


The Church and Children in Care

Dr Krish Kandiah





**Sing to God, sing in praise of his
name,**

extol him who rides on the clouds;

**rejoice before him—his name is
the Lord.**

**A father to the fatherless, a
defender of widows,**

is God in his holy dwelling.

God sets the lonely in families,

**he leads out the prisoners with
singing;**

**but the rebellious live in a sun-
scorched land.**

Psalms 68:4-6

God has always identified himself with vulnerable children and families, providing for them protecting them, and promoting their welfare.

This was counter-cultural at the time the Psalms were written and remains so today. Just as then, it is often still believed that the powerful and wealthy and those who can boast strong, successful or large families have been blessed by God. Conversely it is still far too easy to assume that the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable are somehow outside of that blessing.

God puts the record straight in Psalm 68 – and so must we.

A Church that seeks to be godly, Christlike and in step with the Spirit must follow God's lead and identify with the vulnerable, be actively involved in building structures that support those who are struggling, and take the lead in releasing the potential of the marginalised.

There is a mandate here right in the middle of our Bibles to provide vulnerable children and young people with parents, families, advocacy, security and joy. This continues to motivate believers, churches and Christian charities and organisations in the UK to get involved in supporting children in the care system.



The UK care system is in crisis.

- It is predicted that in the next few years, for the first time there will be over 100 000 children in care.^[1]
- The number of children in care currently is at an all-time high, according to latest figures from the Department for Education^[2]. As of 31 March 2021, 80,850 children - 67 in every 10,000 - were in care. This amounts to a one per cent increase compared with the number of children in care in March 2020.
- Out of the 12 million children living in England, more than 80,000 of these children are placed in the care of others.^[3]

What can the church do?

There are critical things that the church can do at 5 key points on what is described as the continuum of care. In each of these 5 areas individuals, congregations and the corporate church can play their part to serve God, the country and those children and families who are poor, vulnerable, invisible and marginalised. Some of these children and families may be in the church, others in the parish or beyond.

The key points on the continuum of care are:



1. Early intervention

Many families are facing challenges that make children vulnerable. There are growing mental health challenges, new parenting challenges and high breakdowns in marriages and family cohesion. With the cost of living crisis adding to the toxic stress faced by families, these challenges are increasing. There is robust evidence showing an overlap between poverty and abuse and neglect and so early intervention to keep families out of poverty is worth every penny of government, church and civil society investment.

The more we can do to support families and stop family breakdown will help more children to grow up in safety with their birth families.

Churches have a brilliant track record in this as the largest provider of parenting courses, mums and babies groups, toddlers groups, children's and youth groups, and non-government run schools. Many churches are also offering other family support services such as debt relief and foodbanks.

However the deaths of Arthur Labinjo and Star Hobson show us that sadly we have not learned sufficiently from the time of Victoria Climbié. We do not have enough eyes on the child, or effective ways that communities, schools, civil society partners, charities, churches and faith groups can work effectively with social workers to support families and identify signs of abuse and neglect before it is too late.

As the economy recovers after the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine, public funds are in short supply. This is an opportunity for a new collaborative approach that does not only save money but could save lives. ^[4]



Recommendation:

The church can:

- strengthen familial relationships, including offering marriage and parenting support at all stages particularly where members are vulnerable or “at risk”.
- support church members in issues regarding extended family, particularly to play their part in extended family, particularly where members are vulnerable or “at risk”.
- Offer services such as CAP, Foodbank, Mental Health Support, Social Prescribing, Baby groups, Toddlers Groups, Youth Groups, family days, etc.
- Reach out into the parish offering relational support in early intervention programmes. Safe Families and Kids Matter have ready-made programmes to assist family support and avoid family breakdown.
- Ensure all church staff and volunteers have DBS checks, and have undertaken safeguarding training.



2. Kinship care

The first port of call for children who cannot live with their birth parents due to abuse, neglect, incapacity or death should be kinship carers. Thanks to special guardianship orders an increasing number of children are leaving care to be looked after by kinship carers. 14% of children leave the care system and go into kinship care each year, often through a special guardianship arrangement.

The Independent review of Children's Care headed by Josh MacAlister highlighted the importance of kinship care and a recent report from the charity Kinship further highlighted the challenges facing grandparents, aunts and uncles who have taken on caring for children often at a stage in their lives when they were not expecting it. Many families are being pushed into poverty as a result of kinship care arrangements.^[5]

Churches can play a huge role in providing wrap around and peer support to kinship carers. It has the relational and social capital to come along kinship carers and offer support, advice and encouragement.

Recommendations

The church can:

- Encourage current and considering kinship carers, honouring and celebrating those that are caring for children and young people in this way.
- Adapt their language to talk about “parents and carers” instead of “parents” or “mums and dads”.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer groups or coffee mornings which can be transformational as a low cost/high impact informal support group.
- Provide practical support to these families by encouraging them to access services provided by the church.
- Ensure all church staff and volunteers have DBS checks, and have undertaken safeguarding training.



3. Fostering

Foster parents provide vital care for the majority of children in the care system. There is a huge challenge with the recruitment and retention of carers, often due to the insufficient support for the intensive round the clock work that is required. New recruitment and retainment strategies are required that include robust support packages for foster carers, fostered children and other family members.

Many Christians apply to become foster carers driven by a desire to help vulnerable children. Some Christians are worried that they won't be treated fairly in the assessment process and this leads to hesitancy in coming forward. Some Christians are treated badly by social workers due to an often faith-suspicious and faith-illiterate workforce. Despite this, there are many Christian foster carers – these include clergy and even bishops.

Many Christians report the significant help and support they receive from their churches which enables them to continue. Others sadly report that their churches are the hardest place to bring their foster children. There is a minority of Christian foster carers who have left the church because their children were not made welcome in the church's youth and children's provision. Often this is due to a lack of trauma and SEND awareness.

Recommendations

The church can:

- Encourage current and considering foster carers, honouring and celebrating those that are caring for children and young people in this way.
- Adapt their language to talk about “parents and carers” instead of “parents” or “mums and dads”.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer groups or coffee mornings which can be transformational as a low cost/high impact informal support group.
- Access resources from Home for Good or Care for the Family
- Provide practical support to fostering families by encouraging them to access services provided by the church.



- Ensure all church staff and volunteers have DBS checks, and have undertaken safeguarding training.
- Encourage all church staff and volunteers to access Trauma and SEND awareness training.



4. Care leavers

While most birth children continue to live at home and gain support from their families after the age of 18, many foster children do not. Too many children age out of being in care at 18. It is not that their life circumstances have changed. It is not that they have suddenly become less vulnerable. It is simply due to the fact that they have turned 18 years old. Their experience of stable family life is often truncated at the beginning due to neglect or abuse, and then truncated at the end because of lack of funds and support.

The data shows that only 31% of young adults leaving care at 18 are housed with family or foster carers – some of these have a change of carer at this point. The vast majority of those who cease being in care at 18 (69%) do not have any active and recognised family relationships. Sadly care leavers are more likely than the rest of the population to face criminalisation, destitution or exploitation.

The statistics are shocking:

- 25% of rough sleepers report having been in care at some point during their childhood.
- Almost 25% of the adult prison population have previously been in care, and nearly 50% of under 21-year-olds in contact with the criminal justice system have spent time in care
- 41% of care leavers aged 19-21 years are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to 12% of all 19- to 21-year-olds

There is a huge gap in support here, and the church is ideally placed to meet this need as it can offer a sense of extended family and community support with ongoing relationships that can meet practical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Recommendation

The church can:

- Recognise and encourage those who are pursuing ongoing and life-long relationships with careleavers and children in care.



- Help to find and support genuine permanency solutions for children in care before the age of 18.
- Provide different forms of relational and accommodation support for young people leaving care.
- Become involved in prison, rehab and homelessness support charities.
- Support those church members whose workplaces can offer apprenticeships, pathways, internships and government sponsored programmes for young people in and leaving care.



5. Adoption

For some children adoption is the only way they can enjoy the love, support and stability of a family for life. Adoption should not be framed as a way for families to find children – this can lead to a consumerist approach where children are made to be the answer for a couple's infertility, family completion or personal fulfilment. Instead adoption should be portrayed as a way for children to find the families they need. A child-centred approach ultimately ensures families are more realistic and robust before opening up their homes.

Currently in England and Wales there are more approved adopters than children in care but the adopters do not want or are not able to support the children that are in need of adoption. Black children currently wait the longest for adoption as do children with additional needs, siblings and older children. We need to recruit a different type of adopter: those who are willing and able to put the needs of the children first. This will require lots of support. The Adoption Support Fund is a government programme offering unprecedented financial support for therapeutic interventions for children in care. It is also available for previously looked after children who are in special guardianship placements. However most adopters also gain significant support from the wider community, and the church is ideally placed to offer the emotional, practical and spiritual support required.

Recommendation

The church can:

- Encourage current and considering adopters, honouring and celebrating those that are caring for children and young people in this way.
- Encourage the wider family of adopters, as each new addition impacts other children, grandchildren and others.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer groups or coffee mornings which can be transformational as an low cost/high impact informal support group.
- Access resources from Home for Good or Care for the Family



- Provide practical support to adoptive families by encouraging them to access services provided by the church.
- Ensure all church staff and volunteers have DBS checks, and have undertaken safeguarding training.
- Encourage all church staff and volunteers to access Trauma and SEND awareness training.



Dr Krish Kandiah

Dr Kandiah has been working with refugees and vulnerable people, since 1999. Over the past year he has led the Afghan Welcome and UKHK initiatives which have worked with government, faith groups, philanthropists and civil society to welcome newcomers from Afghanistan and Hong Kong to the UK. He is also the Chair of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board where he brings strategic leadership to the finding of permanent loving families for children in the care system working across the sector and advises the English government on issues of child welfare. His doctorate is from Kings College, London in Theology and Culture.



"There is huge scope for the church to play a transformative role in reforming the child welfare system in the UK. We need a system that puts children's well being and flourishing at its centre. The church can be a huge advocate for children and a wonderful means of support for families."

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