

## **Growing Within Our Hearts. Explorations in the Faith Development and Religious Education of Adopted Children and Their Parents**

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**Abstract:** This paper is a case study showing the interplay of religious education and curriculum development with the lived experience to be found in the private, familial, and community life of people of faith who have been touched by the phenomenon of adoption. It begins with a brief survey of the literature, showing the new permutations of adoption in the United States today and setting out in broad strokes the psychological and social agenda of adopted children and their families. It places the demand for an engagement with religious education in the context of the new “technologies” which bring hope to the challenge of infertility but may split biologic from social parenting; with the new face of adoption in its international complexion; and with a new embrace of special needs adoption -- each making a sense of religious rootedness and identity more of a challenge. It summarizes the findings of the few studies addressing the spiritual and religious development of adopted children and makes recommendations for religious education resource development with children, adults, and families. Using the methodology and theoretical constructs from process thinkers and practical theologians, it identifies religious rituals that can support, celebrate, and validate new families and new family members.

“Our self- representation, the way we define who we are, takes the shape of the life story we tell. What we remember, what we stress as significant, and what we omit of our past defines our present. And since the boundaries of our self-definition also delimit our hopes and aspirations, this personal history affects our future. If we see ourselves as victimized, as powerless and overwhelmed by forces we cannot understand or control, we will choose to live cautiously, avoid conflict and evade pain. If we see ourselves as loved, grounded, powerful, we will embrace the future, live courageously, and accept challenges with confidence.”

Gilda Lerner, *Why History Matters:  
Life and Thought* (NY: Oxford, 1997), 199

Religious educator Jane Regan in *Toward an Adult Church* speaks of meaning-making, an exploration of what she describes as the very heart and task of what it means to be human, a process she defines as “finding the patterns and forms and relationships that give unity and significance to one’s life.”<sup>1</sup> This search is a constitutive part of understanding the complex

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<sup>1</sup> Jane E. Regan, *Toward an Adult Church. A Vision of Faith Formation* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002), 32.

developing faith in adults, she argues. For people of faith, the experience of God arises in specific events or contexts and then, through theological reflection given shape and vocabulary by religious education, changes our meaning-making of those events. Religious truth must always be brought into deep dialogue with given persons and what they deem to be of ultimate value.

One of the “events” in contemporary U.S. culture is the more widespread practice and changing face of adoption. Adoption can be one lens through which questions of the view of the self in families, in community, and in the world can be examined. “Since it forces us to confront questions about personal identity, the nature of family, the relationships between racial and ethnic communities, and the role of different societies’ perspectives on children and families, adoption has long demanded much wider and deeper attention than it has received,” contends one writer in the field, an adoptive parent himself.<sup>2</sup> More than five million people in the United States have been adopted (more than in any other country), and roughly 140,000 children are newly adopted each year. When birth parents, adoptive parents, biological and adoptive siblings are added, the number of people touched by adoption increases into the tens of millions.<sup>3</sup>

If it is indeed true that, as one professional in the field notes, adoption may prompt “normative crises” in the life history and development of the adoptive family through time and generations,<sup>4</sup> what for the most part has been left unarticulated in the literature is the insight that adoption, as one of many human dilemmas, may have profound and deep influences on the religious development of children and their families as well. Yet children and families have been poorly served in the curriculum and resources that religious education might bring to bear in the meaning-making of this profound experience. If the adopted child charts a journey starting from - “If my (biological) parents relinquished/rejected me, how can I be beloved of Abba?”— can the family and religious traditions provide a space, language, and vision of promise, covenant, and fidelity that can lead to a confident claim -- “Just as my adoption was a gratuitous gift and I was beloved of my (adopted) parents before I was known, how much more so is God’s love for me.” How can religious education more consciously serve as an invitation to the grounded, powerful, courageous life we all want for our children...and for ourselves?

This paper explores the experience of adoption as an example of the synapses among pastoral care, theological reflection, and religious education. A new moment in theology (sharpened by the contribution of feminist theologians and others) is seeing in the particularity of experience – experience in history, in culture, in place, and in time – an ever-renewing crucible of revelation. As theologian Dermot Lane notes, “One of the most significant developments in Christian theology in this century has been the recovery of experience as an integral element in the exercise of theology.”<sup>5</sup> Theologian Roger Haight sees experience as a revelatory “product of God’s presence and initiative within human subjectivity.” Never reduced to psychology, never

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<sup>2</sup>Adam Pertman, *Adoption Nation. How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America* (NY: Basic Books, 2002), x.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Maguire Pavao, *The Family of Adoption* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Dermot Lane, *The Experience of God. An Invitation to Do Theology* (NY: Paulist Press, 1981), 1.

purely subjective, experience is a historically-mediated content of revelation, he argues.<sup>6</sup> Religious education is a full and necessary partner in this endeavor as experience is brought to word through reflection and articulation – a word that speaks to the root experience it seeks to interpret. It is this reflection that serves to integrate spirituality, prayer, liturgical life, and Christian action.<sup>7</sup>

### **Adoption Today**

It is estimated that 20% of all Americans are directly linked to the experience of adoption as adoptees, adoptive parents, siblings, biological parents, spouses, grandparents, or offspring.<sup>8</sup> The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that 1.6 million children under age eighteen live with adoptive parents and that 2.5% of American families include an adopted child.<sup>9</sup> Talk show stories of adopted children successfully searching for birth parents, only to find a whole new family of step-siblings as well, remind us of how this issue has the potential to touch many lives. And even though there is no common script for talking about adoption in our society – with a rich panoply of experiences falling within the adoption framework – adoption “touches upon universal themes of abandonment, sexuality, identity, and the sense of belonging,”<sup>10</sup> each with the concomitant potential for profound implications for one’s sense of God and sense of community.

Adoption is not what it used to be, however. Once the task of adoption agencies was the placement of healthy, white babies with young and white married couples. A four-year-old child was too old to adopt. A mentally challenged child was destined for life-long institutional care. In the 1970’s, when the supply of healthy white babies seemed almost to disappear, the priorities of adoption agencies began to change. Child welfare advocates began to champion the cause of special needs children in the foster care system, for example, and many potential parents are now encouraged to consider adopting adolescents, ethnic minority children, chronic care children, children removed from parent’s care or lack of care, children who are victims of sexual abuse, and children born in other countries. Persons seeking to become parents through adoption carry a new face as well. Single men and women and gay men and women, both single and in coupled relationships – all are sharing in this contemporary way of forming a family.

Approximately 50,000 children are now available for adoption and, of these, approximately half are non-white, primarily black. *Transracial* adoptions account for roughly 4% of all adoptions each year. As one author reminds us, “One can well imagine that, if being an

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (NY: Paulist Press, 1990), 96.

<sup>7</sup>These disciplines and constructs are often housed under the rubric of practical theology. Practical theology is broadly defined as an endeavor to “make theology in general more relevant to the guidance of action and to bridge the gap between theory and practice, thought and life.” See Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology. The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 3. Practical theologians examine the formation of Christian community and personhood through the critical reflection demanded in a public theology of preaching, worship, pastoral care, and religious education.

<sup>8</sup> Marian Sandmaier, *When Love is Not Enough* (Washington, D.C.: Children Welfare League of America, 1988), 6.

<sup>9</sup>*Adopted Children and Stepchildren 2000 Census*. 2000 Special Report, CENSR-6 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Miriam Reitz and Kenneth W. Watson, *Adoption and the Family System: Strategies for Treatment* (NY, NY: Guilford Press, 1992), 3.

adoptive parent is considered anomalous, adopting transracially is an even greater deviation from the average.”<sup>11</sup> *International* adoptions, involving permutations of transcultural and transracial dimensions, may carry extra challenges.<sup>12</sup> Loss of parents, siblings, culture, and country can make joining a family of strangers a formidable task indeed. The portrait of the overseas adoptee as an “adorable, dark-eyed moppet waiting eagerly for rescue by a new family” may not prepare parents in some cases for the severe medical problems or troubled behavior stemming from malnutrition, abuse, or neglect.<sup>13</sup> *Special needs adoptions* (placement of older age children, or those with developmental problems, physical disability, behavioral problems, or need for sibling group placement) are usually accomplished only after barriers have been overcome that delayed or prevented timely permanent placement. Some key predictors of success include younger age of the child at placement, adoption by the child’s foster parents, and access to complete background information and health history of the child. Sexual abuse of the child prior to placement is a major factor in unsuccessful outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Religious educators may ask what these new faces of adoption will mean as we explore implications for children’s spiritual health and the religious education curriculum that can bring it to bear -- children who have already made a complex and sometimes tortuous journey from foster family, from foreign land, from danger to safety.

As the complexion of adoption moves from homogenous adoptions (white Catholic “unwed mother” wants to place baby with white Catholic family) to situations where children – often school-age or early adolescents -- are not being surrendered for adoption by parents but are available for adoption because their parental rights have been terminated, the implications for religious identity and formation become more immediate.<sup>15</sup> In these circumstances, religious rootedness and a language to express it take on new importance post-adoption and should be a more clearly articulated part of the counseling process with children and their welcoming adoptive parents.<sup>16</sup>

### **Psychological and Developmental Issues**

A detailed examination of the psychological and developmental issues that may confront the adopted child and the family system is beyond the scope of this paper. (Variables abound as well: age at adoption, number of moves before permanent placement, relinquishment by parents or removal, history of sexual abuse, etc.) As religious educators begin a conversation on this issue, however, knowledge of the “pressure points” facing children and parents at various stages in the family life cycle will be essential.

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<sup>11</sup> Anne-Marie Ambert, *The Effect of Children on Parents* (NY: Haworth Press, 2001), 172.

<sup>12</sup> Almost 20,000 adoptions in 2002 were intercountry adoptions, slightly less than half of them from Russia and China. See [http://travel.state.gov/orphan\\_numbers.html](http://travel.state.gov/orphan_numbers.html).

<sup>13</sup> Sandmaier, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Center for the Future of Children, *Adoption: The Future of Children* (Spring, 1993), 77.

<sup>15</sup> Researcher Barbara Melosh has developed a history of adoption in the United States, using Maryland case files and practices as illustrative of broader patterns. She noted that religious affiliation had served traditionally as a significant marker of parental fitness. By the end of the twentieth century, however, religious affiliation was underplayed as a factor in matching children with adopted parents. Most state regulations are now “permissive” – i.e., placement without regard to religious heritage unless honoring a maternal preference. See Barbara Melosh, *Strangers and Kin. The American Way of Adoption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 77-79.

<sup>16</sup> Wendy Freund, New York Foundling Hospital, telephone interview by author, 9 November 2001.

The majority of adoptees who write out of their own experience – and the professionals who have interviewed, studied, or counseled them – agree that part of the developmental process and growth toward a mature adulthood for the adopted person involves wrestling at some point in their lives with ambivalent or painful feelings about their adoption. Adoption launches the child on a lifelong quest to form an authentic sense of self. “Who am I and how did I get here? To whom do I belong and owe my allegiance?” -- questions asked in all sorts of ways, explicit and implied, healthy and destructive. Psychologists may speak of cognitive dissonance, adoption experts of genealogical bewilderment -- “genetic ego replaced by a hereditary ghost.” But the relinquishment by the birth mother, the separation and violation of trust – whether experienced at the time of the transfer or reflected upon at a later stage – is a personal and primal pain which needs to be verbalized, validated, and grieved. Dr. Sherrie Eldridge, herself an adopted child and now a psychologist working in the field, has written:

As with most everything in life, adoption has positive and negative elements. None of us wants to acknowledge the negative, painful side – that is, loss. But the truth is, the very act of adoption is built upon loss. For the birth parents, the loss of their biological offspring, the relationship that could have been, a very part of themselves. For the adoptive parents, the loss of giving birth to a biological child, the child whose face will never mirror theirs. And for the adopted child, the loss of the birth parents, the earliest experience of belonging and acceptance. To deny adoption loss is to deny the emotional reality of everyone involved.<sup>17</sup>

When loss is unresolved and grief suppressed, feelings of rage, depression, low self-esteem, and acute separation anxiety can occur. Eldridge cautions that “if left unresolved, this grief can and often does sabotage the strongest of families and the deepest potential within the adopted child. It can undermine the most sincere parental commitment and force adoptees to suffer in private, choosing either rebellion or conformity as a mode of relating.”<sup>18</sup> The struggles with intimacy, attachment, loss, and anger that adult adoptees portray can make for powerful reading. Witness titles such as *Being Adopted: The Life Long Search for Self* or *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* and *Don’t Touch My Heart: Healing the Pain of an Adopted Child*. In *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* author Betty Jean Lifton organizes her chapters with titles such as “Mothered/Motherless Self”; “Artificial Self, Forbidden Self”; and “Stuck in the Life Cycle.”

This raw and palpable sense of loss and grief may not hold true for each adoptee. How adoptees process the narrative of their adoption is, however, critical to developing a sense of peaceful, authentic selfhood. “It can be a confusing, painful revelation,” a family therapist cautions. “It causes some children to begin grieving, others to become angry or feel guilty, yet others to withdraw. Whatever its effects, it’s one of a series of distinct stages in most adoptees’ lives that can powerfully influence their maturation... and presents particular challenges for their

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<sup>17</sup> Sherrie Eldridge, *Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wished Their Adopted Parents Knew* (NY: Dell Publishing, 1999), 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

parents.”<sup>19</sup> For religious educators, it is important to note that the latency stage (age seven to eleven) can be a critical period when the adopted child begins to fully understand intellectually and emotionally what adoption really means in his life. He begins to grapple with the reality that for his adoption to have taken place, the mother who bore him had to have “given him up.” The perception of rejection may come as an affront to a child who had heretofore thought of himself/herself as wanted, chosen, and special. Adolescence is another developmental stage fraught with potential challenges for adopted teens, a time of self-doubt and searching where issues of loss, rejection, and identity are added to the mix of the “control and independence” agenda, especially when the relationship with parents is already strained or the bonding with them tentative.

Parents struggling with these issues may find comfort in knowing that the literature on adoption is divided between researchers who have not found any significant difference in adjustment levels and outcomes and those who do. Professionals who counsel troubled adopted children or adolescents can perhaps be too hasty to see all problems through the adoption lens, framing questions within a pathological or deficit view of adoption, helping to create stigmatizing social constructions of adoption.<sup>20</sup> Some studies have found that, to the contrary, adopted children show increased ego strength and resiliency. In any event, the wise family system allows for all feelings to be expressed, no matter how painful, and the child receives emotional support in her exploration. Most counselors are in agreement that if adoptive parents have access to genetic or hereditary information about the child, they should share it.

### **Family Issues**

Some understanding of the parallel backdrop of the family and its own hurts, vulnerabilities, and resilience is needed as well. The adoption literature is unequivocal in linking the ease with which the child accepts his or her history with the degree of success the adoptive parents have had in accepting their own status, claiming fully that they are entitled to raise, love, and discipline this child “born in their hearts.” Claiming, a social process, involves making a lifelong commitment to the child with all the legal rights, responsibilities, and privileges that go with this status. Entitlement, a psychological task unique to adoption, is the perception and the feeling that the child is “rightfully yours,” a response from both head and heart.<sup>21</sup> “Entitlement” comes only when role ambiguity and vulnerability have been successfully negotiated. Symptoms showing the work is unfinished may include problems with discipline; an overindulged child; feelings of guilt; difficulty in allowing the child appropriate measures of independence and individualization from the parents; and difficulty in discussing the adoption or, conversely, seeing all of the child’s experiences or difficulties through the adoption lens.<sup>22</sup>

In this regard, the stigma of language can work to undermine the mantle of entitlement, impacting both adoptees’ and parents’ sense of worth. “Blood is thicker than water,” “real,” “own,” “natural” -- all can imply that adoptive parents are somehow “unnatural” or that adoption is an inferior form of becoming a parent. Another challenge is the absence of social symbols and

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<sup>19</sup> Pertman, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Ambert, 170-172.

<sup>21</sup> Jerome Smith, *The Realities of Adoption* (NY: Madison Books, 1997), 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

customs to validate adoptive parenthood - - the baby showers, parental preparation classes, and work leave, for example, that attend a home-from-the-hospital newborn arrival. Adoptive families may have the sense of “having gone underground” to create a family and can feel deeply isolated from relatives and friends. Acceptance by new grandparents, other children, school personnel, and the community at large may be less than enthusiastic, especially in the case of disabled, transracial, or transcultural children.<sup>23</sup> For some couples, coming to embrace “full entitlement” can come only after a healthy mourning of their own infertility. Childlessness – and, by implication, adoptive parenthood – can be a discrediting social attribute if infertility is seen as an inadequacy and a barrier to experiencing a full humanity.

Other adoptive parenting challenges can impact the adoptive child’s journey in loss, trust, acceptance, and intimacy as well. After waiting so long and enduring endless agency scrutiny, parents can sometimes feel pressure to prove their parent-worthiness by producing the “perfect child.” Seduced by slogans of instant love and forever families, parents may be bewildered and overwhelmed at the complex and difficult task that parenting can be but may fear confiding frustrations and feelings of inadequacy. Adoptive parents may also need to come to terms with the “limits of the dream” with their adopted children, when the child’s assets and needs crystallize and their own gifts and deficiencies as parents become clearer. This process can involve a real sense of loss and grief.<sup>24</sup> In working through these and many other issues, the goal for all parties is to embrace the adoption process as inherently good, for “the child who is taught that adoption is good feels that she, too, is good. She comes to like herself as worthwhile and a valuable member of the family.”<sup>25</sup>

In summary, adoption is a complex reality, one that must not be underplayed nor overemphasized in family life. It calls for an integration of the child’s heritage – biological, social, and psychological-- without repudiation or denial, letting the past have “a vote, not a veto” as a future is imagined. Differences within the family are celebrated but not idolized.

### **The Spiritual Health of the Child**

Part of that move toward integration should include a more forthright recognition of the spiritual needs of the child and the family as well, this paper argues. What are the resources available to parents, families, and professionals who want to honor and celebrate the spiritual journey of this adopted child and the family making this pledge to learn to love? One answer to the question is “the null set,” for, surprisingly, much of the literature and studies concerning adopted children fail to frame the adopted child as a spiritual being or give any recommendations for fostering the child’s spiritual health. For example, Reitz and Watson’s *Adoption and the Family System* is a rich resource for counselors and therapists working with adoption family systems but is silent on any discussion of religious development or pastoral resources.<sup>26</sup> Sandmaier’s work in *When Love is Not Enough* calls for mobilizing support systems to overcome

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<sup>23</sup> Sandmaier, 42-43.

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy W. Smith and Laurie N. Sherwen, *Mothers and Adopted Children: The Bonding Experience* (NY: Tiresias Press, 1988), 137.

<sup>25</sup> Jerome Smith, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Miriam Reitz and Kenneth W. Watson, *Adoption and the Family System: Strategies for Treatment* (NY: Guilford Press, 1992).

adoption stigma by working to create a greater sense of both claiming and entitlement for adopted families, but no mention is made of religious tradition nor religious community as one of those supports.

It is in the personal reflections of authors writing out of their own adoption where the question of “search” is reframed as more than a genetic or medical model only. They ask, “What are my gifts, my vulnerabilities, my heritage? – questions religious educators will recognize as the very fodder of the spiritual journey. Betty Jean Lifton in *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* speaks of the struggle to move to “internal rhythms of unknown progenitors” when legacy and lineage remain unknown. Sherrie Eldridge in *Twenty Things Adopted Children Wish Their Adopted Parents Knew* reminds the reader-parent that their children will have spiritual needs. “I need to be taught that my life narrative began before I was born and that my life is not a mistake,” she writes. “I need to be taught that I have intrinsic, immutable value as a human being; I need to accept the fact that some of my adoption questions will never be answered in this life.” In a conclusion to her work, Joyce Pavao speaks almost reverently of what one might label the *vocation* of being adopted. She speaks of the innate sense of spirit/spirituality that many adopted persons have as they wrestle with archetypal themes, “delving into who we are, and where we come from, and where we are going. We wonder why we are here and what we will leave behind - - in the name of all of our fathers and all of our mothers.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The New Technologies**

New directions in adoption may add greater urgency to the need to examine questions of the spiritual wellbeing of adopted children and their parents. Commercial surrogacy, donor insemination, and IVF embryo adoptions are new realities that accentuate the splitting of biologic from social parenting. One author questions the implications of this move from traditional adoption to what she labels technological adoptions, where “best interests of the child” has been replaced largely by the adult interests involved. She asks, “Is it good for children to be deliberately created so they can be spun off from their biologic parents and raised by others? Is it good for people to give away or sell their genetic products for others to raise?”<sup>28</sup> We have only begun to examine these moral and ethical questions – and the implications for the birth narrative of the children whose very creation has been made possible by new technologies. In addition, the expanding availability of fetal genetic tests and the broader array of new embryonic screening technologies may mean that more parents are choosing adoption after a painful wrestling with the ethics of abortion or a lingering grief over the decision to terminate a pregnancy.

In another development, use of the Internet to connect birth mother, adoption facilitators, and potential parents (all outside of traditional adoption agencies) will give adoptees more information about their relinquishment, but will increased access to information heal or hurt? The over two hundred web-sites that give information about the adoption records issue and access to links for any person in the adoption triad - - coupled with the debate over searches to

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<sup>27</sup> Pavao, 92.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Bartholet, *Family Bonds: Adoption and the Politics of Parenting* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 222-226.



“unmask genealogical bewilderment” and unseal birth records - - reflect our societal ambivalence over biological and social bonds. Some authors point out that the search movement, which has seized the public’s interest, has “inadvertently contributed to the further stigmatization of adoption and adoptive parents, as well as of adopted children who are not interested in finding their birth parents.”<sup>29</sup> New ways of communicating and researching have resulted in adoptive parents staying in contact with birth parents while their children are still young, adoptees using Internet resources to explore history and heritage at younger ages, and birth mothers and fathers and others in their families instigating searches with biological relatives.<sup>30</sup> Will it be sufficient for our young adoptees to learn to carry the truth that both pregnancy and parenting are important - - that parenthood, in the true sense, can be determined by either?<sup>31</sup>

### **Religious Education, Ritual, and Pastoral Practice: Connections and Integration**

Children who are adopted - - and families formed through adoption - - have their own set of challenges as well as their own unique beauty. Being adopted has the potential to be “extra baggage” in the spiritual, religious, and educational development of the child. It also has the potential to be experienced as a privileged locus of grace and blessing. How have our religious traditions given sanctuary and vocabulary to this search for meaning, helping to make the connections between the adopted self, the healthy self, and the beloved-of-God self more explicit? Parents and religious educators can help tilt the scales as they consciously claim the rich resources of their religious tradition - - images, language, metaphor, and narrative - - as a source of healing and wholeness and wellbeing in the lives of children and their families.<sup>32</sup>

Religious rituals could be of great help here. For example, is it possible to develop a rite-of-welcoming for the child which would support, celebrate, and validate the new family member and the new family, deepening the adoptee’s sense of belonging and enhancing the parents’ sense of entitlement to their child? (This validating ritual might be especially important if, as is often the case with older children, the child comes to the new family post-baptism.) Support groups for adoptive parents and peer support groups for age-cohort adopted children can be an appropriate outreach ministry for communities of faith. (The Rainbows for All God’s Children program for children who have experienced the loss of a parent through death or divorce models this parallel outreach to children and their parents.)

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<sup>29</sup> Ambert, 169. It is important to note that in our congregations may also be birth parents still living out the legacies of closed adoptions. Some of these birth parents may have decided to search for their children; others may feel “too embarrassed, afraid, or powerless to do so” but may still struggle with pain or guilt or a “festering desire to know what became of their babies.” Pertman, 125

<sup>30</sup> Pertman, 17.

<sup>31</sup> K. Wegar, *Adoption, Identity, and Kinship: Debate over Sealed Birth Records* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 137.

<sup>32</sup> See Ronald J. Nydam, “Adoption and the Image of God,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 46 (Fall 1992) : 247-260. Nydam explores the psychological and theological implications of adoption on the God-image of the child. Using the framework of Paul Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, Nydam contends that the journey from rejection and loss to acceptance and the encounter with the “God beyond God” happens only when painful losses are accepted and valued objects are sufficiently mourned. Paradoxically, it is in the midst of the diminishment and shame that a child of adoption may be experiencing emotionally, where the grace of being grasped by God can be revealed most potently, he argues.

These welcoming rituals and the support from parenting and faith sharing groups may work to overcome any “spiritual dross” that would interpret infertility as failure of prayer or absence of God’s blessing. As one pastoral counselor notes, the Christian tradition sees adoption, not fecundity, as the controlling metaphor for a sharing in the creative, providential life of God. The Good News is that “those who share in Christ’s life through faith become children, not parents. The value of each person is centered on being a child of God, not in having children.”<sup>33</sup> Operating from their own experience, these groups may then choose to examine adoption in its public and political complexion, advocating for the movement of children more rapidly from foster care to permanent homes, for example, or increasing public awareness about children waiting for adoption.

Our work with adopted children will always be a thinner expression of the Good News (“You are a marvel! You are unique! You are loved!”) if space is not created where “my adoption” can be explored in safety. Congregations will be richer for welcoming in this kind of dialogue and in helping children tell the story of their adoption in life-giving ways that allow them to live more beautifully, graciously, and redemptively in the world. In many ways their story is our own, for in the rich heritage of Judeo-Christian understanding, all humanity is grafted into existence in the world, sharing the free, unmerited gift of divine inheritance as brothers and sisters in communion and ministry.<sup>34</sup> What sacred work it is for religious educators to help children discover the very ground in their roots and in their grafts.

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<sup>33</sup> Ray S. Anderson, “When the Dream Child Dies,” *Christianity Today* (August 1, 1987), 28.

<sup>34</sup> Robert K. Martin, “Having Faith in Our Faith in God: Toward a Critical Realist Epistemology for Christian Education.” *Religious Education* 96 (Spring 2001) : 245-261.