

Making Peace in a World of Violence  
*Families and Congregations Participate  
in Healing Hurt Kids*

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*Imagine a six-year-old little boy, crying out into the dark night: As he screams, shouts, cries, and whimpers, his legs flail, he tugs on his ears, and buries his head deeper in the covers. The third “night terror” of the evening finds Mom racing from her room to his side once again, quietly offering prayers and comfort for her seemingly inconsolable son who cannot tolerate being hugged or even touched. In two short hours, she’ll wake him to get ready for Sunday School. Can she really do this? Was it really supposed to be this hard?*

WHAT THIS CHILD IS experiencing is not that unusual for a hurt child who has been adopted into a family and has a history of trauma, abuse and neglect. Adoptive parents and children are on a journey towards individual and collective peace due to the effects of these early life events, and community found within a congregation can be a healing component of this transformation.

### **Who Are We and Why Are We Writing This Chapter?**

In this chapter, we share glimpses of our daily lives as a way to introduce some of the needs and concerns of congregants parenting children hurt by violence. We hope our stories will help readers involved in congregations and other communities of support to empathize with and assist adoptive families. We could not have survived our experiences nearly so well without the love of our congregations for our children and for ourselves as parents.

April, our co-author, is Laine's eighteen-year-old daughter. She has contributed to this chapter by offering experiences of her life as a hurt child living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Listening carefully to first-hand statements of hurt kids is an essential beginning point and we are grateful to April for sharing her point of view in order to help other kids and families seeking peace.

Hope and her husband Jay adopted Matt and Billy in 2002, at ages three and four. Laine and her husband Glenn, partially inspired by their visits with the Straughan family and Hope's guidance through the CPS negotiations, adopted April in 2005 at age eleven.

### **Making Peace with the Past**

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) introduced Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a possible diagnosis when their 1980 diagnostic manual (DSM) defined a traumatic event as "occurring outside the range of usual human experience." The proposed revisions to the DSM forthcoming in 2013 include additional criteria that refine the definition by addition of two additional criteria: 1) "The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and 2) The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror."<sup>1</sup> The forthcoming 2013 DSM diagnosis may introduce a new diagnosis, "Developmental Trauma Disorder" which will be important for children and teens as it points out how trauma affects physical, cognitive, psychological, (and, we argue, spiritual) development.

Children living with past traumas experience every-day events in dramatically different ways from the rest of us. Hurt children are in a constant struggle to make peace with their past. Greenwald describes a "trauma wall" behind which a person surviving trauma holds all the fear,

1. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 467–68.

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anxiety, anger, and helplessness, rather than being able to “digest” it or process it along with other memories. This is especially true for children and teens who were pre-verbal at the time of trauma. Greenwald relates an example of an everyday experience of a traumatized teen:

Most of us, when accidentally bumped in the hallway, will be slightly irritated, perhaps make a comment, but forget about it five minutes later. Now think about the twelve-year-old boy who has been routinely physically abused at home. Behind the wall is piled-up fear of being attacked, a sense of helplessness, and rage. When he is bumped in the hallway, the “sore spot” reaction from the stuff piled up behind the wall is so strong that he believes he is being attacked. Naturally, being angry and not wanting to feel helpless anymore, he defends himself. When he is sent to the assistant principal’s office for “punching a peer with no provocation,” he insists that the other kid started it.<sup>2</sup>

The person experiencing trauma may not be aware of triggers as they are happening. For example, a child who does not immediately understand how to do her math homework may give up easily, when she may be able to do it with a little more effort. However, she is already overwhelmed by a constant sense of helplessness lurking in the “sore spot” behind the wall. Students, parents, and teachers may not recognize how the sore spot is affecting seemingly ordinary school tasks.<sup>3</sup>

### **Making Peace with Oneself**

At the same time a child is making peace with the past, she must move toward accepting and making peace with herself. Children who have been told from an early stage that they are “bad,” or have been forced by adults to engage in behavior that our society has rejected as bad behavior, must come to terms with what they have done.

One of the important distinctions our professional study has helped us to discern is the difference between shame and guilt. Shame involves emotions of disgrace, humiliation, and self-blame. In healthy families, parents and children re-establish connection after misbehavior; parents assure the child she is still safe and loveable. However, in families with depressed, angry, neglecting, or rejecting parents, the child’s shame leads

2. Greenwald, *Child Trauma Handbook*, 13.

3. *Ibid.*

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her to feel worthless, inferior, and unlovable.<sup>4</sup> These children carry their shame with them, even when they are behaving appropriately. In moments of misbehavior, their shame reactions become extreme, leading them to defend themselves in the face of obvious lying or other infractions. They may withdraw and hide out of fear, refuse to apologize, rage against the person calling attention to the infraction, blame others even when it is obvious the fault is theirs, or avoid the offended people. All of these shame reactions are focused on protecting themselves and surviving.

Helping children learn to move toward guilt, rather than shame, when they have engaged in wrong behavior, is an important task in their healing. Attachment issues come to the fore when describing a guilt reaction: the offending child or teen focuses on the behavior itself and recognizes it as a behavior, not a character flaw. She is anxious to repair the wrong and to restore harmony in relationship. Desire for reparation is increased if she is attached. Apologies flow from guilt and remorse and right relationship can be restored.<sup>5</sup>

Avoiding a shame response seems almost impossible at times. Guilt and remorse, when expressed and acted on by the person experiencing it, can often lead to a freedom from those feelings, reconnection with those who have been wronged or hurt by the choices, and an ability to move on with the day with a steady mood and countenance. However, when small and large mistakes or missteps evoke shame, a child is internalizing a dark, powerful emotion of blame, self-destructive and negative thoughts that make it increasingly difficult to apologize, much less reconnect with the person interacting with them around these choices and behaviors. It often becomes a cycle, which is unable to be slowed down, stopped, or reversed.

For about two years, the primary goal Hope and Jay were working on with Billy and his therapist, was that most of the time, he would become able to make this terribly difficult shift away from his shame, yelling, and accusations to others which ultimately led to destructive self-talk. Instead, he would become able to move toward a short apology and an ability to reconnect with the rest of the family and re-engage in the evening activities, a response to his guilt reaction, and not shame. This goal was set after years of his extremely difficult behavior on most evenings of the week, which led to exhaustion, separation, and destruction of much self-esteem, of material property, and of relationships between the family members. Billy would get sucked up in that dark cycle of shame and self-blame, and

4. Orlans and Levy, *Healing Parents*, 53.

5. Miculincer and Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*.

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often would miss dinner after stomping off to his room, yelling all the way, and barricading himself in his room. He'd fall asleep in a disturbed, exhausted state, without the relief of reconnected relationship, forgiveness and deep acceptance. To further the cycle, this lack of resolution before sleep led to very challenging mornings, as he'd awaken fatigued, embarrassed, and with inexpressible raw emotions.

Norah, Billy's therapist, helped the parents introduce simple "interruptions" to that dark cycle of blame and shame, including offering Billy a small cup of warm milk, using a squishy ball to throw, or squish to focus aggression and frustration in that contained manner. It took over a year and a half for Billy's successes to reach the level of "most of the time he's able to separate himself if need be, but then apologize, reconnect with people, and re-engage in the evening activities." Interrupting that dark and powerful shame and blame cycle remains one of the most important goals as the parents assist Billy in making peace with himself, and coming to a place of acceptance for who he is.

As is common with kids in foster care and adoption, Matt and Billy have additional arenas to make peace with in terms of race and ethnicity. Their biological parents were a mixed race couple: one parent was White and one parent was Black. The Straughans are a transracial family now, as Hope and Jay are both White, and their two sons are both White and Black. Matt looks fully African-American with beautiful, rich dark brown skin, and hair that is currently growing out in twists-becoming-dreads. Billy is much lighter skinned, appearing almost Latino in tone, with hair that is almost exactly like Hope's—full of body, brown, with loose curls.

Children move toward making peace with themselves in a context with those they are closest to, the feedback they receive, and what they "see" when they look around them. In the Straughan family's earliest days, Matt was deeply distraught because his skin was so much darker than anyone else in his new "forever family." He cried over it, begged his new parents to somehow change his hair so it could be more like Jay's—blonde, straight—and very unlike his own! Sometime later, Hope was stunned by a story Matt's kindergarten teacher recounted, having overheard it one morning. Ms. Kremer heard E.J. say, "Hey, Matt, why isn't your mom black like you and me?" Matt stopped his Lego building project, looked up to see Hope walking out of the classroom door, and after a short pause, he said, "I don't know, but her favorite color's black!" It seemed that in a short time Matt had found some level of peace with his own racial identity which

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allowed him to be completely open to any connection he and his forever Mom might have about black-ness.

### **Making Peace in a New Family**

The primary tasks of a new family are to build new attachments and establish roles within the family. Such tasks are surrounded by years of storming, confusion, and grief. As one of our children's therapists put it "the time you need most to get away from your child, perhaps when they are pushing away, will be the time they most need you to come near." How does one move toward a child who is so rejecting? This is one area in which congregations and communities of support can help families the most.

Much of the literature on foster care and adoption points to the very difficult process of attachment, which we will define here as "the deep and enduring biological, emotional, and social connection caregivers and children establish early in life."<sup>6</sup> Attachment is a more complex human need which takes years to develop within adoptive families. Orlans and Levy remind us that attachment security has been shown to be the most powerful predictor of life success because it directly affects learning, brain development, self-control, trust, and impacts relationships throughout life. Hurt children have disrupted and damaged attachments leading them to focus on self-preservation and survival rather than entering relationships in more positive ways.<sup>7</sup>

Studies on the developing brain demonstrate that an infant's interaction with caregivers actually shapes the formation and operation of the brain, including the Neocortex, Limbic system, and brain stem. The parts of the brain most affected by neglect and/or abuse are the areas that regulate self control, the release of stress hormones, and the way genetic material is expressed. Add to these negative effects the mental illness, alcoholism, drug use, and other factors common among parents giving birth to hurt children, and the obstacles to healthy living, beginning in infancy, seem insurmountable.<sup>8</sup>

Neglecting or abusive parents fail to respond, or respond violently to the normal biological and social needs of their children. Setting up a situation where trust is replaced by mistrust and fear may face the infant with a lifetime of disrupted attachments. Orlans and Levy instruct adoptive

6. Orlans and Levy, *Healing Parents*.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

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parents of hurt children to practice what they call “corrective attachment parenting” to build later in life the attachments that should have been in place between parents and their infants.<sup>9</sup>

When children have attachment disruptions early in life, an unfortunate outcome is that the lack of affective attunement with a caring adult causes the child to have a distorted understanding of self in relation to others.<sup>10</sup> Children often find it difficult to discern a level of intensity or intimacy in relationship with others, such as between a “best friend” and a child they’ve played with for ten minutes at the local park for instance. This often plays out in the home as well, but with far more challenging results. The child with reactive attachment disorder (a rare, but very serious diagnosis), often reacts strongly, intensely and negatively to the mother figure in the home. For example, a child may bolt when going from the car to the school, or from the church to the car. In extreme cases, a child may become violent by hitting, pinching and throwing things along with utilizing verbal assaults.

As professional social workers, we were both quite prepared cognitively for this rejection, though nothing could have prepared us emotionally. We have spent our careers studying about psychological processes and teaching human behavior and human development courses. However, even that strong knowledge base could not prepare us for the human experience of being rejected by the child you so hope will love you. It requires a mother to transcend her own needs and emotions and continue to accept the rejecting child. During this phase, adoptive children often are particularly loving and preferential to the father figure, perhaps as a way to stay close to one adult, perhaps as a way to attempt to separate the parenting team.

### **Storms Will Precede Peace**

It is not uncommon for children who lacked stable and consistent parenting from a young age to be impulsive, quick to anger, and easy to reach a point of out-of-control frustration.<sup>11</sup> When in the midst of one of these intense and terrifying episodes a child can be so utterly overcome with fear of being intimately accepted, loved, and deeply loved, that they do all in their power to ensure they will be rejected, sent away, and proven right that they are indeed unlovable. Of course, hurt children are not able

9. Ibid.

10. Hughes, *Building the Bonds of Attachment*.

11. Jewett, *Adopting the Older Child*.

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to articulate or even realize that this is in their thoughts. Instead, what they express is very direct, painful and blaming thoughts and sometimes threats toward the parent.

As Keck and Kupecky point out, “One of the hardest things for many hurt children to let go of is the dynamic of anger they often experienced and participated in while in their birth family. They have an amazing ability to recreate this dynamic with their new parents, who once considered themselves patient and loving.”<sup>12</sup> This was certainly the case with us. Both of us have experienced intensely dark seasons of life with our children. In order to keep peace, we made compromises that did not fit our ideals for family life. Maybe we did not ask a child a second time to hang up a coat or backpack, for fear of an escalated response. While trying to be consistent, maybe we allowed a day of respite from chores in particularly stressful times.

As mothers, we would wake up each morning during these dark seasons and become immediately tense, desperate to avoid our children’s wrath and outbursts, or their ignoring us as if we were invisible. What we understand now that we are through this darkness and on the other side of it, is that children who are fighting their hurt, experiencing flashbacks, desperately trying to trust, and generally still in survival mode, will battle for control using any means possible. These dark seasons are opportunities for congregations to come alongside parents and help them stay grounded in reality. A congregation that knows a child and family well can remind parents how far the child has come, and instill hope that growth can still occur.

Ironically, children behaving their worst are often starving and desperate for someone else who is sturdy, strong, and consistent, to take over.<sup>13</sup> They fight for control at the same time they desperately want to relinquish control. There is wide consensus in the literature on attachment that the adoptive mother bears the brunt of the child’s anger, fear, and testing. In addition, children may perceive fathers as strong, because they often have height, physical strength, deep and strong voices, and all the stereotypical signs of strength for our culture. Families should not face this alone; they must turn to their congregational community for support.

In Laine’s family, the phase of April testing the attachment coincided with adolescence. Having passed through to the other side, April has the wisdom and insight to reflect on what was happening. She writes:

*Every adult had failed me from the day I was born. My birth mother gave me away to CPS [Child Protective Services] when I*

12. Keck and Kupecky, *Adopting the Hurt Child*, 124.

13. Trout and Thomas, *Jonathon Letters*.



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*was four, every foster family I lived with was easily able to remove me from their homes without a second thought, and my first adoptive family abused me for four years after having told me myriad times that they “loved” me. My confidence had been shattered and my view on the world was beyond pessimistic. All people did was hurt others. There was no such thing as being able to love or care about someone. I came to learn that I was the only person I could rely on and the only person I could trust. Through much pain, I became an independent individual.*

*When I was adopted into Laine and Glenn’s family, I wanted to be able to hope that they would never harm or leave me. However, I could not recollect a time when an adult treated me properly and cared for my needs. I had lost the last of my hope years before. Laine and Glenn told me that I could trust them and they loved me, but I had heard that millions of times. They insisted that we would be a forever family, but was there such a thing as forever?*

*Being a part of this forever family, I could no longer do as I pleased. I now had two people that I had no trust in telling me what they thought was best for me. Laine and Glenn would tell me to go to bed at a certain time or to do chores. Now I can see that they meant to add stability in my life and keep me healthy, but at the time I perceived the requests as ways to control me and strip me from the only thing I had left; myself.*

*As I became a teenager, my urge to claim independence became overwhelming. At fifteen, I was begging, pleading, and screaming to stay out until one a.m., be driven from place to place, and to not have chores. I was blessed with many privileges and opportunities that most teenagers were not. But I never believed it was enough. I wanted my full individualism back. When it was not given to me, I began threatening to move out or run away. My mom and I would spend hours yelling at each other and arguing . . . sometimes over the silliest things. Despite all the threats and curses I screamed out and the long arguments, my parents remained strong, stable, and loving. This was exactly what I had needed my entire life. Because of this, I am now a strong, wise, and mature teenager.*

Supportive congregations can help adoptive families by simply staying attuned to parents who need respite, acceptance, or extra encouragement. The hurt children and teens also need to be accepted and to have their behavior viewed as a process that must occur on their journey to making peace with their new families. A loving congregation can support the rejected parent(s) without being overly critical or punishing of this

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hurt child who must pass through this process of testing and temporarily rejecting the parents in order to make peace in the new family.

### **Being Present with a Child Making Peace**

Daniel Hughes, a clinical psychologist who specializes in child neglect and abuse as well as foster care and adoption, has crafted a theoretical model to guide helping professionals, parents, and other caregivers in the healing work of helping troubled children find peace within themselves, and among those surrounding them. The model is based on the five principles of acceptance, curiosity, being empathic, loving and being playful. When a child is railing against himself and talking about how little and how bad he is, Hughes acknowledges that the natural response of most adults is to contradict the child, and show how many ways that child is brave, strong, important, and loved. However, this response, once again, proves to children that they are not listened to, that what they feel so deeply is dismissed entirely. Instead, Hughes says that we should be 100 percent accepting of these statements, and in an empathic, curious manner, reflect back to the child that it must be so hard to feel such despair and sadness.<sup>14</sup>

This connection with hurt children around their very raw and real emotions is a great gift, which can lead over time to a letting go of some of that darkness, as they no longer have to experience it alone. Through the spontaneous use of playful interactions, and consistently loving communication, even in very hard and disruptive situations, a child can begin to experience healthy relationships and a renewed belief in themselves, and peace between themselves and others. We need to be reminded that change takes place over time, and is sometimes barely visible. The disruptions, violence, and challenging behavior found in many foster and adoptive homes often drives extended family and friends away, and they are fearful and blaming at worst, or questioning of the extensive shifts and new ways of interacting and disciplining that are often necessary to help these children heal at best.

Parents must pass the many tests their child may devise to see if he can truly trust this new family. The tests lessen over time but may emerge when another trauma, large or small, occurs for the child of family. Trauma leaves vulnerable spirits.<sup>15</sup>

14. Hughes, *Building the Bonds of Attachment*.

15. Schooler, Smalley, and Callahan, *Wounded Children, Healing Homes*, 8.

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Orlans and Levy recognize that adoptive parents will have three primary challenges, the child will push away love and support, the child will need help coping with emotions and stress, and parents must find ways to manage their own emotional reactions to this challenging process. Congregations can play an essential role in supporting adoptive families and assisting with these three challenges.<sup>16</sup>

### **Making Peace with God**

While spiritual development may proceed differently for each child, the faith of hurt children will be deeply affected by the multiple crises they have survived. While adult onlookers may expect that children surviving trauma might be thankful to God for saving or rescuing them into a new family, this may not be the stance of the hurt child. As social worker and family ministry author Diana Garland reminds us:

Crisis almost always creates questions about the meaning and purpose of human life. Did we cause our own suffering? How can a loving God let children get cancer? How can I be depressed if I believe in a loving, graceful God? And on and on—for every crisis there is a question, a belief system that may be under siege.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the unpredictable behavior of wounded children that stems from their anger and hopelessness may be labeled by others (even church members) as immoral or sinful. They are often more confused than other children about images of God as a loving parent, the sinful nature of persons, forgiveness, grace, and other theological ideas. Families and others working with hurt children may have difficulty suspending judgment or frustration. However, as Wayne Muller, in his book, *Legacy of the Heart, The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood*, describes these wounds may ultimately lead to a closeness to God and “a profound inner wisdom” as the child becomes an adult.<sup>18</sup>

Deep within them [hurt children]—just beneath the wound—lies a profound spiritual vitality, a quiet knowing, a way of perceiving what is beautiful, right, and true. Since their early experiences were so dark and painful, they have spent much of

16. Orlans and Levy, *Healing Parents*.

17. Garland, “Response to Chavez.”

18. Muller, *Legacy of the Heart*, xiii.

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their lives in search of the gentleness, love, and peace they have only imagined in the privacy of their own hearts.<sup>19</sup>

If hurt children and teens have this potential for the “profound spiritual vitality” that Muller describes, how can families and congregations create environments to nurture this kind of faith development?

### Making Peace with the Church

Christian families parenting hurt children must be able to lean on their congregations for support, tangible help, and guidance in spiritual matters. We have learned about this experientially from receiving the good love of our own congregations. We did not know what we needed and could not ask for it. However, our churches were sensitive to our needs and responded.

When Laine and Glenn first met their daughter-to-be (April), she was eleven years old and attended church regularly with her foster family. One of the most special moments of the second visit with her was when she leaned her sweet blonde head against Laine’s arm during the worship service. Her leaning was so tentative that she barely put her little ear against Laine’s shoulder, seemingly afraid to rest her full head, lest she be rejected. Of course Laine responded by embracing her; their first mother-daughter touch. Laine recorded the memory in a few lines of a poem called “Love Decides.”

Little ear on my shoulder in church  
Arms open to surround you and  
Will never close  
Forever family is born.<sup>20</sup>

The journey of this new family included church services right away as a time to be close and to love. In fact, the church pew was always a special place where they sat together as a family of three: girl in the middle surrounded by a loving parent on either side. That December, as a way to celebrate this new family, the pastor invited them to light the advent candles, recalling Christ’s coming. This newly formed family of three mirrored Mary and Joseph welcoming the new baby.

In addition, the new family created a religious ritual together to celebrate their beginnings. By writing a family covenant that became the center of an “entrustment ceremony” in which the foster family and others

19. Ibid., xiii.

20. Scales, “Love Decides,” 25.

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entrusted the care of April to her new parents. The covenant spelled out promises to April from her parents: they promised to stay with her, to help her remember her families of the past, to be present in her joys and sorrows, and that she will always have a place in their home and in their hearts, even after she is grown.

The parents drafted the ceremony and asked April to edit the manuscript. They invited the adoption caseworkers and therapists to attend the ceremony and affirm that they trusted this would be a good family. The current foster family articulated a “letting go,” noting how much she had grown healthier and stronger during the year she spent with them. April’s friend from her current church, Anna, came to the ceremony. The parents’ church provided a candle arrangement and the family lit candles to represent April’s past families, her siblings, and others she would continue to love and remember. The ritual closed with the foster parents and nine foster siblings reading a benediction to April; a prayer from the parents’ wedding ceremony. Each year the family celebrates Entrustment Day with special treats and family togetherness.

The Straughan family ritualized their entrustment in a similar way and both families celebrate these anniversaries with special treats and family togetherness. By ritualizing and celebrating yearly our transitions with promises and prayers, blessings and benedictions, our families have created special memories (and DVD recordings) of our lifelong commitments that we can return to as we wish. While we did not hold these ceremonies in our church’s buildings, our current and former congregations were present in the candles, the blessings, and the friendships represented in the ceremony.<sup>21</sup>

### **Reaching Out to Other Hurt Kids**

From preschool through adolescence, April experienced numerous traumatic events within the church. As she continues to search for peace following these events, has sought positive experiences outside of a formal congregation. She wonders, as many wounded people do, why God was not there in her time of need: if God had been there, how could God allow her to be abused? It may take a lifetime and more for her to be able to find peace about that question, but as her narrative reveals, she is seeking:

21. Leiberma and Bufferd, *Creating Ceremonies*; Mason, *Designing Rituals of Adoption*.

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The day I lost my faith in God is a day I will never forget. It was the day I finally realized that the B's, my first adoptive family who kept me for 3 years before tossing me back to CPS, did not love me or care about me. That was the day I finally realized that no one did or ever would care:

Tina slammed the pantry door closed. Darkness. Vomit mixed with Horseradish and bits of blood covered the tiny, tiled pantry. My adoptive mother was forcing me to sleep with my head in the vomit. I turned my head to face the ceiling. The smell was revolting. I had been taught by this supposedly "Christian" family to listen to Christian music. I began singing Call on Jesus.

"When I call on Jesus,  
All things are possible . . .  
. . . Cause he'll move heaven and earth  
to come rescue me when I call  
la la la . . ."

My voice faltered and tears welled in my eyes. My heart felt as if someone was squeezing it as hard as they could. Anguish. Who was I kidding? I had prayed for years and no one had ever listened. What kind of God would let me suffer so much? My body tensed as I tried to keep my cries inside. All I allowed out of my mouth was air that struggled to be released. I began hitting and clawing my body. Why couldn't I just die? No one loved me. No one would miss me or care. I was just a mistake. I cried until my body was worn, tired, and could no longer produce any more tears. I laid there feeling numb and cold. Finally, I closed my eyes and drifted into an uncomfortable sleep. I was all alone.

After I moved in with Laine and Glenn, we attended church every Sunday and some Wednesdays. During Sunday School, I was fine. We didn't talk much about God. Instead, we did art projects, sang, or prayed. But I dreaded going to the sermons. Not because the preacher wasn't good, but because I was horrified by the God-talk. The sermons were tragic reminders of what the B's did to me and why. During the service, I would lay on my mom and sleep or I'd read; anything to get my mind away from reality for that hour. I would constantly ask what time it was and when church ended. I'd count down how many items we had left on the bulletin.

As I got older, I asked my mom if I could attend Sunday School only. For a while, this worked. But once I became old enough to enter the youth group, almost all we did was talk of God. My mind would wander off and when the youth minister requested I read a passage, my body would tense and my mouth would become dry. I really felt like God was being shoved at me

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when what I needed was space and time to heal. I couldn't heal when I was constantly being flashed into the past and reliving all the memories I had gone through with this family that claimed to be Christians.

Eventually, I moved to a different youth group in a new church, hoping that they might be different. But, they weren't. It was the same every Sunday morning. So I stopped going Sundays and only attended the Wednesday youth activities. Slowly, I even removed myself from that and quit church all together.

For a couple years, I avoided anything related to God. I allowed myself the time and space I needed to heal. I was given the opportunity to work through all the horrors I had experienced.

Now, I am still in between the lines of Atheism and Christianity. However, a few weeks ago, I was able to give the most sincere and heartfelt prayer I had given in six years. I have had a renewed interest in God. A different God than the one the B's told me of. This God is a God that does not believe I am a mistake. . . . A God who forgives and loves all people. The steps I must take are tentative and shaky today, but with time, they will become strong and confident.

One of the opportunities for April to work toward some resolution to her questions is embodied in the ministry she and Laine started together through their church. Creating a satellite of the prayer shawl ministry, they gathered young people and taught them to knit and crochet, producing blankets for foster kids in transition to new homes. Noting that much charitable attention is given to adopted babies while older children often go unnoticed, their group focuses on children and teens age 10 or older. *Kidz Komfort* offers opportunities for April to pay it forward as she once received a homemade quilt from a group of church women in one of her new foster homes.

While meetings are held outside the church walls, this ministry offers a venue for April to share her story at whatever level she feels comfortable with and to do something tangible, comforting, and meaningful in the context of her own journey. She shared a few thoughts with her congregation one Sunday morning about the uses of a blanket:

At night, when they are in a strange place, kids can pull the blanket close to them and know "someone was thinking of me." It lights a spark of hope in the kid's heart. . . . God stitches our lives together, putting us together like a crocheted blanket. You still have mess ups, some holes are bigger than others. We are not

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perfect. But the blanket can still be useful and keep you warm. Also, some kids don't like to be hugged by people, but they enjoy being cuddled by a blanket. I felt that way sometimes; I didn't want to hug or be close to a person because I knew I'd just have to leave them in a few weeks or, at the most, a couple of months. But being hugged by a blanket is like being surrounded by God's love for you. You always have it.

Families and congregations can encourage and facilitate this type of ministry that blesses the giver as much as the recipient. And hurt kids need to give; to see themselves as worthy of being a giver and strong enough to share something of themselves without threatening their own survival. April had an opportunity to describe the ministry in the church newsletter and several church members donated yarn or joined the group.

### **Congregations Can Help**

From our own experiences as adoptive families, we have compiled the following list of suggestions for how congregations can support adoptive families and our children have added to the list. We believe you will recognize how the suggestions relate to the stories we have shared in this chapter. The list is not exhaustive; your congregation will imagine additional ways to help hurt children and families on their journey together toward peace:

#### **Supporting Individual Children and Teens**

1. Understand delayed or unusual expressions of psychosocial development. An older child joining a new family will want to cuddle, lay in a parent's lap, and do other things similar to a toddler. Behavioral issues in the nursery or in Sunday School may mirror children younger in years.
2. As children and teens begin to consider church membership or confirmation, recognize ways in which prior spiritual traumas may affect their perspectives. They may be exceptionally reluctant to trust, or overly eager to join the church without full understanding of their long-term commitments.
3. Create art. Art is therapeutic for children experiencing trauma during a pre-verbal stage of life. Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and other artistic opportunities for children and youth are essential. This focus should continue into the teenage years.



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4. Create sound and movement. Children recovering from trauma must have opportunities to sing, play instruments, dance, and join in other creative activities. Watch for what is being expressed and be available for discussion as needed.
5. Create opportunities for dramatic expression. Plays, pageants, musicals, and other opportunities offered in churches provide excellent opportunities for hurt children to express themselves and try on new or different roles and identities.

### Supporting Adoptive and Foster Families

1. Find ways to help families ritualize their life transitions while acknowledging God's blessings. Some examples include entrustment ceremonies, adoption-day celebrations, child dedications, and families leading worship in song or scripture readings.
2. Offer respite care to adoptive families of hurt children. Families in the congregation may take the children for a weekend or even a Saturday, offering parents needed rest.
3. Protect private stories. Children and youth may tell stories of their past in an effort to bond with their congregation or youth group. Members should be warned of the personal nature of these often dramatic stories of abuse or violence so they are not repeated. The child needs a safe space to tell his or her story without it being repeated.

### Support from the Entire Congregation

1. Join faith communities from across the country in the Children's Defense Fund-sponsored Children's Sabbath, in celebration of children as sacred gifts of the Divine. This communal celebration provides the opportunity for houses of worship to renew and live out their moral responsibility to care, protect and advocate for all children. This celebration is part of a broader movement to improve the lives of children and families, while working for justice on their behalf.<sup>22</sup>
2. Encourage children and youth to minister to others. For example, April and Laine's *Kidz Komfort* became a featured ministry in the church newsletter and members supported the ministry by donating yarn.

22. Children's Defense Fund, "National Observance."

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3. Work through local agencies to advocate for abused children. When the church reaches out to address child abuse, hurt children of the congregation learn productive ways to express their anger and frustration at a world where innocent ones can be violated. The church's advocacy combats the hopelessness that hurt children and youth may feel. In addition, hurt children, if they are comfortable, can be excellent sources of information for others in the congregation who do not understand trauma and abuse. Proceed with caution.
4. As ministers and lay workers work with children and teens, they must recognize and respect the various ways in which a child's trauma may affect spiritual development. Ministers, social workers, and others in the congregation can help identify readings and resources to enhance a layperson or minister's knowledge base regarding abuse.
5. Adopt children as a congregational effort. This requires a large and well considered, long-term commitment, and can range from supporting multiple families within the church who have adopted children, supporting families financially who seek to adopt.<sup>23</sup>

### **Conclusion: Making Peace for a Lifelong Journey toward Healing and Wholeness**

Children and teenagers who have been hurt in violent homes may spend the rest of their lives trying to make peace: with themselves, their past, their new families, and with God. Peace is the theme of this chapter and this collection of readings, and we will repeat what has been stated by several authors throughout this volume: peace, as described in the New Testament, is not passive, it is active. Foster and adoptive families, along with their congregations, must assist hurt children to make peace.

In describing the psychological and spiritual lives of all children and teenagers, developmental psychologists such as Eric Erikson point to conflicting inner urges as well as external demands that are at work to form the personality. As a child pushes away the parts of her life that are "unacceptable" and "not me," those darker parts still remain to be integrated and dealt with in development. This integration may be called "peace" or harmony, and according to White, the achievement of peace "becomes a pressing issue for every child but is, perhaps, the least recognized need."<sup>24</sup>

23. "Church Adoption Funds"; World Orphans, *Our Church to Church Model*.

24. White, "Role of the Home," 235.

### *Making Peace in a World of Violence*

If inner turmoil and the pushing away of the darker “not me” is the developmental task of every child and teenager, imagine how insurmountable this task can be for a child who has been told she is the embodiment of the devil. How impossible might this task be for the boy who has been raped? He knows instinctively that the sexual act has to be “not me,” and yet remembers being present during the rape. One of the common symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a common diagnosis of abused and hurt children, is disassociation. This is an exaggerated “not me” reaction as a child tries to deal with horrendous and unspeakable acts. The disassociating child tries to escape being present, using the mind and spirit to remove her “self” until safety returns. How hard it must be to find peace in one’s lifetime under these circumstances.

White describes the biblical peace as “one which finds its center within the person as that person relates to Christ.”<sup>25</sup> However, peace does not stop there, because from that center the Christian develops peace in her relationships to others. For White, the home provides “the greatest power in the development of peace in any person’s life.”<sup>26</sup>

For hurt children, their earliest homes often held the chaos and battlegrounds that destroyed their families. In their new foster or adoptive families, a child may be able to move toward peace as she experiences the trust and commitment described above, along with discipline and limit-setting that is loving and consistent.<sup>27</sup> As we have tried to demonstrate by sharing our own stories of adopting hurt children, the spiritual development of the child as well as the support of the adopting family can be an essential part of the congregation’s ministry to families. The church is called to lift up, support, develop, and instruct families as they seek to nurture peace within children whose prior homes have been destroyed by violence. The church is also called to advocate peace on earth and freedom from violence for every child.

What we have written grows out of our own experience, of course, and not out of deduction from just peacemaking theory. But it involved all four of the initiative practices (nonviolent action that began to create the peace and justice all children need, independent initiatives, conflict resolution, acknowledgment, forgiveness and repentance). It certainly involved fostering the justice and human rights that all children and all

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. White, “Role of the Home.”

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persons need. And it absolutely required patient and consistent efforts to create community with love, with important support from church groups.

Our prayer is that the peace that passes all understanding may come to the world's children, including our own hurt but healing kids.

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