

Unleashing the Family
God's Answer for Vulnerable Children
By Dr. David Anderson

Introduction: Safe Families for Children

During the final week of 2007, Chicago was shocked by the actions of a young mother who quietly exited a train with her three-year-old daughter leaving her two sons, ages six and four, behind. Fellow passengers frantically attempted to get the mother's attention, but she walked away, abandoning her young boys.¹ Similar scenarios of parents being unable to care for their children occur with greater frequency than many of us are aware. State child welfare emergency hot lines throughout the nation reportedly receive over five million calls each year of suspected child abuse or neglect. Of those calls, about one million meet the State's criteria for abuse, thus activating services.² What happens to the remaining four million families? Someone who knows them or knows of them was concerned enough to make a report to authorities, yet their situation remains unchanged. And what of the additional countless families that are in crisis but are not identified? Safe Families for Children is a program which allows God's people to give meaningful, live-changing support to families in crisis.

Current Safety Net

The current public system in place to care for and protect children is called the child welfare system (or Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Department of Human Services (DHS), etc.). This system is given the mandate to remove abused or neglected children from their parents' custody at which time the children become "wards of the State." This system of care is controversial and at times, fraught with errors. Yet, there are no alternatives.

Developed by most States in the 1940's and '50's, this child welfare system is relatively new. The concept of the government protecting children from their parents is roughly only one generation old. Prior to this, the church and other faith-driven organizations were at the forefront of caring for vulnerable children. The Christian church was active in providing a safe haven for children who were abandoned and neglected by their parents. In fact, throughout history, the church and other religious organizations were the safety net for discarded and vulnerable children. Church history is filled with accounts of believers rescuing "exposed" infants in ancient Rome, taking in all sorts of orphans, caring for the sick and the elderly, and sheltering pilgrims. Many orphanages, hospitals and asylums were first developed by Christians putting their faith into practice.³ However, with the development of state-run systems of care within the last fifty years, the church has relinquished its role. As the government has stepped up, the church stepped back to the point of becoming irrelevant to the real and significant needs of hurting families. Indeed, a handful of Christian families brave the foster care system. However, the church is no longer a visible presence in helping the very groups we are commanded to help the orphans and widows.

A Theology of Orphans and Widows

Throughout Scripture, there are numerous references to widows and children. Few would argue that children are the most vulnerable "people group" in our society requiring

special attention and protection. In fact, James associates the care of orphans and widows with one's purity of faith. He writes, *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world"* (James 1:27). In Lamentations 2:19, Jeremiah cries, *"Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street."* Asaph the song writer pleads, *"Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked"* (Psalm 82:3).

David further describes God's concern for orphans and widows by saying, *"Father to the fatherless, defender of widows - this is our God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy"* (Psalm 68: 5, 6 NLT). Isaiah adds, *"Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow"* (Isaiah 1:17). God clearly states that they need protection, *"Do not take advantage of the widow or 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).

Jesus valued children. His words are direct, *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these"* (Matthew 19:14). He also warned those who would mistreat them, *"But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea"* (Matthew 18:6).

The Early Church

When the early church was fully alive in engaging the culture and significantly impacting the "least of these," the practice of offering care to strangers (hospitality) became a distinguishing characteristic.⁴ These Christians became known for their acts of kindness and service. Babies that were deformed or of the wrong sex were discarded on the waste heaps outside the city. The Christians would gather the unwanted babies and raise them as if they were their own. The Christian writer Tertullian (AD 200) wrote, *"It is our care of the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents."*⁵

As in ancient times, children today continue to be hurt by societal ills that have filtered down to the family. Christians are concerned and disturbed by reports like the two boys abandoned on the train, but often do not know how to make a difference. That is where the ministry of Safe Families for Children comes in. Safe Families is a movement of hundreds of Christian families who have opened their homes to care for children whose parents are struggling. By demonstrating Biblical hospitality, Safe Families returns the church to the forefront of caring for "orphans and widows."

Lonely But Not Alone

Kim came to the United States from China about two years before to begin her post-graduate studies at the University of Iowa. When her father became ill and was no longer able

to send money for her educational costs, Kim made the painful decision to drop out of school. She moved to Chicago and began working as a cashier.

Admittedly shy and feeling very lonely, Kim became involved with the first boyfriend she ever had and became pregnant. Her boyfriend pressured her to end the pregnancy, and Kim broke up with him. Eight and a half months pregnant, she was experiencing much shame regarding her behavior and anxiety over how she could ever build a secure life for herself and her child. She had no one to turn to. She went to an adoption agency to give up her child, but the agency referred her to Safe Families because of her ambivalence.

When Kim came to Safe Families for help, the staff explained that she could place her newborn with Safe Family volunteers while she earned the money needed to get an apartment and to get better established. Kim wept with relief. It was not long after this meeting that Kim delivered a beautiful baby boy, who went to stay with the Safe Families volunteers. Kim named the baby after the Safe Family father and she requested that they become his godparents. The family had a great opportunity to share their faith in word and deed, and their relationship with Kim continued long after the baby was returned to her care. They have become her extended family.

Safe Families for Children

Kim and others like her would only be able to access the help of the State child welfare agency by being an abusive or neglectful parent. This is not a criticism of these State agencies; investigating and intervening in abusive situations is their mandate. But we must not assume that State welfare agencies can solve the problem of countless children unprotected in unsafe homes where there is crisis or serious stress. With the changing economy, many more families are experiencing financial crisis, unemployment, and homelessness. Others are dealing with family violence, parental drug and/or alcohol abuse, illness or incarceration. According to the Children's Defense Fund, children living in families with incomes less than \$15,000 are 22 times more likely to be abused and neglected than children living in families with incomes of \$30,000 or more.⁶ Children with parents who abuse drugs or alcohol are four times more likely to be abused than those who do not. The number of poor children under age 18 was 12.8 million (17.4%), or one child in six. The number of poor children under age 5 was 4.2 million (20.7%), or one child in five.⁷

During such crises, many parents are not capable of providing a safe and caring environment and are at increased risk for abusing or neglecting their children. Historically the extended family often stepped in to support parents by taking care of children for short periods of time, and neighbors came alongside families in crisis. However, many urban families are socially isolated and their extended family is not available. The children in a family traumatized by crisis become especially at risk for neglect or abuse as their parents struggle to cope with crushing circumstances and emotions.

Safe Families for Children (SFFC) is a network of hundreds of host families in Metro-Chicago who are passionate about helping and caring for at-risk children and their parents. Designed to extend and strengthen the community safety net for at-risk families, Safe Families is a positive alternative to the State child welfare system. The voluntary and non-coercive nature

of Safe Families is a hallmark of the program. Free from punitive interactions and coerciveness, parents in crisis are able to place their children (newborns through parenting teens) in safe homes, still maintaining custody of their children. The objectives of Safe Families are to 1) deflect children from the State child welfare system, 2) prevent child abuse and neglect, and 3) provide a family in crisis with the necessary support while demonstrating the love and compassion of Jesus Christ. Many parents struggle in their roles because of limited informal social supports and unavailable extended family support. Many Safe Families have become the extended family that the struggling parent never had. Additionally, by temporarily freeing parents from the responsibility of caring for their child, SFFC provides parents with time to address personal issues without fear of losing custody of their child or children.

Besides meeting the needs of families in crisis, Safe Families serves as a bridge in several ways. Resource-rich families who desire to share their blessings are connected with resource-limited families. Suburban families who typically are isolated from the struggles of those trapped in poverty are connected with urban families struggling daily to make ends meet. Finally, the ministry connects the public sector (State agencies) and the church as the welfare system increasingly has seen Safe Families as a resource for families who are at risk but do not fall within their abuse/neglect criteria.

From Depression to Life Change

Bridges were built when Donna handed her two children over to Safe Families volunteers Mike and Katy Wright. Suffering from depression and feeling overwhelmed, Donna had been habitually tucking her daughters, Alexandria, age four, and Taylor, age two, into bed and leaving the apartment to do drugs and attempt to escape her problems. She had no family to help. At one point, she called DCFS to hand over her children, but the State referred her to Safe Families.

“I was depressed, and things had gotten to the point that I almost didn’t care about anything,” Donna recalled. “But I did want to get better, so I agreed to have my kids placed with the Wrights. I started meeting with a counselor to work through issues related to my own abuse I’d experienced as a kid. I didn’t realize until then how stressed out and angry I had become.”

Donna, who lived in Chicago, began visiting her children at the Wright’s suburban home and eventually began spending weekends with the family, which included Mike and Katy’s four children, ages 10 to 15. Today she recognizes God’s hand in providing her with a friend/mentor like Katy at that critical point in her life.

“Katy wouldn’t give up on me and wouldn’t let me give up on myself,” she stated. “She challenged me to think differently about life and my kids and God. Katy was exactly what I needed in order to change.”

During the four months that Alexandria and Taylor were living with the Wrights, Donna received Christ as her Savior and became involved in a supportive church home where she was baptized by the Wrights. She is now regularly attending a home group Bible Study, meeting weekly with a mentor, and ministering to the youth in her church. She has also become a devoted mother, spending hours helping her children with their schoolwork and reaching out to other overwhelmed mothers.

“Safe Families made it possible for me to get the help I needed without losing my kids to the State, and I’ll always be thankful for that,” Donna said. “I think about how bad off I was before I met the Wrights, and I know God has really blessed me.”

Biblical Hospitality

The Wrights, along with other Safe Families, epitomize the biblical command for all Christians to live lives characterized by hospitality. We are witnessing an extraordinary movement of care as families join this wave of Biblical hospitality by using their homes for Kingdom purposes. In so doing, the church returns to the forefront of caring for children, as we had been throughout history.

The hospitality of the Bible is dangerous, demanding, and must be deliberate. It is radical, far different than the lifestyle with which we may be accustomed. While the Safe Families Program provides as many safe guards as reasonably possible, opening our doors to strangers can be risky. Our own children can be exposed to language and behaviors that are undesirable. The needs of a child or children newly separated from their parent and feeling stressed will demand more of our time and energy. Our children will need to sacrifice and exercise patience as they share their possessions and their parents with those to whom we are ministering. However, the blessings run deep when we practice Biblical hospitality and demonstrate to the world that the Christian family, in obedience to Christ, can be a powerful source of change in our society.

Overwhelmed

Pam experienced the power of Biblical hospitality after coming to us in a desperate state. She had eight children, ages six months to sixteen years old, and was raising them alone, without any support from their fathers. Barely making it by any standard, the last straw came when Pam lost her job, was evicted and became homeless. She and her children lived in a van for a period of time and then moved in with “friends,” who reported her to child welfare officials. An investigation was underway, and Pam began to see that losing her children was becoming a very real possibility.

We heard about Pam’s situation from a friend of the ministry, who asked if we would be willing to care for the children through our Safe Families program. Within days, five of our volunteer families took in Pam’s eight children, presumably for about three months. As our staff got to know Pam, though, we realized she would need more time. So we asked our volunteers if they could keep her children for a year. All said yes.

Among those volunteers were Peter and Cindy Baldwin and their four children, who cared for Trinity, Pam’s six-month-old daughter.

“We are totally committed to this baby, and to seeing Pam’s family be reunited some day,” Cindy said during Trinity’s stay with them. “Our reason for doing it is simple — God wants us to help people in need. After all, these are his children too.”

Pam was able to find a food service position at a suburban school and secured housing. All of her children were able to go home in far less time than what was anticipated. Pam’s fear

of losing them to the State system was assuaged because of Christian families practicing hospitality.

Hospitality Defined

But what exactly is hospitality? We often think of inviting friends and family to our home for food and socializing as hospitality; however, that may be more accurately defined as entertaining. Entertaining is enjoyable and often strengthens relationships, but it is not to be confused with Biblical hospitality. Likewise, we refer to hotel and restaurant establishments as part of the “hospitality industry.” Unfortunately, that is often the extent to which many of us understand and live out hospitality. The practice of hospitality, apart from the hospitality industry, is nearly extinct in our society.

Somewhere along the way we have changed and watered down the original meaning of this concept. The Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia* which means “love of strangers.” We often do not put the word love and stranger in the same sentence. Fear of strangers is a much more common thought than love of strangers.

However, Biblical hospitality is powerful and instrumental in reaching our world with the gospel of Christ. In our post-modern age, hospitality is an essential practice that needs to accompany our verbal proclamation of faith in order to restore our credibility to a society that sees us as being anti-gay, too political, hypocritical, insincere, sheltered, and judgmental.

The practice of Christian hospitality was most vibrant during the first five centuries of the church. It provided credibility (word and deed) and distinguished the church from its surrounding environment. The teachings of the New Testament command all of God’s people to be hospitable, as we will soon see, and the early church believed it and lived it out. This involved loving and welcoming strangers into their homes. Hospitality was not seen as a special gift that only a few possessed but rather as a command for all Christians. Hospitality was one of the foundational ministries of the early church. Christians were to regard hospitality to strangers as a fundamental expression of the gospel.

The New Testament makes frequent mention of hospitality. The Hebrews writer instructs followers of Christ to “not neglect hospitality” (Hebrews 13:2). Peter, with insight into the difficulty of living a life of hospitality, encourages us to “offer hospitality ungrudgingly” (I Peter 4:9). Hebrews also alludes to the fact that the practice of hospitality can be mysterious and have its rewards. *“Do not neglect to show hospitality. By doing so, some have entertained angels” (Hebrews 13:2)*. Paul instructs Christians to “pursue hospitality” (Romans 12:13), because hospitality does not come naturally and it often goes against our nature. Not only were all Christians encouraged to live lives of hospitality, but leaders were especially instructed to be hospitable. In fact, hospitality is a characteristic that was to be used to identify those who should be considered for leadership. *“Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (I Timothy 3:2)*.

Choices, Consequences and Compassion

Nadia came to the United States from Slovakia as part of a church choir performing in a Slovakian church in Chicago. To her friends’ surprise, she married a man shortly after meeting

him. After the birth of their first child, Nadia's husband became physically abusive towards her and left her for another woman. With three months to go until the birth of her second child, Nadia came to Safe Families seeking assistance. In broken English, she struggled to convey her anxieties about separating from her children and allowing them to be cared for by "strangers." Nadia was anxious about the future of her young family.

A few months later, Nadia's son, Jona, was born, and she agreed to place him and his one-year-old sister, Jobelia, in the home of Safe Families caregivers. By living out Biblical hospitality, the Safe Family had a unique opportunity to demonstrate Christ's love to a mother who was overwhelmed and homeless. Nadia was able to get her life back on track and have her children returned to her care.

Barriers to Hospitality

When people consider the challenge of opening their homes to others, a number of concerns arise. These concerns can lead to barriers that hinder us from practicing the discipline of hospitality.

Castle Mentality - Much of our income is invested into our homes. Because we invest so much, we may develop a perspective that our homes are our castles, something of significant value. That perspective can easily shift to our homes and their contents becoming our idols. I once spoke at a fairly wealthy church and a couple came up afterwards indicating an interest in opening up their home for a child but wanted a guarantee that their possessions would not be harmed. When told that such a promise could not be made, they walked away discouraged. I could not help but think of the rich young ruler who walked away from Jesus because of his possessions (Mark 10:17-25). This is probably the biggest challenge for our wealthy North American church. The practice of hospitality is an alternative to a life focused on consumption and materialism. God lends us our homes and possessions to use for kingdom purposes, not just for our own comfort and entertainment. Hospitality insures that we maintain a right relationship with our possessions.

Fortress Mentality – With so many problems and negative influences in our world, it is natural to desire a "safe place" to which we can withdraw. Often our homes become this "safe place" with figuratively high walls and deep moats. The desire for safety and protection is not wrong. However, it can have a detrimental effect as we are lulled into thinking our safety comes from our fortress rather than trusting in Christ for His protection. This fortress mentality also keeps others out who desperately need to be exposed to the extraordinary love of Christ as expressed in relationships within a family. When was the last time a neighbor, stranger, or acquaintance crossed the threshold of your front door?

Haven Mentality – Our homes have become our sanctuaries for refueling and restoration. Certainly this is important. However, hospitality and restoration are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Lord often uses a variety of people and places to restore us, even our guests. Reliance on our home for restoration may detract us from other ways to be restored such as fully using all we are and have for His purpose. "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you my Lord" (Psalm 42:1). Additionally, the joy of seeing God at work in

someone's life is a tremendously rejuvenating experience that we may inadvertently exclude ourselves from when we fail to open our doors to others.

Time – Time is the most often reported reason that people give for being unable to open their homes. Families are quite busy running to school meetings, soccer games, church activities, etc. Many Christian families would like to find the time to mentor/tutor a child, visit a homeless shelter, or reach out to their neighbor. A ministry like Safe Families provides very busy families opportunities to serve because we bring the needs to them and the children are integrated into their routines.

Role of the Family in Ministry

This type of integration into the family not only has a healing affect on the at-risk children, it also allows the host family to participate together in life-changing ministry. There are few opportunities for an entire family to minister together. Church programs and ministries are usually divided by age and sometimes gender. This is helpful in meeting the specific needs of various groups. However, when possible, ministering together as a family promotes unity and allows our children real experience in living out their faith. The Christian family is one of the most powerful sources of change in our society. Our homes are a powerful change agent. Rather than sheltering our families, we need to unleash them for ministry. It is easy for us to see our families as fragile, requiring us to handle them with care by defending and protecting rather than unleashing. Few sports teams ever win games by solely focusing on defensive strategies. If the Church is going to make a significant impact in our society, we have to use our homes and change our strategies from being predominately defensive to an offensive game plan. Our families are not as fragile as one thinks.

Healthy churches understand the importance of both reaching out and caring for its own (discipleship). If one or the other is out of line or non-existent, problems often occur. Might this also be the same for our families? Healthy families must care for its own (raise their children) but also reach out to others as a family. By not recognizing the need to reach out, the church is less effective and our families miss out on a unique blessing (and some suffer the consequences of a lack of purpose).

The section on hospitality in the book of Hebrews (13:2) seems to insinuate that there may be a surprise (“some have entertained angels”) for the host as they live out hospitality. Many of our Safe Families attest to the fact that they received more of a blessing than they gave. It makes sense. When a family is given a life-changing purpose which requires the involvement of every member, new life and energy is breathed into the family. Some have said that their family now has a purpose beyond just raising the next generation. *“Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy”* (Matthew 5:7).

Unloved

The Kimball family experienced this joy of ministry as they provided one young mother with something she had never experienced: unconditional love. Samantha's baby, Africa, had been born prematurely a month earlier and was about to be released from the hospital. The last thing this mother wanted to do was to take her home where her mother and brother were

smoking crack cocaine and dealing drugs. In desperation, Samantha went to a local adoption agency. The adoption counselor, seeing Samantha's commitment to Africa and desire to raise her, sent Samantha to us.

We matched Samantha with Safe Families volunteers Chad and Holly Kimball, who live on the south side of Chicago with their two preschool daughters. They picked up Africa at the hospital and cared for her while Samantha continued looking for housing and employment.

During that time, Samantha spent many afternoons with Africa and the Kimballs. Holly recalled, "Samantha said to me, 'I didn't know there were people in the world like you. I've never experienced love from anyone like this before.' "I told her that we were willing to sacrifice for her because Jesus sacrificed His life for us. She listened closely while I shared the gospel with her, and I could tell she was touched."

A solution to Samantha's problem came just five days later, when she found housing and enrolled in a work/study program at a local trade school. "I fell in love with Africa, and it was hard to say goodbye," said Holly. "It was such a blessing to be part of God's plan to keep this little family together."

Conclusion

Is it possible to create a safety net in our communities so children have a place to go while their parents struggle with their own life challenges? Yes, it is possible. However, it only happens when we unleash our families and help them overcome the barriers to Biblical hospitality. Commissioning and supporting families to open their homes and minister to children and their parents has made a significant statement to the watching world longing to see authentic generosity.

Is the hospitality of the Bible more than just having people over to our homes for coffee and cake or participating on the hospitality committee of our church? Is hospitality only for a select few or should it be an expectation for all Christians? Hospitality is a powerful and effective discipline that can change our world.

Safe Families has hundreds of families opening their homes. It is the largest volunteer movement providing homes for children in the United States. While the program originated in Chicago, Illinois, other state governments are taking steps to support a Safe Families movement in their own State.

A Personal Note

My wife and I committed our home to the Lord's use early in our marriage. During the past 24 years, we have had the privilege of having a variety of people including adults, children, teens, an elderly parent, and a disabled relative live with us. We have never regretted sharing our home with any guest. Last year, through the Safe Families Program, we took in a two-year-old boy whose mother was working to free herself from her drug addiction and other behaviors that support it. Her son had behavior problems and numerous disabilities. He could not talk, did not follow instructions, and was aggressive. In fact, the Safe Families program considered not accepting him and sending him to the State because of his behavioral problems and the numerous diagnoses he had. However, when my son and daughter learned that a child was

going to have to become a ward of the State because there were no other options for him, they convinced my wife and I to take him in. We had thought our nest was full because we had my mother-in-law (who was ill) and my nephew (who was in a wheel chair).

We decided to trust the Lord with this challenge and we took him in. We prayed daily as a family that this child would learn to communicate. He did, and subsequently his behavior improved. In a fairly short period of time, his improvement was so remarkable that there was little evidence of the numerous disabilities he was diagnosed with. We also ministered to his mother, who was surprised that such love would be shown by strangers to her and her son. On one visit, she asked why we were doing this for her because she knew we were not getting paid. What an opportunity to testify to the hospitality we have all been shown by God as we moved from being enemies to being His cherished possessions. However, the time with her was shorter than we anticipated as she was abused by her boyfriend and found dead in a hotel room. Although our children are now adolescents, we adjusted our lifestyle and adopted this adorable little boy that the Lord placed in our care.

Study Questions

1. We have all heard news reports of children being abused and neglected. Many of us are in danger of becoming callused to these situations where our hearts are no longer stirred. Are you still moved by these injustices? If not, what do you need to do to soften your heart?
2. Do you know anyone who seems to have mastered the discipline of hospitality? If so, what is it about their lives that put them in this category? What barriers do you struggle with when thinking about opening up your home?
3. A premise of this chapter is that the Christian home/family is an untapped yet powerful source of change in our society. Do you agree? What is it about the Christian family that gives it this potential?
4. Just like the church, a healthy family needs to effectively care for its own and reach out to others. How can your church implement these principles?

End Notes

¹ Chicago Tribune, December 30, 2007, p. 5.

² Fred Wulczyn, Brenda Jones Harden, Ying-Ying T. Yuan, Richard P. Barth, and John Landsverk. *Beyond Common Sense – Child Welfare, Child Wellbeing, and the Evidence of Policy Reform*, 2005.

³ Joseph Stowell. *The Trouble with Jesus*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003, p. 116.

⁴ Christine D. Pohl. *Making Room – Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 33.

⁵ Joseph Stowell. *The Trouble with Jesus*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003, p. 116.

⁶ Children Defense Fund Fact Sheet. www.childrensdefense.org. 2007.

⁷ Ibid.

Further Reading

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