

***Submission by the Faith to Action Initiative to inform the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Day of General Discussion on 16/17 September 2021, on “Children’s Rights and Alternative Care”
30 June 2021***

In support of the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child’s recognition that “the family has the primary responsibility for the nurturing and protection of children; that family is in the best interests of the child, and that children, for the full and harmonious development of their personality, should grow up in a family environment and in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” the Faith to Action Initiative (Faith to Action) submits the following recommendations to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee), based on our experience, learning, and perspective.

Faith to Action is a coalition of organizations working to increase knowledge and build capacity of US Christians to support nurturing and protective family care for children around the world (www.faithtoaction.org). Faith to Action provides resources and targeted outreach to educate and mobilize Christians toward supporting family-based care using evidence-based best practices. With over 15 years of experience engaging faith-based leaders both in the US and around the world on the issue of family care for children, we understand both the challenges with mobilizing faith actors, as well as the abundant opportunities.

This submission will provide background and recommendations regarding:

1. The role of local and national faith-based leaders and faith communities in improving care for children; and
2. The importance of addressing foreign faith-based funding and volunteering, both drivers of unnecessary separation.

1. The Role of Faith-based Communities in Improving Care for Children

Faith to Action believes that in order for children to be supported in nurturing, loving, protective, and permanent families, and to achieve their full range of human rights - civil, cultural, economic, political and social - local faith communities must be actively engaged in supporting vulnerable families. Churches, faith-based organizations, and individuals need to be educated, mobilized, and equipped to support family care approaches for caring for orphaned and vulnerable children, using evidence-based best practices.

Christians have been significant contributors in responding to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in their communities for thousands of years. Though well-intended, responses have often focused on residential care and not aligned with best practice and international standards for care, as described in the *Guidelines on Alternative Care for Children* and *2019 Resolution on the Rights of the Child*. However, we have found that when faith

communities' efforts are redirected toward family-based care models, they bolster family-strengthening efforts, alternative family-based care models, and care reform.

The experience of one of Faith to Action's partners highlights the importance of States Parties engaging, encouraging, and recognizing Christians and other peoples of faith in care reform efforts. World Without Orphans calls and equips national faith leaders to collaborate in solving their country's orphaned and vulnerable children crisis. Members of their network work together to provide solutions and catalyse change in the systems of care that surround children in their countries. For example, in Romania, they spearheaded a successful campaign that, in 2020, resulted in certain restrictions in the law being cancelled to enable more children to be placed in family-based foster care. Paraguay Protects Families was created as a network in Paraguay to encourage care reform. It supported the government in reviewing the country's child protection system. The review resulted in action plans to streamline the process to reduce the average five-year wait that most children experience while the courts decide their future. These are just a couple examples where faith leaders and faith communities play essential roles, not just in caring for vulnerable families and children, but also in systemic change.

However, within the context of care reform efforts, faith communities and leaders are, in some instances, excluded or overlooked by government planning and implementation. Without faith-based support, care reform and child welfare systems will be limited in their impact. Faith communities can provide direct care to vulnerable children and families in times of crisis. Faith leaders can shift harmful norms or stigmas in societies and call people to action. Faith-based organizations can provide vital services in systems of protection and care of children, such as case management, parenting training, and household economic strengthening. Therefore, the Committee must promote the consultation with and inclusion of faith leaders in the earliest stages of care reform processes of States Parties.

Engaging faith communities in national care reform is particularly urgent considering the global impacts of COVID-19 that will continue to significantly impact vulnerable children and families and children in need of alternative care. The World Bank estimates the impact of COVID-19 on extreme poverty (people living on less than \$1.90/day) to increase by 119 to 124 million people as a result of COVID-19¹. COVID-19's direct and secondary impacts are challenging families around the world and putting children in danger of being unnecessarily separated from their families or placed into unsafe living arrangements. For example, a recent news article shares the story of a 23-year-old woman who is now caring for her six younger siblings after the death of her parents². Faith-based organizations and communities must be catalyzed to support the

¹ World Bank, *Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty: Looking Back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021*, 2021 (p 6). Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021/>.

² CNN, *India's brutal second wave is leaving hundreds of children orphans*. 2021. Available at <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2021/06/07/india-orphan-children-coronavirus-covid-19-sud-pkg-intl-hnk-vpx.cnn/video/playlists/coronavirus-intl/>.

growing number of vulnerable households. Fortunately, faith-based organizations, like those listed on Faith to Action's COVID-19 response website³, are ready, positioned, and willing to respond to the extreme increase of stress facing children and families and to help avoid the unnecessary placement of children from parents or other family members.

While current practices of many organizations, including faith-based, may not yet be aligned with international standards of best practice in care, the Committee can encourage States Parties to support faith communities in their countries in learning to improve their practices, to provide critical support services to families and communities, and include faith leaders in national care reform efforts. This training could easily be done through States Parties engaging with the faith communities and incorporating them into the national efforts to improve care for children.

RECOMMENDATION: Ensure faith-based involvement in national efforts to improve care for children.

Recognizing that local faith-based actors play a significant role in care for children around the world, both formally and informally, they must be engaged in efforts to reform national child protection and child welfare systems. Therefore, Faith to Action calls on the Committee to encourage States Parties to include faith communities and faith-based organizations in efforts to strengthen child welfare and protection systems, as vital contributors to those systems. States Parties must engage these faith actors to develop policies and services with a primary intent to reach vulnerable families and provide child centered support services that reduce or eliminate risks factors, promote safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments, provide concrete support in times of need and improve families' economic security and stability, and foster parental and child resilience, including through increased access to social support and coping strategies. The Committee can ensure care reform efforts of States Parties include engaging, educating, and assimilating national and local faith leaders, faith-based care providers, and faith-based communities in the transition to family-based care models.

2. The Need to Address Foreign Faith-based Funding and Volunteering in Care Reform Efforts

The 2019 UN Resolution on the Rights of the Child urges States Parties to tackle the drivers of unnecessary separation of children, such as volunteering and financial support to orphanages. Faith to Action recognizes that foreign faith actors have unintentionally and significantly contributed to these drivers, through both funding of and volunteering in residential care.

A recent survey by the Barna Group of 3,000 US Christians revealed significant levels of financial support for residential care for children including orphanages and children's homes. Nineteen percent of respondents report giving financially to these types of programs every year. Barna

³ Faith to Action, *COVID-19 Resource Page*, 2020. Available at <https://www.faithtoaction.org/covid-19-response/>.

Group projects that US Christian individuals (not including churches, foundations, or major donors) contribute approximately \$3.3 billion annually to support residential care models. Additionally, 21% of participants who have gone on service trips have visited residential care facilities⁴. A 2017 study from Lumos Foundation USA suggests that US faith-based donors represent 90% of funding to orphanages in Haiti, and estimated the total funding to all Haitian orphanages at \$100 million per year⁵. The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability’s recent survey found an almost 5% increase over the last five years in donations to their members who run children’s homes and orphanages. Clearly, US Christian funding and volunteering present obstacles to care reform, not to mention faith-based funding coming from other countries and other religious backgrounds. Christians who want to help have unknowingly played a role in the separation of children from families.

Faith to Action is concerned about how generous and caring donors will respond to the global impacts of COVID-19. History suggests they will likely fundraise for residential care. Faith to Action was founded as a result of the AIDS crisis and the proliferation of orphanages built or funded to care for “AIDS orphans.” When US Christians responded with empathy and generosity during that epidemic, they focused funding on the building of orphanages throughout Africa. One 2004 study reflected on the previous 10 years of response to the epidemic in Zimbabwe and it found a doubling in the number of registered orphanages (we know many more were likely not legally registered) and that 85% of the funding for those orphanages came from faith-based sources⁶. There is an urgency to learn from our experience in the AIDS response and proactively focus faith-based funding toward caring for families so that the COVID-19 pandemic will not unnecessarily separate children from their families.

Encouragingly, promising data shows that when donors and volunteers are made aware of the negative impact orphanages have on children, they will shift their support. The previously mentioned survey by Barna found 72% of Christians surveyed feel inspired to make a change toward family care and 81% believe ending the need for orphanages is a worthwhile goal.

US Christians can play a vital role in care reform around the world by shifting their support towards models that provide a better way—care for children in families. Faith to Action strives to connect with US Christian donors and volunteers to help them change the way they support orphaned and vulnerable children. Over the last year Christian organizations and churches have come together to voice their support for children in families. Recently, over 350 non-governmental organizations and churches, including the World Evangelical Alliance, World

⁴ Barna Group, *Residential Care: US Christian Giving*, 2021. Available at www.faithtoaction.org/barnastudy2021/.

⁵ Lumos USA, *Funding Haitian Orphanages at the Cost of Children's Rights*, 2017. Available at <https://www.wearelumos.org/resources/funding-haitian-orphanages-cost-childrens-rights/>.

⁶ G. Powell, T. Chinake, D. Mudzingo, W. Maambira, and S. Mukutiri, *Children in Residential Care: The Zimbabwean Experience*, 2004. Available at <https://bettercarenetwork.org/library/the-continuum-of-care/residential-care/children-in-residential-care-the-zimbabwean-experience/>.

Vision, Catholic Relief Services, Bethany Christian Services, World Without Orphans, and Christian Alliance for Orphans have signed *The Global Church Pledge to See Children Thrive in Safe and Loving Families*⁷ committing to “support efforts which strengthen families, invest in family-based solutions, and combat the root causes of their vulnerability.” These commitments, in addition to the influence these organizations can have as they share their commitment with others, can help shape support for how vulnerable children are cared for in the wake of COVID-19 and beyond.

The Committee must encourage States Parties to support the redirection of foreign faith-based funding toward programming that helps build effective systems of protection and care for children.

RECOMMENDATION: Address foreign faith-based funding and volunteering

Recognizing that well-meaning support for institutions through donations, orphanage volunteering, and faith-based missions can lead to unnecessary family-child separation and undermine de-institutionalization and care reform efforts, Faith to Action calls on the Committee to encourage States Parties to regulate and utilize foreign donor funds in ways that best support children.

Faith to Action calls upon the Committee to require States Parties to, at minimum, establish registration, oversight, and accountability mechanisms and licensing systems for all formal alternative care options, including private faith-based organizations with foreign funding. We urge the Committee to support States Parties to assess the quality of care and status of children in all facilities and formal placements in their countries; conduct a planned, time-bound process to register; and develop and implement a plan for the safe, phased closure of those unable or unwilling to fulfill requirements for registration and licensing within a set period; prohibit the establishment of new institutions; and ensure effective gatekeeping and referral mechanisms are in place.

Finally, Faith to Action asks the Committee to urge States Parties to adequately resource care strengthening and reform and redirect public and private resources, such as faith-based foreign funding, toward a range of suitable high-quality community-based care options and the safe transition from institutional to family-based care in the community. For example, States Parties should ensure that public or private funds are not spent on maintaining, renovating, establishing, building, or creating any form of institution or institutionalization.

In conclusion, Faith to Action urges the Committee to do what they are able to recognize and increase the valuable role faith-based actors can play in supporting vulnerable children and their families. Thank you for considering our recommendations.

⁷ Available at www.globalchurchpledge.org.