



Emma and Chris have fostered 20 children

# It's a privilege to see their lives transformed

EMMA and Chris knew God was calling them to use their parenting skills to make a difference to children's lives.

The year after they were married, they found themselves looking after a teenager whose academic skills and self-esteem improved hugely in just six months. They'd thought about adoption and fostering, but they were both in full-time work. They asked for a sign from God, and out of the blue Emma discovered she would lose her job within six months. She used that time to prepare for the challenges of fostering.

Since December 2010, they've fostered 20 children, from babies to 18-year-olds. Sometimes they have stayed only a few days or weeks – other times for a year or more. Some are placed with them in an emergency, while others are being carefully prepared for adoption.

They can see the huge difference that a loving Christian family and a supportive church can make to the lives of those who would otherwise be in care.

"It is a real privilege to have the opportunity to parent these amazing children," said Emma. "There is immense satisfaction in making a difference in people's lives.

"Fostering is a mammoth task, and we can't do a perfect job of raising these children who have been hurt and damaged. But the fact that God has called us to do this means that he has also equipped us, with the strength and patience to do it when ours runs out.

"The Bible is full of people who have been adopted and fostered, and the whole message of the gospel is about us being adopted into God's family. So we hope to demonstrate God's love for them by taking them into our home and bringing them up as best we can.

"We've looked after young girls who have experienced domestic abuse and violence in the home. One was 18 months when she came to us, just a tiny thing.

She was so scared of people looking at her that she hid under her clothes, and would want to be held constantly, because she'd been left alone for long periods of time. We had her for more than two years and saw her regress through all the stages she hadn't experienced as a baby, then put on a healthy weight and grow into a loud toddler that you wouldn't recognise. It was incredible to be part of that restoration process.

"People wonder how we can bear to let them go. You have to love them 100 per cent. You can't hold anything back, so it is heart-breaking when they do go. But if they have attached well to us, they are likely to attach well to a 'forever' family who adopt them."

Worshippers at their church have helped hugely, by cooking meals, walking their dog, and providing work experience for teenagers. They also ask before a child is placed if it is OK to take them along to church on Sundays.

"The church has really rallied round us," said Emma. "We really couldn't have done it without friends, family and church people, who pray for us, help us and share the care of these children when they can."

The couple originally started fostering via an agency, and were then approved by Portsmouth City Council. They currently foster three boys, one of whom is a 16-year-old refugee from Syria. As they were already approved to foster by the council, they were able to respond to that need straightaway.

"I'd been praying about the situation in Syria, and to be able to provide a safe house and regular meals for an asylum-seeker has been a positive experience," said Emma. "I'm passionate about adoption and fostering and I'd strongly encourage Christian families to look into it. If you've ever thought you have the capacity to love a child who really needs it, you should go for it."

# We can make a difference to lives of these children

**F**OR Howard and Linda, the experience of being adopted into God's family was a powerful inspiration when they considered adopting their own children.

Their life-changing experience of salvation gave them an insight into how God accepts and loves us unconditionally as a Father. This gave them a model as they considered offering a new start to two children who were unable to remain with their birth parents.

"When we choose to accept Jesus as our Saviour, we are born again and adopted into God's family," said Linda. "This gave us a clear model and example to draw from when we considered being adopters. Could we love children in an unconditional way and use our Father in heaven as a role model?"

They felt God had been preparing them for this moment, albeit in different ways. Howard had been part of a loving, secure Christian family, and had always wanted to adopt as well as have birth children. Linda had grown up in a one-parent family, but had been a lodger with a family from her church in her 20s.

"I felt part of their family in a really healthy way, and it restored my sense of family, having grown in a family that had been fragmented," she said. "It was a key time when I was able to sense God as my father and preparing to be a parent myself."

The couple spoke about adopting before they were married. They had to work through the pain of not being able to conceive naturally, and were able to separate that sense of grief from the sense that they wanted to adopt.

"Adopted children are special because you have chosen them," said Linda. "You don't share a history or genes, but you share the need to develop as a family.

"You have to work out what it means to be an adoptive parent, read books, pray and talk to others who have adopted. It's not necessarily the same as going by your parenting instinct, or how you were yourself parented.

"We have been privileged to become parents through adoption. Being a parent is a wonderful thing.



Howard and Linda's children: bringing joy and energy into their lives

Children are exciting, they love life and they bring joy, energy and purpose into every day. We can love them, give them nurture and care, without having given birth to them. And we can see models for that in the Bible, with people like Moses and Esther.

## Teenagers are challenging but ultimately rewarding



Alec and Eileen Weaver

FOSTERING a series of teenagers is a challenge for Eileen and Alec Weaver – but ultimately very rewarding, and a fulfilling way of life.

It was their Christian faith that prompted the couple, from Church of the Good Shepherd, Crookhorn, to offer their home to teenagers in need of care and support.

They provided supported lodgings for half a dozen homeless young people before they started fostering in 2011. Since then, they've cared for eight foster children aged from 14 to 18 years old. Some have stayed for several months, others for just a few days.

"It's about making a difference to young people's lives," said Alec. "The youngsters who come to us often have never known any boundaries in their lives. They need safety, security and routine, as they are often much younger than their chronological age. All the young people we have fostered have been involved with the youth justice system, so they might be subject to night curfews and need to attend Youth Court.

about the science of reproduction, but they often forget the heart of family life is about building relationships. For me, adoption is an exciting way to create family, as well as challenging."

The couple are now part of St Jude's Church in Southsea, where a group has just begun to meet each month for those who have adopted and fostered. They've experienced support from family and friends – but would love to see more understanding of what adoption means within church communities.

"There does need to be more understanding of the needs of adopted children and families," said Linda.

"There have been huge changes over the years in the way in which adoption now happens, and these changes need communicating for churches to be able to offer support and encouragement.

"We had two children seemingly overnight. Even though we had been preparing for years, it still took a long time to settle down, for us and the children. This is a time when understanding and practical support is really vital – it's like having a



newborn baby. Thankfully, one couple cooked us meals for a week.

"People need to be aware of the language that they use, and that adoptive parents are introducing children who are hurting into that community. You need to be part of a congregation which has strong relationships and is resilient, as everyone will make mistakes."

As with all adoptive parents, Howard and Linda went through a process of being assessed by social workers. Howard's sister told them that God would bring them 'peace' about it – so they were amazed when they discovered their social worker's surname was Peace.

"You can start praying for your children before you even know who they are," said Linda. "It's hard because other people are taking decisions on your behalf, but you can hold onto God's faithfulness and trust ultimately that he is in control."

we can do. I have sat in the next room to a teenager refusing to get out of bed and prayed that something will motivate them to get up! Our church is generally supportive, but sometimes we can feel lonely and isolated if we haven't managed to get to church.

"As a champion for the charity Home for Good, I would love to see more Christians becoming adoptive parents and foster carers, and to see churches supporting families.

"It was while we were providing supported lodgings we realised we enjoyed the company and chaos that teenagers bring to our home, so we approached the charity Action for Children and went through the formal assessment process. It can be quite intrusive, but it does challenge your reason for fostering."

"We chose Action for Children as they provide specialist fostering for teenagers. We receive 24-hour support from experienced social workers and we also receive regular training and support groups."

## DEALING WITH THE MYTHS

**MYTH: It is difficult for Christians to be approved for fostering or adoption.**  
TRUTH: Local authorities and agencies are looking for people of all faiths and no faith to adopt and foster. What's more important is respecting the background or faith of the child or young person.

**MYTH: We can't take fostered children to church with us.**  
TRUTH: It's important to take the views of the child and their birth family into account, and permission may need to be obtained to take fostered children to church. If a child comes from non-Christian faith, it will be important to take them to their own place of worship. But churches do offer supportive networks for parents who adopt and foster.

**MYTH: You can't adopt or foster if you are a one-parent family, or if you don't own your own home.**  
FACT: Lots of people do adopt and foster successfully who are one-parent families, and who rent their homes. There is no specific 'model' for adoptive or foster parents. You will be assessed according to your ability to care for children, whatever your circumstances.

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