

# Pastoring a Church with an Orphan Care Mission

Below is a quick snapshot from an interview with Jon Dansby, a pastor at the Austin Stone Community Church, who has learned how to shepherd families and encourage the church to respond to God's call to care for the orphan, the fatherless and marginalized.

## 1. How did you become aware of the mission of foster care and adoption within the church?

My family adopted our son Elliot around the time we first moved to Austin, and so we had learned about it from a conference we attended. At our church, we had a sermon series and have had pushes from the pulpit and main-stage announcements and the vision will come up in sermons from time to time. We also hold regular classes that teach the theology and first steps into foster care. A great practice we've adopted is to tell video and written stories of families that have fostered. This has been a real game changer to put names and faces to the call of fostering and adoption.

## 2. How do you keep informed about who is fostering in your church?

We have an awesome foster care ministry that keeps an ear out for these folks. We are also about to assign deacons to the task keeping a running list. We find out through our small groups as well as leaders and people let us know. Very often, we'll find out if someone is fostering through our child check in system on Sundays. As they check in, we'll see new faces and we get to hear what's going on.

## 3. What would you tell fellow pastors about how to care for new foster families in their church?

These people need practical helps. Most often, people think of providing help primarily through the lens of babysitting or respite care, which require certifications. This is great, but there are TONS of ways to serve foster parents in ways that don't require certification. New foster parents need help with mowing, groceries, chores, gift cards, and sometimes even procuring extra furniture or vehicles. If a foster family is not in community, they will need help finding one that advocates for them and that they can turn to in a crisis.

## 4. What is the first step where you point members who want to get involved in foster care?

They need exposure to foster kids. They should volunteer at a Parents' Night Out that gives foster parents an evening date night. Or they could get certified to babysit or provide respite care for a family already fostering. They could also visit a local child placing agency to gain more information.

## 5. Since your church has engaged in this call to action, what has or hasn't worked, and what could improve?

What has gone well: Awareness, generally people know there is a need and we have a lot of people involved.

What hasn't worked: We've had a few large event signups where people fall through the cracks. We were too quick to celebrate a list of people who would show up to an information meeting. Also, when you collect gift cards to bless foster and adoptive families, remember that many gift cards depreciate. In addition, there is the well intentioned, "let me know if you need anything." Instead of making that general offer, prepare people to just start meeting some practical needs. When families are burdened it is hard for them to identify their needs and ask for help in the moment.

What can we improve: When a child goes back or an adoption is finalized, children fall off the radar. More, not less, support is needed at that point. They should not be dropped off the list at that point, but rather transferred to a new list for a different kind of care. Another improvement is that at the beginning we focused a lot on the doctrine of adoption, but not the biblical theology of mercy. Both are important, but focusing exclusively on adoption doesn't take into account the many possible outcomes of foster care. Having shown mercy must be a win for foster care that may not end in adoption. Mercy in the name of Jesus, not only adoption or rescue, is the win.