

Orphan Ministries Movement Still in Infancy

For too long there has been a disconnect between the church and issues surrounding orphan care, according to Johnny Carr, national director of church partnerships at Bethany Christian Services.

Carr addresses the issues in *Orphan Justice: How to Care for Orphans Beyond Adopting*, a book from B&H Publishing Group designed to provide education about and action plans to care for the estimated 153 million orphaned and vulnerable children in the world.

“Many churches have started orphan ministries, but this movement among churches is still very much in its infancy,” Carr said in an interview. “It is my hope that this book challenges churches to take their involvement further.”

Carr said he wrote *Orphan Justice* based on his own journey in understanding the instruction for “pure religion” defined in James 1:27, which calls believers to care for orphans. As a former pastor, Carr said he believes the church—not government programs or social service agencies—has the most potential and the mandate to take the lead in addressing the world’s orphan crisis.

Adoption is only part of orphan care, he said. HIV/AIDS, **human trafficking** and poverty are all in the picture.

“We (the church) honestly have not done well in the past with orphan ministry, just like HIV/AIDS ministries haven’t done well (through the church),” he said. “But it’s all tied together. It’s all related. We can’t care about orphans without caring about AIDS.”

Carr, who has three adopted children, weaves first-hand

stories throughout Orphan Justice to explain data on the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children and to connect what many consider “liberal issues” together as critical aspects of orphan care.

His overall theme throughout the book is to help the church discover its role in meeting these needs and to help develop an action plan using worldwide partnerships.

“I wanted to write about the complex issues and put them in terms that are simple to understand, [so] that we can make a difference—whether it’s something very small that an individual can do or something large that a church can take on,” Carr said.

Carr explained the disconnect between orphan care and the church grew as evangelical churches distanced themselves from the social gospel movement.

“Churches grew to interpret the social gospel as ‘liberal’ and for people who don’t witness,” Carr said. “But it’s not either/or. It’s both/and. We can’t witness and leave people starving.

“We went so far to the other side of the issue that humanitarian aid came to be seen as liberal,” he said. “It’s not about liberal issues, it’s about sin issues.”

Carr writes in the book: “We are good at keeping ourselves unspotted from the world and sharing our personal witness, but in all of our passion for sharing the Gospel, we neglected to place the same importance on caring for those in distress, as we are commanded to do in James 1:27.”

Categorizing orphan care as only an international issue is also a mistake, he writes in the book:

“Lest we think that orphans only exist in other countries, we must also look at our own problems. Here in the United States,

there are nearly 400,000 children in the foster care system at any given time, and some of those foster homes are not exactly ideal. In addition, over 100,000 of those children are waiting to be adopted.”

Carr is quick to say he is not advocating that everyone adopt a child.

“Adoption is not for everyone and I hope that is clear in the book,” he said. “However, there are many other ways to be involved, such as supporting families who are adopting, offering to babysit, provide respite opportunities for families with special needs children ... those things are really important.”

Organizations like “Bethany are not going to solve the orphan crisis, it’s just a tool,” Carr said. “The **gospel** is the answer. Professional organizations need to see themselves as partners with the church, fleshing out the Gospel.

“What if the church stepped up and adopted every kid in the foster system?” he said. “How about supporting women in unplanned pregnancies? That is being pro-life. I hope to see adoption move from being ‘something some people do’ to ‘it’s what we do as the church.’”

According to Carr, “For churches with nothing in place, I hope this book is a spark. For churches with something, I hope it serves to fan the flames.”