

When considering the prospect of ministering to 16 million orphans it would be easy to become overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. In order to be effective, we should attempt to abide by 2 guiding principles:

1. Individual Value

While God loves and cares for each individual that He has created, we must understand that there are occasions when we are called upon to spend what might seem to be disproportionate resources in the cause of affecting a small number of children. Adoption is a prime example; God motivates families to spend money on rescuing one child that could be used to improve the conditions for many.

2. Stewardship

Notwithstanding (1.) above, our goals should always be to affect the *final outcome* of as many children as possible. Without that focus all the resources imaginable would be consumed very quickly in the process of making very temporary improvements.

By attending to the health, educational, and social needs of the institutionalized child, our goals are to see the children:

1. Survive the institutional experience with health, dignity, and self-worth intact, so that they can:
2. Remain healthy enough to be adopted, thereby ceasing to be an orphan, or
3. Be connected into a community that will care for them as they transition from institutional life.

There are many opportunities for the church to exert a Godly influence at each level. The following are some observations about each one; these should be considered very brief introductions to topics that range far beyond the scope of this document:

1. Surviving the Institution

Mortality and morbidity risks are much higher among children in institutions than for those in the general population. There are many reasons for this, the majority of which are remedied when biblical standards of care are applied. One example is the question of nutrition. God's word places a high priority on feeding the hungry and He has given us wisdom to understand hunger as it specifically concerns orphans. We have long known how to recognize the signs of Protein/Energy malnutrition – skinny limbs, bloated abdomens etc. But we now also know that in many countries institutions (through ignorance) feed children a diet deficient in vitamin A, Iron, and Iodine (Micro-Nutrient Malnutrition). This results in children who may not appear hungry, but who will suffer developmental delays that at best are long-term, and in many cases are permanent. Supplements to remedy this problem are inexpensive and simple to administer and yet the social impact of fewer mentally compromised children is very significant.

2. Adoption

The principle of adoption is a spiritual one. All regenerate Christians, can, in a certain sense, consider ourselves to have been 'adopted' into God's family. Having been born 'Fatherless' (separated from God) we now, through His unconditional love, experience the nurturing that enables us to become functional members in His 'society' – the Kingdom. Perhaps it is also for this reason that the Word so frequently calls our attention to the fatherless. Unfortunately, any analogy of this nature (if it is valid at all) serves to highlight how worldly practice differs from the Godly model. Most adoptions, especially those from poor countries to affluent ones, have been relegated to commercial transactions, facilitated in many cases by opportunists in direct contravention of scripture:

“Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.” Exodus 22:22-24

Here again, the church has a significant opportunity to reassert Kingdom values for the benefit of children that are viewed by many as commodities. While there are no functional models in the realm of international adoptions (where they are most needed) there is one church that has done some pioneering work with domestic adoptions. Antioch Bible Church in Kirkland, WA felt called to tackle the racial discrimination in the US adoption industry that results in much higher fees to adopt Caucasian children. Through some creative financing, Antioch Adoptions became the first US agency to means test adopting parents and according to the need, provide an adoption service free of charge, or at cost, and give no consideration to the ethnicity of the child. An expanded version of this model that could, over time, dismantle the greed, corruption and profiteering that currently dominates international adoptions and results in fewer children finding families.

One of the most daunting aspects of the escalating orphan crisis is the dramatic impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As a result of the death of their parents from AIDS, the orphan population is expected to rise by 16 million over the next ten years. Many of those children will themselves be born HIV positive as a result of vertical transmission from their mothers. In many countries, lack of education assigns such children to receive a lower standard of care since they are considered 'doomed' and therefore a pointless drain on resources. This is most common in societies where collectivist philosophies, through oppression or cultural legacy, oppose the biblical view of each individual being a deliberate and valuable component of God's creation. It is true that babies born HIV positive who are deprived of basic nutrition and medical care do not fare well – they generally live only a year or two. The tragedy is that when given good nutrition and basic medical care, almost all will survive. In fact, over 80% will actually eliminate the virus from their bodies and become HIV negative before age three. Education is often the only weapon needed to win this aspect of the 'war'.

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3. Transitioning to the Community

One of the saddest consequences of an institutional background, is the likely failure of the child to successfully integrate into society. Clearly the primary cause for this is the fact that most institutions fail to imbue biblical principles. Accounts of transitions from C.H. Spurgeon's orphanages at Stockwell demonstrate that institutionalization alone does not account for these failures. To improve the transition statistics, children in their final 2 years in the orphanage need to develop relationships on the 'outside' with individuals who can provide, at minimum, some guidance and care during the treacherous transition process. In most situations, local social services simply do not have the resources to provide these programs. This may be because welfare ministries are affected by political attitudes that marginalize the orphan, but in most cases it is simply further evidence of the same lack of social infrastructure that precipitates the need for orphanages. The primary solutions to this issue involve negotiating access with the relevant government ministries, and motivating the local churches to initiate relationship with the 'graduating' orphans.

The process of delivering any or all of these solutions through local churches would return blessing on the broader community of a scale and persistence far beyond what we might imagine from simply re-valuing a few abandoned kids:

"The power for good or evil that resides in a little child is great beyond all human calculation. A child rightly trained may be a world-wide blessing, with an influence reaching onward to eternal years. But a neglected or misdirected child may live to blight and blast mankind, and leave influences of evil which shall roll on in increasing volume until they plunge into the gulf of eternal perdition." **George Müller**

Mr. Müller would not have been at all surprised to learn that in Russia today, over 40% of 'graduating' orphans become career criminals within 5 years and that an increasing number of babies abandoned to the state are themselves the progeny of orphans.

Initiating and implementing these solutions through local churches is a substantial task, drawing on significant time, labor, and some financial resources. It could be argued that to embrace such a ministry could dilute resources that should be applied to church planting. Certainly, the mandate for church planting is clear – only in this way can we hope to effectively propagate the Gospel and then disciple people in the principles of Godly living. The church planting process certainly encompasses, indirectly, the way He would have us respond to the plight of abandoned children and so we would hope that over time, church planting will have a direct impact on their care. However, there are already millions of children whose care has been assigned to state institutions. For the vast majority, their institutional experience will be complete long before a team from a local church plant has begun to have an impact on their care. This is why Christians need to be educated, resourced, and motivated to see the orphans with the same priority afforded them in scripture. Today.

