



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Adoption by Kira Austin-Young



Adoption Overview

Our modern conception of adoption is much different from the way it originated in ancient times. During the Roman Empire, wealthy families without male heirs might adopt sons in order to continue their lineage. In fact, several Roman emperors, including Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, were adopted. In the Middle Ages, bloodlines became paramount in matters of inheritance, and adoption declined.

In the United States, Massachusetts passed the first adoption statute in 1851. This statute required a judge sign off on the adoption, thus ending more informal adoptions where a relative or some other interested party would simply take in a child who had been orphaned without legal or government involvement. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Civil War and increased immigration led to an explosion of orphans in East Coast cities. Charles Loring Brace came up with the idea to transport these orphans to the Midwest on trains. Between 1859 and 1929, over 200,000 children traveled on the “Orphan Trains,” which ushered in the first foster care system.

In the early twentieth century, most adoptions were closed adoptions, where the identities of both the adoptive parents and birth parents were kept a secret. This helped avoid the stigma of illegitimacy and was thought to help the family bond.

Since the 1970s, open adoptions, where both parties are known to each other, began to be more accepted, and today these make up between sixty to seventy percent

While the concept of adoption is familiar to most people, the specifics of adoption are less commonly understood. What are the different scenarios that lead to adoption? What are some of the complicating factors? How does our faith help us sort through these issues so that we can support both adoptees and adoptive parents?

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of adoptions. International adoptions and private adoptions, where prospective parents contact individuals through advertisements, lawyers, or other professionals, have risen in popularity since the late twentieth century. According to the Adoption Network, there are currently 1.5 million adopted children in the United States. Every year, 140,000 children are adopted, and nearly 100 million people have someone in their immediate family who has been adopted. Whether as birth parents, adoptive parents, siblings, or adoptees, adoption touches a large number of families, many of whom are present in our churches.

REFLECT:

- What factors do you think have changed how adoption functions on a social, legal, and emotional level throughout history?
- How have you or your family been touched by adoption?

Adoption Procedure

At present, the most common kind of adoption is relative adoption, or adoption by someone related to the child by blood or marriage. This includes both adoption by a stepparent, where someone becomes the legal parent of their spouse's child, or grandparent adoptions. Of those children who are adopted by someone who is not their relative, more than half (fifty-nine percent) come out of the child welfare or foster care system, a quarter (twenty-six percent) come from other countries, and fifteen percent are voluntarily relinquished.

Families considering adopting must be prepared for a long, slow, and frequently expensive process. Typically, the least expensive option is to adopt from foster care, though the process differs between states. Families often undergo the full licensing and approval process that allows them to foster children before being able to adopt. While babies can be adopted from foster care, most of the children are older with a median age of eight years old.

Outside of foster care, licensed private adoption agencies, which adhere to state standards and

oversight, can help facilitate an adoption. Alternatively, families can try an independent adoption or adopting through an unlicensed adoption agency. Going this route may mean more of a financial, emotional, and legal risk for both adoptive and birth families. Unfortunately, there are far too many examples of people taking advantage of a couple's desire for a child to line their own pockets. Recently, an Arizona man who operated an adoption law firm was federally indicted on smuggling, money laundering, and visa fraud charges while linking pregnant women from the Marshall Islands with American families seeking to adopt.

Due to the visibility of many celebrities who adopted children internationally, some families may be drawn to this option. Before safeguards were put in place, international adoptions were too often coercive and unsafe. In 2008, the United States ratified the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, which was enacted to safeguard children and families involved in these adoptions. The agreement requires home studies, parent training, and accreditation for adoption services. Since the Hague Convention, international adoptions have become more restrictive and the numbers have declined. In 2018, most international adoptions were from China, India, Colombia, South Korea, and Haiti.

REFLECT:

- What factors might affect which route a family takes to adopt?
- Why do you think the narrative of relative adoption is missing from many of our conceptions about adoption?

Complicating the Adoption Narrative

Adoption is often presented as a solution to a host of complex issues, from being an alternative to abortion to helping those who are unable to have biological children to providing an outlet for expanding the foster care system. On the surface, this makes sense. Ideally, adoption is about a child Experts consider the experience of separation

from birth parents, even as an infant, to be a form of trauma. Ultimately, even in the most loving and caring scenario, there is no adoption without separation and loss. Paying attention to this more complicated narrative can help adoptive families adjust and heal without feeling like their struggles are abnormal or shameful. Children adopted out of the child welfare or foster care system have often experienced other trauma in addition to the separation from their birth parents. Early traumas also have long-term effects on one's physical and psychological health that often manifest in behavioral problems.

The history of adoption shows us that even the best of intentions can cause harm. For example, adoptive parents of international or mixed race adoptees in the later twentieth century were urged to raise their children in a "colorblind" fashion, while currently, adoptive parents are urged to familiarize themselves with their child's birth culture, country, and language. While most adoptive parents are white, most adoptees are children of color. We must be mindful and attentive to the ways in which

eugenics, white supremacy, and colonialism manifest in discussions and practices surrounding adoption.

Christianity is particularly concerned with the weak and vulnerable, and there is little more vulnerable than a child who is available for adoption. However, keeping the balance between regulations that protect everyone involved while also striving to swiftly place children in loving homes is tricky. Christians should support and encourage adoption and adoptive families while being aware of some of the complications, trauma, and ethical issues surrounding adoption. While adoptive families are no different from birth families in many ways, they may need more nurturing and deliberative care from their faith community.

REFLECT:

- How have you heard a simplified view of adoption used as an answer to a particular problem or issue?
- Do you think adoptions should be more or less regulated than they are today? What are the pros

Core Bible Passages

The concept of adoption features prominently throughout Scripture, including in Jesus' own family. Though he mostly stays out of the spotlight, Joseph, spouse of Mary and stepfather of Jesus, raises Jesus as his own child. Out of the four Gospels, only Matthew tells us about Joseph's struggle with Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy and his choice, encouraged by an angel, to take Mary as his wife and raise Jesus as his own son (Matthew 1:18-25). Because of his role in salvation history, he is sometimes viewed as a kind of patron saint by nonbiological parents. Considering that stepparent adoption is the most common form of adoption, Joseph's choice and commitment to his nonbiological child is a narrative that the church can highlight in supporting families who adopt.

Whether or not we have personal experience with adoption in our immediate families, according to Paul, we are all adopted into the family of God. Adoption is one of Paul's primary metaphors for explaining how Gentiles are included into what was once only available to Jews. In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul talks about how we are adopted through Jesus Christ and receive an inheritance in Christ. In Romans 8:14-17, Paul tells us that we are heirs with Christ and that we too are God's children and not merely slaves.

REFLECT:

- Why do you think Joseph's role as a stepfather to Jesus is frequently overlooked?
- How is Paul's metaphor of spiritual adoption similar to or different from the adoption process as you understand it?
- In what ways is Paul's metaphor of adoption meaningful to you in your spiritual life?

Orphans and Adoption in Popular Culture

From classic literature like *Jane Eyre* to fairy tales to superhero movies, many of our most beloved and memorable characters are written as orphans. Situating a character as an orphan is shorthand for that character's struggle and resilience. They have known loss and trauma, and now they can overcome adversity on their hero's journey. The trope is so common that it almost fades into the background. Think about some of your favorite movies or books, especially those that feature children, and there is a strong likelihood that a character has lost one or both parents.

However, the way orphans are treated in popular culture has also led to some common misconceptions. The orphans depicted in books like *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden* were often written in protest against the treatment of orphans at that time who were often used for cheap labor and were intended to show that orphans were valuable simply for themselves. However, these characters have also perpetuated misconceptions about real orphans who may not be as naturally resilient as those in books and may not be able to easily reintegrate into family life, nor do they often model current best practices or procedures of adoption. While orphans in stories follow one narrative, it is important to remember that real-life orphans are individuals with varying struggles and gifts.

REFLECT:

- What was the last thing you watched or read that contained a character who was an orphan? What was their story arc?
- How have the popularity of orphan characters influenced the way we think about orphans and adoption at present?

United Methodist Perspective

“The Nurturing Community” section of the United Methodist Social Principles contains a paragraph that directly addresses adoption. Social Principles acknowledge the complicated nature of adoption and recognize that there are usually difficult circumstances that lead a birth family to allow a child to be adopted. Naming the “agony, strength, and courage” and the “hope, love, and prayer” of the birth parents and the adoptive parents, The United Methodist Church recognizes the varying emotions and situations on both sides of an adoption.

Because adoptions can happen in a variety of ways, the Social Principles currently advocate for adhering to proper legal procedures as well as encouraging open adoptions, “so that a child may know all information and people related to them, both medically and relationally.” In addition, they call for greater awareness and education to promote adoption through a variety of avenues in order to care for a broad number of children. All of the parties involved in an adoption—the birth parents, the receiving parents, and the child—are commended to the care of the church.

Frequently, adoption is suggested as an alternative to abortion, and thus the Social Principles briefly mention adoption in the section about abortion, acknowledging it as one option among many. In compassionately exploring all options related to unintended or difficult pregnancies, the Social Principles state, “We particularly encourage the Church, the government, and social service agencies to support and facilitate the option of adoption.”

REFLECT:

- What would you add to the section on adoption in the Social Principles that might more directly address the needs and experiences of adoptees?
- In what ways does your church or community educate or promote awareness around adoption?

Helpful Links

- This government packet summarizes the different types of adoptions and the decisions that families considering adoption need to make.
https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_adoption.pdf
- This website contains links about the ethics of adoption, including placement, post-adoption, and types of adoption. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-ethics/>
- A first-person article written by a Korean woman adopted internationally by white parents.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nicolechung/being-korean-and-adopted-by-white-parents-nicole-chung>

About the Writer

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Next Week in **FaithLink**
Connecting Faith and Life

Long-Term Effects of COVID-19

by Benjamin Dueholm

Over the last several months, COVID-19 had radically reshaped the lives of billions of people around the globe.

What are long-term medical effects of COVID-19? What financial and social effects will the pandemic have on our country and our world? As Christians, how will the church be effected and how should it respond?



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Opening Prayer

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Be present with us now in this gathering. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Open the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.
- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Open the discussion by inviting participants to brainstorm the first words that come to mind when they think of adoption. Have a volunteer write these words on a markerboard or a large sheet of paper. After sharing for a few minutes, have participants discuss how these words shape the way they view adoption.
- Invite two volunteers to read the following Scriptures aloud: Ephesians 1:3-14 and Romans 8:14-17. Discuss how this metaphor of adoption helps us to understand our role in the kingdom of God. Ask: How do you think this metaphor sounds to those who are adopted? How would this experience change their understanding of Paul's metaphor?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Learn more about the child welfare system by having a foster parent or social worker active in the foster care system speak to your group. Research what the laws regarding adoption are in your state as well as the process to become a foster parent or adopt out of the foster care system. If you cannot locate anyone to speak to your group, utilize the modules and videos on the Adopt US Kids website (<http://adoptuskids.org>) to educate your group about the child welfare system.

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children. Give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.