



## **A Frank Analysis of *The Child Catchers***

The new book *The Child Catchers* delivers aggressive criticism of the growing Christian orphan care movement. Author Kathryn Joyce provides important warning regarding potential hazards, excesses and blind spots within the movement. At the same time, the book's overarching narrative and many of its claims often distort more than they reveal.

Thoughtful orphan advocates would do well to 1) Listen carefully to the book's criticism; 2) Affirm its condemnations of misguided compassion; and 3) Confront the book's many caricatures, half-truths and misrepresentations directly and graciously.

### **Setting the Context**

How will history judge the Christian orphan care movement? Amidst the daily rough-and-tumble of any significant undertaking, one can never know for sure.

This was certainly the case with the U.S. Abolition movement. Abolition encompassed a huge diversity of personalities, motives, and philosophies. Many of its leaders differed sharply on methods and desired outcomes. Some sought to amend the Constitution; other burned it publically. Some resorted to violence; others believe "moral suasion" was the only means of lasting change.

This diversity guaranteed that journalists wishing to portray the Abolition movement in a particular light always had plenty of real evidence they could draw upon to build the storyline they wished to portray.

Many Southern journalists wanted to give to abolitionism one interpretation in particular: that it was a movement of religious zealots so desperate to do good that they'd go to almost any extreme to achieve their goals.

It wasn't hard to present this narrative. One could start with a few examples of actual radicalism—like John Brown, Nat Turner and William Lloyd Garrison. Once that context was set, one could pull just the right quotes and stories from even moderate abolitionists to suggest that the entire movement was riddled with religious extremism, ill-considered initiatives and philanthropic undertakings destined to do more harm than good. In fact, there was at least some truth to each of these claims.

The journalism employed by The Child Catchers offers much the same interpretation of today's Christian orphan care movement: religious zealots so desperate to do good that they'll go to almost any ill-advised extreme to achieve their goals.

This leaves readers with a watershed question: Is this interpretation correct?

Or might history come to a more positive conclusion? Is it possible that the Christian orphan care movement carries both strengths and weaknesses similar to many other important movements: prone to certain excesses and enthusiasms, at times naive, always needing of improvement and self-correction...and yet ultimately effecting deep and lasting good for millions? Only time will tell for sure.

### **Affirming Important Criticisms**

As I wrote in an article on the Christian orphan care movement in 2012,

*Any movement seeking to reflect God's heart for justice and mercy is highly vulnerable to excess and error. This is as true of today's Christian adoption and orphan care advocates as it was of champions of Abolition and Civil Rights. The justice of a cause can easily blind us to folly in our tactics. So it's always best to begin by listening to criticism, even if it carries major blind spots of its own.*

This is where we must always begin. The Child Catchers issues a number of criticism shared by many thoughtful Christian orphan advocates. These include:

#### **1) *Underestimating the Hazards of Caring for Orphans***

Anyone who dares to engage the world at its most hurting must know this: they will inevitably encounter vexing dilemmas to which there are no easy answers.

This is true with all forms of orphan care, and perhaps adoption most of all. So it is absolutely essential that we speak frankly about the dangers inherent in caring for children. We as a movement need to do this more.

The hazards are many. They range from the risk of disempowering local solutions with western "community development" projects...to potential for labor exploitation and sexual abuse in home-based foster care...to the way orphanages can "pull" children from their impoverished families into well-funded facilities.

When it comes to international adoption, the foremost danger is the potential for U.S. dollars to distort decisions in developing countries regarding what is truly best for a child. The promise, or even hope, of a payment (potentially many times the amount an average annual salary) could twist the thinking of almost anyone, even a child's parents. So although money will always be necessary to cover the

costs of adoption, we must do all we can to create a “firewall” between U.S. dollars and any decision-maker who is determining whether a child will truly be best served by inter-country adoption.

Certainly, errors and unintended consequences will always be part of any effort to respond to deep need. So setting perfection as our standard will ensure one thing only: that no solutions are ever provided at all.

But despite the inevitable blend of helps-and-hazards that adoption and other expressions of orphan care will always carry, we must be *relentless* in seeking to minimize the potential that well-intended efforts might ultimately work ill.

**2) *Allowing adoptions when poverty may be the sole cause of relinquishment.***

A child should never be given or accepted for adoption if lack of financial resources is the *only* reason for relinquishment. Some agencies, including Christian ones, have not been as aggressive as they should to ensure this doesn't happen. The worst actors—particularly unscrupulous middlemen in other countries—have even encouraged it.

Of course, when parents considers relinquishing a child, financial poverty is often entangled with far deeper issues that may not be solvable: a new step parent that wants nothing to do with the child; a pregnant teen who desires to continue her education without having to raise a child; sexual abuse within the home; or other painfully complex matters.

Determining what is truly best for a child in such situations is never easy. But Christian adoptive families and agencies should be known in this field as the most vigilant in seeking to prevent adoptions driven solely by poverty. In such cases, every effort should be made to both persuade *and* empower the parent to raise the child at home.

**3) *Failing to respect birth parents.***

There are three parties to any adoption: the child, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents. But sometimes, especially in the past, this third member of the “adoption triad” has been overlooked or even disparaged. For the Christian, that's unacceptable.

The decision of a pregnant woman to choose life for her child requires bravery and sacrifice that must be honored. The mother deserves both respect and support before, during and after giving birth—whether she opts for adoption or to parent her newborn. Failure to do provide these is always immoral.

**4) *Highlighting only the beauty of adoption***

Christian adoption advocates at times have been guilty of “adoption cheerleading”: highlighting the joy adoption can bring without equally presenting the potential challenges. This can lead to all manner of ills, with families racing to adopt without preparation for what it takes to help heal a child who has deep wounds. This can be especially hazardous when unprepared families adopt older children, sibling groups or children with special needs.

The Child Catchers catalogues a number of such stories that would make any orphan advocate ache. They remind that any discussion of adopting must consistently emphasize *both* its beauty and its challenges. This is true of many other expressions of care for orphans as well, from foster care to mentoring. Whenever we open our lives to a child who has known great hurt, we will taste some of that deep hurt as well.

Adoption agencies and church adoption ministries must focus not just on the *process* of adopting, but the lifelong *journey* of adoption that demands both strong preparation in advance and support along the way.

### 5) *Savior Complex*

Any effort to help others can quickly become about *us*. We come to see ourselves as noble rescuers, riding into perilous situations on a white horse. Words we use can perpetuate this narrative, such as “rescuing orphans” and “saving children.”

Of course, these words aren’t bad in themselves: the world is full of children who *do* need rescue. And there is certainly nothing wrong with taking a robust joy in bringing good to those who desperately need it.

But when the dominant feature of our thinking becomes “us as rescuers,” we’re in grave danger. What often follows is the pride, self-focus and I-know-better outlook that has been at the root of countless misguided efforts to help others, both religious and secular.

Christians have no need to find our identity in being “the rescuer.” We are the rescued. And we must not just say this, but *know* it. Even our best efforts are simply small, imperfect reflections of the way we’ve first been loved.

Of course, none of these errors are unique to Christians. Criticisms of adoption and orphan care written in the 1990s and early 2000s mention many of the same issues The Child Catchers highlights, yet with no mention of Christians as their cause.

But it is accurate to say that the surge of Christian involvement with adoption and orphan care *amplified* what challenges already existed, and sometimes gave them a religious edge. Having more people who care about orphans, or any issue, tends to increase both effective responses and poor ones.

Wherever the source of problems and whatever their extent, Christians have every reason to be the most active and most honest in seeking to root them out—both within the movement and beyond it.

### **What the Book Leaves Out**

Even as it delivers many important criticisms, The Child Catchers also distorts a great deal. At times, it leaves out huge realms of Christian engagement that do not fit the portrait the book desires to paint. The result is a picture that is not just incomplete, but often highly inaccurate.

***Foster Care.*** One massive omission from a book claiming to depict the Christian orphan care movement is the extensive involvement with children and families in the foster system. This local expression of love for the fatherless is one of the three core elements of the Christian orphan care movement, and has grown dramatically over the past several years.

As I shared with the author of The Child Catchers in several interviews I did with her, this engagement is seen vividly from [Colorado](#) to [Florida](#) to [Kentucky](#) to [Georgia](#) to [Illinois](#) to [Oklahoma](#) to [California](#) to [Arkansas](#) to [New Jersey](#) to [Washington](#) and beyond.

Yet virtually none of this—the mentoring, family preservation, foster care, and adoption of American children that most everyone else has largely abandoned—made it into the book.

***Global Orphan Care.*** The lion's share of Christian engagement in caring for orphans worldwide is not via inter-country adoption. Rather, it is expressed in a vast array of international initiatives supported by Christian funding, staff and volunteers. These in-country responses are highly diverse, ranging from local adoption and foster initiatives...to group homes and orphanages...to programs that enable struggling orphan-widow families to stay together.

In a few cases, The Child Catchers touches briefly on such activities. But this reality receives mention in perhaps three percent of the book at most (realistically much less). In contrast, more than 80 percent of CAFO member organization are involved in caring for children *within* the countries in which they work—most of them exclusively so.

This fact and the reality it represents severely undercuts the book's claims that Christians focus solely on inter-country adoption as *the* solution for orphans worldwide.

In truth, virtually all of the Christians I know who care deeply about orphans are involved on multiple fronts. One family does local foster care while also sponsoring orphan care work in Central America. A second runs summer camps for foster youth and has also adopted from Asia.

Just this weekend, I talked with a couple who adopted from Ethiopia in 2011. They've joined with eleven other Christian adoptive couples to raise funds for in-country orphan care and family preservation efforts in Ethiopia. In just over a year they've raised together more than \$600,000. Meanwhile, they've also secured sponsors at \$19 per month for schooling and basic nutrition for more than 400 children that are being cared for within their own families. And they say they're just getting started.

This multi-faceted response to the needs of orphans is the norm among Christians, and stands in sharp contrast to the one-dimensional portrait painted by The Child Catchers.

***Family Preservation.*** On an even broader level, it's important to recognize that the vast majority of Christian dollars spent to address human needs globally fall into the category of "family preservation"—not direct care for orphans.

This is as it should be, since it is always far preferable to prevent a child from becoming an orphan whenever possible. One sees this commitment to elevating families from poverty most everywhere Christians are serving—from the \$2.79 billion budget of World Vision, to the 1.3 million vulnerable children sponsored through Compassion, to the feeding and education programs operated by even many "orphan care" organizations.

Although rarely billed as "family preservation" or "orphan prevention" programs, they do just that. The countless health, micro-finance, disaster relief, community development and related efforts prevent children from becoming orphans by helping hard-pressed families stay together. Virtually every Christian orphan advocate I know is involved in supporting such efforts financially, and often in other ways as well.

The fact that these twin commitments—to both family preservation *and* adoption—are supported by most Christian orphan advocates is overlooked almost entirely by The Child Catchers.

***Special Needs.*** The Child Catchers also ignores the growing number of Christian adoptions of children with special needs, from HIV+ to Downs Syndrome to the hearing impaired. Frequently, these children are left alone and untouched in orphanages, abandoned to die in fields, or used as props to beg money on the streets...until welcomed into loving homes by committed Christians.

A 2009 survey by the Joint Council on International Children's Services (JCICS) found that 27 percent of all adoptions facilitated by its members were of children with special needs, and that number is considerably higher in many Christian communities. Bethany Christian Services, the nation's largest Christian adoption agency, reports that in 2012, 57 percent of all of its adoption placements were of children with special needs. When counting only international adoptions, the percentage with special needs rises approximately 80 percent. Once again, because this reality did not fit the story The Child Catchers sought to tell, it was largely left out as well.

The book relegates special needs adoptions, literally, to a footnote. And even the footnote finds a way to level criticism and misjudge motives. It includes a quote suggesting that special needs parents are thirsty for “a higher place in the moral order...” It also claims that “special-needs adoptions may constitute the next wave of adoption corruption.” It concludes that even these “seemingly heroic” adoptions are not “exempt from commercialization.”(217)

The Child Catchers showed no familiarity with the horrific treatment of special needs children common in much of the world. Nor did it even hint at the daily load of adoptive parents who love and care for children with special needs. For such families, and the countless children yet in need of families, this omission is heartbreaking.

***Supporting Local Movements Worldwide.*** The Child Catchers offer a sincere affirmation of the work of Saddleback Church and others that are growing in-country orphan care and adoptions within Rwanda. The fact that the book acknowledges this tremendously significant effort is no small thing. It is, in fact, one of the only affirmations the book affords to any aspect of the Christian orphan care movement.

Even so, The Child Catchers largely omits the wide range of other local orphan care movements growing worldwide, from Eastern Europe to Zambia to Central America.

Seeing these locally-led orphan care movements grow is the ultimate desire in all that CAFO does, particularly the CAFO [Global Movements Initiative](#). The goal is simply this: *that the local church in every nation will become the primary answer for the orphans in its midst.*

In recent years, the Christian Alliance for Orphans’ (CAFO) national conference (known as “Summit”) has offered a wide array of speakers and workshops championing this vision for locally-led orphan care movements. An entire two-day pre-Summit this year was designed especially for global leaders, who represented 25+ countries at Summit 2013. Many other sessions also offered training for western Christians desiring to support indigenous movements worldwide.

This year, CAFO will actively support substantive conferences advancing this goal in Ukraine, Mexico, Kenya, Guatemala, Bangladesh and elsewhere. Likewise, the annual Orphan Sunday campaign increasingly has become a major catalyst for local orphan care efforts not only in the U.S., but also worldwide. Thousands of churches outside the U.S. participated last year in 39 countries—and much more expected in 2013.

In these examples and many others, The Child Catchers simply misses the heart of the Christian orphan care movement—both its motivations and all that is happening just below the surface.

## **Unable to Grasp the Motive**

The Child Catchers frequently imputes motives to the people it criticizes. At times, the book appears puzzled by the idea that Christians might *really* be motivated by love—a love they first received from God and now share freely with children who bear no biological claim upon them.

Confronted by this mystery, the book grasps for explanations. At times, it imagines adoption and orphan care to be a zealous crusade to proselytize captive children. At others, it writes off the movement as mainly a PR campaign for Christians seeking to soften their image, burnish compassionate conservative credentials, “make restitution for racism” (75) and “make their antiabortion stance seem more truly ‘pro-life’” (56).

Rick Warren’s exhortation to Christians to more sacrificially serve the poor is dismissed as “grandstanding, to be sure.”(53) Harry and Bertha Holt—Oregon farmers whose work led to the adoption of thousands of Korean orphans and countless others—are described as “aggressively humble.”(47) The life and writings of Katy Davis are summed up as “ostentatious modesty” and a “cover-to-cover humblebrag.”(68)

Certainly, all human motivations are mixed at best. But for the vast majority of Christians who carry the daily joys and challenges of loving children from hard places, the explanations offered in The Child Catchers ring hollow.

What inspires most Christians to action is seen first in the Bible’s clear mandate to “defend the cause of the fatherless” (Isaiah 1:17) and to “care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). In a mysterious way, welcoming a child into one’s home is equated with welcoming in Jesus himself (Matthew 18:5).

In the end, what animates most Christian service is found even deeper than mandate alone. The Bible describes God’s own character as one who “defends the fatherless” (Deuteronomy 10:18). As the Psalms express, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:5-6).

Ultimately, the heart of the Christian story is that God chose to seek us out when we were destitute and alone. He loved the world so much that He chose to pursue us and meet our deepest needs, at inestimable cost to Himself. And now He invites us to live as His sons and daughters. The Apostle John put it this way, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (I John 3:1)

So when Christians foster or adopt or mentor or help struggling families stay together, they are simply giving a small, simple reflection to the far greater love they have been shown. As it says in 1 John, “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

## **Bending Reality**

At times, The Child Catchers does not merely omit facts but also distorts them with subtle precision. Addressing each such case would take far too much space. But one vivid example helps explain the ways truth and half-truth is blended throughout the book.

The Child Catchers repeatedly suggests that Christian advocates have inflated orphan statistics to create the illusion of an “orphan crisis.” It describes Christians “flogging 143 (or 210) million on their chests” (62). It quotes another critic stating, “As soon as anyone quotes that figure [143 million], you know they are an enemy of reality”(63).

Ultimately, one is left to believe that Christians essentially made up these numbers to serve as jet fuel to propagate “Orphan Fever.”

As with all distortions, there’s some truth here. Many orphan advocates, including Christians, have misunderstood the orphan statistics released by global authorities. At times, these misunderstandings have produced sloppy advocacy and misguided priorities.

But The Child Catchers is entirely mistaken to claim that it was over-zealous Christians that attached the 143 million statistic to orphans.

The 143 million figure was, in fact, promoted first by UNICEF as an estimate of *orphans* in the developing world—both double and single. Friends from the UN have shared with me that they now regret having not made clearer from the start the distinction between double and single orphans. But their estimate was indeed intended as a count of orphans. If the figure had included “vulnerable children” too, the count would easily have been hundreds of millions higher.

Even today, UNICEF’s Press Centre website still describes of its 2006 State of the World’s Children report, “143 million children in the developing world - 1 in every 13 - are orphans.”<sup>i</sup> Significantly, this UNICEF web page makes no mention of the difference between single and double orphans. The title of a 2002 UNICEF press release is representative of many others: “*Joint report details escalating global orphan crisis due to AIDS.*”<sup>ii</sup>

One can certainly fault Christians and other advocates for not parsing numbers more carefully. But the simple truth is that the genesis of these estimates or the idea of a “global orphan crisis” lies not with Christian activists as The Child Catchers claims, but with well-meaning UN officials.

The book also left out the ways thoughtful Christian advocates have been trying for many years to clarify the confusion created (unintentionally) by the approach UNICEF chose to take with its estimates. Long before The Child Catchers was written, the CAFO blog in 2010 expressed clearly:

*One of the slipperiest elements of orphan advocacy is the statistics often quoted to describe the number of orphans worldwide. These often-varying estimates are sometimes misstated and frequently misapplied. ...[S]ince global orphan*

*estimates include children who've lost either one or both parents, roughly 90 percent of children classified as "orphans" have one living parent. This does not mean that these children are not highly vulnerable, but it does mean that the best response to their needs is often not adoption or some form of orphan home, but helping the family remain intact or reunite.<sup>iii</sup>*

## **Using Small Stories to Twist the Big Story**

The core arguments of The Child Catchers are made using sensational anecdotes, followed by suggestions that these stories offer an accurate picture of the movement as a whole.

Story after story depicts peculiar personalities—the kind of eccentric characters one almost always finds on the fringes of any movement or cause. An overwhelming portion of these stories are of people and activities that most mainstream Christians would find odd, if not downright disturbing.

This begins on the first page, with the profile of a woman named Sharon, described as an advocate of “prolific fertility” and “fundamentalist,” as well as a “Tea Party Activist” (who all “true to form” like to wear “colonial gowns” or “tricorn hats and knee socks.”)

Next comes Laura Silsby, a “divorced mother of three” with a “troubled financial past” full of shady business dealings, whose childhood church didn’t allow women to cut their hair. Silsby’s now infamous attempt to smuggle children from Haiti to an unbuild-orphanage in the Dominican Republic landed her and nine others in a Haitian prison.

Third is Tom Benz, who is presented as “wide-smiling” and “likeable” but ultimately deeply naïve, not to mention dishonest. Benz is seen again and again using ends-justify-the-means deception to trick foreign governments into releasing orphans into his care.

The stories of eccentric characters and bizarre behaviors continue throughout the book. Chapter 5 presents the Allison family, who purportedly treated their adopted children “like slaves,” hit them with hoses to the point of drawing blood, and made strange sexual advances towards them.

At times, The Child Catchers offers feeble caveats acknowledging that “not all” Christian adoptions or orphan advocates look this way. It presents the vile behaviors attributed to the Allisons as “extreme but not isolated.” At times, it even goes so far as to affirm that most adoptive parents act with “compassionate intentions.” But in the end, the stories told always return to the accounts that fit neatly with the book’s storyline—whether depictions of actual “bad actors” or simply unfair caricatures of good people.

In between these stories, one can find some *bona fide* data and many quotes taken from mainstream leaders. But these are rarely drawn from the balanced and well-considered

reflections that would be most typical of these individuals. Rather, it appears that the author has sifted through years of research and emerged with both stories and quotes chosen artfully to confirm the narrative the book was intended to convey.

### **How Widespread Are the Problems?**

A central argument of The Child Catchers is that unethical, and sometimes tragic, things happen with inter-country adoption. In this, it is correct.

This leaves us two vital questions. First, whether unsavory activities are endemic to inter-country adoption or generally the exceptions. And second, whether we should ever participate in flawed systems.

On the first question, the book rarely moves from anecdote and conjecture to data that could help us understand whether the tragic stories are the exceptions or the rule. However, when clues are offered in the book, they often point to a far more limited frequency of problems than the book suggests.

For example, Chapter Four carries a number of anecdotes of Ethiopian adoptions gone wrong and implies that such situations are common. But when it comes to evidence of what actually is typical, the few broad indicators the book references actually point to a system that has flaws but generally avoids substantive errors.

The chapter profiles a story of a “searcher” named Samuel, who can be hired by adoptive parents to ascertain whether the information provided by their agency is correct. But while the anecdote involving Samuel showcases a tragic story, it also slips in a highly significant caveat, admitting that “...Samuel typically finds little more than discrepancies in children’s ages...”(159) The book also quickly moves past the a highly significant fact it briefly notes: that a review by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) reported that most Ethiopian children being adopted do, in fact, fit the US definition of an orphan. (168)

Both critics and proponents of adoption agree that more research on the presence, or absence, of unethical practices is called for. But the limited data the book references suggest that the stories it tells are far more exceptional than the book implies.

### **What Should be the Standard?**

Perhaps most challenging is the question of whether we should continue to work amidst a system when it does, in fact, sometimes lead to ends that are opposite its intended purpose.

For example, the U.S. foster system is intended to protect children. Yet one child dies in foster care in the U.S. for almost every day of the year.<sup>iv</sup> Should our response be to shut

it down until we ensure there are no risks? Or do we instead seek to improve the system to the utmost...while also acknowledging that addressing deep human need will *always* come with risks?

If our standard is zero tolerance for error, we had all best pack up and go home. We will not only need to abandon adoption, but virtually every other attempt to engage the world at its most hurting.

Consider, for example, that significant amounts of food shipped to Somalia during recent famines was diverted by regional warlords—and used to strengthen their brutal control.<sup>v</sup>

Or that it appears almost certain now that UN Peacekeepers inadvertently imported cholera into Haiti after the earthquake, ultimately killing nearly 8,000 Haitians.<sup>vi</sup>

Or that even in America, there are more than 6,500 ambulance crashes in the U.S. each year, many with fatalities.<sup>vii</sup>

None of those facts are “acceptable.” And yet—even as we labor to minimize unintended outcomes—we must know that such risks always come with addressing urgent need.

Certainly, there's a fierce tension we must grip here. We balance precariously between error on either side: flippancy toward problems on the one hand and fervent perfectionism on the other. But that is where we must live if we are to thoughtfully, seriously engage the world's hurt.

### **Crisis Pregnancy Centers**

A large section of The Child Catchers (page 75 to 127) focuses on the work of crisis pregnancy centers (CPCs) in the U.S. It is beyond the scope of this paper to respond to these criticisms. But many claims against CPCs appear as unfair as those lodged against the orphan care movement.

The Child Catchers describes information provided by CPCs as “confusion and intimidation tactics.”(105) These are purportedly aimed at “increasing the number of infants available for adoption at the expense of pregnant women’s interests.”(111) Another critic is quoted to provide the conclusion: “They say they want to help people in a crisis pregnancy, but really, they want to help themselves to a baby.” (126)

There is strong irony in that The Child Catchers repeatedly criticizes Christians for not doing enough to help struggling mothers. Yet most CPCs do just that, from parenting classes and mentor mothers to free diapers, clothing and cribs.

It is unfortunate that The Child Catchers takes such a negative approach to CPCs and to adoption as an alternative to abortion. Amidst the intense polarization of U.S. politics,

adoption has risen as a rare opportunity for common ground solutions. Even many ardently pro-choice political leaders now affirm adoption as a positive alternative.

The Child Catchers leaves no space for such common ground. The author not only views abortion to be an inviolable right, but also expresses explicitly that she believes it would even be “wrong” to “attempt to talk a woman out of an abortion” and offer to adopt the child instead (xi). If such efforts are wrong, Crisis Pregnancy Centers do indeed represent a moral ill, for they encourage women to make a choice other than abortion and work to support them in that choice.

But for the majority of Americans of all political persuasions, having not just one alternative to abortion but two is not coercion. Rather, it offers an important expansion of options for the woman facing an unplanned pregnancy.

### **The Most Important Voice of All**

Despite the myriad voices The Child Catchers quotes, it ultimately ignores the most important voice of all: *the orphan*. We hear virtually nothing from the child who faces the prospect of growing up on the streets or in an institution. Also ignored is the child growing up in foster care.

The book suggests that dozens, perhaps hundreds, of children are “trafficked” for inter-country adoption each year. Yet it fails to mention a single one of the tens of thousands of orphans trafficked each year into forced labor and sex slavery precisely because they lack the protection of a family.<sup>viii</sup>

The book recounts tragic stories of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of international adoptions that disrupt each year. But it does not tell the story of even one of the 4,500 Russian orphans returned by their Russian adoptive families to Russian orphanages in 2010 alone.<sup>ix</sup>

The book spotlights ways in which adopted children have been wronged by overzealous or unprepared adoptive parents. Yet it does not include a single story of the countless orphans that are physically and sexually abused every day in orphanages and on the streets.

If one spends time with any of these children and listens as they share their stories, it becomes clear that each is unique. Yet when asked, virtually every one will tell you they desire one thing more than any other: a loving family, wherever that family may be found. Those are the voices The Child Catchers leaves out entirely.

### **What Are We to Do?**

At times, a reader may be tempted to conclude that if Christians were willing to give up their “Orphan Fever,”<sup>x</sup> and limit themselves to only raising money for good causes, the world’s orphans would be much better off. Just send checks and leave compassionate action to the professionals in government and large NGOs.

The reality is that there are times when that is true.

But this narrow perspective leaves out a very, very important fact. Children need more than government or large NGOs alone can provide. Children need nurture and protection and belonging. Children need love.

These are things that cannot be mass-produced and delivered. They can only be provided one life, one heart at a time. And that requires welcoming homes, and caring individuals and families willing to sacrifice comfort and convenience in order to love a child who looks nothing like them—whether by mentoring or fostering or adopting or otherwise.

From start to finish, The Child Catchers carefully avoids this fundamental reality—omitting entirely both the real stories and academic studies of children who grow up outside of parental care.

The only glimpse the book offers of the inside of an orphanage (258) stands in shining contrast to the myriad dark portraits the book has painted of adoption.

In The Child Catchers, we encounter none of the grime, ache and abuse that characterize many institutions worldwide. Rather, we see “clean and cheerful rooms” where children “grouped by age lay in orderly rows of well-cushioned cribs.” The children are “swaddled in heavy blankets and tended by nurses,” “giggling,” and “well-cared for.”

But this is not the likely outcome for most children who must face the world without the nurture and protection of parents, whether in the U.S. and worldwide.

The future awaiting young adults who “emancipate” from the U.S. foster system without being adopted are [sheer tragedy](#). By their mid-20s, less than half are employed. More than 80 percent of males have been arrested, versus 17 percent overall. With women, 68 percent are on food stamps, compared to 7 percent overall. Similarly tragic consequences of growing up without a family are seen globally as well, from stunted size and intellect to emotional trauma. One startling yet representative [study](#) in Romania by Harvard professor Charles Nelson found that up to age 3, children’s IQ decreased by nearly one point for every two months spent in an orphanage.

If a sequel to The Child Catchers is ever written, it would do well to take these needs far more seriously the second time around.

Donating funds *definitely* is important. And Christian giving to orphan care and adoption has risen faster in recent years than virtually any other category of giving.<sup>xi</sup> But orphan advocates have every reason to continue encouraging the personal, sacrificial and well-

informed involvement of caring individuals and families. Why? Because children need love, and that requires more than money can provide.

### **A Positive Vision and a Need for a Full Spectrum of Response**

Almost all of The Child Catchers is dedicated to criticism with little hint of solutions.

One important exception, however, comes when it joins the Christian Alliance for Orphans, USAID and many other voices in praising efforts in Rwanda to expand in-country adoption and orphan care.

This vision for locally-led efforts rooted in the local church is indeed the ultimate desire of the Christian Alliance for Orphans.

But even as we champion this goal, it is vital to recognize that growing local adoption and orphan care is a long-term undertaking. Strong cultural biases against taking in unrelated orphans (except as household help) exist in many parts of the world and do not change easily. Even care by relatives often relegates a child to living as a 2<sup>nd</sup> class member of the household. So even as we work towards a day when local families meet the needs of every orphan, we must know that the journey there will be long and hard.

This is the case even in Rwanda, which many Christian and secular advocates hold up as the ideal of a country seeking to shift its children from orphanages to local families.

Progress has been significant but slow, and not without problems. The book quotes one advocate in Rwanda lamenting, “I wish I could say there are all these Rwandan families lining up left and right that way to do this [adopt], but these are just the first, initial steps.” A Rwandan summed up efforts to open Rwandan homes for every Rwandan orphan, “We are not there yet, but we may definitely get there.” (266)

That is certainly reason for hope: that we may get there someday in every country on earth. Every Christian who cares for the “cause of the fatherless” must both pray and labor towards it.

And, until the day arrives when every orphan is cared for in a loving local home, we must continue to support and grow a broad continuum of response to the needs of orphans.

This continuum always starts with efforts to preserve families threatened with disintegration and to re-unify families that have been needlessly severed. When it’s clearly not possible for a child to remain safely with her first family, a loving and permanent second family should be sought promptly—locally if possible, and via international adoption if not.

When finding a permanent new family is not an option, other home-based options should become the priority, including foster care. Finally, when no home-based options are

feasible, well-run residential care facilities provide an important alternative far preferable to an abusive home or life on the streets

## **Conclusion**

It's been said that democracy is the worst form of government...except for all the others. The same could be expressed of many other good things, including aspects of the Christian orphan movement.

None of its expressions are perfect—whether adoption, foster care, mentoring, family preservation or global orphan care initiatives. And yet, despite many shortcomings of this work, tremendous good is brought daily to millions of children around the globe.

Yes, errors and pitfalls will always come with any effort to address deep human need. So we must labor continually to minimize risks and avoid unintended consequences. Yet this realism need not lead to the cynicism that defines The Child Catchers. Nor to the hopelessness or temptation to withdraw from engagement the one might feel after reading it.

Rather, it reminds us that we must do two seemingly opposite things at once: *relentlessly pursue the highest ideals...while also knowing that the situations we enter and the results we achieve will often be far less than ideal.*

Knowing this guides us past cynicism, despair and the temptation to withdraw. It permits us to give ourselves wholeheartedly to children, even when we know the outcomes we seek for them will always be alloyed. Most of all, it frees us to love freely...even as we have been freely loved.

*--Jedd Medefind serves as President of the Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO). Not every member of CAFO would necessarily agree with every element of this paper, but the perspectives, values and commitments of this paper do reflect the consensus of the CAFO members and Board.*

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.unicef.org/sowc06/press/who.php> (Confirmed June 12, 2013).

<sup>ii</sup> See UNICEF release from July 10, 2002 title, “Joint report details escalating global orphan crisis due to AIDS,” available at <http://www.unicef.org/newsline/02pr43brink.htm> (checked June 26, 2013.)

<sup>iii</sup> For this blog post, see <http://www.christianalliancefororphans.org/2010/08/09/global-orphans-the-numbers-2/>. To more accurately understand global orphan statistics, see the Christian Alliance for Orphans’ 2012 report, “On Understanding Orphan Statistics at <http://www.christianalliancefororphans.org/orphanstats/>

<sup>iv</sup> See the 2012 AFCARS report #19, page 3, which lists 343 deaths in foster care for FY 2011. This number has been significantly higher in prior years.

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, the article “Contractors are Accused in Large-Scale Food Theft in Somalia,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2011. It describes, “Back in 1991 and 1992, during Somalia’s last famine, warlords and their militias were notorious for commandeering food shipments.”

<sup>vi</sup> The “2010-2013 Haiti Cholera Outbreak” entry on Wikipedia carries a well-documented review of the relevant articles on this controversial topic. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010%E2%80%9313\\_Haiti\\_cholera\\_outbreak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010%E2%80%9313_Haiti_cholera_outbreak) (confirmed June 25, 2013).

<sup>vii</sup> See “Study Confirms Ambulance Dangers,” at <http://www.emsvillage.com/articles/article.cfm?id=1302> (confirmed June 25, 2013).

<sup>viii</sup> The murky nature of human trafficking makes it hard to obtain precise numbers. But people who work closely with trafficking victims consistently recount that children without the protection of a family offer an ideal target for traffickers—both in the U.S. and globally. For example, of the trafficking victims in Alameda County, California, [55 percent](#) were from foster youth group homes. In New York, [75 percent](#) of trafficking victims were in foster care at some point. And in Florida, the head of the state’s trafficking task force estimates that [70 percent](#) of victims are foster youth. The same trends are seen globally as well. For example, UNICEF reports that children growing up in institutions in Moldova are [ten times more vulnerable](#) to trafficking than other children.

<sup>ix</sup> See <http://timesofnews.co/2012/11/12/over-4500-children-rejected-by-russian-adoptive-parents-last-year/>

<sup>x</sup> “Orphan Fever” is the title of a magazine article by the author of *The Child Catchers*, echoing many of the book’s themes.

<sup>xi</sup> See the past three years’ “State of Giving Reports” from the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA).