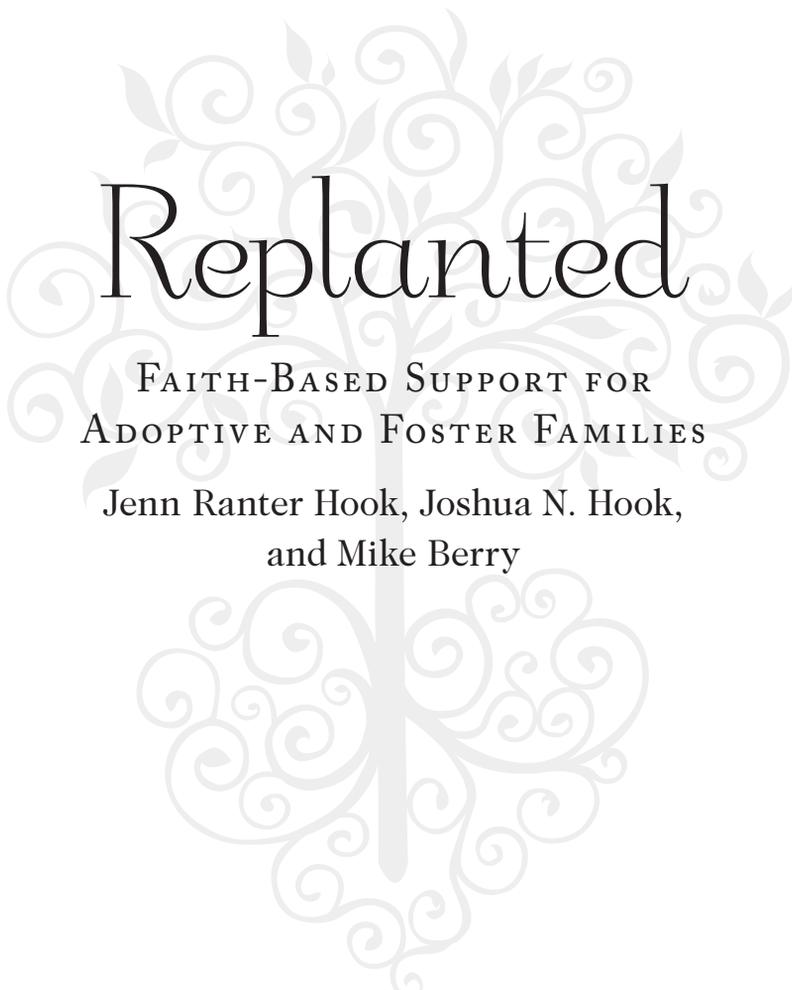


REPLANTED





# Replanted

FAITH-BASED SUPPORT FOR  
ADOPTIVE AND FOSTER FAMILIES

Jenn Ranter Hook, Joshua N. Hook,  
and Mike Berry



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*To the Replanted leadership team in Chicago, who pioneered and helped breathe life and vision into this ministry—this book is a reflection and extension of what you helped to create.*

*To my parents, Fred and Laurie; my brother, Craig; and my sister-in-law, Vicki, who have been my biggest cheerleaders in life.*

*And finally, to my husband, who encouraged me to write this book.*

—JENN RANTER HOOK

*To my wife, Jenn—I love you and am proud of you!*

—JOSHUA N. HOOK

*To the amazing, beautiful people who are our support community: there's no way we could do this journey without you!*

—MIKE BERRY



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## Preface

**A**DOPTION AND foster care are holy but difficult work. Parenting children from hard places is one of the most rewarding, meaningful journeys in which you can ever engage. But it is also challenging and stressful. Sometimes adoptive and foster families are struggling and feel overwhelmed, not sure whether they can face tomorrow. As a therapist who worked in the foster care system, and later as a leader of a ministry serving adoptive and foster families, I saw the joys and challenges of adoptive and foster parenting firsthand. I saw the meaning and the struggles, the beauty and the pain.

One of the things I realized was that adoptive and foster families needed more support. I walked alongside many children in foster care who had been abused and neglected, who were often misunderstood as misbehaved or problematic children rather than being seen as precious and worthy with a complex history that had shaped their present reality. As a Christian, I sat through sermons where the preacher would talk about how Christians should prioritize orphan care or encourage members of the congregation to adopt and foster. At the same time, however, I noticed that church after church provided almost zero help and support after a family adopted or fostered. Something was missing here. I knew there was an awesome opportunity for Christians and the church to help support adoptive and foster families who were struggling, but we were missing it—and families were paying the price.

That's why I wrote *Replanted: Faith-Based Support for Adoptive and Foster Families*. If you're an adoptive or foster family, or thinking

about being one, I want to be honest about the joys and difficulties of the journey. I want you to enter your adoptive and foster experience with eyes wide open. I don't do this to scare you; instead, I want you to be prepared for the challenges along the way. Specifically, I want to encourage you to get the help and support you need to thrive.

Maybe you're not an adoptive or foster family, but you have a close family member or friend who has adopted or fostered, and you want to help. This book is for you as well. I want you to be informed about the needs of adoptive and foster families so that you can help in a way that is balanced and effective. Too often people are misinformed, and they try to help in a manner that actually does more harm than good. I want you to be an effective helper.

Finally, maybe you work at a church and you want your church to be a safe and supportive place for adoptive and foster families. You see families in your congregation who are struggling, but you don't know how best to help. This book is for you too. One of my dreams is for churches to partner together to resource ministries to effectively support adoptive and foster families. This book gives you the tools for how to do that as well.

Wherever you are, thanks for taking this journey with me. I'd also like to invite God along with us. I firmly believe that God places a high priority on caring for vulnerable children, and we are all called to be a part of the mission and work he is doing. Some amazing things are happening in the world of caring for vulnerable children, and it's exciting to partner with God on that road together. I'm glad you're here.

Jenn Ranter Hook

## Acknowledgments

**I**N 2011, I was introduced to a pastor named Gregory Whittaker at a farewell party for a friend. After learning that I worked as a therapist in foster care, he asked what seemed like a simple question: “What do you see as the church’s role in supporting our families?” Gregory, I bet you had no idea what you were getting yourself into, but thanks for believing in me and advocating for our church to actively love and serve our adoptive and foster community. Replanted exists because of you. Church of the Resurrection, thanks for saying “yes” and for faithfully praying for and supporting our adoptive and foster care community.

I want to give a huge shout out to my original team in Chicago that helped pioneer and breathe life into the Replanted Ministry at its inception. Scott and Sarah Roney, Mike Swihart, Christie Otts, and Michelle Peterson: Your dedication, passion, and vision to support the families in our community through the local church has brought us to where we are today.

Our team of dedicated leaders and volunteers has consistently shown up and served as the hands and feet of Jesus to our families. You are the heartbeat of this ministry. Thank you for all the ways you lead and love our families, from launching groups, attending meetings, setting up tables and chairs, playing with and investing in the kids, and faithfully praying for, sitting with, and listening to the hearts of our parents. There are so many people to thank for their dedication, leadership, and service: Hollee Ball, Currey and JJ Blandford, Melissa Harms, Mark Hawkinson, Lisa Jarot, Laura

Leonard, Sonja Shogren, Christine Stahl, Jessica Stoffer, David Vosburg, Chris Wilson, and David Wrigglesworth. You are true rock stars.

To the Replanted leadership, group facilitators, hosts, and mentors around the country: It's been an honor to share this passion and calling in life with you. Thank you for dedicating your lives to sit with our families in both the joy and the pain, mentoring and investing in the lives of our children, and being kingdom influencers.

To all the children that forever changed my life while I worked at the Youth Service Bureau: This ministry was created for you. Thank you for trusting me with your hearts and your stories.

To all the Replanted families we've had the privilege of supporting and journeying with: Thank you for your faithfulness in this journey, even when it's hard. It brings us great joy to do life together, to hold one another's arms up when we feel weary, and to celebrate the joys with fierce abandon. We love you dearly and are cheering so hard for you and your precious kiddos.

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To my high school teachers and coaches Mr. Buma and Mr. Roukema: My course in life was altered because of you. Thank you

for challenging me to be my best, believing in me when I didn't believe in myself, seeing what I couldn't see, coaching me, and cheering for me. Thanks for seeing the real me. I am where I am today because of you.

To my friends who are more like family in Canada and Wheaton: Thanks for doing life with me. You have taught me the value of deep, genuine, grace-filled relationships. To Karen, Paige, and my 868 girls, I love you! To Brenda and Randy, thanks for being like second parents to me and encouraging my competitive nature. To Aunt Trish, my hockey aunt, you are simply the best!

To my crazy, ridiculous, goofball family: Who would have thought a dairy farmer's daughter would write a book someday! "Ranter" is on this book as a reflection of the impact you have had on my life. I miss you all the time. Mom and Dad, you always knew God had big plans for my life. Thanks for supporting that, even though it has led me far away from doing life with you. Craig, little broski, you have taught me so much! Thanks for being my friend and for fiercely protecting me.

And finally, to my husband, Josh Hook, who encouraged me to write this book. I seriously would never have done this without your support. When we first met, I was terrified to let you read anything I wrote. Look how far we've come. I'm so blessed to be married to you. Thanks for so fiercely believing in me. You were worth the wait.

—Jenn Ranter Hook





SECTION I

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*Introduction and Theoretical  
Foundation*



## Caring for Vulnerable Children Is Challenging *and* Beautiful

The beginning is always today.

—MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

As I (Jenn) begin to write this book, my mind wanders back to one of our Parents' Night Out events, which is an event our ministry organizes so that adoptive and foster parents can have a night out to themselves and our kiddos can build relationships with one another. We get a group of volunteers together and come up with a bunch of fun activities for the children so that the parents can get a few hours to go out alone. One husband told me that he and his wife were planning to have dinner at the local Olive Garden, and we laughed, agreeing on our mutual love for the unlimited salad and breadsticks. Another couple was planning to see a movie with a few friends. They hadn't been out to see a movie in—well, they couldn't remember the last time. Another couple hadn't planned anything. They chuckled and said that maybe they would just go home and take a nap. I wasn't sure if they were joking or not. But one thing was clear, our parents needed this time to recharge and care for themselves, and for some, our offering of Parents' Night Out was the only opportunity they would get.

We had a great time with the kids. It was fun to see the children laughing, playing, and connecting with one another. As I ventured from room to room, I realized we were also creating a deeper community for our kids—where they could be with others on a similar journey and know that they are not alone. The night

went off without any major problems or incidents. Sure, there was a bathroom accident, but luckily the parents had left a change of underwear and clothes. I had to intervene in a few places where the children were having a tough time, and the volunteers weren't sure what to do. I chuckle, remembering my then-boyfriend Josh (who is now my husband) struggling to problem-solve with a young girl who didn't want to be in the group she was assigned to, but who started to cry and scream when Josh suggested she join a different group because her bracelet didn't match the new group's. When the children arrived, they were each given a colored bracelet to help them remember which team leader they were with for the evening. Her bracelet was orange, but the group she wanted to be in had purple. Josh quickly dug through the materials and found an extra bracelet that matched the color of the new group and calmed the crisis. Many readers can likely understand the difficulty our children can experience with transitions like this one.

As the night came to a close and the parents came by to pick up their children, I reflected on what had happened. Although the evening was energizing, and I loved the ministry and playing with the kids, I was tired. It was a lot of work, and I was ready to head home and go to sleep. Something clicked, and I realized I recognized a similar feeling reflected in each of the parents' eyes who dropped off their kids that night. They were tired. Being an adoptive and foster parent was energizing and rewarding, but it was also draining. Their lives were filled with joy and love for their children, as well as the satisfaction of joining with God to engage in the meaningful pursuit of caring for the vulnerable. But responding to the trauma and special needs that are unique to children impacted by adoption or foster care is challenging.

The paradox here is that the journey is beautiful and difficult all at the same time. As a former therapist for children in foster care, and then as a leader of a ministry for adoptive and foster families,

I had the privilege of coming in and out of the lives of families and (hopefully) offering some support, help, and hope. But the parents and families were the real shepherds. These were the people who were giving it their all, day after day, even when they felt they had nothing left to give. I smiled, recognizing that we all had an important part to play in responding to God's call to care for vulnerable children, and this was holy work, kingdom work. Then I packed up and went home to bed.

The journey of adoption and foster care is rewarding and meaningful. Many adoptive and foster parents say their parenting journey is the most meaningful and joyful part of their lives. I remember one adoptive mom who teared up when she was reflecting. Even though her two adopted girls had gone through some tough times, she said, "I wouldn't trade in my family for anything. They are my world." Caring for vulnerable children is deeply connected with the heart of God. Opening up your home and family to a child in need is incredibly moving and amazing. Adoption and foster care connect with important values that are deeply integral to what it means to be a Christian. It is a beautiful expression of *love*: it involves caring and sacrifice for a child in need. It is a powerful expression of *justice*: it involves meeting the needs of vulnerable children and the "least of these." And it is a wonderful expression of *faithfulness*: it involves sticking with a child for the long haul, whether that is permanently or temporarily, and through the inevitable ups and downs. Being willing to serve as an adoptive or foster parent involves becoming the hands and feet of Jesus to a child. If you are involved on this journey, you are doing a great and mighty thing. I am in awe of your love, commitment, and faithfulness.

But another reality is just as true: being an adoptive parent, foster parent, or kinship caregiver (i.e., a relative, such as a grandparent, who cares for the child when the child's biological parents are unable to do so) can be challenging. If you are on this journey right now,

you know this in a unique and personal way. The challenges can feel overwhelming and might leave you feeling alone, rejected, and isolated. You might even question whether you should have become an adoptive or foster parent in the first place.

These struggles are a reality for many of our adoptive and foster families, but there is also hope. Hope for things to get better. Hope for healing and growth, both for you as a parent, your children, and your family. Hope for you and your family to get support—to get your needs met in a real, tangible way. Hope for God to be alive and moving in the midst of your pain and struggle. The hope we speak of may not mean that everything is working out, your children are behaving, your home is peaceful, or all of your plans are lining up the way you thought they would. Sometimes hope is found in the middle of the dark or defeating circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is in knowing and trusting that your Heavenly Father is holding on to you, even when the storms in your life are the fiercest, and that he willingly steps into our mess. Hope is also found when we join with others who are on the journey. We'll talk more about support later, but it's important to note here that hope is found through Jesus, and that often comes to life more than anything through our relationship with others who are on this journey with us.

### **WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR**

Where are you in your journey of adoption and foster care? Throughout this book, I use the phrase “adoption and foster care,” but this book is for anyone involved in caring for vulnerable children—including adoptive parents, foster parents, kinship caregivers, Safe Families parents, and those who are considering such type of involvement. (Safe Families is an organization that provides temporary respite care for children whose parents need additional support,

without having their child removed and placed in a foster home. Parents maintain guardianship of their child and have access to their child while the child stays with a Safe Family. Placements can range anywhere from one day to one year in length, and it is completely voluntary on the parents' part. For example, a mother who is having surgery may not have anyone to care for her children while she is recovering, so she can place her children with a Safe Family until she is back on her feet again.)

Maybe you are at the beginning of your journey. Maybe you feel a call to care for vulnerable children but you don't know exactly what that looks like yet. Or maybe you are in the middle of your journey and are having a tough time. You recognize the beauty of the journey but are also having difficulties and need support. Or maybe you don't personally feel called to adopt or foster, but you still feel a strong call to do something. It may be a realization that the folks in your congregation or neighborhood are struggling and could use a helping hand. You want to support adoptive and foster families, but you don't know how to best do that. Or perhaps you have friends or family who have adopted or fostered, and you are struggling to walk alongside them in the journey and understand why adoptive or foster parenting is unique compared to more traditional types of parenting.

Wherever you are in your journey, this book is a guide for you. Many adoptive and foster families are struggling and feel as if they are alone. At a foundational level, the heart of this book is for you to feel validated and supported right where you are—in the beauty and the struggle. The reality is that the adoption and foster care journey involves joy and heartache—death and resurrection. I long for you to know, at a deep, heart level, that you are not alone. We all need safe, loving, grace-filled relationships and communities that accept our families right where we are—in our beautiful messes.

I hope this book encourages you and lets you know that you are not alone, and you are not crazy. Also, I want to acknowledge that

sometimes friends, family, and the church can have good intentions and try to help, but this “help” can actually do more harm than good. For example, maybe your church told you it couldn’t meet the needs of your child, so your child couldn’t come to Sunday school anymore. Maybe you had a friend who immediately tried to give you advice when you were struggling, even though she didn’t understand your situation or your child. If you have been hurt during this journey by your friends, family, or church community, I am deeply sorry. It might feel difficult to get into a place where you feel safe to reach out for help again. That makes sense.

Throughout this book, you will read stories of adoptive and foster families who are just like you—facing real-life challenges and doing the rewarding but sometimes exhausting work of parenting children from hard places. I try to be honest with these stories. I don’t shy away from the pain and struggle, but I also want to share stories of families working through their difficult circumstances and recognizing that they are not alone. You will also learn about the importance of support—what kinds of support systems exist for adoptive and foster families, and how you can advocate for yourself and your family to get the support you need. You will also learn about how churches can work to support adoptive and foster families and invite these families to participate fully in the richness of a loving, grace-filled community.

In the end, my goal is that you will be instilled with hope, wherever you are—not hope that your problems will go away or that you will suddenly solve all your children’s difficulties and problems. Although great, that would be impossible. I can’t remove or take away your difficulty and struggle. Instead, my goal is that you will experience hope and understand that it is possible to experience a full, vibrant, healthy life as an adoptive and foster family. You can learn new skills to help you improve your relationship with your child and with your spouse. You can gather a group of faithful peo-

ple around you to help support you through your ups and downs. You can have people who understand you and have your back, no matter what. And you can be a church community that actively cares for vulnerable children and supports adoptive and foster families in a way that really works.

## **OUR STORIES**

Let me tell you a bit about myself and my background. My name is Jenn Ranter Hook. I'm originally from Canada, and I moved to the United States to attend graduate school at Wheaton College, which is near Chicago. After getting my master's in clinical psychology, I worked as a therapist in the foster care system. In my work with children and families, I first recognized that families needed more support.

For example, I remember working with Lindsey (age five) and Edward (age eight). These siblings had been placed in a Christian foster home, and I started doing therapy with each of the children, and occasionally the parents as well. The parents were loving and supportive and had a genuine heart to care for vulnerable children. They felt a call from God to foster and prayerfully considered this call for some time before committing to the journey. They also had two other children in the home (two boys—one three years old and another eighteen months).

Even though they were in a good place as a family, the parents were in deep trenches with Lindsey and Edward. The siblings were experiencing some serious emotional and behavioral problems at the time of their placement. Lindsey had been sexually abused, which was the primary reason for the children going into foster care in the first place. She would act out, escalating from zero to a hundred in the blink of an eye. The parents also once found Lindsey playing doctor with their three-year-old son and were uncertain about

whether this was developmentally normative or might represent a repetition of her previous sexual abuse. Edward was struggling as well, especially with feelings of sadness and depression. He also didn't want to leave his biological parents and seemed down and withdrawn most days. At one point, the foster parents came into therapy because Edward had tried to run away on multiple occasions, and had also tried to cut himself with a knife. At age eight, Edward told them that he wanted to kill himself, and they just didn't know how to handle that. He was troubled that he was not able to protect his sister from the abuse she experienced, and he desperately wanted to return home to his mother.

As I sat with the parents in the therapy room, we worked through several issues. We talked about the effects of trauma on children, and I normalized the reactions Lindsey and Edward were having. We discussed the need to adapt parenting strategies to help children who have trauma histories. We came up with a plan for keeping Lindsey, Edward, and their children safe. And throughout the course of therapy, Lindsey and Edward made progress. Lindsey was able to share her feelings with me, and later with her foster and birth parents, which helped reduce her acting-out behaviors. She learned coping skills for how to take care of herself when she started to escalate. Edward was able to communicate some of his sadness through play therapy, and he no longer was suicidal. There were bright spots as a family—movie nights, play dates in the park, and soccer games.

We also spent a lot of time talking about support. As with many families I saw, the parents were more or less on their own. They didn't have adequate support from their friends, family, or church community. Their children felt alone. They felt alone, as if they were the only ones struggling with these kinds of issues. As a therapist, I knew other families living with similar kinds of issues and feelings. The aloneness these families felt was destroying any hope the fam-

ilies had for healing and growth. I couldn't help but think, *Where is the church in this?*

From this place a group of us developed an organization called Replanted ([www.ReplantedMinistry.org](http://www.ReplantedMinistry.org)) in 2011, a ministry that organizes and provides faith-based support for adoptive and foster families. Replanted is a place for families wherever they are on their journey. Parents are encouraged to get involved with support from the very beginning, even as they are working to discern their call from God to foster or adopt. The vast majority of our parents are in the trenches, working day to day in both the beauty and the struggle that is adoptive and foster parenting. We help facilitate authentic community with others who understand the joy as well as the challenge and struggle of adoption and foster care. I remember one adoptive parent who approached me in disbelief about the support she received from participating in a Replanted group with others who truly got it. She had a strong support network of friends in her area, but none who understood the adoption or foster care journey firsthand. The support she received from others speaking a similar language was unlike anything she had experienced. I remember her saying with tears in her eyes, "This ministry is filling a void of support I didn't realize I needed until now."

Replanted also provides a way for church communities to get involved in a real, tangible way to partner with and support adoptive and foster families. We all have a significant role to play. The call to care for vulnerable children is deeply biblical and something that can unite the church. Replanted is not about one church, but about *the church* as we seek to be the unified body of Christ. This book was born out of my experiences over the years as both a therapist and a leader of a national organization that works to provide support to adoptive and foster families.

It has been especially rewarding to write this book as a team with two coauthors, and this volume also draws on their experiences and

expertise. (The book is written from my voice for the ease of reading, but the content reflects our collective experience.) Joshua Hook isn't just my coauthor; he is also my husband, and it has been a blast to dream about and work on this project together. Josh earned his PhD in counseling psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University, and he currently works as a professor at the University of North Texas. He has done quite a bit of research on topics relevant to this book, including humility, forgiveness, healthy relationships and marriage, and Christian counseling. He is also a licensed clinical psychologist in Texas and author of a book on leading small groups (Hook, Hook, & Davis, 2017) that we use to train small group leaders in the Replanted ministry. He also blogs about personal and spiritual growth at [www.JoshuaNHook.com](http://www.JoshuaNHook.com). I draw on his research expertise and clinical experience throughout the book.

Then there is my good friend and colleague Mike Berry. Mike and his wife, Kristin, have adopted eight children. In addition to being adoptive parents, Mike and Kristin served as foster parents for eight years. Mike has the firsthand personal experience of what it is like to be in the trenches and feel as if you have little or no support around you. Partly in response to Mike and Kristin's own struggles and needs, Mike has been involved in supporting adoptive and foster families for many years. He is cocreator of the award-winning blog *Confessions of an Adoptive Parent*, which provides helpful resources for parents, and he also speaks regularly at conferences around the United States on adoptive and foster parenting.

## **STORIES OF ADOPTIVE AND FOSTER CARE FAMILIES**

Throughout this book, I share stories of adoptive and foster families to illustrate key themes and topics of the book. The cases are based on actual experiences with adoptive and foster families, but the names, identifying information, and some details of the stories

have been changed to protect confidentiality. I hope these examples help you recognize that you are not alone.

For example, maybe you'll connect with the story of Josie and Michael. Josie and Michael married in their mid-twenties and had a great first few years of marriage, traveling and getting settled in their careers, church, and community. In their late twenties, they decided to start having kids, but it didn't happen right away. After two years of trying, they saw a fertility doctor, which ultimately led to trying in vitro fertilization (IVF), which was unsuccessful. This news was devastating for Josie and Michael, who needed to grieve that they could not have their own biological children.

Still wanting a family of their own, Josie and Michael decided to adopt internationally, and after a long and expensive adoption process, they adopted a two-year-old girl named Sara from Ukraine. Sara had been placed in an orphanage at birth, which was the only home she had known until she was adopted. Sara was a precious little girl who loved playing dress-up and running around outside. She was a curious child, and Josie and Michael loved walking as a family in the forest preserve behind their house. Every tree, flower, or bug was a new adventure. Josie and Michael loved seeing the world through Sara's eyes. Their family felt more complete, as if something missing had been put in its place.

Although adopting Sara was a joyous occasion, parts of the journey were also difficult and painful. The adoption agency didn't have a lot of details about Sara's family history, but there was concern that Sara's mother had used alcohol and drugs while she was pregnant. Sara showed signs of developmental delays, and she had difficulty attaching to Josie and Michael. She would cry when she was left alone, but when Josie or Michael would try to hold and comfort her, Sara struggled to calm down. Sara had a hard time regulating her emotions and would often hit and bite other children. Because of Sara's emotional and behavioral problems, Josie and Michael had

trouble asking friends and family to agree to babysit so that they could get some time for self-care. The nursery and Sunday school teachers were kind, but eventually they told Josie and Michael that one of them would have to stay with Sara because of complaints from the other parents about her aggressive behavior. Going to church together as a family became tough. Even Josie's family, who lived in the area and were very supportive at the beginning of the adoption process, began to make excuses for why they couldn't babysit or watch Sara.

After a while, these obstacles began to wear on the young couple. They loved Sara deeply, but they became worn-down, tired, and overwhelmed, and they felt ill-equipped to parent a child with developmental delays. Michael and Josie felt as if they were the only ones advocating for their precious little girl. Furthermore, they felt alone. They had thought they had a good support system in place when they began the adoption process, but as Sara's emotional and behavioral problems became more visible, their support system seemed to melt away before their eyes. Friends and family wouldn't return their calls, and those people who did stick around couldn't relate to Josie and Michael's experience. They didn't understand why Sara was acting the way that she did. Some people would give Josie and Michael advice or criticize the job they were doing as parents. Josie and Michael even began to question themselves. Were they doing something wrong? Were they bad parents? Was there any hope of things getting better?

These challenges were also leading to problems in Josie and Michael's marriage. Because of their struggles with support and babysitting, they hadn't been on an actual date in several months. Parenting was taking a toll on their physical health as well. Neither was sleeping or resting enough. Josie used to be a regular at her Pilates class, and Michael enjoyed playing basketball with the

guys each week, but it seemed impossible for them to engage in these activities given their increased levels of stress and Sara's pressing needs. Josie and Michael were arguing more, and they hadn't had sex in three months. Both felt frustrated. Something needed to change, but they didn't see a clear way to do something different.

Or maybe you'll connect with the story of Greg and Kristin. They had two children (Brian, age twelve, and Jenny, age ten). After hearing a sermon at their church on caring for vulnerable children, Greg and Kristin both felt convicted that God wanted them to do something to help meet this need. They felt as if they were in a good place with their family, and after several months of prayer and discernment, they felt that God was leading them to be a foster family. They wanted to provide a loving and safe home for a child in need, while the foster care agency worked toward reunification with the child's birth family.

Soon after going through the process of preparing themselves and their home to be foster parents, they received their first placement: two brothers named David and Jay (ages eight and six). Greg and Kristin, as well as their children, were excited about the new additions to their family. They prepped the boy's bedroom and received donations of clothes, toys, and school supplies from their church. The social worker brought the boys to Greg and Kristin's home two weeks later.

David and Jay presented with moderate levels of emotional and behavioral problems as a result of the trauma they experienced. The brothers had been physically abused by their mother's paramour before a school counselor was made aware of the abuse and reported it. The investigation determined that the boys needed to live with a foster family while their mother worked on being a safe and healthy parent. The boys felt confused about why they couldn't stay with their mother. They thought their mother was awesome and loved her

deeply, and added to the trauma they experienced was the trauma of separation from her. Both contributed to their emotional and behavioral difficulties.

When they first arrived in care, the boys asked Greg and Kristin when they would be able to return home to their mother. Greg and Kristin did their best to answer the almost overwhelming number of questions that David and Jay had, but many times the answers were unknown. David tended to externalize his problems and frustrations, yelling at Greg and Kristin whenever they would try to enforce a rule or boundary with him. He would become deregulated for prolonged periods of time, and nothing seemed to help calm him down. Jay, on the other hand, tended to internalize his problems. He didn't act out as much, but he was quiet and would shut down, sometimes not even responding when Greg, Kristin, or the kids would try to reach out and include him in conversations or activities. The boys began weekly counseling to process all their big feelings and work through their trauma experiences.

Greg and Kristin began adjusting, but they quickly realized there were so many ups and downs, unknowns, and big feelings that came along with being foster parents. Among the positive things were that Greg and Kristin felt deeply that they were doing what God wanted them to do. They were providing a safe and loving home for the boys in their time of limbo. There were times when David and Jay seemed genuinely appreciative of Greg and Kristin's efforts. Greg, Brian, David, Jenny, and Jay would sometimes all play basketball together in the front driveway, and their laughing and energy could fill the house with joy.

The unknowns did become overwhelming for the family. Greg and Kristin constantly felt pulled in opposite directions. They wanted the boys to reunify with their mother when it was safe and possible to do so. On the one hand, they developed a relationship with the biological mother, and she was making progress toward her

goals. On the other hand, sometimes she would make poor choices or miss a weekly visit. When she missed a visit, the boys would be devastated and upset. They started displaying more and more emotional and behavioral difficulties, which made Greg and Kristin feel upset and protective of the boys. The courthouse, weekly visitations, therapy appointments, social worker visits, school meetings, and frequent phone calls from their foster care agency all became the norm.

Living in this state was hard for everyone. Greg and Kristin were stressed and overwhelmed, but doing their best. They loved caring for David and Jay, but they longed for empathic support. When Greg and Kristin would share their experience with friends and family, some were able to listen nonjudgmentally and offer grace and support. Some were understandably upset as well and gave all sorts of advice. Some encouraged Greg and Kristin to stick it out, while others said enough was enough: it was time to send David and Jay back.

Unfortunately, stories like Greg and Kristin's are all too familiar to the foster and adoptive journey. We are often in an uphill climb with our kids because of their trauma and special circumstances. These are precious kids, but trauma manifests itself in so many ways. The story of Greg and Kristin brings up the need for community for the parents and the children, and that's precisely what we're going to discuss in the coming chapters.

## **ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

This book is organized in three major sections. The first section presents the book's theoretical foundation. In chapter 2, I take an in-depth look at what life in the trenches looks like for adoptive and foster families. I think it is important to present an honest picture of the challenges that many adoptive and foster families face, because it is from this accurate place of the gravity of the needs involved that

we try to come up with a workable plan for support. I discuss some of the common challenges facing adoptive and foster parents, such as struggles with infertility, parenting at an older age, and parenting a child from a different cultural background. I also address some of the unique challenges for adoptive and foster children, including a history of trauma, attachment difficulties, and emotional and behavioral problems.

I discuss in chapter 3 the Christian call to care for vulnerable children, as well as those who have been orphaned. First, I explore what I believe to be God's heart toward children who, by definition, are orphans because they have lost their biological parents. At a foundational level, God's heart for children in this state is connected with the core message of Christianity: we are all adopted into God's family as sons and daughters. I then take a deep dive into God's heart for children in these circumstances as illustrated in God's relationship with the Israelites in the Old Testament, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the work of the early church. I also focus on the importance of wisdom and discernment in the Christian call to care for vulnerable children. In addition to encouraging us to think about where God is calling us to get involved, I also encourage entering into this journey with a strong dose of humility, an awareness of our limitations, and appropriate boundaries.

The second section of the book presents the Replanted model of support for adoptive and foster families. I highlight the need for a good support system in place throughout the adoption and foster care journey. Using the metaphor of a child being "replanted" in a new family, in chapter 4 I address emotional support, or the "good soil" necessary for a flourishing adoptive or foster family. It is critical to be in relationship with others who understand the journey—people who can say "me too" when you are experiencing pain, difficulty, struggle, and even small victories. I stress the need to develop relationships and communities characterized by grace, safety, and vul-

nerability. I also talk about practical steps that adoptive and foster parents can take to initiate and seek out these relationships to get the support they need.

As a follow-up to discussing emotional support, I focus in chapter 5 on informational support, or the “sunlight” necessary for thriving as an adoptive and foster parent. Children impacted by the loss of their first family often come from difficult places. Many have experienced trauma and have complex histories. Many do not respond well to traditional parenting discipline practices such as enforcing consequences and removal of privileges. However, adoptive and foster parents are not generally given the necessary training and education to bring their child to a place of healing. As a result, some parents find their child’s behavior perplexing, confusing, and even frustrating. I’ll cover some of the key issues related to parenting through adoption or foster care, and also discuss some key strategies for getting additional information, education, and support.

Tangible support, or the “water” needed for thriving adoptive and foster families, is my topic in chapter 6. Sometimes adoptive and foster parents struggle with getting basic needs met for their children, such as therapeutic services, school supports (e.g., Individualized Education Programs [IEPs]), and medical care. Foster parents may find it especially frustrating to advocate for their child’s needs with the state. If friends and family initially were supportive in regard to tangible needs such as child care, these support systems can dissolve quickly as the support system begins to get a clear understanding of the needs and associated difficulties of the child. Often people have a lot of energy to help and provide support at the beginning of the adoption or foster care journey, but this can wane as the excitement of a new child begins to wear off. I discuss avenues and strategies for obtaining tangible support, as well as some of our psychological blocks with stating clearly the kinds of support we need from others.

The third section of the book explores what support looks like in

context. The topic of chapter 7 is support from the perspective of the family member or friend of the adoptive and foster family. Specifically, I talk about how you can help without hurting. I also discuss some of the common pitfalls and ways that people can try to help that actually do more harm than good. Finally, I share resources and ways that anyone can improve one's own training and education in order to be more helpful when supporting adoptive and foster parents and children.

In addition to exploring how we can help support adoptive and foster families at the individual, relational level, I address support at the organization or church level in chapter 8. Churches often put forth that orphan care is an important value, and they want to help support families. However, they may not know how to provide this support in a way that is effective and actually works. Using examples from real churches that have been successful in creating thriving orphan care ministries, I cover some of the key ways that churches can work to provide a sustainable ministry that provides crucial support to adoptive and foster families.

Chapter 9 provides a send-off and encouragement as you continue your journey. In this concluding chapter, I share some of my deepest hopes and dreams for you—specifically that you would feel supported and find community as you continue in this important work of caring for vulnerable children. I believe God calls us all to play a role in such care, but he also wants us to enter this journey in a way that is balanced, wise, and life-giving. Support is the key way to provide the best chance to make that happen.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

I'm so glad you are here with me on this journey. When I sat with families, more than anything I wanted them to feel that they were

not alone. I wanted them to know that I was with them, I empathized with their struggle, and I had their back. That's the same desire I have for you. There is incredible, healing hope in understanding this, especially when we are struggling and feeling isolated. Discovering others who have the same limp or the same wounds that we have can be ointment to our souls. While it may not solve the issues you are facing, the discovery does give you strength to face the next day. We're in this together—and it's a good thing we are, because the challenges are significant. We need everyone working together, and we need God, too, if we are to provide those loving, supportive families in which our precious children “will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor” (Isaiah 61:3b).

### **EXERCISE: WHERE ARE YOU NOW?**

My goal for this book is for you to engage with it as you read. In fact, one of the best ways to process the material is to work through the book with others who are also on this adoption or foster journey. This might be your spouse, but you could also invite others, such as friends, family, and church members. Each chapter closes with some discussion questions to allow you to reflect on and engage with the material.

Reflect on where you are in your journey in adoption and foster care. Maybe you are at the beginning of your journey, trying to discern God's heart for you and your family. Perhaps you are in the middle of the journey, experiencing both the joy and the struggle. You may even be experiencing more of the struggle part of the equation, and you want to figure out how to get back in balance. You might not even feel called to adopt or foster yourself, but you long to support others who are in the trenches.