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**SPECIAL ISSUE:  
HISTORY, SOCIAL WORK AND CHRISTIANITY  
INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

*James R. Vanderwoerd, Guest Editor*

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Faith as a Protective Factor against Social Misconceptions of Black Girls: A Historical Perspective

"Accepting a Trust So Responsible": Christians Caring for Children at Buckner Orphan's Home, Dallas, Texas, 1879–1909

"To Give Christ to the Neighborhood": A Corrective Look at the Settlement Movement and Early Christian Social Workers

**REVIEWS**

**PUBLICATIONS**

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# “Accepting a Trust So Responsible”: Christians Caring for Children at Buckner Orphan’s Home, Dallas, Texas, 1879-1909

*T. Laine Scales*

*The Buckner Orphan’s Home, established in 1879 in Dallas, Texas, provides an example of early church-related institutions serving children. In 1909, as the new social work profession emerged and the nation turned toward a modern foster care system, the Buckner Home experienced important changes that would divide its work from that of professional social workers. Using primary and archival sources, the author documents the early work of the Buckner Home, and calls on social workers to accept responsibility for telling the stories of church-related agencies and their contributions to social welfare.*

**O**N A WINTER DAY IN 1908, A THIRTY SEVEN YEAR OLD MOTHER, Mrs. Beatrice Dixon, traveled with her four children from Letto, Texas to the Buckner Orphan’s Home in Dallas. She carried her 2-year-old son, little Jimmy, along with three daughters, 10-year-old Flora, 8-year-old Nellie, and six-year-old Grace. She would be traveling back to Letto without her family. She intended to leave her children in the care of the Buckner Home “on account of abandonment” of her 37-year-old husband, Thomas Dixon, a “railroad man” from Texas. Filling out the simple admission form, Beatrice reported that all of her children were in good health and of legitimate birth, that both parents were of good moral character, and that the family had a relationship with a

Baptist church. Beatrice abdicated her parental rights by signing a fixed statement presented to her by the Buckner Home. She agreed to

...transfer to the Buckner Orphan's Home all authority and control over (child) during (her) minority, agreeing not to interfere in any way whatever. This I do of my own accord and preference, feeling grateful to the Institution for accepting a trust so responsible" (Buckner Admissions Form, 1908; Buckner Registry, n.d. p. 321).

At a later time, perhaps when she had secured the financial means to care for one child, she returned for her "baby," presumably Jimmy, her 2-year-old son. She signed another form, indicating that she was reclaiming possession of the child (Buckner Transfer Blank; n.d.). The Dixon children would be absorbed along with over 600 other children into the daily routine of the Buckner Home (Bullock, 1993).

Though many children, like the Dixon's, had one or two living parents, some children, like the Warrens, came from families in which both parents were deceased. Just before Christmas in 1907, 17-year-old Mary Warren made her way from Allison, Oklahoma, bringing her sister and five brothers (ages 6 to 15) to the Buckner Home, six months after the death of their mother. The children's mother had died at age 42 of "inflammation of the bowel." Mrs. Warren had been a widow for five years, since her husband, a farmer from Mississippi, died of pneumonia. The father had sustained no church relations, but was reported to have good moral character. Mrs. Warren and all but the youngest children were reported to be affiliated with the Baptist church. Her dying request was that the younger children be left in the care of their eldest sister, Mary. This was an awesome responsibility for a young girl.

Mary's five younger brothers were admitted to the Buckner Home, but her 15-year-old sister, Suzie, was not admitted due to a physical disability. Presumably, Reverend R. C. Buckner would help Suzie find an institution considered more suitable for "incurables and permanent cripples." Five months later, perhaps after attempting to make a living on her own, Mary traveled back to the Buckner Home to gain admission for herself, writing on her application form, "I beg a home." Her request was approved and she joined her brothers as a resident (Buckner Admission Form, 1908).

The Dixon children, the Warren children, and many other orphans and "half-orphans" came to the Buckner Orphan's Home during a time

when orphanages were seen as the solution for helping poor children (Smith, E. P. (1995). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, parents who were deceased or in poverty often left a child in the care of an institution, which was operated from private and charitable funds donated by church members, primarily Baptists (Bullock, 1993). However, the turn of the twentieth century and the rise of professional social work brought a change in philosophies and practices of child care, favoring private homes, rather than institutions as the proper setting to raise a child in poverty.

These two important changes, the professionalization of social work and the turn toward what would become our modern-day foster care system, led social workers to dismiss and even attempt to dismantle the important work of religiously-motivated workers providing care for homeless and orphaned children. The story of the Buckner Orphan's Home illustrates how institutions might have become a casualty of social work's professionalization. However, Buckner stayed true to its mission while making important adjustments and grew to be one of the largest and most well-respected orphanages of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The enormous contribution of the Buckner agency continues into the 21st century as the agency itself responds to our society's recognition of what we now call "faith based agencies." The Buckner agency of today hires professional social workers in key positions as the religiously motivated volunteer of yesterday has more opportunities to become the well-educated and licensed social worker of today. Christian social workers must keep these stories alive as we battle the tendency within the social work profession to ignore or demean the important work of church-related agencies like the Buckner Home.

### **For the Comfort and Education of Orphan Children**

Robert Cooke Buckner, founder of the orphanage, was born in 1833 in Tennessee and moved as a young boy with his family to Kentucky. There he became a Baptist preacher and married Vienna Long. In 1859, after a serious illness he moved to the dry, healthy climate of Northeast Texas. Over the next two decades, Buckner established himself in Paris, Texas as a well-known pastor, leader in the Southern Baptist denomination, and owner and editor of *The Texas Baptist*, a denominational newspaper circulated to about 4,000 subscribers in the

state. During these years Buckner, Vienna, and their children moved to Dallas, which provided a more practical setting for publishing and mailing his newspapers (Bullock, 1993, pp. 32-9).

In 1876, shortly after moving to Dallas, Buckner began articulating in *The Texas Baptist* his ideas for a plan to establish an orphanage. He hoped to form a convention of Baptist deacons from around the state to oversee and support financially the enterprise. In the October 26 issue of 1876, he wrote: "What should the Baptists of Texas do for the comfort and education of orphan children? Let us have an orphan's asylum" (Buckner, cited in Bullock, 1993, p. 41). The Deacons Convention was organized July 18, 1877 and selected fifteen representatives from across Texas to serve as an Executive Board. R. C. Buckner was appointed General Superintendent and was charged with raising funds, promoting the cause, and managing correspondence. Two years later, on April 9, 1879, the first charter was filed in the Department of State in Austin. The Executive Board had named the institution "Buckner Orphans' Home" and appointed Buckner as the General Manager. The home was to receive "any and all dependent white orphan children without regard to section or sectarian bounds." The bylaws also permitted that in some instances, "half-orphans", or children with one parent living might also be accepted (Buckner Orphan's Home, 1879).

### **Humble Beginnings**

Buckner took the money that had been raised, adding his own large contribution, and rented a temporary home in Dallas for the children until a more permanent home in the country could be secured. The Buckner Home opened December 2, 1879 in a three-room cottage on two acres of land. It housed three children, John and Alice Cruse from McKinney and John Jones from Ellis County. Deacon L. H. Tilman and his wife served as the first superintendent and matron (Bullock, 1993; Cranfill & Walker, 1915). By September 1880, Buckner had secured an offer from J. T. Pinson for forty-four acres eight miles east of Dallas. Though the land was worth \$1,216, Pinson sold it to Buckner for \$500 cash, donating the remainder. A two-story dormitory was completed and in April of 1881, eight children, along with a new superintendent and matron, T. J. and Sara Reese, moved into the new home (Deacons Convention Minutes, 1881).

Children attended school for a half-day at the orphanage and were assigned chores on the farm and in the home for the remainder of the

day. On Sundays, all children were required to attend church services in which Buckner presided as pastor (Bullock, 1993). Through the daily activities at school, church and work, the Buckner Home ensured that children were developing in “mind, morals, and industry” (Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 260).

By 1883, the Buckner Home was caring for fifty children. Baptists continued to send support, often in the form of food and dry goods such as sugar, coffee, tea, and dried fruits. Clothing and shoes were also donated, as well as cash (Cranfill & Walker, 1915). The gifts of Baptists allowed for the provision of a new school-and-chapel building, completed in June of 1883 (Bullock, 1993). The completion of such a building reflected Buckner’s priorities of intellectual, moral, and religious instruction for children. Such instruction was considered imperative by Southern Baptist supporters. Buckner noted the children’s progress in his latest newspaper, *The Good Samaritan*, a monthly publication addressing social issues with the motto “Good Will, Good Words, Good Works.” When enough money was raised to build it, the new school-and-chapel building occupied the center of the campus, reminding children, staff, and visitors of the central place of formal schooling and religious training for orphaned children (Bullock, 1993).

### **The Buckner Orphan’s Home School**

In 1883, when the new school and chapel building opened, *The Good Samaritan* reported that “for the first time [the children] are now under a teacher, in regular school.” Buckner urged supporters to send more contributions, as earnings from the children’s farm labor decreased, while expenditures for school clothing and books increased. Children from the near-by community of Reinhardt were also invited to attend the Buckner school, a precious gift in the days before every community had a state-supported school (Bullock, 1993). Buckner placed a great deal of importance on education, noting:

No public school or charitable institution should be satisfied with less than the very best of teachers: and certainly, where an individual or society is entrusted with the education of those who have no parents to look after their welfare, the greatest of care should be exercised to put them under the most skillful and approved teachers,



not only competent to teach, but kind and faithful to control (Buckner, 1883, p. 6).

The teacher in charge in 1884 was described by a visitor to the Buckner Home as “a sweet Christian young lady.” Miss Carrie Smith, a reporter from Dallas, had high praise for her:

A faithful and competent teacher has clearly proved herself, judging from the practical demonstrations of her pupils. She seems to know how to make the children love and obey her, at the same time take an interest in their books (V.C.H., 1884, p. 68).

The teacher lived in the institution as a member of the Buckner Home family. She found opportunities for teaching the children outside of the classroom. She described to readers of *The Good Samaritan* the musical interests of a young boy, Oscar.

Music has a most wonderful effect on him... He will sit around the house all day until he hears the organ... often, when I sit down to the instrument and begin running my fingers over the keys, he is instantly by my side, moving to and fro with the sound of the music, drinking it all in as if he were perfectly charmed (Sister Carrie, 1884, p. 28).

The Buckner Home relied on donations from interested Baptists to provide school supplies and advertised for what was needed in *The Buckner Orphan's Home Magazine*, printed by the children as part of their vocational training. The magazine listed specific items for donors to send such as tablets, slates, pencils, pens, wall maps, charts and other school furnishings (*Magazine*, 1896). Soon a complete library was established with newspapers and other periodicals donated by publishers (Bullock, 1993).

As the Buckner Home grew, the school made slow improvements. By 1908, a larger school and chapel building had been built “of reinforced monolithic concrete and brick.” to accommodate the 550 children in school and kindergarten (Buckner Orphan's Home, *Annual Report*, 1888-1918). The school only offered elementary grades at this time and utilized six classrooms, with half the students meeting four hours in the morning, and the other half meeting in the afternoon session.

Children did chores or played, according to their age and abilities, when they were not in school (*Annual Report*, 1906-7).

The school employed a principal and “five excellent graduated teachers” to serve in its nine-month program. The salaries and other school expenses were paid for by the State of Texas and run from the public free school fund (*Annual Report*, 1908-09, 1909-10). Buckner Home paid the salary of the kindergarten teacher, and provided a furnished teachers’ cottage for the state employees. In addition to the traditional “three R’s,” the curriculum was designed to teach skills such as stenography, typewriting, and music, both vocal and instrumental. Since these courses fell outside of the standard curriculum paid for by the State, Buckner Home paid the teacher’s salaries for these courses and instruments were donated (Bullock, 1991).

### **Religious Education**

For R. C. Buckner, the clearest path to building a moral character was through Christian teachings. He often emphasized that the orphanage was open to children from all religions or no religion and he stated that the Buckner Home never forced children to make religious commitments. However, religious teachings were woven into the fabric of every day living, and attendance in Sunday School and church was an expected part of the Buckner Home routine (Bullock, 1993).

Three short years after opening, The Home established its own church, with Buckner as its pastor. In its earliest years, the Home transported the children in wagons, three hours round trip, to attend the Live Oak Baptist Church. On July 15, 1883, the Home Baptist Church was organized, allowing for stability and convenience of providing formal religious education at the Buckner Home site. On opening day, the church baptized five persons, presumably children (Bullock, 1993). Like all Southern Baptist churches, the Home Church became part of a local association of churches, the Elm Fork Association. Operating in a similar manner to other small churches of the region, preaching services were held once each month on Saturday and Sunday, with prayer meeting and Sunday school meeting weekly. By 1903, preaching services were held each Sunday (Bullock, 1993; Cranfill & Walker, 1915).

From the earliest days of the Buckner Home, visitors commented upon the strong religious flavor of the daily routine. No child ate a meal without first thanking the Lord for the food. Each morning, fam-

ily worship “was conducted in a serious and impressive manner by Papa Reese...every effort is made to instruct the children in the fear of the Lord,” reported a visitor (C.P.S., 1884, p. 43). Occasionally, Baptist leaders would visit the Buckner Home and provide additional sermons or religious teachings. They would also assure Southern Baptist donors that the children were being provided with a proper religious education. This description of the visit in 1885 by V. G. Cunningham, a traveling Sunday school worker, reveals the flavor of such lessons:

These dear children have the benefit of Sunday school training, and of what—would it to God it were otherwise—many children with fathers and mothers are not blessed, that is, family worship. It did my soul good to tell the precious lambs about the tender Shepherd, and in solemn prayer to commend them to Him who hath said: “When my father and mother forsake me then the Lord will take me up.” Whoever hears their childish voices sing, “I have a father—a mother—in the promised land,” will have abundant use for his handkerchief (*The Texas Baptist*, 1885, p. 64).

Although a thorough religious training was provided, Buckner adamantly declared that the children were not coerced to make religious confessions: “No constraint, rewards, penalties, favoritism, or improper means of any kind are resorted to influence their faith or practice in religious matters” (*Annual Report*, 1888, p. 4). Buckner was aware of the vulnerability of children to the pressures of some revivalists and traveling evangelists who used emotional appeals to win converts. He was opposed to such practices and did not allow protracted revivals in the home. Nevertheless, the number of Home Church memberships continued to grow.

In the Southern Baptist denomination, church membership was attained by making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and the commitment was symbolized by baptism. During his Reunion Sermon of 1903, Buckner described how the daily life of the Buckner Home led to many baptisms:

The other day more than 40 of these [children] were baptized, within three weeks more than 60. They came to me at different times and places and told of their conversion. No

revival meeting, no evangelist, nothing but songs, Sunday school and a sermon each Sunday morning. No death bed stories, no appeal to sympathy, only heart repentance for sin, simple faith in Christ and a desire to walk in the truth (Buckner as cited in Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 308).

While Buckner insisted that coercion was never used in religious matters, it is clear that making a confession of faith leading to baptism was the norm for children in his institution. On August 30, 1914, he baptized 87 children within 35 minutes (Cranfill and Walker, 1915).

In 1908 a new chapel and school building was built to accommodate the growing church. In that year the Home cared for more than 650 orphans, almost 300 of whom were Buckner Home Church members. The Sunday School averaged 380 for the year. In 1910 the Sunday School attendance averaged 500 with a total church membership of 412 (Bullock, 1991, p. 75).

Sunday was a busy day for Reverend Buckner and for the children. After an early breakfast, they all assembled in the chapel for a Family Talk, in which "orderly conduct of the past week is mentioned and commended" by Reverend Buckner. Sunday School was taught in age-graded classes, followed by preaching services with all assembled. After lunch, Bible study was taught in smaller groups, followed by an evening service for all, which included a sermon and sometimes, baptism of many children (Cranfill & Walker, 1915).

### **Lessons in Morality**

In addition to formal religious training on Sundays, lessons of morality were woven into the everyday life of children at the Buckner Home. At meal times, children might have been scolded for wrongdoing, or they might have been given a little rhyme about right living. Buckner biographer Karen Bullock (1991) notes his "manner with the children was a mixture of solemnity and laughter" (p. 124). As the children described: "Father Buckner makes talks from the music stand, sometimes he makes some of us feel bad because we are bad. Sometimes he makes us feel glad. Sometimes he makes funny rhymes just to tickle us" (Buckner Orphan's Home, 1907, p. 11).

Buckner often used stories of disobedient children to provide moral instruction. On one occasion he instructed his audience:

I remember one of our dear boys, sitting years ago on the gravel walk near the well, with dejected look and fallen countenance. He had no words at command. He had gone into the path of disobedience to his matron, and tried to cover it with a falsehood. But I approached him kindly, persuaded him that truth was better than falsehood and he soon told me all, looking me in the eye and feeling better and stronger. It was his last falsehood so far as I have learned. He is now a man, a Christian man, and has a Christian wife.... he is successful in business...has self-respect and self confidence, and does not think of failure (Buckner as quoted in Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 303).

One little girl demonstrated that she was learning lessons of morality when she wrote the following report of Father Buckner's visit to the children at the Baptist Orphanage at Thomasville, North Carolina:

He told us that some of his boys and girls were not always good, and had to be punished. He said one little boy was sent to look for a cow and climbed up a tree. Then he asked the boys if they would go cow-hunting up a tree. And we had a laugh. But there was a sad ending to his story. The little fellow lost his hold and fell to the ground, breaking both his arms, which was caused by disobedience (Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 159).

### **Rules and Regulations**

Reverend Buckner had strict rules for teenagers, particularly concerning courtship. Orphans dated one another and sometimes married. Young men and women also dated teenagers from the nearby community of Reinhardt, or from Dallas, but young people had to follow strict decorum required by Father Buckner. He explained to supporters that young women were more properly supervised in the orphanage than if they were living with a private family: "Custom in many private families where orphans are placed, permits them to go buggy-riding or walking in single couples; from this institution never! Nor is it permitted by other institutions that are properly conducted." Instead, young women received gentleman callers in the parlors of the institution, just like in

a middle class home (*Annual Report*, 1907-08, pp. 23-4).

Father Buckner assumed the role of vigilant patriarch for the young women at the Home. In 1912 he wrote this curt letter to a potential suitor from Dallas:

Dear Sir,

Referring to your proposition to my ward, Miss XX, to call on her tomorrow, also to bring your "pal" with a desire that another of my young lady wards be about so he can meet her, I beg to request that the visit be not made, either of yourself or your "pal". I have just talked with both the girls and have read your last two letters. If you should desire to cultivate the acquaintance of the young lady or any of the young ladies in B. O. Home, it is requisite that with proper recommendations you first seek my acquaintance and permission. (Buckner, R. C. to E. A. Sellars, July 1912).

Buckner expected that children would behave in a manner considered appropriate and that they would create among themselves a norm of obedience. One young boy who ran away requested to come back to the Home. He was asked to acknowledge in writing his wrongdoing and then to promise "to be a truthful, obedient, and honest boy, [and] to tell on any boy in the Home who may not be honest and truthful." (Buckner, R. C., to Master Paul Reed, June 26, 1899).

As was common in those days, corporal punishment was sometimes used to discipline children, though Buckner insisted it was used sparingly, "only in extreme cases, and then only in a mild and judicious way" (Buckner, 1886). In the following letter he provides moral instruction to a boy who ran away because he had been whipped by a staff member. The child asked to re-enter the Buckner Home "because I knew I did wrong and wanted to go to school and do my duty." In his response to the boy, Buckner justifies the whipping, but also shows his openness to receive any reports of abuse from the children.

I well know that many boys need the rod sometimes, and at the Home it is often spared when it should be used. In that fit of anger you did what in cooler moments you regret. You ought always to cool off before doing such a serious thing. I forgive the past and restore to you the

privileges and advantages of the Home. If you should ever believe you are seriously mistreated come to me about it and tell the whole truth whether it is hard on yourself or any body else. The past is forgiven... (Buckner, R. C. to "Eugene," Archives, BBB, 1902).

### **Buckner's View of Character Education**

Buckner often spoke of his institution's emphasis on moral and religious development: "It is a character builder, and husbands the material... Orphan children are as good and worthy as anybody's children. They are not responsible for their sad condition" (*Annual Report*, 1909-10, n.p.). Buckner's emphasis on the teaching of good character reveals his philosophy of human development. He viewed children as innocent victims of their parents and of society. "What is prettier than a child?", he asked those listening to him preach in 1903, "What more innocent? Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Buckner, 1903 as quoted in Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 307).

Like most evangelicals of his day, Buckner believed that philanthropic motivations to help others were not sufficient; rather Christian soul-winning was the goal. He wrote in the *Good Samaritan*: "The motives of the philanthropist are good and commendable, as he endeavors to reclaim any who are in any of the whirlpools [of sin such as alcohol, gambling, brothels, crime] or drifting in any way. But the motives of the Christian are equally so, and then they reach further, desiring poor, drifting souls to be saved in Christ...." (Buckner, 1884 as cited in Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 298).

Buckner's firm belief that good or bad character was learned led him to lobby for reformatories for young boys in trouble. He believed the reformatory could save the young boy and urged Dallas leaders to create a system "for proper restraint and training for these crooked young sprouts, for after awhile it would be impossible to straighten them out" (*Reformatory for boys*, 1903). Presumably, Buckner also wanted to insure that delinquent boys would not be sent to the Buckner Home to live with the orphans and teach the Buckner boys behaviors considered immoral.

Buckner believed that good or bad character could be taught, and he proudly took credit for the moral training of the children. According

to Buckner, some of the children arrived at the Home having formed undesirable characters through improper learning. "Some have come who had not heard the name of God except as used in profanity. They had seen the inside of the saloon and almost every or any kind of place but the inside of school and church buildings (*Annual Report*, 1912-13, p. 11). Buckner described these children as "ignorant, untidy, immoral, and with other evidences of having been under the influences of vicious, degrading environments," but under the Buckner Home influence, they quickly "take on better ways, the use of better language and cherish higher ideals" (*Annual Report*, 1915-16, p. 12).

Former wards of the Buckner Home were held up as examples of good character in hopes that children would be inspired to emulate them. In the following letter that Buckner received from an employer, the feminine qualities of a former ward are described, and Buckner is given the credit for cultivating her good character. He published the letter under the heading "A Sample Training":

Yes, Dr. Buckner, Miss Wagon is a jewel, a most charming young lady, kind, industrious, and full of sunshine. Few people will ever meet her without admiring her goodness of nature and disposition. She surely reflects great credit upon your noble work in staging the habits and disposition of a Godly and queenly type (*Annual Report*, 1918, pp. 8-9).

Children were taught patriotism and devotion to the United States and many young men joined the military once they left the home. *The Annual Report* noted, "They love the flag of their country and the Banner of the Cross. Hear them sing "my Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty" and your patriotic hearts would swell with pride..." (1912-13, p. 3).

In the same way that children learned "good" character, they could also learn "bad" character, in Buckner's view. A child could be trained for immorality so that he or she may never be able to walk the proper moral path (Cranfill & Walker, 1915). Relatives and others who visited the Home were expected to set an example for the children. They were instructed not to use tobacco in any form in the presence of children and not to indulge in "ardent spirits" nor profane language. Violators would be asked to vacate the premises (*Buckner Orphan's Home Magazine*, Oct. 1896).



## Labor and Industrial Training

R. C. Buckner expected children to work in the Home and learn “habits of industry.” The daily routine included chores supervised by matrons or workmen:

- 4:00am kitchen girls rise to prepare breakfast
- 5:00am rising bell
- 5:30am first bell, prepare dining room tables
- 6:00am breakfast; “at the ringing of this last bell the boys and girls form into lines in their respective corridors, the smallest in the lead, and march in single file to organ music, and fill nine tables.”
- 7:00am various household chores
- 8:30am half to school, half to chores
- 11:30am prepare for dinner
- 12 noon Dinner
- 1:30pm second half day of school
- 4:30pm school is dismissed
- 5:30pm prepare for supper
- 6:00pm supper
- 7:00pm some are engaged in study, some promenading the walks, others talking or singing or swinging.
- 9:00pm bedtime (Cranfill & Walker, 1915, p. 181)

The daily example was reinforced by lessons and sermons emphasizing the value of work. Buckner often repeated this reminder: “Without work it is impossible to please God” (*Annual Report*, 1910-11, p. 19). One of Buckner’s sermonettes, printed in the *Baptist Standard* and perhaps preached to the children, demonstrates the value of work. Buckner quoted from Ecclesiastes: “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” Buckner went on to emphasize the importance of all tasks “Whatsoever, whether it be great or small, hard or easy, pleasant or disagreeable” (Cranfill & Walker, 1915, pp. 287).

Lessons about the value of work were reinforced by experiences. Children at the Buckner Home performed daily chores in order to learn the value of hard work for all. In addition, the children’s labor functioned to support the Home financially. In keeping with an ethic that disparages “a free hand out,” the children of the Buckner Home were not receiving charity but were, through their labor, contributing

something for the care they received (Bullock, 1993).

Each child attended school for a half-day and for the rest of the day all children were busy in industry. Assigned chores reflected popular notions of gendered division of labor. The boys worked in farming: plowing, planting, harvesting, and dairy operations. Girls stayed busy with the cooking, sewing, laundry and ironing. On Sundays, there was no laboring, and all children were required to attend church services (Bullock, 1993).

Though not often engaged in manual labor himself, Buckner certainly was industrious. Buckner's reputation for being a hard worker was legendary, and it was said that he could do the work of six men (Bullock, 1991). Reporting on his writing and correspondence for 1907, he notes that in addition to writing many newspaper articles, sermons, and other addresses and traveling in connection with the Home, he wrote about forty letters a day, amounting to 14,600 for the year. This work was in addition to the management and oversight of the orphanage, as well as other charitable operations he managed, such as the Cottage Homes for the Aged, the Children's Hospital, the city Annex, and the farming operation (*Annual Report*, 1906-07, p. 20).

Through his publications, Buckner assured supporters that their money was not being used to support lazy children. When Mrs. K. E. Hewett visited the Home, she assured readers that Southern Baptist dollars were being well spent: "Now to the question I have been asked: 'Are these children supported in idleness? Let me say that industry is the life of the Home; the larger ones serving alternately in the house and in school'" (Hewett, 1884, p. 42). However, Buckner also stated clearly that the children's labor was not enough to support the Buckner Home. Some expenses were reduced, and the value of industry was taught, but no profits were realized. In the 1907 *Picturebook*, the young narrator notes: "Father Buckner says the shops do not really make money, but they help to make useful men out of what might be idle boys. But by handling the water and fans, lights and laundry they do save very much money as well as time" (p. 20).

In the earliest days of the Buckner Home, before a regulated nine-month school year, children sometimes had opportunities to earn their own money by laboring for neighbors. A teacher at the Buckner Home reported in 1884:

The boys feel about three inches higher, on account of the new boots they bought with their "cotton money"

i.e. what they made by picking cotton for some of the neighbors. It makes them quite proud to get some shiny dimes of their own.... (Sister Carrie, 1884, p. 28).

Buckner made it clear that the orphanage did not send children to families that would exploit their labor. He described a well-to-do family intending to exploit a boy, requiring him to do farm work “and do other things for a man who wants to send his own boy off to school, or wants cheap labor that he can control....” (Buckner Orphan’s Home, 1906-07, p. 25). Buckner would not supply labor for such a family in the form of an orphan child. Nor would he send a girl to care for children and perform other housekeeping duties and “do such things as the own daughter “must not do” (Buckner Orphan’s Home, 1906-07, p. 25). Buckner did not mind children working, but he did mind them being exploited and particularly in the face of other children in the family who did not have to work. This fear of favoritism was perhaps the reason he established a policy of only giving children to adoption by couples that were childless (Buckner Orphan’s Home, 1906-07, p. 25). Buckner was aware that some adoptive parents were motivated to take children in to provide needed labor. In his publications, he warned prospective parents that his orphanage was “not a labor bureau.... It trains for independent citizenship in the best government on earth. It is meant that young men and women shall go out as farmers, teachers, mechanics, preachers and into the various industries and professions” (*Annual Report*, 1909-10, p. 22).

The Buckner Home was not considered transitional or temporary placement for orphan children; rather it was rare that children were adopted. Buckner said:

During thirty years of experience in orphan work, and close observation, I have formed, and been thoroughly confirmed in the opinion that at least nineteen of every twenty who seek to get possession of an orphan child, or children, are actuated by selfish motives; that not one in a hundred mean it simply for the good of the child... Those without children of their own seldom know how to treat a child; adopting or indenturing one from an orphanage, they are likely to spoil it by overindulgence, or to break its spirit by being too exacting and severe... Then they want to be rid of the child and it is left with-

out home; and some such drift into shame and ruin....  
(*Annual Report*, 1906-7, pp. 25-6).

### **Twentieth Century Changes**

Two important trends intersected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to bring changes to the Buckner Home. On the national scene, as the new profession of social work emerged, professionals with social work education and credentials would differentiate themselves from clergy or volunteers, at times devaluing the contributions of those who had served faithfully. At the same time, the nation's child welfare advisors, led by social workers, expressed preference to place orphaned children in family homes, rather than in institutions like the Buckner Home.

### **The Rise of Professional Social Work**

By the late nineteenth century, social workers began searching for a way to explain their own contributions and to gain respect from other professionals and the public. In the early twentieth century this became a preoccupation, especially after 1915 when the landmark speech of Abraham Flexner entitled "Is Social Work a Profession?" caused a flurry of activity to professionalize (Bledstein, 1976; Lubove, 1972). The rise of new schools of social work, beginning with the New York School of Philanthropy, provided credentials to create a sharp separation between educated professionals and the proto-social workers who had served faithfully in agencies. (Klein, 1968).

While professionalization brought important gains to social work, some losses were sustained. For example, social work historian David Austin argued that social work's obsession with one speech, Flexner's speech in 1915, prevented social workers from creating their own criteria for becoming a profession. While attempting to fulfill Flexner's recommendation, based on his experience with medicine, rather than social work, the new profession became distracted from its own work (Austin, 1983).

Another loss to social work came when the new professionals embraced scientism and a more efficient and rational approach (Lubove,

1972; Kunzel (1988) argues that the move toward scientism was launched to gain prestige for the profession by identifying with the more “masculine” professions such as medicine. Whatever the mixture of motives, it is clear that by the twentieth century the new social work profession had launched on to the values of “efficiency, objectivity, and expertise. (Kunzel, p. 25).

While the Flexner speech and the trend toward scientism are often noted in social work histories an additional story that is seldom told, but is one of the most important for Christian social worker to understand recounts the devaluing of church-related volunteers, board members, and paid workers. Diana Garland describes this decline in her book, *Church Agencies: Caring for Children and Families in Crisis*:

Social workers, anxious to guard their claim to professional knowledge and skill, questioned the ability of laypeople to set policies. That required professional expertise. They hoarded information about their work and their clients, excluding board members from meaningful roles in what had been their institutions (1994 pp. 77-78).

Garland points out that the professionalization of social work certainly made services more effective and more efficient for some clients. But what was “lost in the shift,” she argues, was the personal relationship between religiously motivated workers and their clients (Garland, 1994 pp. 77-78).

### **The Rise of Modern Foster Care**

In addition to the trend toward professionalization, the nation's decision to abandon institutional care as a viable option for dependent children shaped the future of the Buckner Home. On January 25, 1909, at the White House Conference on Dependent Children, a notable change in the methods of caring for dependent children would transform child welfare strategies for the rest of the twentieth century. Soon thereafter, Congress passed The Children's Bureau Bill to advance the emerging movement advocating the placement of orphaned children in families rather than in institutions (Lundberg, 1947). The Bill passed without the votes of the Texas senators. They had been persuaded by their familiarity with the advantages of the Buckner Home, as well as

by the arguments of R. C. Buckner and other Texas supporters, to vote against the bill (Cranfill and Walker, 1915).

As the modern foster care system emerged, institutions like the Buckner Orphan's Home were dismissed by members of the emerging social work profession as outmoded, cold, and sterile. At the 1909 Conference on the Care of Dependent Children, called by Theodore Roosevelt, the consensus of child welfare workers, which included the new professional social workers, was expressed in these words: "Home life is the highest and finest product of civilization. Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons. Surely poverty alone should not disrupt the home." Leaders in child welfare proposed that widows and women who had been deserted "should be given such aid as may be necessary to enable them to maintain suitable homes for rearing their children.... Children from unfit homes and children who have no homes, who must be cared for by charitable agencies, should, so far as practicable, be cared for in families" (Proceedings, 1909).

This shift in philosophy brought about important benefits for children. It created a foster care system, as well as supplemental income or "welfare" for poor mothers, first known as Mother's Pensions in 1911 and, in 1935, known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children. These changes contributed to the professionalization of social workers in child welfare, a positive step indeed. However, the contributions of faith-based agencies like the Buckner Home were not recognized by the new profession of social work as the important contributors they were (Garland, 1994; Keith-Lucas, 1962).

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, national changes in the child welfare scene set in motion by the Children's Bureau set the course for a new system of foster care and adoption. In addition, the emerging profession of social work claimed child welfare and "home finding" as its turf. This shift was symbolized when the social workers, preparing the list for the 1909 conference, omitted most of the leaders of church-related institutions. Buckner and other leaders of church-related institutions had for years attended the National Convention of Charities and Corrections along with Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, and others that today's social workers claim as founders of the profession. However, when he did not receive an invitation to the table, Buckner and other leaders of institutions caring for children recognized what was about to happen (Cranfill and Walker, 1915).

## Forging ahead

So what happened to institutions like the Buckner Home? In spite of the new bill, institutional care did not disappear immediately and, particularly church-related institutions would house children through the first half of the twentieth century (Garland 1994). However, the new system of foster care and adoption, growing alongside the emerging profession of social work, was firmly set in motion by the bill.

It would be over 30 years before the number of children in orphanages began to decline nationally (Jones, 1989). By the 1930s, there were more foster homes than ever. However, due to the Great Depression, which displaced many children, both foster families and orphanages were needed to care for more children who were staying longer in care (Jones 1989). The new Social Security Act of 1935 placed the care of foster children and poverty-stricken children living with their parents in the hands of governmental agencies. The government provided very little institutional care in orphanages, leaving that task to church agencies.

According to Alan Keith-Lucas, social worker, Christian, and pioneer in training workers in church institutions, the divisions were made along the lines of church vs. government. Child welfare professionals supported or attacked a system of care, not based on its intrinsic strengths and limitations, but rather because they were pro-church or anti-church. (Keith-Lucas, 1962).

Although the Children's Bureau Bill aimed to put professionally trained social workers in the new child welfare system, by the turn of the twenty-first century, state agencies employed fewer and fewer social workers on the front lines. Scarce resources and high turn-over led to the employment of case workers and child welfare workers without social work degrees or licensure.

Church-related institutions like Buckner continued caring for children, but their purposes shifted over time to providing residential treatment for troubled children and facilitating adoption and foster care for non-residential children (Garland, 1994). By the end of the twentieth century, critics of the modern foster care system called for a revival of orphanages, arguing that institutions would address some of the flaws of foster care including expense, abuses, and too few homes ready for placement ("Minnesota Brings," 1998; "Social Workers Condemn," 1994); While orphanages have not reappeared on the American scene, a new appreciation of faith-based social welfare emerged in the twenty-

first century with the creation of the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (now called the White House Office for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships) (Travers, 2009).

Today's Buckner International, thriving in Dallas, maintains the vision of its founder: addressing the church's mandate to care for our most vulnerable members of society—populations we used to call “orphans and widows.” Expanding beyond Texas, the Buckner agency continues to provide a wide array of programs and services for children, families and older adults, both in the US and abroad. (“Who We Are,” 2011).

Some faith-based institutions, like Buckner, have increased their hiring of professional social workers. Determined to hire MSW-level graduates with strong Christian commitments, the Buckner agency of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is addressing the divide between church agencies and professional social workers. Buckner partners with undergraduate and graduate social work programs located in Christian universities, such as Baylor University in its home state of Texas, to hire the very best professionals who combine Christian faith with a sound social work professional training (“About Us,” 2011). Rather than being excluded, as R. C. Buckner was in 1909, today's Buckner social workers disseminate their knowledge and experience by presenting at social work conferences such as National Association of Social Workers, Texas Chapter, and North American Association of Christians in Social Work.

### **“Accepting a trust so responsible”—Reclaiming our stories**

The Buckner Home adopted, nurtured, and reared the infant child welfare system by raising money, discovering best practices, and saving children lost or abandoned after the Civil War. When the child welfare enterprise was adopted by the U. S. Government in 1909 for oversight and regulation, the now “adolescent” system operated by social workers showed contempt for its church-related roots, as teenagers often do. The 1909 White House meeting, as well as the 1935 Social Security Act, increased government roles. But without the early care and nurturing of institutions like the Buckner Orphan's Home, the child welfare system as we know it today could not have survived its childhood years. As Mother Dixon felt gratitude in 1908 to the Buckner Home for “accepting a trust so responsible,” the profession of social work must also recognize and appreciate the important work of institutions like the Buckner Home who nurtured the fledgling child welfare system.



The stories of early child welfare agencies like the Buckner Orphan's Home must be told, not only to Christian social workers, but to all social workers. Unfortunately, authors of social work text books often distill the complex and variegated story of our profession's roots into a page or two of text for students. Social work authors sometimes report a distorted version of the profession's entire history as resting on the shoulders of two venerated figures—Mary Richmond and Jane Addams—with no mention of the contributions of early church-related agencies like the Buckner Orphan's Home (Scales & Kelly, 2011). If church-affiliated agencies are mentioned at all, they may be portrayed as over-zealous or incompetent meddlers operating poorly-run agencies.

Christian scholars must continue to study, record, and publish stories of the dedicated and competent faith-based agencies and their leaders who cared for vulnerable children. Moreover, we must report and celebrate the cooperative spirit of the past that brought Reverend Buckner yearly to the National Conference of Charities and Corrections to work with and learn from other social welfare agencies. We must resist adopting our profession's tendency to emphasize divisions between professional and volunteer and social worker and clergy when recounting our profession's history. Christians in social work can lead the way by making an intentional effort to move forward in celebrating both our Christian and "secular" roots together. My hope is that the Buckner Home story has inspired you, readers exploring the history of social welfare, to seek out and publish stories of early social welfare services from your own faith traditions. ❖

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**Key Words:** orphanage, child welfare history, Christian social worker, faith-based agency, history of social work

**Author's Note:** I dedicate this article to my dear daughter April, a modern-day "Buckner girl," entrusted to us in 2005 by Buckner Baptist Benevolences (now Buckner International) and Child Protective Services of Texas. It has been the joy of my life to accept "a trust so responsible."

The names of children and families mentioned in the article have been changed to protect their identities.