



Fresno Can Be A CITYWITHOUTORPHANS

By Whitney Bunker

Picture the home you grew up in. Remember the way you looked up to your mom and dad? Now imagine that without warning you are taken away from your mother and/or father because of abuse or neglect in your home. Everything you've ever known is gone. Complete strangers take you away and you are frightened, confused, sad and alone.

For thousands of children in Fresno County, this is a familiar scenario. It happens nearly every day. In fact, Fresno County has approximately 2,500 kids in the foster care system. These children needed to be removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, at no fault of their own. Now they need a loving, stable foster family who will care for them as their biological family gets help and healing. Some of these children need permanent homes through adoption because their biological parents will never be able to properly care for them. As I write this, many children in our city are still waiting for that loving "forever family."

As a former social worker, I have first-hand experience with the needs of foster children throughout our county. As a woman of faith and a pastor's wife, I believe God has called and equipped His people to care for these children. Even a quick reading of the Bible shows God's heart for orphans. Paul tells us in Romans 8 that we were once spiritual orphans and God adopted us. James 1:27 tells us that the kind of faith God accepts as pure and faultless is "to look after orphans and widows in their distress ..."

We can't gloss over those verses and think they don't apply to foster children. When the Bible uses the word "orphan" it's not just talking about children who have lost both parents to death. Orphans are vulnerable children, those who are voiceless and powerless, whose parents are unable to care for them either temporarily or permanently. We might not call them orphans, but our city is full of them.

That's why we started an organization called City Without Orphans (CWO). We are praying and working toward a day when there will be no more children waiting to be

placed in a foster home or waiting to be adopted. Instead, children in need of a home will have a willing family waiting to give them the love and healthy environment they deserve. Then Fresno will truly be a "city on a hill that cannot be hidden," giving light and hope to the rest of the world.

Before launching City Without Orphans, we explored ministries in other states that were successfully linking local churches with child welfare agencies to help find more foster or adoptive families. We realized this was not just a vision for "those" cities and states. It was what God wanted for Fresno, too. We needed to create an entity that could be a bridge between local churches and the child welfare system.

Fresno County's child welfare system needs the help of the whole community (including the faith community) to properly care for children in foster care. They need financial resources, the use of buildings, volunteers, and most of all, loving families who would be willing to foster or adopt these children. There are hundreds of churches in Fresno County. Churches have resources, buildings, volunteers and families willing to care for children. Most of all, churches have the calling of God to care for orphaned children. CWO is the bridge that connects these two groups together.

Since we launched in February of 2011, we have presented the needs of vulnerable children to church members and leaders throughout the city. We have begun to see churches respond in incredible ways:

A local church created a closet filled with donations of gently used baby and children's items available for foster families.

A local church collected duffel bags for children who might otherwise transport everything they own in a plastic bag.

Several local churches have used part of their Sunday service or hosted a special event to bring more awareness to the issue of orphans locally and globally.



A local church has offered their facility for free as a safe site for foster children to have visits with their biological families.

Local churches have opened up their buildings to host parties, classes and events for foster youth, social workers and foster/adoptive families.

These things have been a huge blessing to foster children and families, as well as those who work for the county and local foster/adoption agencies. Still, we know the greatest need vulnerable children have is the need for a loving family. We believe God wants every child to be raised in a family. That's why we put so much emphasis on recruiting and preparing families for foster care and adoption.

One way we do this is through the Heart Gallery, a traveling exhibit of pictures of real children in our county who need adoptive homes. In the fall of 2011, we were asked to collaborate with the County of Fresno to re-launch the Heart Gallery. Photographers donate their time

to photograph sibling sets or older youth. Profiles of the child's interests are posted. Not only have we helped get this exhibit back up and running, but we have been able to get the Heart Gallery hosted at churches and faith-based community events. This serves as a great tool to recruit families for foster care and adoption.

My husband Daniel and I also recruit and educate for foster care and adoption in churches by hosting a free workshop, "Fostering and Adoption 101." This three-hour workshop teaches basic information about the process of foster care and adoption. In the class we talk about things to consider before foster care/adoption, such as healthy motives and expectations, how to choose an agency, biblical foundations, and finances. The class delivers solid information, busts common myths and misconceptions people have, and offers practical next steps. We also ask local agencies and current foster/adoptive families to attend. They are able to answer questions and offer more information to those who are ready to take the next step in the process. So far we have hosted workshops in six churches and have spoken to over 80 people interested in learning more about foster care and adoption. Already, families are beginning the process of fostering or adopting and we know many more now have the knowledge they need to make a decision in the future.

It is evident that God is moving the hearts of His people all across our city to join in caring for our vulnerable children. This partnership with local child welfare agencies has shown that the church can be used as one of the greatest agents of change. We are God's plan A – there is no plan B. As the church rises, we move closer to Fresno being a city without orphans.

We know it's just the beginning, and we have a long way to go if we are to see this dream become a reality, but we are already seeing signs of hope in our community.

If you would like to learn more about City Without Orphans and how you can get involved personally or through your church, we encourage you to visit our website at: www.citywithoutorphans.com

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