35

Family Life: Question 2

Next, foster parents were asked, "What do you do to help welcome a new foster child and encourage a sense of belonging within your family?" Thirty-two of the 38 participants responded to this open response question. Upon review, the researcher identified six themes among the responses: introductions, time together, discovery, fostering a sense of agency, respect for the child's biological family, and providing comfort.

Eight participants (25%) commented on their intentionality in introducing their family at the beginning of a new placement. Examples include creating "a welcome book that explained about us, our chosen family, what to expect on weekdays/weekends/holidays, etc." and giving "a warm welcome, introduce the pets, give a tour of the home, show them their room, look through clothes that might fit," etc. Foster parents appeared to be deliberate in openly communicating "how our family works" and sharing "rules and expectations." Foster parents also reported being sensitive

during the transition period, “about two weeks,” and used this period to set expectations and establish consistency. Initially, foster parents desired to build connections with them before introducing them to everyone. Then, when introducing them to others, foster parents “never introduced them as our ‘foster children’” to avoid singling them out.

Fourteen participants (43.75%) referenced time together and emphasized including the foster children in their “everyday experiences,” both “the exciting things we do as well as the mundane things.” Spending time together cooking, eating a meal, playing games, watching a movie, or doing a hobby allows them to get to know each other better. A couple of participants described hanging pictures on the wall as a tangible sign of the foster children belonging within the home.

Nine participants (28.13%) emphasized the need to be intentional about discovery. Finding out their favorite food and meals was the most common example, reported by six of the participants (18.75%). Overall, learning about the foster child’s culture, customs, traditions, hobbies, interests, and sense of style enabled the foster parent to incorporate those preferences into their family life, environment and activities.

Eight participants (25%) described fostering a sense of agency within the foster child. Given that so many circumstances around the placement are outside the foster child’s control, foster parents sought ways to help them find their voice to express what would make them feel more at home. In age-appropriate ways, foster parents encouraged the foster child to pick “what they wore, what they ate, what toys they wanted, how their room was decorated,” etc. One also reported that they defined “individual responsibilities in [the] context of family.”

Five participants (15.63%) referred to respect for the foster child's biological family. These foster parents sought to keep the child "connected to their family and culture" by keeping "pictures of them and their biological family around the house" and never "[speaking] ill of their biological parents." These foster parents reassured the foster child that they were "not replacements for their parents, just some help in between" and facilitated visits with the birth family when appropriate.

Five participants (15.63%) expressed the importance of comfort and empathy. Answers included "lots of snuggles for little ones," "pour love into them," and "hugs." One participant described a "focus on attachment in physical, spiritual, and emotion." Overall, there appeared to be recognition of the importance of listening to and respecting their needs, empathizing with their feelings, and staying connected emotionally in addition to caring for their physical wellbeing.

Family Life: Question 3

Then, foster parents were asked, "How would you describe life as a foster family?" Thirty-three participants answered this open response question. The researcher identified the most frequently used adjectives and categorized responses into positive, neutral/ambiguous, and negative descriptors. In Table 5.2, notice that chaotic was the most commonly used word, followed by rewarding or fulfilling. Busy, hectic, crazy, overwhelming, loving, complex, difficult, and daunting were other shared sentiments. The adjectives were all encompassing of the full range of emotions. Oftentimes, words from the same participant fell into multiple categories which accentuates the complexity of foster parenting. One unique response includes, "Everyone has a role in the process.

Even our children that are at home with us." Another notably referenced John 5:19, "Jesus gave them this answer: 'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; He can only do what he sees His Father doing.'"

Table 5.2: Describing Life as a Foster Family

Positive Words	*Neutral/Ambiguous Words*	*Negative Words*
"Rewarding"/"Fulfilling" (7 similar responses) "Loving" (5 similar responses) "Blessed" (2 similar responses) "Fun" (2 similar responses) "Forgiveness" (2 similar responses) "Working together" (2 similar responses) "Sacrificial Love" (2 similar responses) "Sweet" "Joyful" "Beautiful" "Learn more about yourself" "Feel strong and proud of what you are building" "Never a dull moment" "Full of life" "Usually grateful" "Flexible"	"Roller Coaster" (3 similar responses) "Loud" (2 similar responses) "Inviting bio family members into your life has an impact" (2 similar responses) "Ready for unexpected" "Intense" "Unique" "Unexpected adventure" "Big" "Diverse" "Adaptable" "Normal"	"Chaotic" (10 similar responses) "Busy" (5 similar responses) "Hectic"/"Crazy"/"Overwhelming" (5 similar responses) "Complex"/"Difficult"/"Daunting" (4 similar responses) "Regularly having time and boundaries being broken without respect of personal needs, lack of privacy" (2 similar responses) "Sad" "Tense" "High intensity" "Exhausting" "Stressful" "Isolating" "Messy" "Lots of hurts, anger" "Living in a fishbowl" "It always feels like living in a state of stress in response to injustices"

Unique Foster Parent Experiences

Foster Parent Experiences: Question 1

The researcher asked each participate to use a sliding scale to represent how accurately each statement represented his or her family where zero meant strongly disagree and 100 meant strongly agree. Results are displayed in Table 5.3. The average

participant agreed that it was more complex to parent foster children than biological children. Similarly, the average participant disagreed that traditional discipline techniques were an effective strategy for foster children.

Table 5.3: Foster Parent Experience Sliding Scale Questions

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
It is more complex to parent foster children than biological children.	1	100	75.67	27.09	733.86	33
Traditional discipline techniques (e.g., time outs) are an effective strategy for my foster child(ren).	0	96	36.12	26.4	697.16	34

Foster Parent Experiences: Question 2

Subsequently, the survey asked, "What do you think makes foster parenting unique from traditional parenting?" Thirty-two participants responded to this open response question. The researcher identified four themes: trauma/attachment, oversight, different parenting techniques, and biological family involvement.

Eighteen responses (56.25%) referred to the trauma the foster child experienced before being placed in the foster parent's home. Four participants (12.5%) spoke about the need for foster parents to be trauma-informed by understanding the way trauma and neglect impact children's brain development. A couple addressed the uncertainty of what may trigger disruptive behavior in their foster child. A couple of others described the lack of information foster parents have regarding the foster child's family history, both in terms of life circumstances, experiences, and medical or mental illness history. One foster parent elaborated, "One key difference is that behaviorally, my wife and I cannot point out to each other 'this comes from you…' and therefore cannot look at our own histories

to draw upon when working through situations." Similarly, six participants (18.75%) mentioned attachment. Foster children can "have a hard time creating stable bonds" and establishing trust. One response summarized:

> "With biological children [there] is an attachment that is just easy and natural. With foster/adoptive children you have to work at it and tend to it and be intentional. There is a powerful, powerful bond that [can] happen… but it's work and it's hard. When you don't have secure attachment and you tell your child you can't watch screens right now but you can later, they have no reason to trust you. They may not know you will feed them, love them, be there no matter what. They push you away through behaviors to see if you'll really stay."

Eight individuals (25%) described the unique oversight or "involvement of social workers, [biological] family, caseworkers, court, [and] paperwork." At times, this was perceived as interference. Other times, it was perceived as judgment. Overall, there was a recognition that there were more perspectives, different expectations, and less freedom than in traditional parenting. Foster parents describe "[having] all the responsibilities of caring for a child, but none of the legal rights as a traditional parent" and needing to "follow someone else's rules and jump through their hoops."

Eight foster parents (25%) reported the need for different parenting techniques. They said, "you can't just expect normal parenting techniques to work on your average foster child" and need to be trauma-informed in one's discipline techniques. They deemed a different parenting approach necessary because "typical kids see grown-ups as there to help them. Trauma kids see grown-ups as an unpredictable threat." Participants described customizing their parenting approach according to the needs of the child and prioritizing connection over correction.

> "Since they come from a family that has needed help to parent usually means they haven't had many rules and boundaries. That's what makes it more difficult to parent… They have their own ways of doing things and often times they were able to do what they wanted [whether] that's safe or unsafe activities for their age. They often times don't understand why they are in care and struggle with listening to someone who they don't even know (which is completely understandable). Being empathetic while having boundaries with them is what we found most helpful.

Five answers (15.63%) highlighted the unique impact of biological family involvement. One response elaborated, "The after effects of parent visits can be difficult (emotionally and physically). The stuff the parent feeds them has a big effect on behavior as well as the confusion of limited time spent with parents." Similarly, another participant emphasized how each foster child comes with "their culture, their experiences, their fears, [and] their personalities" which were established before their entered foster care. Another foster parent echoed this, stating, "foster children bring a history that adds self narratives, different self beliefs, different cultures, and traditions to the fostering family." Another associated response stressed the importance of "understanding of race dynamics" in the United States since trans-racial fostering is common.

Avoiding Burnout

Avoiding Burnout: Question 1

The researcher asked each participant to use a slide bar to represent how accurately each statement represented his or her family where zero meant hardly ever and 100 meant nearly all the time. Results are presented in Table 5.4. The average participant somewhat struggled to prioritize self-care but often felt support from his or her friends and community.

Table 5.4: Foster Parent Experience Sliding Scale Questions

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
I prioritize self-care.	15	80	46.42	20.31	412.43	33
I receive support from my family and friends.	10	100	70.82	22.46	504.62	34

Avoiding Burnout: Question 2

Then, the survey asked, "What does self-care look like for you right now?" Thirty-three participants responded to this open response question. The researcher categorized the responses into spheres of wellbeing: physical health, relational health, spiritual health, fun, work-life balance, and time alone.

Fun was the most cited dimension. Seventeen participants (51.52%) described fun leisure activities they enjoyed doing for themselves. Pampering activities included haircuts, getting their nails done, taking baths, or getting massages. Examples of leisure activities included playing games, going to the amusement park for a day, reading, listening to podcasts, or getting coffee. Finally, a couple of people mentioned getting a coffee before work or ordering out once a week.

Physical health was the second most frequently referenced dimension. Fifteen people (45.45%) referred to physical health care practices and "exercise" was the most commonly used word. Eleven people (33.33%) described exercise, working out, and going to the gym. In addition, a couple of people described buying or eating healthy foods and a couple of people prioritized naps or sleep. Overall, there appeared to be awareness of how physical wellbeing helped foster parents "unwind from the stress" and "stay on track" with their overall wellness goals.

Twelve participants (36.36%) cited relational health activities as a means of self-care. For example, five (15.15%) mentioned going on a date or having time alone with a partner. An additional two participants described "tag teaming" with their partner. Five participants (15.15%) said they spend time with friends. One participant mentioned support groups and one reported seeing a therapist as their primary self-care strategy.

Spiritual health disciplines were referenced by nine participants (27.27%) in their self-care strategies. Three (9.09%) mentioned spending time with Jesus or the Lord to recharge them. Another two (6.06%) described devotions and spending time in God's word and practicing Sabbath. More unique answers included an "upcoming mission trip," "prayer," and "counseling" which were each reported once.

Work-life balance was mentioned by four participants (12.12%) who described "unplugging from work," "setting boundaries," and "saying no to a lot of commitments."

Overall, time alone was noted by seven participants (21.21%). It was commonly described as "quiet moments to be alone and think without interruption," even if that required "sitting in my car by myself" for a bit or scheduling time aside for about 30 minutes. Self-care was possible when they had a day off or just a little extra time "to do what I want/need to do."

Avoiding Burnout: Question 3

Next, the survey asked, "What self-care practices do you wish you had more time for?" Thirty-three participants responded to this open-response question.

The most common response was the desire for more time alone with their spouse or friends (42.42%). Eight participants (24.24%) wished for more getaways, dates, and

time alone with their spouse. An additional six responses (18.18%) wanted more time with friends. Finding a babysitter was reported as a common obstacle in this arena.

Another dominant theme was time for pampering and fun. Participants were looking for "more free time for doing crafts/hobbies," "leisure reading and long showers," "[getting] my nails done or [having] a spa day," "yoga and massages," "learning and personal development," and "traveling [or] days that nothing is accomplished." Overall, this theme of leisure appeared seven times (21.21%). Similarly, seven participants (21.21%) expressed the need for more alone time. This might look like "time to myself for 30 minutes each day," respite care for a couple of days, or "sitting in my car by myself."

In the physical health dimension, five people (15.15%) described wanting more exercise, two people (6.06%) mentioned wanting more sleep, and one person wanted more time for meal prepping. In terms of spiritual health, four participants (12.12%) wanted more time for prayer, journaling, bible study, and quiet time with Jesus.

Avoiding Burnout: Question 4

Subsequently, the survey asked, "In what ways do your friends and community members make you feel most supported as a foster parent?" Thirty-three participants responded to this open-response question and the researcher organized their comments into the following categories: material support, childcare, parenting support, encouragement, spiritual support, relational support, and engagement.

Sixteen respondents (48.48%) described material support and meals were the most frequent example, cited nine times. Other examples included help with rides,

donating clothing and other childcare items, sending gift cards, and help running errands or completing chores. Eleven foster parents cited childcare, babysitting, or respite care. They also appreciated invitations for sleepovers. Six participants (18.18%) gave examples of other appreciated ways community members could do to engage in the lives of their foster children such as attending the kids' sporting events, showing up at court dates, coming alongside us, and being present in times of crisis.

Twelve foster parents (36.36%) spoke about how encouraging their friends and community members were by reaching out to see if they were ok, letting them vent, listening without judging, allowing them to cry, and reassuring them that they are doing a good job. Having others who were empathetic to the differences of foster parenting and listened without saying, "That's typical kid behavior" was commonly valued. One specifically mentioned sharing foster care stories with other foster parents who get it. Two participants specifically mentioned how helpful it was when others came to their house to hang out, especially when it's hard to bring the kids out. Two participants described the overall blessing it is to have friends and community members treat foster children like any other one of their family members, regardless of the length of the placement.

In addition, four participants (12.12%) emphasized the unique support they discovered in a support group of other foster parents who understand the struggle. A couple of respondents appreciated receiving parenting advice, especially "from foster parents that have been doing foster care longer than our family." Half of these replies (6.06%) specified that the support group met in their church and eight participants

(24.24%) mentioned how having others pray for them, and remind them that they are praying for them, made them feel supported.

Avoiding Burnout: Question 5

Next, the survey asked, "If you were to give advice to a parent considering fostering a child, what are the top three things you would want to say?" Thirty-three participants answered this open-response question. This time, the researcher categorized the responses into advice related to preparations for becoming a foster parent, the foster care system, the foster family lifestyle, expectations about the process, and the reason why it can be worthwhile.

A couple of participants (6.06%) advised, "just try it" and stop waiting because "there's never a right time." Three other participants (9.09%) recommended praying about it in order to "make sure you are taking on this role because God has directed you toward this." Yet the majority of responses regarding deciding to become a foster parent addressed practical things foster parents should do to prepare and make sure their family was ready. For example, two replies (6.06%) encouraged prospective foster parents to assess their motives and ensure their ability to support reunification. Three spouses (9.09%) emphasized how important it was for married couples to make sure that both people are on the same page and equally committed to the responsibility of being a foster parent. Four people (12.12%) advised discussing boundaries to make sure the family has margin in their life. Then, they recommended writing these boundaries down, sticking to them, and having others to provide accountability for them. Overall, sixteen people (48.48%) stressed the importance of surrounding oneself with a strong support system. A

couple recommended joining a foster parent support group immediately, even before the licensing or accepting one's first placement, in order to listen and learn from those with lived experience. Finally, four people (12.12%) emphasized researching and learning as much as possible about trauma and its effects on child development. Additional learning about parenting styles, attachment, transracial adoption, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), and the myriad of other issues common in foster care was also recommended.

Four participants (12.12%) offered advice on the foster care system and cautioned, "The government bureaucracy is real, learn to be patient." Practical advice included getting a foster parent mentor to help beginners navigate the system, taking the time to understand what rights and limitations foster parents have, and learning the role race commonly plays in the foster care system.

Twelve answers (36.36%) addressed preparing prospective foster parents for a change to their lifestyle or family system. Six respondents (18.18%) spoke about the need for foster parents to be flexible. Three participants (9.09%) warned that foster parents need to be adaptable, especially in terms of their parenting style. One foster parent said, "Be ready to throw out everything you thought you knew about parenting and grab onto patience and grace." Three responses (9.09%) emphasized the need for foster parents to be intentional about connecting foster children with their biological families and culture. Responses indicate this might look like in-person visits with biological family members, photos, sharing stories, participating in cross-cultural activities, and learning new things, such as how to properly care for Black hair.

Eighteen people (54.54%) cautioned prospective foster parents about setting appropriate expectations. Three people (9.09%) warned that it is hard work. Yet, foster parents should "not expect gratitude or a thank you from anyone." In fact, at times, "you may be considered the enemy because to them they have just been removed from the only home they have ever known" so foster parents should not expect to be loved right away. Two others agreed and said, "don't take everything personally" and "don't take all things said to heart as some things are said out of frustration or fear." Three participants (9.09%) warned that caring for foster children is very different than biological children and every child is unique. One foster parent summarized that perhaps the only appropriate expectations are "No expectations. Just love them."

Ultimately, ten participants' (30.30%) advice to prospective foster parents would be to remember why foster care can be so worthwhile and rewarding. Many accentuated the opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of children and vulnerable families. Two spoke to a sense of fulfillment in how God was calling them to care for vulnerable kids. One spoke of how being a foster parent was not only an opportunity to serve others but receive blessings in return. Three people explicitly said, "It's worth it."

Avoiding Burnout: Question 6

Next, participants were given nine types or categories of support strategies and asked to drag and drop them into a category that best fits his or her experience (i.e., support strategies I've tried/experienced and support strategies I haven't tried/experienced) and then rank each list according to what he or she found most valuable where the top item in each list represented the most valuable. Results are

displayed in Tables 5.5 and 5.6. Trainings were the only support strategy that all participants reported having experienced and they were commonly deemed the most valuable. There was greater variety in what participants anticipated to be the most valuable of the support strategies they have not yet experienced but the most common response was having a mentee.

Table 5.5: Ranking of Support Strategies Participants Have Experienced

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Count
Trainings	13	4	4	3	4	0	2	0	0	30
Babysitters/ Respite Care	4	11	7	4	1	1	0	0	0	28
Support Groups	4	7	7	3	1	1	1	1	1	26
Foster Resource Closet	2	2	2	2	0	2	0	2	0	12
Having a Mentor	1	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	8
Retreats/Camps	1	0	0	6	3	1	0	0	0	11
Scholarships/ Financial Support	0	2	2	3	5	1	0	0	0	13
Therapy	0	1	4	2	1	1	1	0	0	10
Having a Mentee	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	3

Table 5.6: Ranking of Support Strategies Participants Have Not Experienced

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Count
Having a Mentee	7	3	8	5	2	1	0	0	0	26
Having a Mentor	5	6	5	2	2	1	0	0	0	21
Foster Resource Closet	4	3	4	4	1	1	1	0	0	18
Scholarships/ Financial Support	4	3	3	2	3	1	0	0	0	16
Therapy	3	3	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	10
Retreats/Camps	2	9	3	4	1	0	0	0	0	19
Support Groups	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	4
Babysitters/ Respite Care	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Trainings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Church Support Strategies

Church Support Experiences: Question 1

The researcher asked each participant to use a sliding scale to represent how strongly he or she agreed with each statement where zero meant strongly disagree and 100 meant strongly agree. Results are displayed in Table 5.7. The average participant felt somewhat neutral on how well the church strove to understand the experiences of foster parents. Nevertheless, the average respondent agreed that the church they attend provided support for foster parents and families saw foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact, and prayed for his or her family regularly. However, there was a significantly larger degree of variance in this category of questions than the majority of the prior sliding scale questions.

Table 5.7: Church Support System Sliding Scale Questions

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
I feel that the church I attend strives to understand the experiences of foster parents.	0	100	49.59	30.79	947.93	32
The church I attend provides support for foster parents and families.	0	100	57.63	31.63	1000.37	30
The church I attend sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact.	0	100	68.40	32.99	1088.11	30
Members of my faith community pray for my family and me regularly.	0	100	72.81	31.35	982.67	31

Church Support Experiences: Question 2

The first open-response question in this section asked, "In what ways does your church mention foster care (e.g., sermons, service opportunities, testimonials, dedications, etc. and how frequently?" Thirty people answered but three people felt the question was not applicable to them and six people (20%) said that their church never mentions foster care. The majority said that their church rarely mentioned foster care (i.e., on occasion, maybe once every three years, not frequently, off and on). Three participants (10%) estimated that foster care was mentioned a few times a year (i.e., quarterly, maybe twice a year, maybe quarterly). There was one outlier who said, "Foster care ministry is the foundation at our church, so it feels like it's mentioned every week."

Foster care was reported to be most frequently incorporated within the church by inviting foster care organizations or ministry partners to share with the congregation or

by having foster care mentioned in sermons, which were each reported four or five times. Three people (10%) mentioned hearing testimonies shared and one participant said hearing that testimonial "is what led us to become a foster family." Other respondents spoke more broadly about the awareness of a small group, having several foster families in the congregation, or a general philosophy of ministry in which the lead pastors framed foster care as "a church problem and we need to be helping any way we can."

Church Support Experiences: Question 3

Next, the survey asked, "What ways has the church you attend provided support for foster parents and families." Thirty people answered but three people stated that they felt like the question didn't apply to them. Four people (13.33%) stated that their church did not offer any real support. One foster parent said that a couple help individually, "but not the community." Others said, "I honestly can't think of anything" or "nothing." Similarly, others shared that assistance seemed to spring up from the bottom-up rather than top-down. In other words, foster care ministries were rarely formalized and awareness of needs came about through life groups, small groups, or friendships with other congregants. Examples of the care participants reported receiving fell almost evenly between tangible support, support groups, and acceptance.

Nine foster parents (30%) reported receiving a variety of tangible support from their church community. Five mentioned help with meals, three mentioned childcare or babysitting, three cited financial assistance, three described a foster closet or backpack with supplies, and one said tutoring. A couple mentioned that their church created a

system such as CarePortal or matching families with “a champion family” to create a sustainable network that could identify needs early and be ongoingly available.

Seven participants (23.33%) accentuated the way their church was always welcoming and accepting of their foster children by treating them like any other member of the family. Unique examples included having the church provide a buddy to accompany the foster child during Sunday school or offering events specifically for foster youth. One response highlighted that the congregation was not only welcoming to the foster kids from “hard places” or who were “having a hard time,” but the church was also “welcoming to any bio parent we have shown up with.”

Eight respondents (26.67%) described having a support group that ministered to foster parents. Participants shared that these groups typically met once a month. One foster parent noted that their support group had a group message which enabled them to check in with each other on a more frequent basis. Similarly, four participants (13.33%) talked about receiving prayer support from the congregation.

There were also a few notable outliers within the response to this question. One responded that there were a “couple members [at their church] who work[ed] for the county and understand” and another who said their church has “service to local [Department of Children’s and Family (DCFS)] offices.” The other unique response was from someone who said their church offers training at the church.

Church Support Experiences: Question 4

Subsequently, the survey asked, “In what ways do you feel that churches might more effectively provide support for foster parents and family members?” Thirty-two

participants responded to this question but two felt that the question didn't apply to them because they don't attend church. Several themes from the previous questions re-emerged, such as tangible support, relational support, and prayer.

Uniquely, this is the first time that education and awareness arose as a dominant theme among ten of the responses (31.25%). Participants hoped that the church would have "more open discussions… to encourage members to open their homes to experience and share their gifts by fostering." They hoped for the church to "understand the intent" of foster care and seek to "support struggling families [in order] to prevent family separation." Respondents were looking for churches to be more engaged in addressing the issue and more empathetic in understanding its inherent challenges and foster children's challenging behavior. They expressed the need to educate the congregation about the need for stable families and how to best include and support foster families. Without such education, foster parents reported staring at foster kids' disruptive behaviors and gossiping about foster families. Participants suggested that the church could host courses, such as a Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) class which is a training curriculum for prospective foster parents about serving children from the child welfare system. Another participant provided a unique example by advocating that pastors or church "staff need to foster/adopt to set the example and join in the experience first-hand" to transform church culture surrounding foster care. If churches took such steps to educate themselves on issues surrounding foster care, a respondent suggested churches could extend their impact by collaborating with agencies and advocating for policy development.

Thirteen participants (40.63%) reported examples of tangible supports that the church could offer or increase such as providing meals, financial assistance, help cleaning the house or making repairs, buddies to accompany kids with extra needs in church services, parents' night outs, babysitters, foster closets, and carpools. Eight respondents (25%) recommended increased social support such as support groups, care teams, peer foster parent connections, mentoring programs for foster parents and foster kids, and wrap around teams.

Church Support Experiences: Question 5

Then, the survey asked, "In what ways have you actively partnered with your church (e.g., children's or youth ministry staff or volunteers) to identify ways to better meet the needs of your family?" Twenty-seven people answered this question but three people said that the question did not apply to them because they did not attend church. Four of the responses (14.81%) said that they haven't actively partnered with their church in this way or haven't asked for help. Another specifically said, "I'm not comfortable asking for help. This is a ministry that we're called into. While I believe others are called to support that, I'm not comfortable discerning who could help in what ways."

Ten of the participants (37.04%) responded that they were an active volunteer in their church's ministry programs. Six served in the children's ministry, three served foster families, and one partnered with women to restart the women's ministry and start a parents' night out. Two participants described how their foster children were also able to volunteer in various roles during the church services. Four of the responses (14.81%) referred to speaking with the pastoral staff and one practical example was a foster parent volunteer who communicated with the assistant ministry director when conflicts came up.

The individual expressed appreciation for their flexibility and understanding. Another participant shared, “We did meet with ministry staff members to give a brief ‘here’s what you need to know about our family’ intro to provide some context for the accommodations we were requesting.”

Five respondents (18.51%) expressed communicating with pastoral staff to help identify those in need or partner together in facilitating events. According to the responses, that might look like educating on a trauma-informed perspective, sharing an insider perspective of what it is like to be a foster parent or family, advocating for a sensory room, creating a support group, organizing educational events, communicating needs, and facilitating connections.

Summary

The researcher conducted a qualitative research study and had 39 participants complete the online survey. Survey questions sought to explore family life, unique foster parent experiences, community support strategies, and church support strategies. When analyzing the results, several common themes emerged representing the kinds of support that foster parents reported as valuable. Foster parents described their family life as busy, overwhelming, complex, difficult, and daunting and it appeared that the best way for others to support them was by being welcoming and inclusive and coming to them. Additional themes of foster family life include flexibility, resiliency, unconditional love, adjustments, and mission where others could meaningfully support them through encouragement and engagement. Unique foster parenting experiences centered around different parenting and discipline techniques, the child’s history of trauma and neglect, and the unique oversight or involvement of social workers, biological families,

caseworkers, court, and paperwork. In response, others could impactfully support foster parents through increasing their own education about trauma-informed care, provide tangible support, and advocate for policy reforms. The busyness of foster parenting tended to leave little time for self-care but foster parents expressed gratitude for even a few minutes each day. Many foster parents relied on community and church support to sustain them with material support, relational encouragement, prayer, involvement, and support groups. The participants felt that the church in particular was well positioned to increase awareness and education about foster care and its related issues and desired for churches to do more in this regard. The next chapter will explore these themes and search for any correlations that emerged from the research.

CHAPTER SIX: EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

Evaluation of Project Design and Implementation

This qualitative research project utilized a phenomenological approach in order to identify the essence of foster parents' experiences surrounding family life, care for children in foster care, and strategies the church might implement to provide support for foster parents. The entire project entailed five steps which were detailed in chapter four. It began with a review of the biblical and theological foundations and a survey of relevant existing literature and research on this topic. Then, the researcher conducted independent research and analyzed the results of the data. The research for chapters two and three occurred simultaneously. Then, the development of the research instrument and implementation happened sequentially.

Project Design Strengths

One strength of this study was the diversity of participants which brought depth to the research. Within the participants, there was representation of foster moms, foster dads, married foster parents, and single foster parents. They had a range of experience in the total number of foster children they have cared for (i.e., 1-58), age of foster children they have cared for (i.e., birth-18), and years of service as a foster parent (i.e., 7 months-15 years). The participants also reported diversity in the number of forever children in their home (i.e., 0-6).

An additional strength was the ability to include the actual words from the foster parent participants in the analysis and report. The researcher recognized the ontological reality that each foster parent has a unique experience. Consistently incorporating the actual words from respondents allowed a phenomenological assessment of their shared understandings and the presentation of some of their unique, different perspectives.

Another strength was the researcher's ability to remain objective in her analysis of the data because she had no personal experience as a foster parent, no one in her close family or friends have fostered, and she has had no contact with the foster care system. Therefore, she was able to refrain from assuming the role of an expert. Instead, she relied upon the direct voice of the participants as an authentic representation of being a foster parent and sought to regularly include their direct quotations so that the reader could gain a direct glimpse into their personal lived experiences.

Thankfully, the researcher also had strong community support from contacts who helped distribute the survey. She was grateful that others saw the importance of the research project and were curious about what the findings would be and intrigued about how the discoveries may be able to be applied to their local ministry contexts.

A further strength of the study is how the majority of the study's findings were consistently supported by previous research from the literature review. In addition, there were a few unique discoveries and expanded understandings that can add to the research in this area.

Project Design Weaknesses

The study was limited in its ability to assess the uniqueness of parenting foster children because there was no control group. The researcher relied upon the self-reported

descriptions of the foster parent participants who have cared for both biological and foster children to compare their own experiences.

In addition, the researcher chose to avoid asking questions that explicitly addressed trauma because she was on a consolidated timeline for the project and her goal was to emphasize support strategies. Although trauma was regularly touched upon within some of the open response questions, further questioning on the trauma could have provided additional insight into understanding the unique stressors foster parents face which can contribute to burnout.

Another limitation of this study was that the sample size of foster dads was significantly smaller than that of foster moms. This distribution is consistent with other research found in the literature review. Nevertheless, the researcher believes their perspective and voice is a critical contribution and would like to have seen a higher number of foster dad participants.

Similarly, a strong majority of the participants were married. Increased involvement of single foster parents would have been interesting and allowed the researcher to see if there were any potentially significant correlations or differences in foster parent experiences based upon their marital status. The researcher assumes that single foster parents would require more support from friends, family, and community members but cannot support or reject this claim based on the findings in her research.

Research Discussion and Findings

The purpose of this research project was to identify the best practices with foster parents in terms of developing family life, caring for at-risk children, and offering support to foster parents. Overall, conclusions and implications were derived from the

common themes that arose from participants' survey responses related to each theme. The findings from this analysis are presented here.

Developing Family Life

Life as a foster family was described with a wide variety of phrases. From a biblical perspective, Scripture avoids prescribing one standard for how to develop family life but it promotes many family values. Overall, "the Bible keeps pushing out the boundaries of the family" to become more and more radically inclusive.[431] In Matthew 12:50, Jesus defines family according to those who do the will of God, rather than defining family according to biological or household ties. From the family resilience perspective within the literature review, family members are those who are trying to do their best for one another (albeit in sometimes misguided ways) and engage with one another based on respect, compassion for their struggles, and hope for their reparative potential.[432] When this study's participants were asked, "How would you describe family life**?"** they responded that family life was busy, hectic, crazy, overwhelming, loving, complex, difficult, and daunting.

Explaining this difference in family lifestyle became a prominent theme within one of the open response questions as well. Participants were asked, "If you were to give advice to a parent considering fostering a child, what are the top three things you would want to say?" Seventeen of the responses (53.13%) related to setting expectations for family life. Seven responses advised prospective foster parents to be flexible or adaptable

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[431] A.E. McGrath, "Family," 372.

[432] Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework," 130, 133.

because "your family/home will adjust and change with each placement." Three replies emphasized patience, three underscored love, and four accentuated its hard work.

Flexibility

Flexibility emerged as the most dominant characteristic of foster families. Within the literature review, Mateo highlights the flexibility inherent in parents' willingness to "redirect their lives and change their own model of family to assure a full integration of the child" into the family unit.[433] Likewise, Scripture illustrates how biblical hospitality is rare because it is inconvenient and vulnerable.[434] Biblical hospitality requires flexibility as it often entails unpredictably stopping, abandoning one's schedule, and dedicating time to focus on the person in need.

First, participants were asked to use a sliding scale to represent how accurately they felt the statement, "My family is highly flexible" represented their family, where zero meant not accurate at all and 100 meant extremely accurate. The average response was 75.00. Only one participant reported that they somewhat disagreed with a score below 50 (i.e., 38); everyone else reported a score of 52 or higher. Interestingly, this question had the lowest standard deviation of all the sliding scale questions in the survey which means there was the least variation in or dispersion of responses. The researcher explored if length of time as a foster parent was correlated with their self-assessment of

[433] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 9, 11.

[434] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 104.

flexibility and did not find a significant correlation ($r = -0.1925$). Nevertheless, foster moms averaged a higher score ($\mu = 77.73$) than foster dads ($\mu = 66.25$).

Participants elaborated on the importance of flexibility within four of the open response questions. For example, if they were to give advice to a parent considering fostering a child, eight people (24.24%) mentioned flexibility. They specifically recommended being "ready to throw out everything you thought you knew about parenting," making "adjustments to your parenting style," and flexible parenting techniques because "normal parenting techniques might not work." One respondent advised "always be flexible when they first come" in order to help encourage a sense of belonging within the family for a new foster child. Another mentioned gratitude for flexibility and understanding when she partnered with church staff. In addition, a couple of participants used "flexible" and "adaptable" as part of their open-response answers to describe life as a foster family.

Resiliency

The literature review suggested resilient families work together through "a transactional process of coping and adaptation that evolves overtime" and is marked by shared family strengths.[435] Similarly, Scripture warns that relying on one's own strength is insufficient and "dependence on it alone will eventually lead to burnout."[436] This study's participants made a self-assessment regarding how accurately the statement, "My

[435] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 660.

[436] Gloer, *1 and 2 Timothy-Titus*, 246.

family is very resilient" represented their family, where zero meant not accurate at all and 100 meant extremely accurate. The average response was 78.27. The average among foster dads ($\mu = 83.5$) was slightly higher than the average among foster moms ($\mu = 79.38$). The researcher explored whether participants' rankings of their families' flexibility were correlated with the ranking of their families' resiliency and found a relatively insignificant correlation ($r = 0.2312$). Similarly, the researcher found no positive correlation with between resiliency and the number of years as a foster parent ($r = -0.1257$) nor the total number of foster children they have cared for ($r = -0.4198$).

Ultimately, resilient families share a belief that "learning and growth emerge from adversity."[437] In Scripture, Paul writes that believers should "glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom. 5:3-5). Eleven participants (34.38%) elaborated on this theme of resiliency when they answered the question, "If you were to give advice to a parent considering fostering a child, what are the top three things you would want to say?" Responses included, "it's worth it but it's incredibly hard," "have patience… never give up," and "be ready to hurt for them, fight for them, and be their fierce advocate parent." Similarly, 15 respondents (45.45%) hinted at resiliency when they answered the question, "How would you describe life as a foster parent?" Remarks included, "roller coaster," "plenty of ups and downs," "full of surprises, twists, and turns," and "self-sacrifice."

[437] Henry, Morris, and Harrist, "Family Resilience," 34-35.

Unconditional Love

Unconditional love is a dominant theme throughout Scripture and perfectly expressed through God's unconditional, covenantal love toward Israel through His radical pursuit, abundant kindness, extreme grace, constant forgiveness, wise discipline, and close relationship.[438] Participants were asked to use a sliding scale to represent how accurately the phrase "My parenting style is characterized by unconditional love (i.e., my love for the child is unrelated to their love toward me in return and unchanged by their behavior or misbehavior)." The average response was 86.47, where zero meant not accurate at all and 100 meant extremely accurate. Foster moms reported a slightly higher score ($\mu = 89.08$) than foster dads ($\mu = 72.50$) but there was essentially no correlation between their years of service as a foster parent and response to the unconditional love question ($r = 0.2049$)

In the literature review, Mateo emphasized how unconditional love is expressed through consistent care, especially during difficult and challenging circumstances.[439] She described how unconditional love means accepting family members for who they are, including their strengths, weaknesses, past traumas, and uncertain futures.[440] Two respondents emphasized unconditional love when responding to the question, "What makes foster parenting unique from traditional parenting." The first foster parent said, "Love them, be there for them no matter what. They push you away through behaviors to

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[438] Jack O. Balswick, Judith K. Balswick, and Thomas Frederick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 24.

[439] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 2-13.

[440] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 11.

see if you'll really stay" and the other said "You must first build trust with the child before they will feel loved and appreciated. As a foster parent you are also aware of what they have been through and what might trigger behaviors."

Overall, unconditional love is the assumed family context that creates a safe space where individuals can express and meet needs and find a deep sense of belonging.[441] Two participants stressed the importance of love when answering the open-response question, "What do you do to help welcome a new foster child and encourage a sense of belonging?" Similarly, when giving advice to a prospective foster parent, three participants emphasized love by saying, "just love them," "love them hard" and "simply love them." When describing life as a foster family, four responses mentioned love including, "we have a lot of love, "lots of… forgiveness and love," "full of sacrificial love," and "love fiercely with open arms no matter the outcome." The participants' answers were consistent with Mateo's understanding of unconditional love being willing to "naturalize the extra weight" of the foster care system "as part of what it means to be family" and requiring growth, adaptation, and intentionality to care for the other in the way that they need, even self-sacrificially.[442]

Adjustments

The addition of any new family member, including a new foster child, inevitably causes "a period of instability and disequilibrium for the family unit" as it adjusts to new

[441] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 36.

[442] Mateo, "The Duty of Love," 3, 6, 11.

relationships and roles and integrates the new family member into family life, patterns, and rules of behavior.[443] In this study, one participant described how she "created a welcome book that explained about us, our chosen family, what to expect on weekdays/weekends/holidays, etc." According to Lanigan and Burleson, the first few days to months can be especially challenging.[444] During this transition period, foster parents expressed that their friends, community members, and churches made them feel supported by providing meals when they get a new placement or providing a backpack with all the necessities to welcome a new child.

The survey question addressing the adjustment period most directly asked, "What do you do to help welcome a new foster child and encourage a sense of belonging within your family?" Without the natural biological ties and shared history of traditional families to define belonging, Lanigan and Burleson suggest that "foster families must rely on communication to build and sustain feelings of family inclusion and family ingroup membership."[445] Meanwhile, Scripture proposes individuals can develop a sense of security and belonging through "covenantal love and empowerment [which] lead to a mature interdependency in which there is both freedom and a continued sense of belonging."[446] *Within the present study, t*he researcher identified six themes related to how foster parents reported facilitating a sense of belonging: introductions (25%), time

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[443] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 906.

[444] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 908.

[445] Nelson and Colander, "Fostering 'Family,'"479.

[446] Balswick, Balswick, and Fredrick, *The Family*, 33.

together (43.75%), discovery (28.13%), fostering a sense of agency (25%), respect for the child's biological family (15.63%), and providing comfort and empathy (15.63%). Several of these themes emerged in other questions. For example, introductions, acceptance, and welcome was mentioned five times when participants described ways the church they attend provided support for foster parents and families. Introductions and acceptance were also called out by a respondent regarding ways she received support from friends and community members. Time together was also identified as a way the church could more effectively support foster parents and family members. "Include them," she advocated, "don't stare [at] behaviors and gossip, understand." Respect and support for the child's biological family also came up in participants' advice for potential prospective foster parents. Four respondents promoted "[connecting] with their bio family as much as safely possible," "[being] a resource for [biological parents]," "[building] authentic relationships with the family of the kids in your care," and being "truly committed to supporting the whole family and rooting for reunification." In order to assist with this adjustment period, four participants recommended that potential prospective foster parents "learn as much as you can about trauma-informed parenting" and "the effects of trauma and healthy attachment."

Mission

The biblical and theological review addressed the common misconception that hospitality's benefits are limited to the guest and spoke to hospitality's ability to also

nourish, challenge, and transform the host and larger community as well.[447] Within the literature review, Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel proposed a model for the process of family resilience in which the fourth phase entails growing stronger and shared meaning making.[448] They suggested that families in this stage have regained stability and emerged from the stress even stronger and more unified.[449] They asserted that this stage is marked by the ability to reflect on and recognize how persevering through challenges as a family has developed unique character, deep empathy, increased patience, and renewed appreciation for their family.[450]

These themes appeared within the current study as well. When asked to rank how accurately the statement, "being a foster parent has brought our family closer together," represented their family, the average response was 71.82 (where zero meant not accurate at all and 100 meant extremely accurate). Foster moms ($\mu = 72.46$) more commonly felt the statement was accurate of their family than foster dads ($\mu = 51.25$) but the sample size was limited to four foster dads. Only four participants felt this statement did not accurately describe their family (i.e., 20, 30, 31, 49). The researcher wondered if there was a potential correlation between the reported score on this question and the participant's years of experience as a foster parent, but it was only very slight ($r = 0.1265$).

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[447] Pohl, *Making Room*, 11.

[448] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," fig. 1.

[449] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 669-670.

[450] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 670.

Participants were also asked to report how accurately the statement, "being a foster family is how we serve Christ together" described their family. This question was of interest to the researcher since the Barna Group found Christians foster and consider fostering at a higher rate than the general population.[451] Likewise, Leitz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel reported testimonials from foster parents emphasizing their dependence on spirituality, faith practice, and God to sustain them.[452] Similarly, scripture describes families as agents of the covenant who share a purpose and calling from God to be on mission together.[453] The average response was 77.09, where zero meant not accurate at all and 100 meant extremely accurate. The average response among foster moms ($\mu = 78.54$) was higher than foster dads ($\mu = 67.50$). The average among those with five plus years of experience as a foster parent ($\mu = 87.35$) was higher than those with four or less years of experience as a foster parent ($\mu = 70.47$) but these factors were not strongly correlated with each other ($r = 0.2965$).

Participants happened to elaborate on this theme of foster care as ministry to God within the narratives of other open response questions. When asked, "If you were asked to give advice to a parent considering fostering a child, what are the top three things you would say?" responses included, "What better way to show the love of God," "make sure you are taking on this role because God has directed you toward this," "allow God to be your guide and prepare to be blessed," and "remember you are always caring for one of

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[451] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap.3.

[452] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 666.

[453] Garland, *Family Ministry*, 138.

God's kids." These replies align with Garland's suggestion that "If you want to know God, to see Jesus, bring one of God's needy children to the center of what you do."[454]

Caring for At-Risk Children

The literature review revealed that the responsibilities of caring for foster children "go well beyond the normative experiences of parenting."[455] The biblical and theological review concurs, recognizing that living alongside those at-risk and becoming first-hand witnesses to the injustices and indignities they face often leaves the caregiver caught in the crosshairs.[456] Participants were asked to use a sliding scale to indicate how accurately the statement "it is more complex to parent foster children than biological children" represented their experience, where zero meant strongly disagree and 100 meant strongly agree. The average response was 75.67, indicating they agreed it was more complex to parent foster children. Only three responses indicated that they disagreed. The minimum response (i.e., 1) is an outlier because the participant commented in an open response question that they don't have biological children. The next minimum response (i.e., 5) stated, "I don't find it to be unique outside of having to involve state and bio families and their expectations into your parenting. Other than that, my parenting is the same. You find what works for the individual child." Nevertheless, the majority agreed that parenting foster children was more complex than parenting biological children. For

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[454] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 34.

[455] Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 149.

[456] Pohl, *Making Room,* 77.

example, eight foster parents (25%) described the unique oversight or "involvement of social workers, [biological] family, caseworkers, court, [and] paperwork.

Pope, Miller, and Benner argued that the most notable difference in foster parenting is learning "to accept the messiness inherent in taking care of kids who have experienced abuse or neglect."[457] Likewise, a Christian worldview recognizes that sin has the potential to disrupt or corrupt every relationship and social structure; even the bond between parent and child can be disrupted and become a source of trauma and neglect.[458] When participants were asked to elaborate in an open-response field about what makes foster parenting unique from traditional parenting, 18 participants (56.25%) referred to the trauma the foster child experienced before being placed in the home and six (18.75%) mentioned the impact of attachment differences.

In addition, eight foster parents (25%) reported the need for different parenting techniques because "you can't just expect normal parenting techniques to work on your average foster child." Four participants (12.5%) described the need for trauma-informed parenting which prioritizes connection and safety over discipline and correction and harmonizes with some of the work uncovered in the literature review, such as Karyn Purvis' research.459 Richmond agrees that foster children's disruptive behavior can be addressed more empathetically after learning that "the parts of the brain most affected by

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[457] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 4.

[458] McConnell, "Children At Risk," 155.

[459] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 2; Purvis, Cross, and Sunshine, *The Connected Child*, chap. 6, Kindle.

neglect and/or abuse are the areas that regulate self-control."[460] Differences in parenting techniques were also measured when participants were asked to rate how accurately the statement "traditional discipline techniques are an effective strategy for my foster child(ren)" on a scale from zero (strongly disagree) to 100 (strongly agree). The average response was 36.12 meaning most felt somewhat strongly that traditional discipline techniques were not an effective strategy for their foster child(ren). This aligns with previous research from Hook, Hook, and Berry who describe discipline as a common stressor for foster parents because they quickly discover that many foster children "do not respond well to traditional discipline practices such as enforcing consequences and removal of privileges." [461]

Interestingly, there was only a minor correlation (r = 0.2184) between ratings on "It is more complex to parent foster children than biological children" and "traditional discipline techniques (e.g., time outs) are an effective strategy for my foster child(ren)." The impact of the child welfare system (25%) and interaction with biological families (15.63%) were examples of other complicating factors unique to foster parenting. Furthermore, there was essentially no correlation between ratings on the complexity to parent foster children and participants' ability to prioritize self-care (r = -0.1969). Likewise, there was no correlation between rankings on the complexity to parent foster children and family's resiliency (r = -0.1826) nor the family's flexibility (r = 0.0344).

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[460] Garland, *Family Ministry,* 204.

[461] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 1.

Offering Support to Foster Parents

Self-Care

The researcher asked participants to rank their ability to prioritize self-care because Lee and Miller's researcher suggested that self-care is most effective when implemented as a proactive, intentional, and regular discipline because it will enable individuals to respond out of a reservoir of sustained energy with sharper problem-solving skills.[462] This finding is supported by biblical principles of self-care, time alone with God, and Sabbath as essential proactive soul-nourishment which enable believers to continue loving and serving others well with stamina and endurance.[463]

In the present study, participants were asked to use a slide bar to indicate how accurately "I prioritize self-care" represented their experience. The average of all self-reported scores on this question was 46.42, where zero meant hardly ever and 100 meant nearly all the time. This finding loosely supports the assumption that foster parents, like other helping professionals, struggle to prioritize self-care while simultaneously serving others.[464] This study also found that foster dads ($\mu = 50.25$) averaged a higher score on prioritizing self-care than foster moms ($\mu = 45.08$) but there were only four foster dad responses compared to 25 foster mom responses. Likewise, this study found that married foster parents ($\mu = 46.30$) averaged a higher score on prioritizing self-care than single foster parents ($\mu = 41.67$) but there were only three single participant responses compared

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[462] Lee and Miller, "A Self-Care Framework for Social Workers," 98.

[463] Muller, *Sabbath*, 57-58.

[464] Lee and Miller, "A Self-Care Framework for Social Workers," 96.

to 26 married participant responses. Nevertheless, this study is consistent with the findings of Miller, Cooley, Fletcher, and Moody.[465]

In addition, there was a slight negative correlation between the score on their ability to prioritize self-care and the number of foster children in the home (r = -0.473). This correlation was slightly stronger than the correlation between their ability to prioritize self-care and the total number of children in the home (r = -0.344). Therefore, this study's findings are consistent with Lee and Miller's research. Although it would make sense that the person receiving the least support from family and friends has the least ability to prioritize self-care, these values were not strongly correlated (r = 0.105). Similarly, the researcher found no strong correlation between participants' ability to prioritize self-care and their years of service as a foster parent (r = 0.132).

When participants were asked to describe what self-care looked like for them right now, they typically listed several things including fun leisure activities (51%), exercise, eating healthy, and sleep (45.45%), time with friends or their partner (27.27%), time with God (27.27%), time alone (21.21%), and maintaining a work-life balance (12.12%). Responses were similar when asked, "What self-care practices do you wish you had more time for?" Examples included time alone with their spouse or friends (42.42%), leisure activities (21.21%), time alone (21.21%), exercise, eating healthy, and sleep (21.21%), and time for spiritual activities (12.12%).

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[465] Miller, Cooley, Owens, Fletcher, and Moody, "Self-Care Practices Among Foster Parents," 208.

Community Support

Next, the researcher asked about the amount of support participants received from family and friends because studies throughout the literature review showed that "support from a network of family, friends, communities, and professionals" offers foster parents with critical, necessary resources that sustain them through the journey of fostering.[466] Likewise, the biblical and theological review suggested that companionship was critical sustenance in ministry for Jesus with His disciples and for Paul with Onesiphorus and Timothy.

Participants were asked to use a sliding scale to indicate how accurately the statement "I receive support from my friends and family" represents their experience, where zero meant hardly ever and 100 meant nearly all the time ($\mu = 70.82$). Similar to the responses in participants' ability to prioritize self-care, married foster parents ($\mu = 72.85$) ranked support from family and friends to be stronger or more consistent than single foster parents ($\mu = 50.00$). Foster moms also reported higher or more consistent support ($\mu = 72.31$) than foster dads ($\mu = 59.25$). The researcher also found a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.425$) between the support participants received from their friends and family and the support their churches provided for foster parents and families.

Then, participants were asked to elaborate by answering the following open response question: "In what ways do your friends and community members make you feel most supported as a foster parent?" Unsurprisingly, none of the responses were identical, supporting the researcher's conclusion from the literature review: Effective

[466] Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 2.

support strategies are as diverse as individuals and the most effective support strategies are individualized and customized to the unique stage and circumstances of each foster family.[467] Nevertheless, common categories emerged including material support (48.48%), encouragement (36.36%), prayer (24.24%), involvement (18.18%), and support groups (12.12%).

Within the survey, participants were given nine types of support strategies and asked to drag and drop them into categories in order to divide the support types into those the individual had and had not experienced. Then, within these categories, they were asked to rank each list according to what he or she valued most, where the top item in each list represented the most valuable. Given the variety of responses and rankings, the researcher analyzed responses by employing a ranked choice voting system. Nine points was given to their first choice, eight points to their second choice, and so on. Then, the points were multiplied by the number of participants who gave the same ranking. Results are displayed in Table 6.1 and Table 6.2.

[467] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 117.

Table 6.1: Experienced Support Strategies Scored as Ranked Choice Voting

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Summed Ranked Choice Voting	Count	Average Rank Choice Voting
Trainings	117	32	28	18	20	0	6	0	0	221	30	7.37
Having a Mentor	9	32	7	6	5	0	0	0	0	59	8	7.37
Babysitters/ Respite Care	36	88	49	24	5	4	0	0	0	206	28	7.35
Support Groups	36	56	49	18	5	4	3	2	1	174	26	6.69
Foster Resource Closet	18	16	14	12	0	8	0	4	0	72	12	6.00
Therapy	0	8	28	12	5	4	3	0	0	60	10	6.00
Scholarships/ Financial Support	0	16	14	18	25	4	0	0	0	77	13	5.92
Retreats/Camps	9	0	0	36	15	4	0	0	0	64	11	5.81
Having a Mentee	0	0	7	0	5	0	3	0	0	15	3	5.00

While trainings were experienced by all and most commonly ranked first, using ranked choice voting analysis, it was tied in average value with having a mentor, even though notably fewer participants reported having that kind of support. Having babysitters or respite care providers was valued closely behind in average ranked choice vote.

Table 6.2: Non-Experienced Support Strategies Scored as Ranked Choice Voting

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	Summed Ranked Choice Voting	Count	Average Rank Choice Voting
Babysitters/ Respite Care	18	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	26	3	8.67
Support Groups	18	0	0	12	0	0	0	0	0	30	4	7.50
Retreats/Camps	18	72	21	24	5	0	0	0	0	140	19	7.36
Having a Mentor	45	48	35	12	10	4	0	0	0	154	21	7.33
Therapy	27	24	7	12	0	0	3	0	0	73	10	7.30
Having a Mentee	63	24	56	30	10	4	0	0	0	187	26	7.19
Scholarships/ Financial Support	36	24	21	12	15	4	0	0	0	112	16	7.00
Foster Resource Closet	36	24	28	24	5	4	3	0	0	124	18	6.89
Trainings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Having babysitters and respite care providers also fell at the top of the list of those supports that participants have not yet received, although the number of participants was low. Support groups were also ranked highly but reported by a low number of participants. The more commonly prioritized support strategies that a significant number of people had not yet experienced were retreats or camps and having a mentor. It was also intriguing to see having a mentee was anticipated to be more valuable by those who have not had one ($\mu = 7.19$) than by those who have had or currently have a mentee ($\mu = 5.00$). Nevertheless, this is an indication that many of the participants may have reached phase five of Walsh's family resilience framework since they report a strong desire to help others and become a provider of social support.

Church Support

The researcher asked participants to use a sliding scale to indicate how strongly they agreed with the following statement: “I feel that the church I attend strives to understand the experiences of foster parents,” where zero meant strongly disagree and 100 meant strongly agree. The average score was neutral at 49.59. However, the lowest three scores (i.e., 0, 0, and 1) were from respondents who also commented that they do not attend church. The fourth lowest score (i.e., 9) came from a participant who said her church never mentions foster care and does nothing to provide support for foster parents and families. Therefore, the researcher looked for correlations across these sliding scale questions. The Pearson correlation coefficient factor for “I feel that the church I attend strives to understand the experiences of foster parents” and “The church I attend provides support for foster parents and families” was very strong at 0.9173. There was also a somewhat strong correlation between “I feel that the church I attend strives to understand the experiences of foster parents” and “The church I attend sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact” ($r = 0.7052$). A similar correlation was discovered between the scores on how the church strives to understand the experiences of foster parents and “Members of my faith community pray for my family and me regularly” ($r = 0.6549$). In the following open response questions, there was little to no elaboration on what it looked like for the church to strive to understand the experiences of foster parents in practical terms. However, when foster parents were asked how they actively partner with their church to identify ways to better meet the needs of their family, five participants (18.51%) expressed communicating with the pastoral staff to help identify foster parents in need or partnering together in facilitating events. When asked, “In what ways do you

feel that churches might more effectively provide support for foster parents?" one participant asserted the need for pastors or church staff "to foster/adopt [in order] to set an example and join in the experience first-hand" to better understand the unique experiences of foster parents.

Then, participants were asked to use the same sliding scale to represent their level of agreement with the statement, "The church I attend provides support for foster parents and families." The average was 57.63, indicating slight agreement which is similar to Salmon's literature review which found that "67% of foster parents agreed or strongly [agreed] that being part of a spiritual community helped them cope with the high demands of fostering." [468] In this study, after excluding the responses from the participants who commented that they don't attend church, 17 participants (65%) gave a score of 50 or higher. Salmon also states that foster parents described their spirituality "as a survival tool that kept foster families intact and was related to their longevity" in serving as foster parents. Salmon's finding is consistent with the way this study's participants frequently mentioned spirituality, prayer, and time alone with God in their self-care and community support strategies. However, her finding was not replicated when trying to measure a correlation between the scores on this sliding scale measure and the foster parents' self-reported years of service as a foster parent ($r = -0.1191$). Nevertheless, there was a strong positive correlation between ratings for "The church I attend provides support for foster parents and families" and "Members of my faith community pray for my family and me regularly" ($r = 0.8156$). This is likely related to

[468] Salmon, "Spirituality and Treatment Foster Care," 29.

the fact that prayer was described by nine participants as a way they feel most supported by friends and community members, five times as examples of how the church they attend has supported them, and two times as ways the church could more effectively provide support to foster parents. Likewise, there was a relatively strong positive correlation between scores for "The church I attend provides support for foster parents and families" and "The church I attend sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact" ($r = 0.799$).

When given the chance to elaborate on what ways the church they attend provides support for foster parents and families, four people (13.33%) stated that their church did not offer any real support. One foster parent said that a couple help individually, "but not the community." The most common responses included receiving tangible support (30%), having the church welcome and accept the foster children (23.33%), and having the church host a support group for foster parents (26.67%).

The most unique finding of this study, in the researcher's opinion, was based on participants' responses when asked, "In what ways do you feel that the church might more effectively provide support for foster parents and families?" The predominant message for church leaders is that foster parents wish the church would increase education and awareness around foster care issues within the church. Foster parents believed that more congregants can be mobilized to serve in foster care as a foster parent, respite provider, or CASA. They also alleged that with more education, congregants would be more empathetic to struggling families, increase support for family preservation, and demonstrate more understanding with the inherent challenges of foster care.

Next, participants used the same sliding scale to signify how strongly they agreed that "the church I attend sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact." The average response to this question was 68.40. This question was inspired by Hook, Hook, and Berry, who assert that the church needs to affirm the importance of foster care ministry and encourage foster parents by "reminding them that they are 'missionaries in their own homes'" and actively reflecting the redemptive gospel of reconciliation through the service to foster children and their biological families.[469] When asked, "In what ways does your church mention foster care and how frequently," one participant elaborated, "They believe it is very much a church problem and we need to be helping in any way we can" and another said, "Foster care ministry is the foundation at our church." In addition, one respondent reported, "there was a testimonial at church and that is what led us to become a foster family" which accentuates the church's potential role in expanding care for at-risk children through foster care. Again, the researcher found positive correlations; this time between "the church I attend sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact" and "members of my faith community pray for my family and me regularly" ($r = 0.6776$) and between "Being a foster family is how we serve Christ together" and "The church I attend sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact" ($r = 0.6235$).

Subsequently, participants utilized the same sliding scale to express how strongly they agreed or disagreed that "members of my faith community pray for my family and me regularly." The average response to this question was 72.81 which is the highest or strongest level of agreement on sliding scale questions related to church and spiritual

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[469] Hook, Hook, and Berry, *Replanted*, chap. 7.

support. As reported above, this question was also positively correlated with the other sliding scale questions related to church support.

Although the majority of participants felt supported by their church according to the sliding scale question, when asked, "In what ways does your church mention foster care and how frequently?" the majority said that their church rarely mentioned foster care (i.e., on occasion, maybe once every three years, not frequently, off and on). For example, one participant responded that her church "never" mentions foster care yet she still reported strong agreement (i.e., 89) that her church sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact. The open-response nature of this question makes it impossible to calculate a correlation coefficient between these questions but it was surprising to see that a church's low public mentioning of foster care does not appear to be associated with the foster parents' perception on the level of support they receive from the church. It seems like many churches or church members still manage to serve foster parents and families behind-the-scenes.

This question was inspired by Garland's assertion that churches should consider how to make Sunday mornings a source of support for foster parents by inviting a foster parent to share their testimony or asking permission to integrate one of their stories into the sermon as an illustration.[470] Within this study, open responses that described churches frequently mentioning foster care included "sermons, services, opportunities, testimonials, everyday DNA. They are all in" and "Our lead pastors foster and so it is an open subject and talked about very frequently. They very much believe it is a church

[470] Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 117.

problem and we need to be helping in any way we can." However, these robust examples of churches mentioning foster care did not result in extraordinarily high scores in how the church they attended strove to understand the experiences of foster parents (i.e., 85 and 80 respectively) or how well the church provided support for foster parents (i.e., 80 and 90 respectively); nevertheless, these frequent mentions were both associated with the highest score on how the church sees foster care as a ministry with kingdom impact.

Research Project Conclusions

This research study's conclusions were extrapolated from the analysis of a mixed-methods online survey. This instrument collected data related to the project's central research problem. The problem this research project addressed is the understanding of how to effectively support foster parents in order to prevent burnout. In order to fully understand this problem, the project divided it into three researchable focal points to seek better understanding about foster parents' family systems, what makes foster parenting unique, and what makes foster parents feel most supported.

The biblical and theological review revealed there is no singular model for a biblical family, sin has the potential to disrupt and complicate every relationship, and God does not want individuals to carry the weight of serving faithfully alone. Likewise, the literature review proposed a model for family resiliency and unconditional love, accentuated the unique stressors of foster parenting, and proposed support strategies to serve foster parents.

The research project demonstrated how foster families are making adjustments in their family, adapting their parenting techniques, and relying upon support from friends, family, and church members for support. Foster parents are intentional and sensitive

throughout the transition process of welcoming and caring for a new foster child. Similarly, the church and broader community ought to consider how they can be empathetic and offer a place of belonging for foster families.

Foster families' lives are already busy, hectic, and overwhelming. They choose to remain flexible, adaptable, resilient, and loving because, despite its complexities and challenges, they consider the opportunity to serve at-risk children and families to be worthwhile, rewarding, and fulfilling. Many participants commented on their gratitude for the ways friends, family, and the church have served them thus far but they also see ways for additional or increased involvement in supporting foster parents and families.

Research Project Recommendations

This study was an attempt to understand how to better support foster parents. In broad strokes, the findings of this study suggest support was perceived as most valuable when the volunteer(s) came to the foster family. While foster parents recognized the good intentions behind potential new activities or events, they expressed that it is nearly impossible for them to fit another thing into their busy and chaotic schedules. In addition, this study found that support is most appreciated when it emerged from consistent, trusted relationship. Within the context of friendship, supporters could easily check in to see how foster parents are doing and what they might need without requiring the foster parents to necessarily initiate and ask for help. Most of the support strategies (i.e., meals, donations, childcare, encouragement, and prayer) mentioned by foster parents were not unique to a particular context (i.e., friends, family, or church). While these strategies should not be neglected by the church, the researcher would encourage the church to lean into the more unique recommendations.

First, the church should continue to host support groups for foster parents. This support strategy is commonly utilized and highly valued by foster parents. Moreover, the researcher believes that this is a natural extension of existing small group ministries in most churches and is unlikely to become a burden to ministry leaders. In addition, the church can consider other creative ways to utilize their building space to host other foster care related events, such as offering classes or trainings.

Second, churches ought to consider how to increase awareness about foster care within their congregations. Foster parents were eager for churches to address the issue of foster care more directly and give congregants opportunities to learn more and contemplate their potential calling to become more involved. At the very least, participants felt that the church educating the body would help attendees understand the intent of foster care, be more welcoming, and respond more empathetically when foster children exhibit disruptive behaviors. There was a consensus that foster care is an expression of the gospel message and everyone should engage in more open discussion about how to use their gifts to serve within the foster care system and family preservation programs. Daring ministry leaders can choose to become personally involved by serving as a foster parent or CASA to help meet the need, serve at risk families, set an example for the congregation and better understand the experiences of foster parents. Churches should also consider having foster parents share testimonials, inviting outside foster care ministries or agency partners to speak, and incorporating foster care into sermons or sermon illustrations. Foster parents would also appreciate if the church found ways to collaborate with agencies and get involved in advocacy and policy development.

Third, church leaders can re-evaluate their budget and/or benevolent offering allocations. Foster parents reported great appreciation for small donations like hand me downs, meals, coffee, rides, and sleep overs. In addition, foster parents were grateful for generous financial gifts, like a special offering around Christmas that one church used to bless a foster parent with $500. More than half the foster parents in this study had not experienced scholarships or financial support. Foster families receive a stipend but it doesn't cover things like swim lessons, soccer, or pictures. Foster parents would value financial gifts and scholarships to help cover the expenses of desired retreats or activities.

Fourth, the church can facilitate connections by establishing a mentoring/support program. Participants saw the value in pairing new foster parents with an experienced foster parent mentor, foster kids with adult mentors, foster families with one another, and foster families with a wrap-around team for support. The church is one of the only remaining multi-generational social structures where these relationships could naturally flourish.

Finally, the church can preach and teach the theological principles highlighted in chapter two. In particular, the church should focus on presenting a biblical understanding of the necessity of self-care and corrects any misconstrued interpretations of self-care as selfish. This message is critical in a culture where burnout seems rampant. Freudenberger described burnout as "a state of fatigue or frustration brought about by devotion to a cause… that failed to produce its expected reward" within the anticipated timeline.[471] Believers, foster parents and non-foster parents alike, who are committed to a lifestyle of

[471] Olson, *A Guide to Ministry Self-Care*, 34.

service and choose to walk the narrow road modeled by Christ will undoubtedly empathize and relate to the phenomenon and temptation of burnout. The church ought to remind congregants that: (a) God's burden is light, (b) He intentionally created humans with limits, (c) He designed us to be surrounded by community to help us carry those burdens, (d) Sabbath rest is a gift and commandment, and (e) self-care is a spiritual stewardship process.

There has been a large gap in the literature focused on the intersection between churches and foster care. This study sought to begin to address that hole by identifying and recommending foster parent endorsed support strategies that churches could consider implementing. If the above recommendations seem like too big of an undertaking, one cannot underestimate the value of making foster parents feel welcome, treating their foster children like any other one of their family members, and encouraging them that their hard work is worthwhile.

Summary

Evaluating the project design and implementation entailed assessing the overall flow of the project and analyzing whether the techniques were appropriate to adequately address the thesis problem and its subsequent subproblems. It included a thorough review of the project design's strengths and weaknesses and a summary of the findings and implications that were derived from the study related to each research theme. The components addressed in this study support the original research question and contribute to the scope and depth of research related to support strategies for foster parents.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTIONS

Throughout the research project, the researcher had a sense that small, intentional acts exhibited with faithfulness and perseverance could radically encourage and support foster parents. The researcher believed that her own perseverance on this project would be one such contribution.

The researcher began this thesis journey out of a desire to invest in continued learning and personal growth. The topic of this study became clear as she considered her future ministry goals and envisioned her potential future family structure. Through the biblical and theological review, the researcher was able to discover God's heart for foster care ministry and the theological underpinnings that motivate and sustain many Christian foster parents. Through the literature review, the researcher could see the great need for wraparound community support to prevent burnout among foster parents. By conducting her own research, she benefitted from the testimonials of foster parents' personal experiences of family life, unique stressors, and beneficial support mechanisms. Now that this research has been completed, she is eager to become more personally involved in foster care related ministry.

Spiritual Growth

Throughout the process of working on this project, the researcher developed a greater appreciation for a theology of self-care and an understanding of its necessity in the lives of believers. The researcher initially signed up for the program in hopes that it

would force her to adopt healthier self-care boundaries. Rather than spiraling further into burnout by unsustainably overworking, she hoped that classes and homework would offer accountability in order to help her prioritize intellectual and spiritual self-care. In many ways, it accomplished this goal. For example, one assignment enabled her to write a short photojournalistic devotional that she had dreamt of writing for years but never prioritized. As the thesis responsibilities ramped up, the researcher's chronic pain flared in new, unignorable ways. When even the doctors were unable to identify a means of relief, the researcher was forced to look inwards and re-evaluate what self-care looked like in that season. Despite her deep value of perseverance, her mental fortitude was unable to surmount her new physical limitations. As a result, the researcher took a semester off of school to rest and prioritize her wellbeing. In the following months, the researcher learned to reframe honoring her limits and investing in self-care as a form of worship that expressed deep trust in God. Overall, the last few years were also a form of sabbatical rest and respite. The researcher started the program after stepping away from ministry leadership positions. She needed a break after four years of enduring trying and traumatic ministry challenges. The break allowed her to reflect upon the ways traumatic ministry experiences had positively and negatively influenced her life, perspective on ministry, and understanding of God.

To some extent, another motivation for entering the program was the researcher's desire to prove herself to those who have doubted her calling and giftedness in the past. Throughout this process, she gained clarity on how she had let those voices creep in and become her own incessant inner critic. She believes that God has redeemed this insecure motivation and managed to use this academic journey to prepare her for even greater

opportunities moving forward. Now, the researcher has greater clarity on whose voices can offer true godly wisdom, direction, and discernment in her life. The researcher is aware that being obedient to God commonly entails self-sacrifice and often looks foolish or crazy to an outsider. There were plenty of people in the researcher's life who thought it was crazy for her to pursue the Doctor of Ministry degree. Nevertheless, the researcher is proud of the ways she has stepped out in faith throughout this academic program. These small acts of faith within higher education, where the researcher is comfortable, will enable bigger leaps of faith in the future, like moving away from her family and her birth state to where she believes God is calling her next.

Ultimately, the researcher was motivated to pursue this degree because of the calling to children's, youth, and family ministry that she has sensed since third grade. Spiritually, the researcher has found the following quote from Diana Garland to be true: "If you want to know God, to see Jesus, bring one of God's needy children to the center of what you do."[472] In times of exhaustion and desperation, the researcher was sustained by a God who cares for 'the least of these,' a God who heals, redeems, and restores. When the researcher was at risk of losing herself in the overwhelming sea of research and the seemingly endless to-do list, God anchored her and reminded her that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. The researcher uniquely senses God's presence in the midst of the disenfranchised, brokenness, and lament. This study reaffirmed the researcher's passion for ministry focused on marginalized minority groups and at-risk children.

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[472] Diana S. Richmond Garland, *Inside Out Families*, 34.

Academic Growth

Academically, the researcher was challenged to express her learning in new formats throughout the Doctor of Ministry program. While the project papers in the coursework leading up to the thesis prepared the researcher for lengthy writing assignments, the thesis project pushed her outside her comfort zone in many new ways. Most notably, the researcher began to struggle with feeling like things were outside of her control as she adjusted to the schedule, expectations, and review cycle for the thesis. This feeling resurfaced when she was soliciting participants and hoping enough participants would volunteer to have a sufficient sample size for analysis. Upon reflection, the researcher is grateful for the researchers and theologians who have established a foundation for her to build and expand upon. While trying to fit into the prescribed mold of the Doctor of Ministry program's expectations had its challenges, she can appreciate the consistency it offers readers and the high bar it holds for academic quality and integrity.

In addition, the researcher is grateful for the ways the Doctor of Ministry program fused academic rigor with hands-on ministry. She was grateful for the flexibility and customizability of the preparatory project papers to fit the student's passions and ministry context. Although the requirement for the researcher to conduct independent research for the thesis pushed her outside her comfort zone, it emphasized the need for ministers and theologians to listen to those we serve. Initiating the conversation and prioritizing testimonials enables leaders to have a better finger on the pulse of their ministry, meet the felt needs of participants, and maintain humility as a servant leader.

The researcher was also reminded of the powerful importance of community as an antidote to loneliness and burnout. Another challenge she encountered in the thesis process was an overwhelming sense of loneliness since no one in her close circle could relate to, or at times even understand, the process of writing this paper. Finding the courage to reach out to a classmate was a breakthrough moment for the researcher. The conversation sparked a deeper friendship that reminded her she was not alone in her academic struggles. The researcher also learned the importance of asking for help. She was grateful for Bethel staff and faculty who empathetically helped partner with her to accomplish her goals over the last few years.

Next Steps

At this closure, there is a sense of satisfaction and uncertainty. Like foster parents who know they have invested their all into the child during their time together, there frequently remains uncertainty about their long-term future impact. Similarly, the long-term impact of this study is unclear. The researcher hopes that foster parents will find their experiences accurately reflected in this research and encouraged by the desire for churches to become more active within foster care and wraparound support. Moreover, the researcher hopes this study will be another stepping stone to ongoing research in this area.

If the researcher were to conduct an additional study, she would be interested in attempting to fuse her passion for foster care and disability-focused ministry. Her assumption is that foster parents and parents of children with disabilities would have many similar experiences and could benefit from many of the same support structures. It would also be interesting to see how many children in foster care have physical or

intellectual disabilities, emotional or behavior disorders, or are otherwise neurodivergent. Understanding the intersectionality of individuals who are marginalized by multiple facets of their identity fascinates the researcher. To accomplish this goal, she would likely implement a narrative, case-study approach to dive deeper into the nuances of their particular lived experiences.

Next, the researcher plans to focus on fulfilling her dreams of moving to Costa Rica and partnering with Roblealto, a ministry that serves at-risk children and families. The organization helped inspire the researcher to focus on foster care ministry for this project since one of its programs entails a temporary shelter for at-risk children where they are cared for by temporary, substitute parents. They also serve a variety of at-risk children with emotional and behavioral disorders and disabilities. Recently, the researcher has had encouraging conversations with the international team and Roblealto's Head of Development about welcoming the researcher as part of their team and working together to expand community partnerships. It will be interesting to see if the insights gleaned through this project are applicable in a cross-cultural context.

If the researcher resettles in the United States, she plans to pursue becoming a foster parent or Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to have more hands-on experience in the foster care realm. Long term, the researcher hopes to be bi-vocational and would be interested in becoming a professor one day. Her experiences as a student will undoubtedly shape any future interactions as an instructor with empathy for the myriad of responsibilities, hopes, and dreams that students juggle simultaneously.

Meanwhile, the researcher will continue to gain strength and encouragement from the foster parents in this study. This study has challenged the researcher to define her own

family more inclusively and open her home more hospitably. It has also reminded the researcher to remain rooted in her calling that can make all the challenges and obstacles worthwhile in the end. The insights gleaned from this study enable the researcher to pray more specifically for foster parents and engage in foster care ministry more strategically. Moving forward, she will continue to be an advocate for foster care ministry and espouse foster care as kingdom-centered work.

Recommendations for Future Research

Deeper exploration on effects of trauma, grief, and loss. The current study lacked targeted questions around these themes due to the level of IRB approval sought. Nevertheless, participants highlighted the impact of the child's previous trauma in open response questions. These themes are worthy of further exploration because the larger American culture and church generally struggle to adequately address these topics. Mitchell highlighted the lack of vocabulary around ambiguous loss in American culture and Rah has called attention to how the American church struggles to adequately address the reality of suffering and discover God "in the context of pain and trouble."[473]

A longitudinal study. It would be intriguing to study whether a foster parents' support needs change over the lifecycle of a placement or over the length of their cumulative years of experience as a foster parent. Research within the literature review occasionally focused on the immediate support necessary when welcoming a new

[473] Mitchell, "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt," 2-3; Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), sec. Introduction, Kindle.

placement, reuniting the foster child with family, or terminating a placement.[474] Likewise, the literature review suggested some foster families may reach a point in the process of family resilience where they begin to focus on helping others, rather than being the recipients of help.[475] Therefore, a longitudinal study that more closely evaluates and compares the phase of foster parenting with support strategies would be interesting.

A comparative study. Additional comparative studies between foster parents, adoptive parents, and biological parents would be fascinating. Foster parents are commonly grouped with adoptive parents for a variety of reasons, including the fact that some foster parents end up adopting their foster child. Nevertheless, a wide range of parenting topics and supports are beneficial to all parents. Greater comparative analysis will enable churches and ministries to identify opportunities with broad appeal and target specialized ministries to the unique needs of each population. Moreover, the present study asked foster parents to self-report how strongly they agreed with the statement, "It is more complex to parent foster children than biological children" but needed to rely on the participants' experience caring for biological and foster children or general perception as reported on the sliding scale. The present study lacked a comparison group. Future studies could utilize a common instrument such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory or the

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[474] Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 665; Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 908.

[475] Leitz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger, and Hayes Piel, "Cultivating Resilience in Families," 670; Walsh, "A Family Resilience Framework," 131; Pope, Ratliff, Moody, Benner, and Miller, "Peer Support for New Foster Parents," 2; Pope, Miller, and Benner, "Cultivating Resilience in New Foster Parents," 1.

Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale to further analyze the degree to which foster parenting differs from traditional parenting.[476]

Additional populations. The researcher also believes that the church and academic community would benefit from additional research on effective support strategies for other members in the foster care ecosystem. While the present study narrowed its focus on foster parents, some of the research within the literature review suggested the immense influence foster care agencies, social workers, and the child's biological family could have in determining the placement's success and the foster parents' wellbeing. [477] The unique oversight or involvement of social workers, biological family, and caseworkers also emerged as a common theme in response to several survey questions so it seems worthy of further exploration. The researcher is also curious about how foster children and their biological children would describe the ideal foster parent. The insights and perspectives from other members of the foster care ecosystem could be utilized in trainings for foster parents to offer new perspectives, set appropriate expectations, and ideally raise awareness that foster parents are not alone in their mission to offer stability, support, and care for at-risk children and families.

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[476] Newell and MacNeil, "Professional Burnout," 63.

[477] Lanigan and Burleson, "Foster Parent's Perspectives," 906; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, and France, "Foster Carer Perceptions of Support," 153; Favela and Velazquez, "Factors that Contribute to Foster Parent Turnover." 11; Randle, Miller, and Dolnicar, "What Can Agencies Do?," 214.

APPENDIX A: A SURVEY GUIDE TO SOLICIT FOSTER PARENT FEEDBACK ON DEVELOPING FAMILY, FOSTER PARENTING EXPERIENCES, AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES

SURVEY GUIDE FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Feedback on Developing Family, Foster Parent Experiences, and Support Strategies

Online Survey for Foster Parents

Prepared by Tara Tulberg

You are invited to take part in a research study on the ways foster families develop family life, care for at risk children, and surround themselves with support systems.

You were chosen for the research study because you are a foster parent. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this research study before deciding whether to participate.

This research study is being conducted by a researcher named Tara Tulberg, who is a doctoral student at Bethel Seminary.

Background Information:
The purpose of this research study is to identify common foster family traits or patterns, common foster parent experiences, and effective personal, community-based, and church-based strategies to help support foster parents.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this research study, you will be asked to participate in an online survey about your experience as a foster parent. It will take approximately 15-30 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Research Study:
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision regarding whether you want to participate in the research study. If you decide to join the research study now, you can still change your mind during the research study. If you feel stressed during the research study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal or not applicable.

Risk and Benefits of Being in the Research Study:
The risks from the research study participation are mainly those negative experiences that you might recall that bring forth negative memories. The benefits to the individual include offering insights that may be used in offering recommendations for how the community could better understand the foster care journey and support foster parents.

Compensation:
There is no compensation for participation in this research study.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside this research project. Also, the researcher will know your name or ask any questions that could be used to identify you. Results will be reported in a synthesized and aggregated format, rather than individually.

If you have questions or would like additional information about the study, you may contact Tara Tulberg at tara-tulberg@bethel.edu.

Please check to confirm that you understand your participation is voluntary and are willing to proceed with participation in the study:

- ☐ Yes, I agree.
- ☐ No, I do not agree.

ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Foster Parents in Church Support Groups

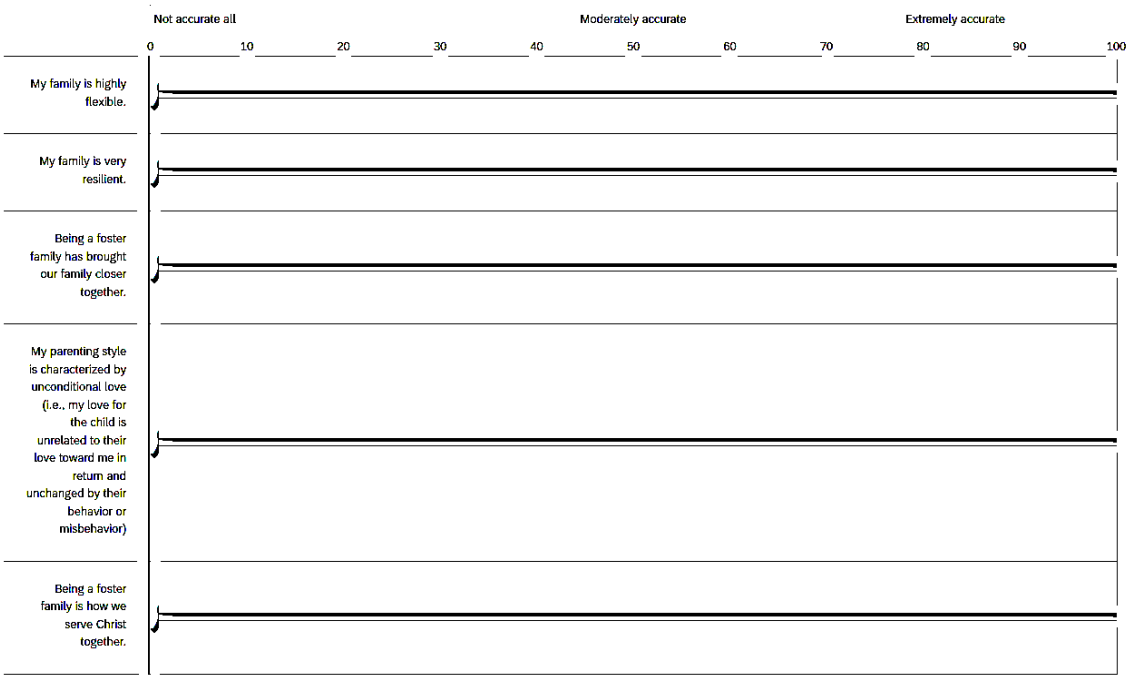
About Yourself: (Section 1/5)

1. Please choose the option that best describes you:
   - ☐ Foster Mom
   - ☐ Foster Dad
2. Please choose the option that best describes you:
   - ☐ Married
   - ☐ Single
3. Please answer the following questions about your experience as a foster parent:

   How many children in foster care are currently in your home? _____
   How many children in foster care have you cared for in total? _____
   What age children have you fostered? _____
   How many years have you served as a foster parent? _____
   How many forever children (i.e., biological and adopted children) are in your home? _____

Family Systems: (Section 2/5)

1. Please use the slide bar to represent how accurately each statement represents your family.

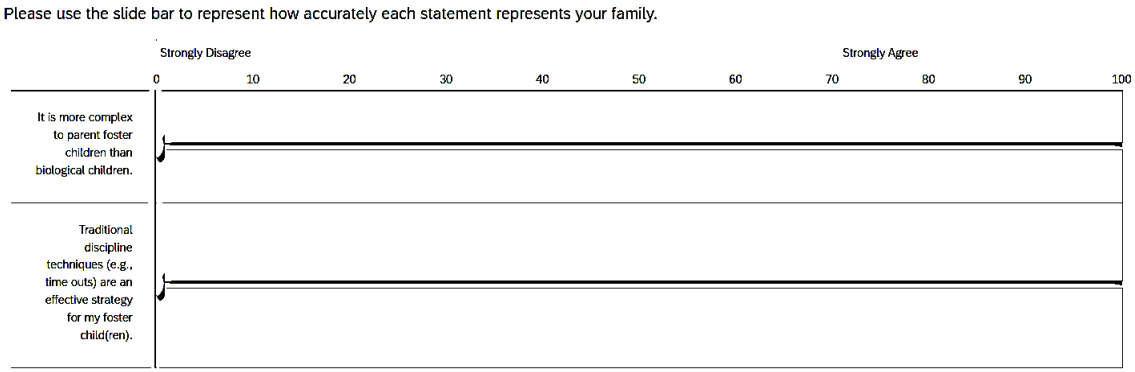


2. What do you do to help welcome a new foster child and encourage a sense of belonging within your family?

3. How would you describe family life as a foster family?

Foster Parent Experiences: (Section 3/5)

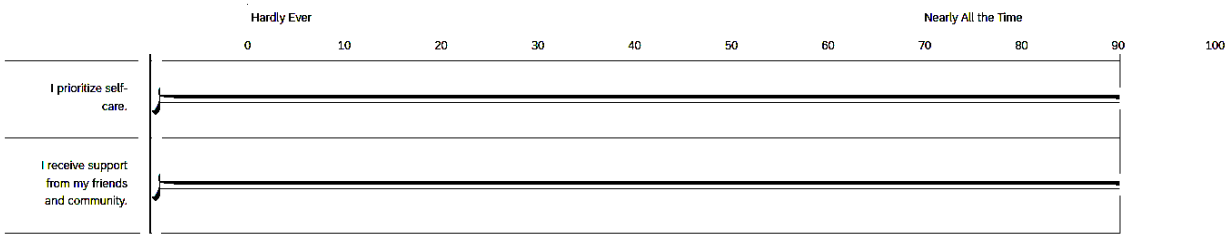
1. Please use the slide bar to represent how accurately each statement represents your family.



2. What do you think makes foster parenting unique from traditional parenting?

Community Support Strategies: (Section 4/5)

1. Please use the slide bar to represent how accurately each statement represents your experience.



2. What does self-care look like for you right now?

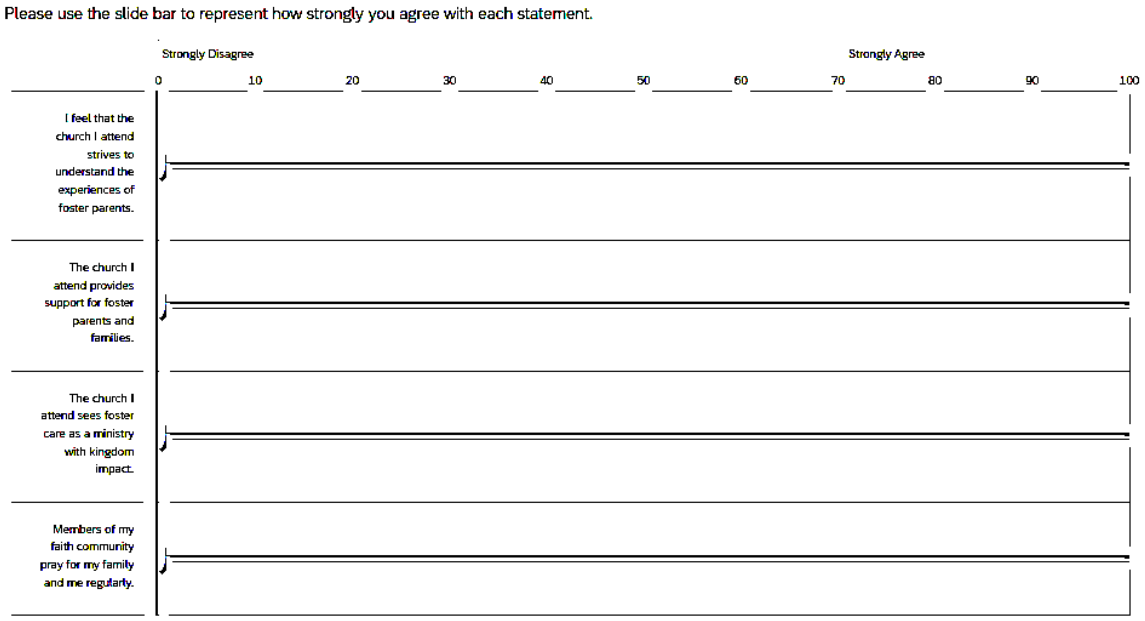
3. What self-care practices do you wish you had more time for?

4. In what ways do your friends and community members make you feel most supported as a foster parent?

5. If you were asked to give advice to a parent considering fostering a child, what are the top three things you would want to say?

Church Supports: (Section 5/5)

1. Please use the slide bar to represent how accurately each statement represents



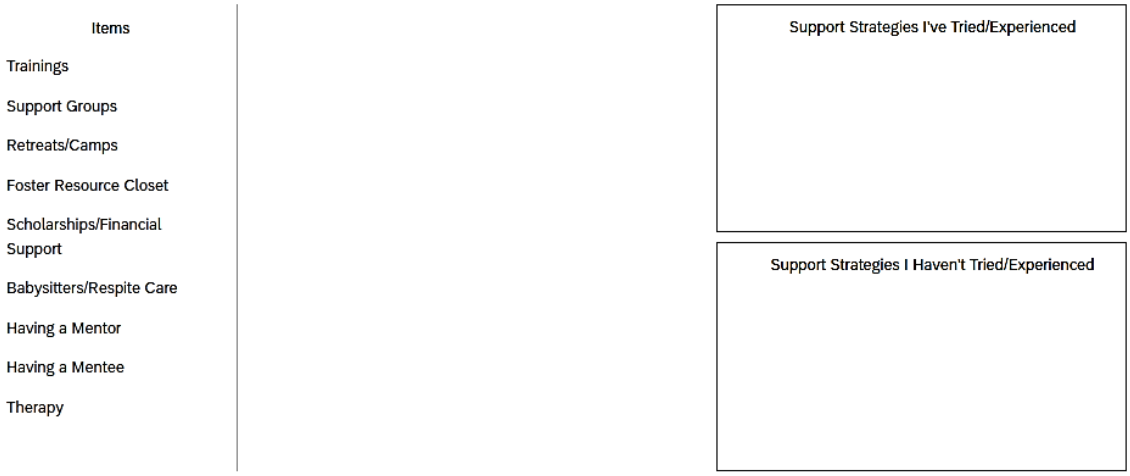
2. In what ways does your church mention foster care (e.g., sermons, service opportunities, testimonials, dedications, etc.) and how frequently?

3. What ways has the church you attend provided support for foster parents and families?

4. In what ways do you feel that churches might more effectively provide support for foster parents and family members?

5. In what ways have you actively partnered with your church (e.g., children's or youth ministry staff and volunteers) to identify ways to better meet the needs of your family?

6. Please drag and drop the various support strategies into the category that best fits your experience. Then, rank each list according to what you find most valuable. The top item in each list should be what you find most valuable.



Thank you for your willingness to participate in the survey. Your contribution to the research is greatly appreciated.

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