

A 6 WEEK CURRICULUM
ANSWERING THE QUESTION:

What Is A Person?

IMAGE OF GOD

**STAND
FOR LIFE**
CURRICULUM

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*Unless otherwise
noted, all Scripture
references are ESV.*

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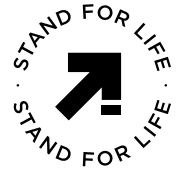
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“From the imago Dei springs the concept that every person, regardless of their utility, their station in life, or their talents, has value and inherent worth. Each is distinct and valuable because of the immeasurable value of the One who made them.”



WEEK 1

IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY PERSON



Pro-Life. Pro-Choice. Pro-Family. Pro-Woman.
Abortion. Baby. Fetus. Simple words. Yet words
that have become so politically and emotionally
charged that the mere mention of them elicits a vis-
ceral response and can send us running for the hills.

L I
F E

In 2020, professors at Notre Dame University released their findings of a study aimed at “listening to the voices of everyday Americans” surrounding views on abortion. During an interview, one of their research subjects, June, said something that rings so true: “We stick with labels a lot. They create comfort zones, but they also create barriers.”

And when it comes to issues surrounding life, the church is not immune to these labels and divisions. Christians have been on both sides of the political aisle since abortion first became legal nationwide in the United States because of the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*. There are countless stories we all know about fellow believers preaching one thing about life and its value politically and publicly, and yet practicing something very different personally and privately. People point fingers and throw stones, looking to score political points instead of softening hearts, and pointing people to God’s design for abundant life for every person.

But for the next six weeks of this study, let’s strip away these labels. Let’s put aside what these terms have meant to us in the past and what they mean to our present culture, and instead dive deep into God’s Word and uncover what He has to say about life, its value, and our responsibilities to it.

Let’s sit at the feet of the Author and Creator of life, asking Him to show us who He is and as His reflection—His imago Dei—who we are.

KNOW

Each week we will begin by introducing a concept found in Scripture that reveals the truth about God's design and the value of human life. We will uncover what the whole of Scripture has to say about that concept, and we will look at how God has revealed that deep truth in the world around us through science, nature, and psychology.

To begin the discussion of human life, we have to dive deeper into the fundamental question of why human life is worthy of protection in the first place. If we want to answer the questions about when life begins, who has authority to end life, and when that life can be terminated, we first need to know why human life is valuable and what makes humanity distinct from the rest of creation.

The answer is right at the beginning of our Bibles. Before the end of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, in Genesis 1:26-27 we read,

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

From the very beginning of creation, God set human beings apart, creating them male and female, and calling their creation “very good.” Each individual is made in the image of God with equal dignity and equal worth. Every human being, no matter their stage of development, abilities, or independence, is valuable because God is valuable and He placed His image and dignity on every human life—the imago Dei. We are all His image bearers.

From the imago Dei springs the concept that every person, regardless of their utility, their station in life, or their talents, has value and inherent worth. Each is distinct and valuable because of the immeasurable value of the One who made them. Human beings are not valuable because of what they can do or contribute but because of whose image they were made to reflect.

Theologian R. C. Sproul explains the foundations of this idea, what he deems “dignity,” this way:

Dignity, by biblical definition, is tied to the biblical concept of glory. God’s glory, His weightiness, His importance, His significance, is what the Bible uses to describe the fountainhead of all dignity. And only God has eternal value and intrinsic (that is, in and of Himself) significance. I am a creature—I come from the dust. The dust isn’t all that significant, but I become significant when God scoops up that dust and molds it into a human being and breathes into it the breath of life and says, “This creature is made

in my image.” God assigns eternal significance to temporal creatures. I don’t have anything in me that would demand that God treat me with eternal significance. I have eternal significance and eternal worth because God gives it to me.¹

The imago Dei is what gives human beings their intrinsic value and distinction from the rest of creation. Apart from God, humanity’s worth could only be tied to our abilities and usefulness.

But God’s Word makes it clear that there is no measuring stick to evaluate whose life is valuable and whose is not. Scripture is clear that all human beings have worth and value just by virtue of the imago Dei imprinted on them. From the little boy with a disability, to the elderly widow with Alzheimers, to the family living in a war-torn refugee camp, to the preborn little girl and the precious mother in whose womb she is growing—each life is of infinite value and worthy of protection.

The Whole Bible Upholds the Value of Every Life

God’s Word also makes it clear that when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden in what we call “the fall of man,” mankind did not lose their image bearer-ness. Even though the fall happened and sin entered the world, the image of God was not removed from humankind, although parts of that image have been distorted or lost. So, while we no longer represent a perfect reflection and image of God to the world, the dignity given to all humankind is not lost.

¹ R. C. Sproul, “What is the biblical basis for human dignity?” Ligonier Ministries, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/what-biblical-basis-human-dignity/>.

From the moment the imago Dei is mentioned in Genesis through Revelation, we see God again and again referring to the imago Dei, teaching His people to value every human life, just as He does.

We see this in Old Testament laws meant to protect and care for foreigners, widows, orphans, laborers, and the poor. The book of Exodus teaches that God's people are never to mistreat or cheat another person.

“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him.” (Exodus 22:22-25)

In Leviticus 19:9-10, God tells His people not to reap their fields right up to the edges or to gather the fallen grapes in the vineyard, but instead to leave gleanings and grapes for the poor and the sojourner. Later in the same chapter in verse 34, God tells the Israelites:

“You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

As we move through the Old Testament and reach the prophetic books, we again see God teaching His people to value every human being, admonishing those who mistreat the hungry, the oppressed, the widow, the stranger, and the orphan.

*“Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
and the writers who keep writing oppression,
to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be their spoil,
and that they may make the fatherless their prey!” (Isaiah 10:1-2)*

*“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.” (Isaiah 58:6-8)*

And then, as we move into the New Testament, the Gospels are filled with images of Jesus living out the theology of the imago Dei. Through the parables Jesus teaches and His acts of ministry are

recorded by the Gospel authors. We see Jesus manifest the laws of the Old Testament as He spent time with and healed the blind and lame, loved and welcomed the outcast, and taught about the value of the poor.

In Matthew 25:35-36, Jesus said one day He would separate the sheep from the goats, or those who were blessed by the Father from those who were not, giving the sheep their inheritance in the kingdom. He explains that His sheep are those who recognize the dignity of their fellow man and act accordingly, meeting the needs of all of their neighbors in His name. Jesus said,

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”

When Jesus dined at the home of a ruler of the Pharisees, He said to the host,

“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (Luke 14:12-14)

Jesus wanted His audience to see that in His Kingdom a human being's value is not derived from what they are able to pay or contribute, but instead by the very nature of who God has created them to be—His beloved.

As Jesus taught in the temple, He watched those who came to put money in the offering box. He saw many rich people put in large amounts of money, then noticed a poor widow who put in two small copper coins, a small amount. He drew His disciples' attention to her, saying,

“Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4; Mark 12:41-44)

Even the last chapter of the Bible tells us that God sees each human being and cares deeply about each of us and our pain. Revelation 21:3-4 says that one day God will dwell with man and that “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” He has created us with intrinsic value, and He sees and cares when we are sad, in pain, and facing the devastation of death.

Even Secular Documents Have Adopted the Biblical Concept of Inherent Dignity

The concept of inherent dignity is so foundational to human life that even the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an international resolution that is considered to be the foundation of modern international law, begins its preamble stating, “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,” and then states in Article I, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”²

In this secular document, there is an acknowledgment that human beings are endowed with equal worth completely separate from anything we do and completely dependent upon who we are. There is a recognition from the outset that human beings are distinct from animals and the rest of creation because of the inherent value bestowed on us. Even though the world may lack the words to express it or the grace and power to live it out, it cannot escape the concept of inherent dignity. God has written this truth on the hearts and minds of every human being.

Nelson Mandela, who famously fought against the unjust South African apartheid government that denied the dignity of millions of Black South Africans, said, “No power on this earth can destroy

2 https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf

the thirst for human dignity.” That is because God planted that in each of us before sin even entered the world. And Christ not only showed us how to defend the dignity of others, but sacrificially died for our sins, laying down His own dignity to overcome sin and death on our behalf.

GROW

Each week we will take the concept that is introduced at the beginning of the lesson and apply it to our present context. How does the truth play out in our world today? What are the challenges our present generation faces in living out the truths we have just uncovered in Scripture?

The entirety of Scripture points to the eternal truth that apart from the saving power of the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:2-3), humanity is incapable of upholding and protecting the inherent worth of our fellow man. Put another way, we are incapable of fully and perfectly living out God’s command to love one another (John 15:12)—a command that demands that we recognize the *imago Dei* in our neighbor. We will always sin and fall short of giving our neighbors the love and honor they deserve as fellow image bearers. And our fellow neighbors will also fall short of loving and honoring us. Recognizing this truth should propel us to lead these conversations with the same grace that God has shown to us.

As we look over the whole of human history, we see countless examples of human beings stripping their fellow image bearers of their inherent dignity. Chattel slavery in the United States is one such ex-

ample when one group of people refused to acknowledge the imago Dei in their fellow man and instead treated them as property. Although at first glance it may appear that we have overcome the evil of slavery in the modern day, the International Justice Mission (IJM) reports that in fact there are more than 40 million people in slavery right now—more than in any other time in human history. Human trafficking generates \$150 billion annually. It is a big business that is thriving and that continues to degrade and humiliate human beings around the globe everyday.

The generational and systemic sins of racism embodied in chattel slavery transformed and evolved to Jim Crow segregation, with a belief of superiority manifesting itself in different ways with the same results: unjust murders and lynching, systemic oppression, and ultimately the degradation of human dignity. Still today, almost 50 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, America still grapples with the reality of sin, the fall, and prejudice in our own hearts. Even though Jim Crow laws may be off the books, we still don't perfectly reflect the dignity due to each person.

The Holocaust is yet another infamous example of what can happen when we fail to acknowledge the imago Dei in fellow image bearers. Millions of Jews and people with disabilities were systematically and brutally murdered simply because the Nazi leaders viewed themselves as superior and chose to eradicate those they deemed unworthy.

In fact, it was the horrors of the Holocaust that led to the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³ and subsequent international documents enshrining the inherent dignity of every person. Yet as beautiful and powerful as the words written in these documents were, they did not end systemic genocide once and for all. From the mass slaughter of Tutsis in the Rwandan genocide in 1994 to the current and ongoing systemic campaign of oppression and persecution against an estimated 1.8 million Uyghur people in China.⁴ The systemic denial of human dignity did not end just because treaties were signed.

Yet the denial of human dignity in our fellow image bearers is not something that only happens on a massive, systemic scale. It most often happens within our own communities and within our own hearts. As Jesus makes clear in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount, God does not judge sin based on its total impact, but instead by the motives of our hearts. Whenever we deny the personhood of another human being, we are just as guilty as someone who has carried out genocide. Whenever we degrade the worth of another person, we are just as guilty as the slave master.

While denying dignity is as old as original sin, the good news is that the power of God's Word and the truth that each of us are image bearers of the One True Most High God is even older, built into the foundation of Creation. Christ embodied this during His ministry on

3 <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/udhr.pdf>

4 Chelsea Patterson Sobolik, "The U.S. should oppose China's forced labor practices," ERLC, October 9, 2020, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/the-u-s-should-oppose-chinas-forced-labor-practices/>.

earth. From the parable of the Good Samaritan, to the woman at the well, to His healing of the leper, Christ constantly revealed the sin of selfishness and prejudice in the hearts of His followers. He then modeled how to repair the damage done by our sin and restore dignity to those whom it had been denied.

If we are willing to lay our sin at the feet of our Savior, He has a new and better way for us. He wants His people, His Church, to be at the forefront of restoring dignity to the downtrodden and forgotten, to those whom the world has counted out and thrown away.

And in spite of humanity's fallen nature, history is full of examples of God using His people as His hands and feet to restore dignity to the oppressed. The first Christians set an example of what it means to be committed to the sanctity of human life.⁵ From the first century, Christians were saving infants and children that had been thrown out on the streets and serving the least of these through providing medical care and basic necessities. Their work to care for children who had been orphaned and those with leprosy and other contagious diseases, was countercultural in their society. Even the fact that their congregations were filled with both Gentile and non-Gentile church members was a way they bucked the norms of the day, recognizing the dignity of those who were not like them, living out the theology of the *imago Dei*.

5 Payne, *History of the Child in Human Progress*, pg. 258

Throughout history, we have seen many Christians continue that legacy of protecting life. From the front lines of fighting against chattel slavery, to the fight to end Jim Crow segregation, to giving their lives to protect Jews and other victims of the Holocaust, many of God's people have lived out His commands.

Today, many within the church are leading the way in declaring the inherent dignity and personhood of preborn children and their mothers and exposing the brutality of the abortion industry. Many are championing the fight to free slaves in the far corners of the world, exposing the deadly and degrading lies of eugenics, and empowering those with disabilities to use their God-given gifts to His glory.

Yet, there is so much work to be done.

In *The Dignity Revolution*, author Daniel Darling paints a beautiful picture,

*“Imagine, for a moment, if God’s people began to lead a new, quiet revolution whose foundation was a simple premise: every human being—no matter who they are, no matter where they are, no matter what they have done or have had done to them—possesses dignity, because every human being is created in the image of God. By God’s grace, our churches would change, and our communities would change.”*⁶

That is the example Christ has set for us and the charge He has laid before for us as His followers.

6 Daniel Darling, *The Dignity Revolution*, (The Good Book Company, 2018).

Words Matter

- Words matter. Scripture tells us that God literally spoke the world into being (Genesis 1). The Bible calls Jesus “The Word who dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Words have the power to give life and build up our fellow image bearers, but words also have the power to bring death and to tear down the dignity and personhood of another.
- As advocates for life and human dignity, it is crucial that we choose our words carefully when speaking about another image bearer. It is always helpful to use people-first language. Instead of saying “an autistic boy,” say, “the boy who has autism” or “Jack who has autism.” Instead of saying “the poor child,” say, “the child who lives in a low income household.” Instead of saying “the fetus,” say, “the child in the womb.” Instead of saying “the illegals,” say “the family without legal status.”
- This little shift in language makes a world of difference to the person of whom you are speaking. It shows that you first and foremost see them as a unique image bearer of God. Words are powerful, so let’s choose them wisely.

GO

Each week we will be challenging one another to GO and be the hands and feet of our Savior Jesus to the hurting world around us. Specifically, we will take the truth we have gleaned about life and human dignity from Scripture that week and ask ourselves how we can begin to embody that truth and live it out in our day-to-day lives.

This week, as we have uncovered the truth about how the imago Dei has been imprinted on every human being, we must pause and ask what that means for how we interact with the fellow image bearers around us.

As followers of Jesus, we must lead the way in upholding the dignity of each person all the way from conception through natural death. We uniquely understand the incomprehensible value of the imago Dei because we personally know the One who Himself imparts that value on humanity.

Living out these truths consistently will be a beautiful and compelling picture of the gospel! Living out our beliefs about the imago Dei with integrity will strengthen its impact. Scholar Larry Hurtado authored a book on the distinctiveness of early Christians in the Roman World.⁷ In his writing he asked the question, “Why would anyone want to become a Christian in the first century at a time when Christians were outcasts in society and subject to extreme persecution?” He argues that the countercultural Christian community is what drew people in. Believers were living a lifestyle that was both offensive and attractive. Christianity was a unique religion that for the first time provided a worldview that was accessible to anyone regardless of their race, class, or gender. The Christian belief became your first identity, and your race, class, and gender weren’t wiped away, but they were moved to a secondary place of identity. It taught that all

⁷ Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Baylor University Press, 2016) and *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Marquette University Press, 2016). https://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the_early_christian_social_project

believers were equal among each other. And not only were believers equal in value to one another, but non-believers were also equally inherently valuable as individuals. This belief leveled the ground and recognized the value of every person. It was wildly different from the cultural norm of the day, and it was attractive.

We have the chance to continue that legacy of consistently living out the theology of the imago Dei. Pastor Tom Strode wisely challenges us this way,

The Church of Jesus Christ should lead the way in proclaiming this vital truth about all human beings. It is not simply a declaration to be offered selectively by political conservatives who resist abortion or political progressives who oppose discrimination against various minorities. We, as the true Church, should boldly assert this reality no matter the context. Within the church, our policy positions on a variety of issues may differ, but our defense of the dignity of every human being should never waver.

As the Church, we cannot outsource this responsibility. For, we have the life-changing message that God the Son became an embryo in a virgin's womb and grew into a man who lived a righteous life, died on the cross, and rose again to save His people. We have the mission given by Jesus to make disciples of all people groups, baptizing and teaching them what Jesus has taught, which includes the message that every human being, regardless of age, has a life worth living. And we have the community—we actually are the community—of the redeemed, who love, serve, and welcome all made in God's image.⁸

⁸ Tom Strode, "Why God's majesty is most clearly seen in every human being," ERLC, December 18, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-gods-majesty-is-most-clearly-seen-in-every-human-being/>.

So, let us dive into the communities in which God has placed us and ask,

- “Who is being denied their personhood?”
- “Who is being overlooked?”
- “Who is being oppressed?”
- “Who is facing injustice?”

Whether it is volunteering at your local pregnancy resource center helping parents in crisis navigate a pregnancy, developing an after-school safe space for at-risk children to come while their parents are working, providing a meal to a foster family who is struggling with a challenging placement, or even simply taking the step of diving into this curriculum to learn more about God’s unique design for human beings and educating our congregations on why life matters—let’s take the next faithful step in helping to restore and redeem the dignity of fellow image bearers in our midsts.

Stories of Hope: Pearl Brown

When Eric and Ruth Brown found out that their daughter’s brain was not forming properly in utero, doctors were anything but hopeful. Eric and Ruth were counseled to abort their baby girl, but for them, there was no choice to make. They were confident that their job was to protect the life of their daughter, Pearl.

After being told the best option was to abort their child, Ruth recalled, “I couldn’t do that. For us the only option was to support our daughter as long as we could.”

“It was a belittling conversation, trying to convince that doctor that if Pearl was having trouble we had no interest in taking her away from the provision of Ruth’s womb,” recalled Eric. “It is a daunting thing to be given a diagnosis of ‘not compatible with life,’ and everything is seemingly hopeless. There are countless others in similar situations that have decided to go in the opposite direction than we did. And the lack of hope and perspective that allows one to make that move should only further invigorate us to shout loud from the rooftops about what we know is true for every single human life.”

Despite incredible challenges, Pearl beat the odds and survived her birth. However, Pearl was born with severe disabilities. “Pearl came out fighting and we decided we would join her in that fight,” Eric said. “We would always follow Pearl’s lead.”

For the next five years, Pearl’s parents and siblings fought alongside her, spending many days in the hospital caring for her, but also many sweet seasons together as a family at home. They fought alongside Pearl until she passed away at the age of five, in her bed at home, surrounded by her family.

Pearl’s life is a stunning picture of the imago Dei. Her short life can’t be measured by achievements or accolades. It can’t be measured by the milestones she hit. Pearl’s life was precious and valuable because she reflected the beautiful image of the Master Creator.

During Pearl's last months on earth, her father said, "Pearl can't hustle or chase her dreams. She isn't having her best life now. She can't step into any sort of destiny, can't follow her passions or live adventurously, and she hasn't a clue what it means to try harder. She has not been healed as we pleaded for during that first year, but was given these afflictions by the loving hand of her Creator who knows her intimately and crafted Pearl for her good and His glory.... He carries her as she bears His image and she, like all of us, is completely helpless otherwise." ⁹

Heroes for Life: CARE for AIDS

Caroline, a mother in East Africa, found out that she was HIV-positive in 2007. She was in denial after her diagnosis and decided not to take her medication. At the time, she had just given birth to her second-born daughter and because she was not taking her antiretroviral medication, she passed the virus on to her daughter.

In early 2019, Caroline heard about the CARE for AIDS program in the northeastern part of Nairobi, Kenya, from a friend who had graduated the year before. CARE for AIDS works through a local church to provide a holistic form of transformative care that allows a person living with HIV to turn what has historically been a death sentence into an opportunity for hope. HIV does not have to be the end of one's life, but can be a beautiful opportunity for physical restoration and spiritual growth in Christ.

⁹ Eric Brown, "Testimony: Choosing Life," Evangelicals for Life Conference, January 18, 2018, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/event-messages/testimony-choosing-life/>.

CARE for AIDS operates centers within local church congregations in multiple communities throughout East Africa and invites the most vulnerable people living with HIV/AIDS into those centers. The church journeys with clients for nine months and provides them with critical services to stabilize their often dire situations and empower them for long-term success. They do this by addressing needs in five key areas: physical, spiritual, emotional, social, and economic.

At first, Caroline was hesitant to join the program, but after a few months of counseling and support received within the local church, she accepted her HIV status and has grown to be very healthy. The education and empowerment Caroline received from the CARE for AIDS staff helped her to take all the precautions necessary to seek the welfare of her preborn child. Caroline was able to avoid passing the virus on to her youngest son, Jaden, who was born HIV-negative.

Caroline's dream is to one day open a home for young mothers who are HIV-positive. She knows firsthand how hard it can be, and she wants to mentor others so they can have healthy, thriving families. Like many other mothers who have come through the CARE for AIDS program, Caroline is no longer scared or ashamed; instead, she is proud of who she is and what she is able to do.

WEEK 1: IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY PERSON

“God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:26-27)

Old Testament passages about protecting and caring for foreigners, widows, orphans, laborers, and the poor:

- Exodus 22:22-25
- Leviticus 19:9-10
- Isaiah 10:1-2
- Isaiah 58:6-8

New Testament passages:

- Matthew 25:35-36
- Luke 14:12-14
- Luke 21:1-4
- Mark 12:41-44
- Revelation 21:3-4

Why does having the image of God (the imago Dei) printed on each person give each person dignity and worth?

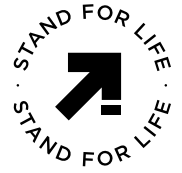
What fears do you have about diving into the topics of life and human dignity during this study?

What does being “pro-life” mean to you?

Have you ever struggled to love someone or see their inherent dignity?

Where is God asking you to step out of your comfort zone to help restore the dignity of another person?

"As we look at the science of fetal development and the philosophy of personhood, we must keep in mind that many in our midst bear the emotional and physical scars of abortion. Let us cling to the truth of the gospel. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). No matter our sin, God has told us 'as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.'" (Psalm 103:12)



WEEK 2

IMAGE OF GOD IN PREBORN CHILDREN



God's Word makes clear that every person is made in the image of God and thus has inherent value. As Christians we are called to uphold the dignity and value of all of life, including the lives of preborn children. Looking at Scripture, we see that life begins in the womb and each child is formed by his or her Creator. As we seek to understand the facts

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and statistics surrounding abortion in the United States, we see the opportunity we have as the church to protect the preborn and show love to mothers in need.

KNOW

The Bible describes the preborn child as a person who is known, designed, and intended. Fetal development also demonstrates that from the very moment of conception a child is a unique living human being. Yet, as we seek to protect these most vulnerable human beings, we must also remember that abortion has affected many people, including many men and women sitting in the pews of our churches.

What does the Bible say?

Scripture speaks to the value of human life, even life in the womb. Psalm 139:13-16 teaches,

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance;*

*in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.*

We see that God plays a role in intricately weaving life together, knowing each human intimately before birth. Jeremiah 1:5 emphasizes this point,

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

In the New Testament, Luke 1:15 speaks of John the Baptist's personhood, even in the womb,

For he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

Remember the scene in Luke 1:39-44 where Mary and Elizabeth, both pregnant, meet each other? The joy within Elizabeth's womb speaks to the personhood of her preborn son.

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are

you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Question: Can you think of other Scripture passages that highlight human dignity?

Throughout this study, we will continue to look at Scripture as well as research, but just as Jesus never lost sight of the hurt and needs of everyone in His audience, we must not lose sight of the fact that these issues affect real people. Many of you reading this today have had a firsthand encounter with abortion. You are not alone.

A Notre Dame study showed that 1 in 4 interviewees disclosed a personal abortion experience, and the researchers wrote, “a full three-quarters of our interviewees know someone personally who has had an abortion. Many shared stories of mothers, daughters, sisters, cousins, friends, people from church, neighbors, or classmates. Though many of these stories are held close or kept quiet, the issue of abortion is more personal than political to many Americans. This is embedded in the way they think about its morality and legality.”¹

¹ Tricia Bruce, PhD, “How Americans Understand Abortion,” University of Notre Dame, 2020, <https://churchlife-info.nd.edu/en-us/how-americans-understand-abortion-a-comprehensive-interview-study-of-abortion-attitudes-in-the-u.s/>

As we look at the science of fetal development and the philosophy of personhood, we must keep in mind that many in our midst bear the emotional and physical scars of abortion. Let us cling to the truth of the gospel. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). No matter our sin, God has told us “as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). Regardless of our pasts and our individual sins, we have ALL fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

This is a truth Christians through the ages have celebrated. In Charles Wesley’s hymn, “And Can It Be?” he wrote these words in 1738,

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th’ eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own*

Satan is the accuser and delights in heaping on shame. As believers, we must fight that accusation and shame with the truth of the gospel.

Prayer: Take a moment to pause now and pray that we would believe the truth of Scripture and that the Lord would humble our hearts as we continue this study.

When does life begin?

Despite cultural currents in every civilization throughout human history and around the world that try to pit science and reason against faith, we know that science is completely compatible with Scripture as science uncovers the eternal truths of how God designed our world.

The better our science and technology get, the more clear our ultrasounds and the better our understanding of the earliest stages of human development, the more we see the truth in Psalm 139. We are indeed wonderfully made, knit together in the womb. Psalm 139 is confirmed by science, not refuted by it.

No scientist argues against the basic truth that when an egg is fertilized, new and unique DNA forms representing a new human life. While this human life needs to implant, receive nutrition, and develop, it is new human life. Its dependence on nutrition and nurturing is also true of a newborn baby, and, if we're honest about human development and dependence, each one of us is dependent as well.

1. Fetal development

Fetal development in the womb occurs rapidly and is amazing to behold. Since technology has dramatically improved over the years, we are able to see inside the womb and get a glimpse into the process. In just the first trimester, the following occurs based on gestational age:

- Week 6: The heart begins to beat. The neural tube along the back closes, which will form the brain and spinal cord.
- Week 7: The head develops.
- Week 8: The nose forms.
- Week 9: Toes appear.
- Week 10: Elbows bend.
- Week 11: Genitals develop and buds for future teeth appear.
- Week 12: Fingernails form.²

2. Preborn children feel pain.

In 2019, a study was published in the Journal for Medical Ethics showing that even while researchers had different worldviews related to abortion, they were able to agree that fetal pain does exist within a gestational window of 12-24 weeks.³

2 "Fetal development: The 1st trimester," Mayo Clinic, June 30, 2020, [https://www.mayo-clinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/pregnancy-week-by-week/in-depth/prenatal-care/art-20045302](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/pregnancy-week-by-week/in-depth/prenatal-care/art-20045302).

3 Derbyshire SW, Bockmann JC, "Reconsidering fetal pain," Journal of Medical Ethics 2020, 46:3-6.

As medical developments advance, doctors are able to perform surgeries in the womb for a variety of medical conditions. During these procedures, “unborn babies are treated as patients by fetal surgeons, and receive pain medication.”⁴

3. Unborn Victims of Violence Act

In 2004, Congress passed the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, codifying federal law in a similar way to many state fetal homicide laws. Under this act, if a pregnant mother is attacked, and her preborn child is harmed or killed in the process, the law regards the “child in utero” as a second victim, thus acknowledging the personhood of the preborn child.⁵

What is a person?

Beyond the belief that a fetus is a living and distinct human being, let’s pose a deeper question: What defines personhood? Even if we concede that a child is alive and is a distinct human being, what actually makes them a person whose life has the right to be protected? The topic of personhood is more of a philosophical question than a scientific one. Many argue that even if embryos and fetuses are biologically human, philosophically they are not yet persons.

4 “Fact Sheet: Science of Fetal Pain,” Charlotte Lozier Institute, February 19, 2020, <https://lozierinstitute.org/fact-sheet-science-of-fetal-pain/>.

5 United States, Congress, Public Law 108-212, United States Statutes at Large, vol. 150, 2004, <https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ212/PLAW-108publ212.pdf>.

Peter Singer, who advocated for abortion and even infanticide in some cases, defines a person by three characteristics: A person is rational, conscious, and self-aware. If that definition is used, then a fetus is not a person, but is that due to a human's nature or simply because of their age?

A one-celled embryo has not been given time to become rational, conscious, or self-aware because the brain has not yet developed, but the fetus's nature is to develop those attributes unlike other species, such as an amoeba. An amoeba is not rational, conscious, or self-aware, but never will be because of its nature. However, a fetus can become these things as she grows and ages because that's the trajectory of the human life cycle.⁶

Ethicist C. Ben Mitchell clarifies the distinction between humans and other objects and animals:

*Rocks are not persons, plants are not persons, and animals are not persons, despite efforts to grant great apes, dolphins, and other animals personhood status. In theological terms, a human is someone made in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:27). In Genesis 9:1-7, God makes a distinction between animals and humans, giving Noah and his family permission to kill the animals for food, but prohibiting the unjust killing of another human being because humans alone are made in God's own image. The image of God, the *imago Dei*, is the basis of human exceptionalism.⁷*

6 Stephanie Gray, "Abortion: From Controversy to Civility," Talks at Google, June 19, 2017, <https://youtu.be/DzzfSq2DEc4>

7 C. Ben Mitchell, "Who counts as a person?" ERLC, December 1, 2020, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/who-counts-as-a-person/>.

If the fetus is human and human nature is to be set apart from other living organisms, humans regardless of age or development should be granted human rights. As we discussed in Week 1, even secular documents like the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognize the rights and dignity granted to human beings. Thus, that protection should extend to the smallest of human beings—those still developing in the womb.

Speaker and author Stephanie Gray makes a compelling argument for the personhood of the fetus through the Socratic method of asking questions of those who may disagree with her.⁸

Gray frames the argument by telling the story of Captain Sully and Flight 15. Captain “Sully” Sullenberger was forced to land his passenger plane in the Hudson River. Before Sullenberger would leave the plane, he made two trips through the flooded cabin making sure everyone was safe. He was considered a hero because he cared for those who were dependent on him before he cared for himself.

Gray then asks her audience, “If you agree that it was correct for the pilot to care for his dependents before himself, when it comes to the topic of abortion, do you agree that a pregnant mother facing an unplanned pregnancy should first care for her dependent, the preborn life in her womb, before she considers herself?”

⁸ Stephanie Gray, “Abortion: From Controversy to Civility,” Talks at Google, June 19, 2017, <https://youtu.be/DzzfSq2DEc4>.

Many people respond to this argument saying the comparison isn't valid because the passengers were human beings while those in the womb are not. Gray goes on to play out conversations that mirror many real-life conversations she has had,

- Q: Do you believe in human rights?
- A: Yes
- Q: What about the embryo's human rights?
- A: The embryo isn't human.
- Q: If the embryo isn't human, what species is the mother or the mother's partner? Isn't their offspring the same species?
- A: Well if it's human, it's not alive.
- Q: If the fetus isn't alive, why do you need to do an abortion?
Also, if the embryo isn't alive, is it growing?

The conversation continues by describing the age of the human. It could be said, "But it's just a fetus." Gray responds, "What kind of fetus?" Fetus is not a species-specific term. If a human, then fetus only refers to the age of life, much like the way a toddler describes a two year old.

So the question then becomes not when does life begin or is a fetus a human being, but instead at what stage of development does a fetus become a person who has the right to have their life protected?

As discussed in Week 1, Scripture makes clear that human beings are valued because they reflect God's image, not because of their age, usefulness, or abilities. Thus, it follows that at the moment a human

being is alive, and science unequivocally confirms that is the moment of conception, then that human being has value and worth and deserves our protection.

GROW

History of abortion

The issue of abortion is not new, and we are not the first generation to grapple with it. In the 1700s, abortion was considered legal in the American colonies until the pregnancy stage known as “quickening,” when the mother first felt the baby move, or generally around 16 to 17 weeks. By the 1880s, every state had a law on the books criminalizing abortion. The eugenics movement in America in the early and mid-20th century gave rise to organizations like Planned Parenthood, whose founder Margaret Sanger saw birth control as a means of controlling population growth, particularly among populations she deemed less desirable, such as minorities and those with disabilities. Alan Guttmacher, the second president of Planned Parenthood, took Sanger’s ideas regarding eugenics and extended them to promote abortion. Attitudes toward abortion continued to change in the 1960s and 1970s, culminating with the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade*.

The *Roe* decision placed abortion under the constitutional category of a right to privacy and limited the regulations states could place on abortion. This decision legalized abortions in the first, and in many cases the second trimesters of pregnancy in the United States. In 1992 the Supreme Court issued a decision in another case involving

abortion, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which reaffirmed *Roe*'s "essential holding" about a woman's right to an abortion before viability and established a new basis from which to measure abortion restrictions known as the "undue burden" standard. This prevented states from implementing restrictions that would, in the court's view, place an undue burden on a woman's right to obtain an abortion that was protected by the *Roe* decision.

The Supreme Court case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, was decided in June 2022 and marked a true turning point in the pro-life movement, a moment that Christians, advocates and many others have worked toward tirelessly for 50 years.

In *Dobbs*, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, and allowed individual states to be free to make their own decisions on abortion. Many states had laws in place that automatically protected or prohibited abortion access. Other states will become contested battlegrounds for control of state legislatures and the governorship in order to pass measures in either direction.

Abortion in the United States

Despite the truth about when human life begins and its infinite value, we must come to terms with the prevalence of abortion in our culture today. According to the Guttmacher Institute: ⁹

- An estimated 60 million preborn lives have been aborted since 1973¹⁰
- 862,000 abortions were performed in the U.S. in 2017
- 24% of U.S. women will have an abortion by the age of 45
- 59% of U.S. women obtaining abortions already have a child
- Medication (non-surgical) abortions increased from 5% of all abortions in 2001 to 39% in 2017¹¹

What is Medication Abortion?

In 2000, the FDA approved the drug mifepristone (formerly known as RU-486) to be marketed for nonsurgical abortion. When taken, it blocks the hormone progesterone, causing the lining of the uterus to thin and preventing the embryo from staying implanted and growing. In most medication abortions, mifepristone is followed about two days later by a drug called misoprostol, which causes the uterus to contract and expel the fetus and placenta.

9 <https://www.guttmacher.org/united-states/abortion>

10 https://www.grrtl.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Abortion_US.pdf

11 <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states>

Medication abortion is provided up to 10 weeks' gestation. In 2017, 30% of abortion clinics provided only medication abortions. As overall abortion numbers have gone down since 2001, the number of medication abortions continues to steadily rise.

These medication abortions pose significant medical risks for women. A review of nearly 7,000 abortions performed in Australia in 2009 and 2010 found that 3.3% of patients who used mifepristone in the first trimester required emergency hospital treatment, in contrast to 2.2% of patients who underwent surgical abortions. Women receiving medication abortions were also admitted to hospitals at a rate of 5.7% following the abortion, as compared with 0.4% for patients undergoing surgical abortion.¹²

Sometimes, women will contact a pregnancy resource center or abortion pill reversal hotline after they have taken mifepristone. These women may have changed their minds or, in some cases, were forced to take the drug and want to reverse its effects. The reversal process involves a large influx of progesterone into the woman's system, counteracting the progesterone-blocking effects of mifepristone. The reversal must begin quickly, preferably within 24 hours of taking mifepristone.

One young woman came to the Palmetto Women's Center in South Carolina after taking the abortion pill at the persuasion of her boyfriend, who insisted they were not old enough or financially stable enough to have a child. At the center, she received the abortion pill reversal and is now raising her son.

12 "Health Risks of Abortion," Americans United for Life, February 14, 2018, <https://aui.org/2018/02/14/health-risks-of-abortion/#fn-16418-35>.

Abortion is an issue in the church as well. In 2014, many abortion patients in the U.S. reported a religious affiliation—24% were Catholic, 17% were mainline Protestant, 13% were evangelical Protestant, and 8% identified with some other religion. Thirty-eight percent of patients had no religious affiliation.¹³

The mother's socio-economic status can also play a significant role in pressures for her to get an abortion. In 2016, 75% of U.S. women having abortions were from low income households.¹⁴

Understanding the massive prevalence of abortion helps us empathize with women who are making very difficult decisions and helps us know how best to support them if they decide to choose life.

Abortion around the world

According to Guttmacher, between 2010–2014 (most recent data available):¹⁵

- An estimated 56 million induced abortions occurred each year worldwide
- The global annual rate of abortion for all women of reproductive age (15–44) is estimated to be 35 per 1,000
- Globally, 25% of all pregnancies ended in abortion

13 <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/characteristics-us-abortion-patients-2014>

14 "U.S. Abortion Patients," Guttmacher Institute, May 9, 2016, <https://www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2016/us-abortion-patients#>.

15 "Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion Worldwide," Guttmacher Institute, July 2020, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide>.

Why women choose abortion

Women may give varying answers to why they choose abortion, but in 2004, women cited the following: ¹⁶

- 25%—Not ready for a(nother) child and/or timing is wrong
- 23%—Can't afford a baby now
- 19%—Have completed my childbearing/Have other people depending on me/Children are grown
- 8%—Don't want to be a single mother or am having relationship problems
- 7%—Don't feel mature enough to raise a(nother) child/Feel too young
- 4%—Physical problem with my health
- 3%—Possible problems affecting the health of the fetus
- 6%—Other

GO

So, now that we know the reality of what is abortion is and how many children and families are affected by it, how do we respond?

Christians have been on the forefront of ministry to parents in crisis for millenia. In our modern era, the church has been leading the way by volunteering in crisis pregnancy centers, donating needed baby

¹⁶ Lawrence B. Finer and Lori F. Frohworth, et al., "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," *Guttmacher Institute, Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 37 (2005): 110-118, <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2005/reasons-us-women-have-abortions-quantitative-and-qualitative-perspectives>.

supplies to a woman who chooses to parent, supporting adoption, and in countless other ways. Believers are acting on their conviction that every life has worth and dignity.

Question: What practical ways have you seen people minister to parents with unplanned pregnancies?

Pregnancy Resource Centers

Pregnancy resource centers (also known as pregnancy health centers or PRCs) meet women where they are. Many women come to them confused or scared about how a pregnancy could alter their lives. Relationships, financial concerns, and abuse can all be factors in their decision of how or if they should move forward with the pregnancy.

Sandi Horsley, the executive director of a pregnancy resource center in Tuscaloosa, Ala., stated, “I often speak to churches and organizations to ask for their support. They consider themselves pro-life, and I ask them to take that step further to provide life—to prove they believe in what they are shouting. It is one thing [to] ask these moms to choose life and quite another to say we want to stand behind you for making this choice.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Eric Mayo, “How pregnancy resource centers empower moms to choose life,” ERLC, June 3, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-pregnancy-resource-centers-empower-moms-to-choose-life/>.

PRCs often provide free pregnancy testing, and if the test is positive, counsel women on the factors involved in the choice to parent, adopt, or abort. Resources are also often provided to new parents such as diapers, formula, infant clothing, and car seats. Many centers offer post-abortion support groups where women who have experienced abortion, either recently or decades ago, can work together to discuss wounds and move forward in freedom. Many of these centers are faith-based and provide Bible studies as well.

The Pregnancy Care Center in Old Hickory, Tenn., “serves women, men, and families in the greater Nashville area facing unplanned pregnancies. Their work has grown to include a special focus on the needs of those from immigrant communities.” Executive Director Lisa Cathart states,

At the Pregnancy Care Center we have a heart for serving vulnerable and marginalized populations. As a ministry that exists to affirm the worth, dignity, and sanctity of all human life, I believe we are uniquely positioned to accept and receive newcomers to our country and community, extending the same compassion and grace to this vulnerable population as we do toward the unborn and the women and men facing a pregnancy decision.

We have now served individuals and families from 38 countries of origin and at least eight unique faith backgrounds. We have ministered to individuals from the Middle East, Africa, Central America, South America, and Asia. Those who are Arabic speaking

continue to represent the largest immigrant population we are serving. Among Arabic-speaking families—which include both Coptic Christians and Muslims—many share histories of war torn countries, poverty, and religious persecution.

When many immigrants face an unplanned or crisis pregnancy, the stakes are extremely high, especially if the relationship is outside of their faith or culture. Sadly, the more assimilated to Western culture an immigrant is, the more vulnerable to abortion they become. Some come from a culture that does not even have a word in their language for abortion, but now they are presented with an option that they have been told will allow them to avoid the shame and pain of unintended pregnancy.¹⁸

Today, many pregnancy centers employ medical personnel, offering ultrasound services and other women’s health services. For example, the Psalm 139 Project, a ministry of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, places ultrasound machines in pro-life clinics using donated funds.¹⁹ These machines allow a pregnant woman to see the life inside her womb and hear the heartbeat of her child.

Liberty Women’s Clinic in Kansas City, Mo., received an ultrasound machine through the Psalm 139 Project. The clinic’s founder and CEO, Carol Graham, said that in the first 12 months since receiving the ultrasound machine they provided 231 ultrasounds and, to their knowledge, 209 of the women who saw their preborn children chose to continue their pregnancies. That is a 90% rate of choosing life.

¹⁸ Jill Waggoner, “How one pregnancy resource center is serving immigrant populations,” ERLC, January 28, 2001, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-one-pregnancy-resource-center-is-serving-immigrant-populations/>.

¹⁹ Psalm 139 Project, <https://psalm139project.org/>.

“Ultrasound is truly what makes a difference for young women who are teetering on the edge of a decision between life and death of their child—the quality of that image is vital,” Graham said. “The truth presented in the ultrasound image and the compassion of His people poured out on the broken, provides an avenue to set captives free from their current anguish and the future despair of a decision to end their pregnancy.”²⁰

PRCs come in so many different forms and care models depending on the region and community they serve. Supporting a local PRC is a great place for a church to start caring for vulnerable women and preborn children. There are so many other ways a church can support mothers and children in need. We will focus more on how to do this well next week.

Supporting fathers

There is also a great need to reach men with hope and truth when they are facing the reality of fatherhood. The father of a preborn child has a great influence over whether or not the mother chooses to keep the child.²¹ When men feel they are not ready to be fathers to their preborn children, they may convince the mother to have an abortion. For some of these men, their own lack of an involved father can lead to fear of the unknown aspects of fatherhood.

20 Tess Schoonhoven, “Two ultrasound machines, hundreds of lives saved,” Baptist Press, January 13, 2020, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/two-ultrasound-machines-hundreds-of-lives-saved/>.

21 Roland C. Warren, “Why Our Communities Need More Josephs,” Care Net, June 13, 2018, <https://www.care-net.org/abundant-life-blog/why-our-communities-need-more-josephs>.

On the other hand, much of the language around abortion rights advocacy leaves the man out of the equation altogether. If it's a woman's body and her choice, a father who wants to keep the child may not feel he has a voice.

There is an opportunity to reach men with the truth and hope of the gospel as they face the uncertainty of fatherhood. The Joseph Project, an initiative of the national pregnancy center network CareNet, exists "to inspire men to be forces for good in the fight for life, and to equip pregnancy centers to serve expectant fathers in the midst of their life or death pregnancy decisions."²² The program offers a range of tools for churches and pregnancy resource centers to use, including a series of workshops teaching expectant fathers health care and child safety skills they will need to care for their children. This kind of training can give a man confidence as he makes decisions involving his preborn child, and it can give a mother confidence in his readiness for fatherhood.

Creating a fatherhood mentoring program at your church or getting involved in one at a local PRC is a great way for Christian men to get involved in local ministry and at the same time strengthen families in their community. While abortion may often be considered a "women's issue," when seasoned fathers mentor new fathers they are making a remarkable difference one family at a time.

22 Ibid.

Education advocacy

Another way we can stand for preborn children is through educating the next generation on when life begins and the incredible process of human embryo development. Introducing concepts like human dignity and human embryology to school curricula empowers students to understand what makes humans different from other organisms and why we should protect and preserve life from the point of conception. The Contend Project is an organization that advocates for human embryology to be added to science standards in schools. Through studying embryology, students encounter the truth that life begins at conception. This knowledge leads students to recognize the value of all life and also empowers them to better understand reproduction.

Question: What ways have you seen individuals or churches serve vulnerable women and preborn children?

Here are some ideas for how to get started caring for preborn children and infants:

- Create a resource closet at your church (or partner with a local PRC) and stock it with prenatal vitamins, maternity clothes, and anything else an expectant mother in crisis might need.
- Volunteer to rock babies in your local neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).
- Create a first year ministry at your church to help provide low-income parents with diapers, clothes, formula, car seats, and any-

thing else they might need for their baby.

- Become involved in advocating for the protection of preborn children in legislation within your state.

Stories of Hope: Melissa Ohden

In 1977, a 19-year-old woman found herself facing an unplanned pregnancy. Her mother was a prominent nurse in the community, and she forced her daughter to have an abortion, arranging the procedure with the local abortionist, who was a friend. This allowed her to bypass hospital regulations, leading the hospital staff to believe the birth mother wanted the abortion. The saline infusion abortion involved delivering a toxic salt solution into the amniotic fluid surrounding the baby's body in the womb. This procedure is designed to poison the baby and induce premature labor to expel the deceased baby from the womb. However, when the baby was delivered, she was still alive.

When staff discovered the baby was alive, the grandmother told them to leave it, allowing it to die. Having been discarded among medical waste, the baby was discovered by a nurse who heard the baby girl whimpering and took her to the NICU. She weighed just 2 lbs. 14 oz. and was given a low probability of survival past infancy. She was adopted by a couple who did not tell her about the failed abortion.

At age 14, Melissa Ohden discovered the circumstances of her birth. She wrestled through the implications, but eventually was able to connect with her birth mother and half-sisters. For more than 30 years, her birth mother believed her baby had died. She was unaware of the circumstances around the delivery or the adoption. Now, they live in the same city and spend time together regularly.

“Learning the truth was a horrific, life-changing experience,” Ohden said. “But looking back on the years that have passed since I first heard the story of my birth, I now appreciate who God made me to be, survivor and all.”

Melissa started The Abortion Survivors Network ²³, which has allowed more than 200 survivors to find connection and encouragement. She has written a book,²⁴ and shared her story with a wide audience, allowing her story of emotional and physical healing to bring hope to many. ²⁵

23 Abortion Survivors Network, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://abortion survivors.org/>.

24 Melissa Ohden, “Reconnecting with the Mother Who Tried to Abort Me,” Focus on the Family, June 5, 2019, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/pro-life/reconnecting-with-the-mother-who-tried-to-abort-me/>.

25 Valerie Schmalz, “Melissa Ohden survived her mother’s abortion – and that’s just the beginning of the story,” Catholic San Francisco, January 26, 2017, <https://catholic-sf.org/news/melissa-ohden-survived-her-mothers-abortion-and-thats-just-the-beginning-of-the-story>.

Heroes for Life: Save the Storks

Save the Storks is an organization that partners with pregnancy resource centers across the U.S. who are the immediate conduit for the love, compassion, and action God calls us to. Equipped with their own mobile medical units, affectionately called “Stork Buses,” these centers are able to bring vital medical care to the women who need them most.

Brienda was a young mom who visited a Stork Bus in a time of personal crisis:

I was with my daughter's father, and that was an abusive relationship, and I left that relationship and went into another abusive relationship. I was just trying to figure out life. I wanted to change, but I really at that point was content with being where I was. I found out that I was pregnant, and I was overwhelmed. I really just isolated myself because I was embarrassed of the situation I was going through. I automatically thought, "I have to get an abortion"....I didn't want to bring a baby into the messed up situation I was in.

Women's Choice Clinic offers free pregnancy tests and ultrasounds onboard their Stork Bus to help women navigate their pregnancy options. Brienda had seen the bus and thought she should go on board because she had pregnancy symptoms. She visited the bus and took a test, and her pregnancy was confirmed.

Brienda felt supported and encouraged by the staff on the Stork Bus. “They didn’t pressure me or anything,” she said. “They just recommended some things and asked me to come out to their center before I made any life-changing decisions. So I came out to the center, and I was able to get an ultrasound.”

“When I saw the ultrasound of my son, I was overjoyed,” Brienda recounted. “I was happy. It just melted my heart. I instantly went into protective mode. There wasn’t an option to have an abortion anymore, there was just the option of figuring out what I was going to do next to be able to support both of my kids on my own in a healthy environment.”

Sarah Leinart, the nurse who performed Brienda’s ultrasound, has seen that response many times when performing ultrasounds. “When a person is really kind of undecided, they see that baby, they see that heartbeat, and everything suddenly becomes real. And in that moment they realize, ‘This is my baby.’”

Brienda responded in a similar manner,

I was just thinking, like, "It's a part of me. This is my baby. And regardless of whatever situation, I've just got to be a better person, a better mother for both of my kids now."

I love my son to death. I can't believe that it was ever an option to not have him. He's my heart. That's my baby. I love my son.

I feel like with choosing his life, I chose mine too. I chose not only to choose a life, but a better life, in a better environment, in a better situation. And to give my kids better, I had to give myself better.

Brienda went back to school to finish her degree, found a good job and a supportive day care for her kids, and started a business.

"Being a mother to two kids is just the best decision I've ever made," Brienda said. "It's the most important job I'll ever have, being their mother. It's just like we were made for each other. I love my kids. We're perfect. We fit like peanut butter and jelly."

WEEK 2: IMAGE OF GOD IN PREBORN CHILDREN

“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”
(Psalm 139:13-16)

Biblical passages about the humanity of the preborn:

- Jeremiah 1:5
- Luke 1:15
- Luke 1:39-44

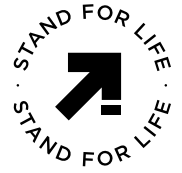
Can you think of other Scripture passages that highlight human dignity?

How have you seen the Lord redeem brokenness or dire circumstances in your own life?

What examples do you see in Scripture where God uses what the world would consider those in lowly positions to accomplish His purposes?

How might the Lord be calling you to minister to those in crisis?

“Jesus took special care to recognize and serve women. Thus when emulating Christ, the work of pro-life advocates naturally involves protecting, caring for, and empowering women. The lives of both the preborn child and the mother who carries him or her matter deeply.”



WEEK 3

IMAGE OF GOD IN WOMEN

KNOW

As we study Scripture and uncover the truth that God values every human life at every stage, we see that one group of vulnerable people stands out that Jesus took special care to recognize and serve: women. Thus when emulating Christ, the work of pro-life

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advocates naturally involves protecting, caring for, and empowering women. The lives of both the preborn child and the mother who carries him or her matter deeply.

What does the Bible say?

From the first chapter of the Bible, we see God's design for women,

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Just as we learned in Week 1, each of us has dignity and value because we are created in God's image. We also see that this dignity is the same for both men and women. One does not bear more of God's image than the other.

Throughout the Bible, from Eve (Genesis 3:15, 20) to Sarah (Genesis 17:7, 15-21) to Rahab (Joshua 2, Matthew 1:5) to Ruth (Ruth 1:3-5, 4:13-22) to Esther (Esther 4) to Mary (Luke 1:26-38) to Lydia (Acts 16) to Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2) and on, we see God using women to fulfill His purposes, and He continues to empower and equip women to carry out their God-given purpose. But we also see women in vulnerable situations and hard places. Sarah was infertile, Rahab was a prostitute, Ruth was a widow, Esther was forced into marriage, and Mary was a pregnant teenager. Yet God used each of these women and redeemed their stories.

Read the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42.

In John 4 we see that it was to an outcast woman in Samaria that Jesus first revealed Himself to be the Messiah. He sought her out and spent time talking and listening to her, demonstrating the kind of care that did not see this woman as a problem to be solved but as a person to be loved. Where others chose to either condemn or ignore, Jesus was counter cultural in His treatment of women, particularly those in vulnerable positions, seeing their dignity and loving them with gentleness and compassion.

We are called to do the same today.

What does it mean to be vulnerable?

People in vulnerable situations are those whose life circumstances leave them open to attack or physical, mental, or emotional harm. Poverty, social stigmas, discrimination, or violence, are all circumstances that can lead to this vulnerability. In many communities, women are vulnerable, because, due to societal structures or circumstances, they lack the resources and power to protect themselves or their families from harm.

This is certainly true for many women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. As mentioned in Week 2, some 75% of abortion patients in 2014 were poor (having an income below the federal poverty level of \$15,730 for a family of two in 2014) or low income (having an income of 100-199% of the federal poverty level). Many were young,

with 34% of abortion patients in 2014 being between 20-24 years old and 12% being between 15-19. Sixteen percent of those who obtained abortions in the U.S. were born outside the U.S. ¹

“Abortion is profoundly anti-women. Three quarters of its victims are women: Half the babies and all the mothers.” — Mother Teresa

Question: Who are the vulnerable women in our communities?

GROW

What are the challenges in our communities that lead women to abortion?

Poverty

In a study published in 2005 by the pro-abortion Guttmacher Institute, when asked their reasons for having an abortion, 73% of patients said they could not afford a baby at the time. ² Because so many women seeking abortions are at or near the poverty line, a lack of resources is a huge barrier to choosing life.

¹ “Induced Abortion in the United States,” Guttmacher Institute, September 2019, <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-united-states#>.

² Lawrence B. Finer and Lori F. Frohworth, et al., “Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives,” Guttmacher Institute, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 37 (2005): 110-118, <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2005/reasons-us-women-have-abortions-quantitative-and-qualitative-perspectives>.

Having a child should not be a privilege reserved for the wealthy. When our solution to an unexpected pregnancy for a woman in poverty is abortion, we are sending a message about her value and the value of her child. We are also sending a message about her opportunities. She can either be a mother or obtain an education or a decent job, but she cannot do both.

We know that is not the case and as the Church, we are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus to vulnerable women in poverty. Just as we saw Jesus do time and time again in the Gospels, we need to meet her right where she is, ask what she and her baby need, and then provide the resources and training she needs to thrive as a mother.

Lack of societal support

In the 2005 Guttmacher study³ as mentioned above, 74% of patients said, “Having a baby would dramatically change my life.” Women said these dramatic changes would affect their education and career plans and would negatively impact other children in their family.

³ <https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/psrh/2005/reasons-us-women-have-abortions-quantitative-and-qualitative-perspectives>.

Mother Teresa saw the effects of abortion on American society and the ways in which it hurts women, saying:

America needs no words from me to see how your decision in Roe v. Wade has deformed a great nation. The so-called right to abortion has pitted mothers against their children and women against men. It has sown violence and discord at the heart of the most intimate human relationships. It has aggravated the derogation of the father's role in an increasingly fatherless society. It has portrayed the greatest of gifts — a child — as a competitor, an intrusion, and an inconvenience. It has nominally accorded mothers unfettered dominion over the independent lives of their physically dependent sons and daughters. And, in granting this unconscionable power, it has exposed many women to unjust and selfish demands from their husbands or other sexual partners. Human rights are not a privilege conferred by government. They are every human being's entitlement by virtue of his humanity. The right to life does not depend, and must not be declared to be contingent, on the pleasure of anyone else, not even a parent or a sovereign.⁴

In effect, women's efforts to obtain equality have failed to recognize the differences between men and women. Our society does not value women as women, but instead it values women who are like men. And instead of bearing equal responsibility with women, men are often given a pass when it comes to bearing responsibility for their child.

⁴ Mother Teresa, "Notable and Quotable," The Wall Street Journal, February 25, 1994, A14.

Instead of seeing childbearing as a valued privilege, we see children, as Mother Teresa said, as an intrusion. And instead of building a society that supports parents through parental leave and child care, we pit children against education, careers, finances, and other opportunities. Society says women need abortion because it's the only way to achieve their goals. But what if we changed societal norms and worked to support women who want to choose life and obtain an education or a career goal?

In America, we have a long way to go to support parents. Of 41 countries in the United Nations and OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the United States was the only country in 2016 that provided no paid leave to mothers or fathers.⁵ For those who have no paid leave, abortion can seem like the only option for survival, particularly if a pregnant mother has other children or dependents looking to her for provision. Our churches have the opportunity to step into this gap and provide resources for child-care and educational options for women so that they can provide for their families.

Lack of family support

Of women responding to the Guttmacher study, 48% said they were choosing abortion because they did not want to be single mothers or were having relationship problems. Many women have reported that

⁵ "Are the world's richest countries family friendly?" Unicef, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/family-friendly>.

they have been pressured by the father to have an abortion or are informed they will be on their own if they choose to continue with the pregnancy.

Far too often fathers in unplanned pregnancies repeat the mistakes of their own fathers, perpetuating a cycle of fatherlessness. They themselves had a father who was not present. They are unable to be the father their new child needs, because they have no example to follow.

Following the example of Christ, it is imperative that boys and men in our congregation are taught how to lovingly care and provide for their families. It is imperative that we disciple and mentor new fathers, giving them the tools and examples they need to support the mother and new baby.

Regardless of a woman's situation, a strong support system is vital in meeting the unexpected trials of an unplanned pregnancy.

Can you think of ways your congregation could serve women who are facing poverty, childcare issues, or a lack of a strong support system?

Vulnerable Women and Abuse

As we seek to be like Christ, the church should be a safe place for women in vulnerable situations. One area of widespread vulnerability for many women is the threat of sexual abuse and violence. The Center for Disease and Prevention cites that 1 out of 3 women

have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact at some point in their lives.⁶ The effects of this abuse can include a significantly greater risk of developing emotional and mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety symptoms, depression, and suicide attempts.

In fact, Darkness to Light, an organization committed to empowering adults to prevent child sexual abuse reports:⁷

- Adult women who were sexually abused as a child are more than twice as likely to suffer from depression as women who were not sexually abused.
- Adults with a history of child sexual abuse are more than twice as likely to report a suicide attempt.
- Females who are sexually abused are three times more likely to develop psychiatric disorders than females who are not sexually abused.

In addition, adult survivors are at greater risk of a wide range of conditions and are 30% more likely than their non-abused peers to have a serious medical condition such as diabetes, cancer, heart problems, stroke, or hypertension.⁸

6 CDC, "Preventing Sexual Violence," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 1, 2019, <http://www.cdc.gov/features/sexualviolence/>

7 "Child Sexual Abuse Statistics: Consequences," Darkness to Light, December 4, 2015, http://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_5_Consequences.pdf.

8 N. Sachs-Ericsson et al., "Childhood Sexual and Physical Abuse and 1-Year Prevalence of Medical Problems in the National Comorbidity Survey," *Health Psychology* 24 (2005): 32-40.

Sadly, there are many instances in church history where Christians have failed to follow Christ's example in loving vulnerable women in our churches and communities, especially those who have been abused within the very walls of our congregations. Quick to teach that all people are created in God's image, we nevertheless undermine that teaching when we neglect to properly care for women, children, and the least of these, as modeled by our Savior (Matt. 18:6, John 4:26). Churches should be a refuge for those who have experienced abuse. But, too often, survivors haven't found the protection they deserve and the care they need from the church.

In 2019, in response to the abuse crisis, the Southern Baptist Convention launched the Caring Well Challenge (CWC). The goal of the CWC is to equip churches to be safe for survivors and safe from abuse. The program provides churches with an adaptable and attainable pathway to immediately enhance their efforts to prevent abuse and care for abuse survivors.

Is your church safe from abuse and a safe place for survivors of abuse? What steps can you take to ensure this?

GO

How do we create a culture that values every woman and child, modeling the call of Scripture to love one another and bear one another's burdens? Here are some practical ways to serve the women in our communities.

Value all women

Before the 2020 March for Life in Washington, D.C., Southern Baptist pastor David Platt prayed the following prayer,

God, have mercy. God, have mercy on children. God, have mercy on moms. God, have mercy on dads. God, have mercy on us. Please open the eyes of every person in our country to see the beauty and the wonder of what you are doing in pregnancy. God, help us to love women in pregnancy, to care for them, to serve them, to honor them-- particularly when they can't see a way forward, when they may not want a baby, help us to come alongside them and say we will take them. We'll take care of you as a mom if you are not ready to be a mom. We will care for your children. We will lead the way in foster care and adoption so that every child in our country, from the moment of conception, knows that they are fearfully and wonderfully made by a God who loves them more than they can imagine. ⁹

The church has a vital role to play in supporting women and showing them that God loves and cares for them.

Pregnancy resource centers are one of the main support systems for women in unplanned pregnancies, yet they need our help. Mary Holoman, the communications coordinator for Greensboro Pregnancy Care Center in North Carolina, says she sees a deep unmet need for the women who come to the center. These women repeatedly told

⁹ David Platt, "March for Life," Radical, January 27, 2020, <https://radical.net/video/march-for-life-prayer-david-platt/>.

Mary they had no true friendships, accountability, or church home. There was no one in their lives giving them guidance and direction when they needed it most.

In response to these needs, the center developed what they call the “Success Sequence.” Like a pyramid, the Success Sequence has three ascending levels:

Level One: Medical Services, including pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, or an STD test and treatment, and the encouragement to choose life and avoid sexual risk.

Level Two: Education and Resources, including classes, community referrals, and meeting practical needs with baby and maternity materials. Class topics include parenting, pregnancy, budgeting, job interviews, healthy eating, and more.

Level Three: Titus 2 Initiative Mentorship Program, which partners applicants with a mentor who initiates a relationship. Hollomon explains,

A client who applies for this program is paired with a mentor who initiates a relationship. It may start out with coffee or an invite to lunch. This new relationship provides a non-intimidating segue for each client to know at least one face within a new church. Willing clients are provided with biblical direction and discipleship before, during, and after pregnancy.

This mentorship program has seen great results for both the clients and the mentors. “Since the launch of this program in 2014,” Hollomon said, “we’ve learned something amazing about mentorship: Both our clients and women within the church are hungry for it.”¹⁰

Programs like the Titus 2 Initiative can open the door to relationships not only with the mother, but also with the father and other family members. As the church comes alongside a pregnant woman, it cannot only become a support system, but also serve those closest to the mother and child.

Supporting single mothers

Lindsey Teat is a pastor’s wife in Alabama whose church hosts a Families Count class, a parenting program designed by Lifeline Children’s Services. The Families Count program is an example of a ministry working on the front end of the orphan crisis to support family restoration and preservation through the local church in an effort to prevent children from entering or repeatedly re-entering state care.

Through this program, Lindsey established a relationship with a single mom, Erin.¹¹ Erin had lost custody of her three children, but came to the Families Count class out of a desire to break the cycle she had experienced from childhood. Based on this relationship, Lindsey gives some practical ways we can help the vulnerable around us:

¹⁰ Mary Holloman, “How one pregnancy care center is connecting women to the church,” ERLC, May 29, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-one-pregnancy-care-center-is-connecting-women-to-the-church/>.

¹¹ Name changed for privacy purposes.

Be present. Most of the parents that come through our doors have been told over and over all the things they need to do differently. They rarely get to share their story. Listen. You don't have to have all the answers, or any answers. Simply listening shows the parents that they are valued and have inherent dignity themselves.

Be honest. Erin and I had conversations about some unhealthy relationships in her life and the need to set boundaries. We talked about ways she could make more money or tighten up her spending to make her budget work and not be in frequent financial crises. We talked about believing the gospel and following Jesus. We had hard and uncomfortable conversations at appropriate times, but they were conversations that were necessary for her to be a successful parent.

Be empowering. Instead of trying to meet every need (e.g., giving them money), help set them up for lasting success. For example, you can do this by teaching them how to create a budget, and then sitting with them and walking through it together. This way, they are making informed choices about how they can responsibly use the income they already have. As a result, they are the ones making positive changes and not relying on someone else, which is an empowering thing.

Be a friend. Text or call during the week, ask how the budget is going or about the relationship boundaries. Show that you care, and be available when both good and bad things happen. I've had the

opportunity to rejoice with Erin when she called to tell me she got a new job, and I've also been able to encourage her when she struggled with a sick child. ¹²

Caring for post-abortive women and men

Pastor Tim Keller said,

What if we took the image of God seriously? First of all, regardless of what the law of the land says, we would know abortion, except to save the life of a mother, is a violation of the image of God. Secondly, the women who have had abortions, and the men who have helped them have abortions, would not feel like scum, because James 3:9 says you don't disdain, you don't demonize, you don't curse, you offer grace to everybody. You see if we believed in the image of God and say abortion is wrong, we wouldn't make women who have had abortions feel terrible, like scum or something. And we wouldn't be single issue people, we would be for all of the poor and all of the weak and all of the marginal. And we would be a very unusual community, wouldn't we? Now let's be that. ¹³

Satan, the master of lies, whispers lies to women on both sides of abortion. At first, he tempts women to believe that abortion will make all their problems go away, and then on the other side of the abortion, he often whispers to them that they are condemned and unforgivable. This shame can last for decades. A 2019 study of ma-

¹² Lindsey Teat, "How meeting practical needs helps vulnerable families," ERLC, March 11, 2020, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-meeting-practical-needs-helps-vulnerable-families/>.

¹³ Tim Keller, "Tim Keller on the Image of God," Focus on the Family, September 25, 2015, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/pro-life/tim-keller-on-the-image-of-god/>.

ternal suicide in Italy found that the suicide rate of women who had abortions was more than double the suicide rate of women who gave birth. ¹⁴

The beauty is that truth sets us free and Jesus removes our shame. We can all learn how to walk forward in the forgiveness and freedom that Christ gives.

Yet abortion is not just something with which women grapple. Many men regret the role they played in their partner's abortion. While the man didn't experience the abortion physically, he may have encouraged it to happen, abandoned the woman to deal with it alone, or paid for it. On the otherhand, the man may have wanted to parent but an abortion took place anyway. Abortion also takes a toll on relationships. A research study showed that only 37% of couples were still together two years after an abortion. ¹⁵

Some women and men with abortion in their past struggle to believe they are worthy to have children in the future. They may think that if they gave up their choice to have a child before, why do they deserve a child in the future?

14 Hannah Howard, "New Study: Elevated Suicide Rates Among Mothers after Abortion," Lozier Institute, September 10, 2019, <https://lozierinstitute.org/new-study-elevated-suicide-rates-among-mothers-after-abortion/>.

15 Mauldon, Jane., Diana Greene Foster, and Sarah C. M. Roberts, Effect of Abortion vs. Carrying to Term on a Woman's Relationship with the Man Involved in the Pregnancy. Perspectives on Sexual & Reproductive Health. Mar2015, Vol. 47 Issue 1, p11-18.

Garrett Kell, pastor of Del Ray Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., told his story of abortion at an Evangelicals for Life conference. He spoke of the tragedy that he and an ex-girlfriend went through in college as they experienced the after-effects of a chemical abortion. That conscience-afflicting experience, along with a life filled with partying and living for self, brought him to the point where he was desperate, and open to receiving the truth of the gospel. His life was forever changed, even leading him to full-time ministry.

“It is good and right to create policies that stand against the evil of abortion,” Kell said, “but brothers and sisters, do not be deceived, the power for change is in the gospel. Jesus is the One who changes people.”

Kell also spoke to men involved in abortion,

...whether they have been passive like Adam in the garden, or an accessory like David, or active like Herod, wherever they are—that they would take responsibility and say ‘Blood is on my hands.’ And that churches would proclaim the gospel that saves sinners and that they would live the gospel, so that the first place that somebody who’s pregnant and says ‘I don’t know what to do,’ would go, would be to the people who know about grace—the church would be the church.¹⁶

Question: What ways have you seen individuals or churches serve post-abortive women and men?

¹⁶ Garrett Kell, “Finding Forgiveness After Abortion,” Evangelicals For Life Conference, January 29, 2016, <https://youtu.be/MGOpdnj7oXI>.

Caring for abuse survivors

At the 2019 ERLC Caring Well Conference, survivor and advocate Susan Codone shared from her perspective of an SBC sexual abuse survivor, challenging the church to acknowledge that many adults in our congregations have experienced trauma.

“Do not be afraid of those of us who’ve experienced trauma,” Susan said. “Our stories are messy, but embrace us and you will embrace our Savior who suffered.”¹⁷

As the Bride of Christ who is to emulate the love and care of Jesus for the vulnerable among us, we must ensure that our churches are safe from abuse and safe for survivors. We must enact policies in our children and youth ministries and throughout our buildings and events to make sure the vulnerable are protected. Additionally, it is essential that we educate our staff on how to handle abuse allegations, develop ministries and resources to care for the abused, and partner with local agencies and nonprofits who serve the abused well.

To learn more about how to do all you can to make your church safe from abuse and safe for survivors, visit www.caringwell.com and take the Caring Well Challenge.

¹⁷ Susan Codone, “10 requests for church leaders from a sexual abuse survivor,” ERLC, October 17, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/10-requests-for-church-leaders-from-a-sexual-abuse-survivor/>.

Here are some ideas for how to get started caring for vulnerable women in your community:

- Create a new mom mentorship program to help walk new mom's through the first few years of raising a child.
- Volunteer to babysit for a single mom while she works.
- Create a scholarship fund for new single moms who want to finish their education.
- Educate yourself and inform others about the prevalence of women at risk.
- Host a pregnant moms' or single moms' night at your church, providing childcare and allowing new moms to be pampered.
- If your church has a daycare or preschool program, help create a financial aid program for moms in need.

Stories of Hope: Elizabeth's Story

Elizabeth still remembers watching the window of the pregnancy test stick. It was the longest two minutes of her life. She used the foolproof test with real words. After praying on her knees, there it was: PREGNANT.

She called a friend, not from her church. She couldn't handle the judgmental stares from her church, or so she thought. She assumed her friend would be supportive. Her friend brought up other "options." However, Elizabeth was confident and resolute this was not a decision to be made. She was carrying a life inside her. She told no one and visited her local OB-GYN the next day, alone. Her

doctor confirmed what she already knew. As she walked out of the cold room, a nurse handed her pamphlets that she trashed on the way out.

The least pro-choice action any woman can make is to automatically assume an unmarried woman wants to have an abortion. And the worst pro-life response a mother can make, after learning of her daughter's unplanned pregnancy, is weep and say, "What will people think of our family?" Which is something Elizabeth will never forget.

Months later, while at work, a customer saw the slight bulge in her abdomen and quietly asked her about it. She smiled and told him she was having a boy. After complimenting her smile and glow, he told her nobody would ever marry her and she should consider other options.

In her third trimester, her church rallied around her. Moms offered advice. Her pastor encouraged her. And the baby shower given by her church family was standing room only, with more than 200 people present. Elizabeth was given everything she registered for and diapers that lasted two years. That church support didn't stop after the birth of Elizabeth's son. They provided baby clothes for years. They brought her food twice a month for the same amount of time. And godly women stopped by her home often so that Elizabeth could take a shower or a nap.

Elizabeth believes the kind of care she received from her church and those around her is what will influence women to choose life. We can learn from her church's example and rally around those in our communities who need support.

Heroes for Life: Amy Ford

Imagine being a teenage girl and discovering you are unexpectedly pregnant. Questions fill your mind: What will my parents think? How will my boyfriend react? What will people at school say? What does this mean for my future? Did my whole world just change with this positive test?

That's where Amy Ford found herself. Did that positive pregnancy test change her world? Yes, but in ways you might not imagine.

Given the shame and loneliness Amy experienced as a pregnant teenager, Amy knew firsthand how to relate to girls in the same position. In addition to choosing to parent and raise that child, who is now a college student preparing for ministry, Amy began a ministry that connects girls facing unplanned pregnancies to local churches through Embrace Grace church groups.

The partnership between a pregnancy center and a church starts with what Amy calls a Love Box.

"The pregnant woman is given this specially wrapped box before she leaves the center. Inside, she finds notes of encouragement with headings such as, 'Dear Brave Woman,' as well as a onesie for her

baby, a book written by Amy called *A Bump in Life*, and information on how to contact the national Embrace Grace program for another free gift—a piece of jewelry. She is then put in touch with a local Embrace Grace leader who invites the woman to join the program at the local church.”¹⁸

These groups help connect women to the church instead of feeling judged by the church. The church even throws them a baby shower to express excitement for this season in their life. The goal is that the women will come to know Jesus and continue to be disciplined in a local church.

From a lonely pregnant teenager to the founder of a ministry, it begs the question: Can God redeem? The answer: Absolutely.

¹⁸ Gayle Irwin, “Pregnancy Center, Church Partnership Exemplifies Why ‘Pro-Life’ Is ‘Pro-Love,’” *Pregnancy Help News*, May 21, 2019, <https://pregnancyhelpnews.com/news/item/1721-pregnancy-center-church-partnership-exemplifies-why-pro-life-is-pro-love>.

WEEK 3: IMAGE OF GOD IN WOMEN

“So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

Women in the Bible:

- Genesis 3:15, 20
- Genesis 17:7, 15-21
- Joshua 2
- Matthew 1:5
- Ruth 1:3-5, 4:13-22
- Esther 4
- Luke 1:26-38
- Acts 16
- Romans 16:1-2

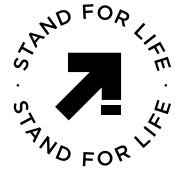
What ways have you seen individuals or churches serve post-abortive women and men?

How did Jesus display His deep love and protection for vulnerable women?

What are some ways your church could meet the needs of vulnerable women to help them choose life for their preborn child?

Have you ever walked next to a mother/father facing an unplanned pregnancy or who are dealing with the trauma of an abortion? What unique needs did they have? What was a helpful resource you provided?

"In light of the plight that vulnerable children face today, Christians are called to mirror the posture and actions of Jesus, step into the darkness, stand up for children, and protect them against those who seek their harm. We are called to resist indifference and move toward compassion."



WEEK 4

IMAGE OF GOD IN CHILDREN



Having laid the foundation in the past three weeks for why life is worthy of protection, including life in the womb and the life of the mother who carries the preborn child, this week we will begin to unpack Jesus' heart for children outside the womb. Scripture is clear that God values all life, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death, so as His

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people we are called to do the same. This includes valuing and protecting the lives of vulnerable children, just as Jesus did during His ministry on earth.

KNOW

Historic views of children

In the Greco-Roman world, into which Christ was born and His Church was established, children were at best viewed as nuisances and more commonly treated as property, objects to be traded and abused.

The concept of *logos*, or a person's ability to reason, ruled the day and determined the value of a human being. Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers dismissed children as stupid, saying their opinions were no more valuable than those of animals. Cicero said, "The thing itself cannot be praised, only its potential."¹

This low view of children, their abilities, and their worth, led to rampant abortions, infant abandonments, neglect, and abuse. In the Greco-Roman world, the abuse and neglect of children was not only widespread, it was legally permissible. In this era, as many as 50% of all children died before the age of 10.² Due to such high mortality rates and extreme poverty, it was "legally permissible and socially ac-

1 Cicero, *De Republica*, 157 as quoted in Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," 32.

2 O.M. Bakke, Trans. Brian McNeal, *When Children Became People*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 23.

ceptable” for parents to abandon their children in the streets, where they would die or be taken by others. But poverty was not the only driver of this practice; it was also common for infants to be abandoned if they were deemed illegitimate, had a deformity, or simply seemed weak.³

Children who were “rescued” from these conditions were called “foundlings” and often became slaves.⁴ But the enslavement of children was not limited to Greek and Roman communities. It was even happening routinely in Jewish communities, where children were sold into slavery as payment for their parents’ debts.⁵

In addition, sexual abuse and exploitation of children was commonplace throughout the Greco-Roman World. Pederasty (sexual relationships between very young boys and men) was socially acceptable, leading to mass sexual exploitation of young boys. Many foundlings were also kidnapped and forced into prostitution.

Christ’s ministry to children

Into this dark and broken society, Christ was born. And most notably for our discussion, Christ didn’t descend to earth as a fully formed adult. He instead humbled Himself, submitting to the confines of a tiny human body, grown in a precious mother’s womb, and birthed

3 Victor Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

4 Judith Evans Grubbs, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Expositi in the Community,” June 15, 2007, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1027290>.

5 Vieth, *On This Rock*.

into this world in the same way every other human being since creation has been. He allowed Himself to become vulnerable, dependent on the care of His earthly parents for protection and care. Jesus truly is Immanuel—God with us.

From the very beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus was teaching us what the Father values. As author W.A. Strange writes, “If the Incarnate Christ has assumed the experiences of childhood, as well as those of adult life, then childhood itself took on a new dignity and importance.”⁶

Each of the synoptic Gospels depicts a moment during Jesus’ ministry when children were brought to Jesus to be blessed. His disciples rebuked the children, sending them away. Yet, Jesus called the children to Him, and instead of chastising the children, He rebuked His disciples, saying, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 19:14)

Jesus’ statement might seem obvious and cliché to many of us as 21st century Christians who may have heard this verse in Sunday School our whole lives. But spoken to the society into which He was born, it was radical and countercultural. Into a culture who denigrated and used children in inhumane and horrific ways, Jesus spoke words of life, hope, and dignity. He flipped the traditional power

6 W.A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 46.

dynamics on their head and said that the lowliest, simplest people in this society, the children, were the ones to which His entire kingdom belonged.

Theologian Edmund P. Clowney writes,

*“If the disciples thought children too small or unimportant for the serious work of the kingdom, they were wrong. Jesus welcomes children, takes them in his arms and declares that of such is the kingdom of heaven. The force of his words is clear. He does not say merely that the kingdom of heaven is for the childlike. He says that the kingdom belongs to them; it is made up of children and of those who come as children.”*⁷

In Mark 9:37, Jesus goes a step further in His defense of children when He states, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”

In this passage, Christ is establishing that children are His messengers and we are to welcome and care for them just as we would if Jesus Himself were standing before us. Jesus makes clear that our treatment of children is a direct reflection of our treatment of God and our love for Him.

⁷ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove, 1995), 283.

Not only does Jesus model that we are to welcome children, and to treat them as His messengers, but He goes even further in modeling that we are to protect them, to advocate on their behalf.

In Luke 17:2, Jesus says, “It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.”

And then in Matthew 18:10, Jesus commands, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

Theologian and Reformation leader Martin Luther commented that in this verse “God lays these very youth in our laps,” commanding us to care for them. Luther writes that the Lord “does not have them each guarded with a gun or pike, but gives them great lords and princes as guardians to protect them, namely the dear angels, who watch over the child against the devil, the evil angel.”

Luther goes on to challenge believers, by writing,

“We Christians... Ought not to esteem the children as being so poor and lowly, but rather we ought to open our spiritual eyes and consider how the little children are surrounded by such tremendously great princes and lords... This should constantly move

us to refrain from doing or saying anything in their presence that would lead them astray. And if you were able with your physical eyes to see one child's guardian, a single angel, then you would be in greater awe before that child than before a king.”⁸

In seeking to emulate our Savior, the church should be at the forefront of all issues involving the protection of children. We are commanded by our Lord Jesus to lead the way on sheltering children, providing for them, and seeking justice on their behalf.

The early church and children

The early church took Jesus' call to value and protect children seriously. From helping to oppose the rampant child sexual abuse in their culture, to caring for orphaned children, to challenging harsh and abusive discipline practices, to persuading the government to better protect children, early Christians were truly the hands and feet of Jesus to the many vulnerable children in their communities.

Author George Henry Payne commented,

Amid all the differences of opinion and doctrine that we find among the early founders of Christianity, there was one thing on which they were unanimous, and that was the attitude toward children. It was a ceaseless war they waged on behalf of children—those

8 Martin Luther, *Annotations of Matthew: Chapters 1-18*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 377.

*early and oftentimes eloquent founders. From Barnabas, contemporary Apostles, to Ambroius and Augustine, they did not cease to denounce those who, no matter what their reasons, exposed or killed children.*⁹

Early church leaders taught that children were important to God and “shouldn’t be killed, maimed or abused.”¹⁰ This included children in the womb. In the early third century, Tertullian wrote:

*In our case, murder being once for all forbidden, we may not destroy even the fetus in the womb, while as yet the human being derives blood from other parts of the body for its sustenance. To hinder a birth is merely a speedier man-killing; nor does it matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth. That is a man which is going to be one; you have the fruit already in the seed.*¹¹

Church leaders also consistently preached against the practice of pederasty, and taught that those who “corrupted boys” or sold their children did not know God. Church leaders also taught that the church was to care for children who were orphaned.¹²

9 George Henry Payne, *History of the Child in Human Progress*, (New York, 1916) 258.

10 Paul A. Offit, *Bad Faith: When Religious Belief Undermines Modern Medicine*, (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2015) 127.

11 Michael J. Gorman, “Abortion and the Early Church,” *Ancient Faith*, <https://store.ancientfaith.com/abortion-and-the-early-church-by-michael-j-gorman/>.

12 Vieth, *On This Rock*.

Author David Nowell notes,

*In the growing Christian movement, the Church fathers consistently and conspicuously called upon followers of Christ to be faithful to Scripture's demand that we care for the orphan. Virtually every early writing on Christian conduct stressed the importance of caring for children without parents. Eusebius, the Apostolic Constitutions, Lactantius, Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr...the list goes on and on, but every one of them called on the early church to care for orphans. One writer goes so far as to say that the orphan had only three possibilities in life: death, slavery, or Christian adoption.*¹³

But more than simply establishing sound theology and doctrine, the early church put these doctrines into practice.

It is well documented that early Christian communities adopted abandoned children and raised them as their own. Within the culture at large it was commonplace for abandoned children to be taken in, but generally in order that they could serve as slaves, prostitutes, or gladiators. But Christians, following the example Christ set for us, took them in as their own children, providing shelter and sustenance, teaching them trades, and helping prepare them for life.¹⁴

Caring for children who had been orphaned became a fundamental expression of faith in Christ. As evidence, a third-century document known as the Didascalia Apostolorum lays out the criteria for

13 David Z. Nowell, *Dirty Faith: Bringing the Love of Christ to the Least of These*, (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2014).

14 Gerhardt. Uhlhorn, *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church*, 186.

selecting an elder, and lists “known as a father to the orphans” as a requirement for consideration. The document goes on to describe “a suitable candidate for the bishopric as one who has been ‘a lover of toil, a lover of widows, a lover of orphans.’”¹⁵

In addition to the practical care the early church extended to vulnerable children, they were tireless advocates for the protection of children at the highest levels of government. Child advocate Victor Veith comments that the early church “pressured the state to protect children which led to the criminalizing of infanticide by Constantine and then, in 321 CE providing relief to poor parents so they wouldn’t have to sell their children.”¹⁶

Early Christians took up the mantle of the incarnate Christ and quite literally followed in His footsteps, continuing His ministry of valuing, welcoming, and caring for the least of these—precious vulnerable children.

GROW

Vulnerable children in our modern world

The accounts of mass infanticide and child abuse in the Greco-Roman era are stomach-turning. Yet in our present-day context, vulnerable children around the world face similar dire circumstances.

15 John Aloisi, “Orphan Care, Adoption, and the Church,” <https://silo.tips/download/orphan-care-adoption-and-the-church-historical-reflections-and-contemporary-chal>.

16 Vieth, *On This Rock*.

According to the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), there are currently 140 million children worldwide who have lost one or both of their parents.¹⁷ And of that 140 million children, 15 million have lost both parents. On any given day in the United States, there are nearly 424,000 children in foster care.¹⁸ In 2019, more than 672,000 children spent time in U.S. foster care.¹⁹ And on average, children remain in state care for more than a year and a half, and 5% of children in foster care have languished there for five or more years.²⁰

UNICEF also reports that 7.4 million children and young people under the age of 25 around the world died alone in 2019, largely due to treatable causes such as infectious diseases.

And although it may seem like slavery and human trafficking are things of antiquity, the International Labor Organization estimates that more than 1.2 million children are trafficked each year around the world.²¹ Even here in the United States, the National Criminal Justice Reference Service estimates that 200,000 children are at risk for trafficking each year.²² Traffickers use threats, coercion, and

17 “Orphans,” UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/media/media_45279.html.

18 “The AFCARS Report,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, August 24, 2020, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcarsreport27.pdf>.

19 The AFCARS Report.

20 The AFCARS Report.

21 “Child Trafficking—Essentials,” International Labour Office, IPEC, 2010, <https://www.ilo.org/ipecinfor/product/download.do?type=document&id=14616>.

22 “Human Trafficking,” Office for Victims of Crime, 2005, https://www.ncjrs.gov/ovc_archives/ncvrv/2005/pg51.html.

sophisticated grooming techniques to abduct and control children, exploiting them through prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery, and even the harvesting of their organs.²³ Poverty, war, lack of access to quality education, and an insufficient justice system can all lead to children being trafficked.

Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) has reported that around the globe 1 out of 2 children aged 2-17 experienced violence in the last year, and an estimated 1 billion children were abused in some way in the past year.²⁴ Even right here in the United States, the National Children’s Alliance estimates that 700,000 children are abused every year.²⁵ That is close to 2,000 children abused every day. A study by Dr. David Finkelhor at the Crimes Against Children Research Center found that 1 out of 12 youth in the United States have experienced sexual victimization.²⁶ Every nine minutes, Child Protective Services across the country substantiates (finds evidence for) a claim of child sexual abuse.²⁷ One every nine minutes.

23 “Trafficking in Persons and Migrant Smuggling,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, <https://www.unodc.org/lpo-brazil/en/trafico-de-pessoas/index.html>.

24 “Violence against children,” World Health Organization, June 8, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>.

25 “National Statistics on Child Abuse,” National Children’s Alliance, <https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/national-statistics-on-child-abuse/>.

26 David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod, “Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles” (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, 2012).

27 “Children and Teens: Statistics | RAINN,” RAINN, 2019, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens>.

These statistics are overwhelming. But in truth they only begin to tell the story. So many victims of child abuse and neglect never disclose their abuse. They suffer silently.

The effects of childhood trauma

The devastation of childhood trauma does not end when the abuse or suffering stops. The physical, emotional, mental health, and spiritual effects of abuse reverberate for a lifetime. Studies show that children who experience adverse childhood experience, known as ACEs, have a significantly greater risk of developing emotional and mental health issues into adulthood, including post-traumatic stress disorder and other anxiety symptoms, depression, and suicide attempts.²⁸

In the “Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease,” the authors found that, “Biomedical researchers increasingly recognize that childhood events, specifically abuse and emotional trauma, have profound and enduring effects on the neuroregulatory systems mediating medical illness as well as on behavior from childhood into adult life.”²⁹ The authors said they came to realize that, “In the context of everyday medical practice,... the earliest years of infancy and childhood are not lost but, like a child’s footprints in wet cement, are often lifelong.” Additional research shows that adverse childhood

28 J.J. Broman-Fulks et al., “Sexual Assault Disclosure in Relation to Adolescent Mental Health: Results from the National Survey of Adolescents,” *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology* 36 (2007): 260-66.

29 Ruth A. Lanius, Eric Vermetten, and Clare Pain, eds., *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77

experiences (ACEs) put children at “a greater risk of several negative health outcomes in adulthood, including poor self-rated health, chronic diseases, functional limitations, premature mortality, and poor mental health.”³⁰

Child protection expert, Victor Vieth writes,

“As humanity grows its knowledge through ACE and spiritual injury research,...we gain a deeper insight into the depth of Jesus’ wisdom in his concern for children and also his engagement with the sinful condition of humankind, a condition which only God fully understands.”³¹

As the body of Christ, charged with being His hands and feet in a broken world, we weep and lament the devastating impact on each child who makes up each of these statistics. Behind each number is a face, a story, a precious child created in God’s image.

30 See the following: Paul R. Amato, “Parental Absence During Childhood Depression in Later Life,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1991): 543–56; Shawn Bauldry et al., “A Life Course Model of Self-Rated Health Through Adolescence and Young Adulthood,” *Social Science & Medicine* 75 (2012): 1311–20; Amy E. Bonomi et al., “Association between Self-Reported Health and Physical and/or Sexual Abuse Experienced Before Age 18,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 32 (2008): 693–701; Vincent J. Felitti et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of The Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–58; Michelle Kelly-Irving et al., “The Embodiment of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Cancer Development: Potential Biological Mechanism and Pathways Across the Life Course,” *International Journal of Public Health* 58, no. 1 (2013): 3–11; Steven Stack, “The Effect of Divorce on Suicide in Denmark, 1951-1980,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1990): 359–70.

31 Vieth, *On This Rock*.

GO

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; for the rights of all who are destitute” Proverbs 31:8 (NIV)

In light of the plight that vulnerable children face today, Christians are called to mirror the posture and actions of Jesus, step into the darkness, stand up for children, and protect them against those who seek their harm. We are called to resist indifference and move toward compassion.

Victor Veith challenges us with these words,

“In light of Christ’s teachings and Christian history, [I] propose the church not do anything new but rather something very old. Specifically, we need to return to the message of Jesus and center our responses to child abuse on the words and actions of Christ.”³²

As the church, we must go back to the very teachings of Jesus and the example set by the early church, and commit ourselves to protecting children.

But the scope of the challenges facing vulnerable children may seem insurmountable. You may be asking, “How in the world can I begin to make even the slightest dent in these horrific statistics?”

As Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things, but all of us can do small things with great love.” The best place to start is right where the Lord has placed you. What vulnerable children are in your sphere of influence for whom you can become an advocate or resource?

Protecting children in our congregations

First, ask how you are ensuring that the children who walk in the doors of your church each week are safe and have the basic necessities they need. As the Bride of Christ, the church should be a refuge for vulnerable children, a place where they are welcomed, resourced, and protected.

And yet year after year, heartbreaking reports emerge of children being abused within the very walls of the church. And far too often, the response of pastors and congregants have been characterized by minimizing or dismissing a survivor’s story.

We need to remember Jesus’ words in John 10:10-14, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” He goes on to call His leaders to protect their flocks, ensuring no predators are allowed in their midst.

A great place to begin caring for vulnerable children is by ensuring that our churches are protected against predators who seek to prey on children in our midst. It is crucial that every congregation, no matter their size, implement stringent background checks for volunteers working with children. Additionally, it is wise to gather a team

of child protection experts in your community to evaluate your children's ministry policies to make sure that safeguards are in place to protect children from those who seek their harm.

For more information on how to protect vulnerable children in your church, visit www.caringwell.com.

Protecting children in our communities

Secondly, ask what children in your local community are in need of protection, resources, and shelter. Just as our early church brothers and sisters led the way on child protection and adoption, we should be first in line to care for vulnerable children in our communities.

The need is great and can feel overwhelming, so start small. Whether it's supporting a foster family by hosting a respite care night at your church, asking your local child protective agency what supplies they need for children in crisis, or partnering with your local elementary school to provide meals for at-risk children during holidays and summer breaks, just start somewhere.

Herbie Newell, the President & Executive Director of Lifeline Children's Services, challenges Christians, ³³

I would encourage any pastor that's not doing something but that wants to, to realize it doesn't have to be overly complex. Know what your limitations are, know what your capacity is and don't over promise, but give it a realistic expectation of what your church can do at this point.

Instead of trying to provide foster parents, maybe you say, "We'd love to do a parent's night out for some of your foster families." There are a lot of little entry ramps for churches to get engaged and get involved.

One of the first things I would tell a pastor to do is to ask those he wants to help, "How can we help you?"

Here are some ideas for how to get started caring for the children in your community:

- Make meals for foster families.
- Create a clothing and supply closet for children in need in your community.
- Plan a night of free babysitting for foster parents.
- Run for your local school board and get involved in helping to make quality education available for all children.
- Create an adoption aid fund to help families who are called to adopt deal with the very high costs associated with adoption.
- "Adopt" a local under-resourced school and help meet the supply needs of the teachers.
- Create an after-school tutoring program to give vulnerable chil-

33 Anita K. Palmer, "Herbie Newell: Caring for ALL Life," Outreach Magazine, May 17, 2020, <https://outreachmagazine.com/interviews/54717-herbie-newell-life.html>.

dren a safe space after school.

- Bring in experts to train local counselors and teachers on how to care for children who experience trauma.
- Provide parenting classes for parents who are struggling.
- Create a scholarship fund to help low income families attend a local Christian school or pay for college.

Stories of Hope: Mr. Williams, inner-city high school teacher in Tennessee

Derek transferred into my 2nd period U.S. history class in the middle of the year. Teaching in the lowest performing inner-city high school in Nashville, mid-year additions to my class were commonplace. Disruption and instability was all our student body knew. In fact, at the beginning of the year our school was “fresh started” and 80% of the staff of the school had been fired and replaced.

From the first day, I knew Derek was sharp. Some of my other students knew him; he’d attended our school previously and had been kicked out. Other kids picked on him as much as he picked on them. On the days he wasn’t suspended (which was nearly half of them) or skipping class, he was engaged—asking better questions than anyone else, dialoguing and debating with me, most of the time respectfully.

As I did with all new students, I gave his guardian a call. She was a kind woman who told me she had recently begun fostering Derek, and she was his ninth or tenth foster placement in the last several

years. She loved him well, but was heartbroken for him. He was 17 and had been abandoned by nearly everyone. He had a lot of resentment and was in trouble constantly.

Derek began dropping by my classroom during lunch, when I had a planning period. He'd try to push my buttons. I tried my best to keep loving him and encouraging him to make good choices. One day he walked in and immediately shoved a stack of papers off the corner of my desk. I turned around and asked him what he was doing and that he knew better. That's when I saw tears streaming down his face. With eyes equally filled with fear, anger, and sadness, he asked me, "When are you going to give up on me like every other teacher and every other adult always has? Why won't you?" Holding back tears of my own, I placed my hand on his shivering shoulder, told him I'd never give up on him and I believed in him because I saw how smart he was and how kind he could be when he decided to be.

Derek was kicked out of our high school a few weeks later, just as he had been in every tough school in our district. I never heard from him or about him again. His story likely doesn't have a happy ending.

But I think about him often. Derek is a fellow image bearer, a child with inherent dignity and worth. Jesus commanded that as His follower I welcome, support, and point Derek towards God's goodness, truth, and beauty.

So often as Christians who long for a redeemed and whole world, we want every story to tie up with a pretty perfect bow. But my time teaching at White's Creek reminded me that God does not promise

that our work for Him will be successful on this side of Heaven. He doesn't ask us to swoop in as the hero of a story, and thankfully my own glaring flaws and inadequacies never let me wear any proverbial capes. But He does promise to be with us when we are taking seriously His call to care for children. He will meet us in the dark and hopeless places, and give us the strength we need to be His hands and feet to His beloved—the little children.

Heroes for Life: Show Hope Story

This is a story of how a seed was planted in the heart of a young woman and how, today, that seed has grown into a tree of hope for children and families.

When Emily was 11 years old, her eyes were opened to the needs of children who had been orphaned. It was on a mission trip to Haiti where Emily made new friends who did not know the love, protection, and security of a family. It was there, in Haiti, that Emily promised to carry their stories with her.

When Emily returned to the U.S., her heart had been changed. She had a passion to make a difference in the lives of waiting children. And so, Emily prayed, and she began to challenge her parents, Mary Beth and Steven Curtis Chapman, to prayerfully consider what it would look like for their family to grow through adoption. Eventually, this faith journey led to the adoption of Emily's three sisters and also served as the catalyst to her parents founding Show Hope, a nationally recognized voice in adoption advocacy and orphan care support work.

In one of those full circle life moments, that 11-year-old youngwoman—Emily Chapman Richards—later became the Executive Director of Show Hope.

“Because we bear the image of a relational God, at our core, we long for connection—a need met only in relationship,” Emily said. “For the more than 15 million children who have been orphaned, that connection can often be unstable. These extraordinary journeys of loss impact children, often leaving them with profound trauma. However, in the words of the late Dr. Karyn Purvis, ‘When you connect to the heart of a child, everything is possible.’”

For more than 18 years, with its founders’ vision guiding the way, Show Hope has existed to care for orphans by engaging the church and reducing barriers to adoption. And while the needs of orphans are complex, Show Hope works to address three key issues standing between children and families: the financial barrier, the medical barrier, and the knowledge barrier.

All those years ago in Haiti, God knew exactly what He was doing. He knew the stories Emily carried home with her would continue to send ripples of hope into a waiting and watching world. God planted a seed in a young woman’s heart, and it ignited something larger than anyone could have ever dreamed.

WEEK 4: IMAGE OF GOD IN CHILDREN

Jesus' teaching about children:

- Matthew 19:14
- Mark 9:37
- Luke 17:2
- Matthew 18:10

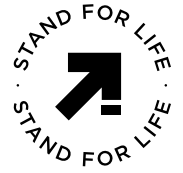
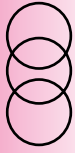
“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed.” (Proverbs 31:8)

How are children treated and valued in your congregation?

What steps can your church take to live out Jesus' call to welcome and protect children?

What policies and systems in your community are broken that need to be fixed in order to protect vulnerable children?

"We are able to welcome the vulnerable, the marginalized, those whom society has counted out, because of the great love we have received at the foot of the cross. We are able to pour out this kind of countercultural sacrificial love out of the overflow that the Lord has graciously given to us."



WEEK 5

BUILDING A CULTURE THAT REFLECTS THE IMAGE OF GOD



Children and families thrive in cultures that value life and are consistent about upholding the inherent dignity of every person. How can we make our communities and churches places where life is valued?

L I
F E

KNOW

What does the Bible say about sacrificial love and hospitality?

A culture that values life will be marked by love and hospitality.

Romans 12:13 clearly commands us, “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”

We are called to be people who welcome others in, seek to bear their burdens, and show sacrificial love, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are called to follow the teachings of Jesus,

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 14:12-14)

This kind of hospitality reflects the true heart of the gospel, as author Rosaria Butterfield stated,

“The gospel comes with more than words; the gospel comes with deeds. The gospel comes with even more than the Word of God; the gospel comes with the hands and feet of Jesus, and that would be us.”¹

¹ Rosaria Butterfield, “Loving Whole Families of Children in Need,” The Gospel Coalition, June 12, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/loving-whole-families-children-need/.

When we seek to build this kind of culture, we can look to Jesus for the perfect example. His life was marked by compassion for others, specifically for those deemed “the least of these.” He demonstrated hospitality by drawing people in and giving them a place to belong, and He showed sacrificial love through the ultimate sacrifice, giving His life for us.

Jesus was not overwhelmed by those with great needs. He invited those who were weary and burdened to come to Him and find rest (Matthew 11:28). And in Galatians 6:2, Paul writes that Christians are to do the same thing: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

This charge to bear one another’s burdens is one of the ways we participate in the kingdom-building work of Christ. But it’s not possible without having our lives radically changed by the sacrificial love of God, which He demonstrated by giving His Son for us.

This love is what we are called to:

We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21)

We are able to welcome the vulnerable, the marginalized, those whom society has counted out, because of the great love we have received at the foot of the cross. We are able to pour out this kind of countercultural sacrificial love out of the overflow that the Lord has graciously given to us.

As Christ-followers, we recognize the dignity and beauty of those deemed “the least of these” in our culture—those with disabilities, those in prison, and those who are immigrants and refugees. They are not the punch-line to a joke. They are not charity cases. They are not political pawns. They are fellow image bearers who reflect the glory of our Most High God.

“The Good Life”

When Darren Carlson and his wife were expecting a child, they went in for an ultrasound five months into the pregnancy. At first, everything was routine. The doctor and ultrasound technician looked at the scans and pointed things out, using the phrase “your child” repeatedly. But when another doctor was brought into the room, something changed. After a few minutes of silence, the doctor told the couple the images showed a potential tumor on the heart.

Then he said, “If the fetus is abnormal and that is a management problem for you, you have options.”²

² Darren Carlson, “They Said Our Unborn Son Could Be a ‘Management Problem,’” February 11, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/unborn-son-management-problem/>.

This change in language is not unique to the Carlsons' situation. In a small study of women's experiences while receiving ultrasounds revealing fetal anomalies, interviewees remembered when the examiner changed language from "baby" to "fetus."³

When writer Kimi Harris received the news that her preborn child had a severe heart defect, she tried to signal to the doctor that she was not interested in hearing about the option to abort her child. The doctor insisted he was legally required to tell her about it, then went on to describe the procedure in detail.

Harris wrote, "A baby with any birth defect—life threatening or not—challenges us personally and as a society to examine what our values are. The words we use to discuss such situations are vitally important."

³ J. E. Van der Zalm and P. J. Byrn, "Seeing baby: women's experience of prenatal ultrasound examination and unexpected fetal diagnosis," *Journal of Perinatology* 26 (2006): 403-408. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.jp.7211540>

But as Harris and her husband met with a cardiologist right after the diagnosis, the tone changed. The doctor spoke about the wonderful lives many of her patients lived after receiving life-saving open-heart surgeries. Suddenly, she stopped and apologized, “I forgot to ask whether you planned on aborting or not.” Harris continued,

We assured her that we weren't considering that option, and she slowly regained her color. While she was embarrassed by her professional blunder, what she could not know was that her “mistake” was a balm to our hearts. She had revealed how she really felt: Our daughter was worth saving...

When we make decisions about a medically fragile baby, we often signal not only what we think about the status and rights of unborn babies, but we also signal what we think about life, death, and suffering itself. Our cardiologist's implied viewpoint was that while there was suffering involved in open-heart surgeries, potentially saving a life was worth it. ⁴

Behind many of the attitudes and ideas we bring to the discussion of abortion are our presuppositions about the purpose of life. When our greatest values are the pursuit of wealth, happiness, and personal comfort, we will naturally have no place for suffering in our value system.

⁴ Kimi Harris, “When Our Ultrasound Revealed a Birth Defect, My Doctor Offered an Abortion,” Christianity Today, April 23, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/april-web-only/when-our-ultrasound-revealed-birth-defect-my-doctor-offered.html>

According to a recent study from Notre Dame that interviewed people in depth about their moral and legal views on abortion, the idea of the “good life” is just as important for many people as the concerns of bioethics when considering whether abortion should be legally and morally permissible:

Interviewees raise questions about whether and when life exists through talk of conception, development, viability, the onset of given traits, medical intervention, and abortion timing. But just as commonly, interviewees ponder the essentials of a “good life” for the baby or parent(s). A “good life,” it would seem, includes health, support, financial stability, affection, rights, and pursuit of chosen livelihoods. Americans deliberate these “good life” cornerstones as much as they do those marking the onset of life. Interviewees who were legally permissive of abortion were more likely to privilege a “good life” than they were to debate the bioethical terms of a person. Choosing a “good life” becomes, for some, a good enough reason to have an abortion.⁵

Whether it’s a doctor recommending terminating a pregnancy because a child could never have a “normal” life or a family member telling a couple they should abort in order to avoid inconvenience, it is clear that our society places value on a version of the “good life” that has no room for suffering and personal sacrifice.

When we read the Bible, though, we see suffering as the norm rather than the exception for Christians. Our Savior exemplified this through His life and His sacrificial death, taking up His cross and suffering

⁵ Tricia Bruce, PhD, “How Americans Understand Abortion,” University of Notre Dame, 2020, <https://churchlife-info.nd.edu/en-us/how-americans-understand-abortion-a-comprehensive-interview-study-of-abortion-attitudes-in-the-u.s/>

out of love. This cross-bearing is what He calls all Christians to. The Christian is not called to a life of comfort, but a life of purpose and dependence on a God who gives strength in our weakness.

This does not mean, however, that we should not pursue the “good life.” It does mean that we need a better definition of what the “good life” is. God’s design for humanity is to live lives of flourishing, seeking good not just for ourselves but for those around us. It is not a life of ease, but a life of meaning and great joy.

In this area, we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters living with disabilities and those caring for others with disabilities. In order to learn from them, however, we need to be sure our churches and communities are places where people feel a sense of belonging. Women and couples who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant or carrying a child who has been diagnosed with a fetal anomaly need to be able to envision a life of hope. When we are known as people who value all of life, it’s easier for a mother to know she and her child will be supported and welcomed.

GROW

Question: What barriers exist in our churches that stop us from welcoming those in need?

Of 1,000 Protestant pastors surveyed by Lifeway Research in 2019, 99% said a person with a disability would feel welcomed and included at their church. ⁶

In response to the question, “In which, if any, of the following ways does your church currently care for people with disabilities and their families?”

- 70% said they provide financially for families with ongoing needs
- 60% said they provide care for family caregivers to give them a break
- 50% said they provide an additional teacher to aid the person in class
- 29% said they provide classes or events specifically for people with disabilities

“Churches should be the very first place that families with special needs can go, not one of the harder things they have to deal with,” said attorney Palmer Williams, who herself uses a wheelchair due to a spinal-cord injury she sustained as a child.

⁶ “Pastors’ Views on Caring for People with Disabilities,” Lifeway Research, September 2019, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Report-Pastors-Disabilities-Sept-2019.pdf>.

Unfortunately, churches aren't always as equipped and prepared to welcome those with special needs as they think that they are.

A landmark study published in 2018 shows that the children most likely to be excluded from church are those with autism spectrum disorders and common mental health conditions—anxiety, depression, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, and ADHD.⁷

- Children with autism spectrum disorders are 1.84 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with depression are 1.73 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with traumatic brain injury are 1.71 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder are 1.48 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with anxiety are 1.45 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with speech problems were 1.42 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with learning disabilities were 1.36 times more likely to never attend church.
- Children with ADD/ADHD were 1.19 times more likely to never attend church.

⁷ David Briggs, "Study: US Churches Exclude Children with Autism, ADD/ADHD," Christianity Today, July 20, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/july-web-only/study-us-churches-exclude-children-with-autism-addadhd.html>.

The situation is similar for adults living with acute mental illness (mental illness with significant and distressing symptoms requiring immediate treatment). A 2014 Lifeway Research Study of Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith ⁸ found that,

- 68% of pastors but only 28% of family members in a household of someone with acute mental illness indicate their church provides care for the mentally ill or their families by maintaining lists of experts to refer people to
- 65% of family members in a household of someone with acute mental illness believe local churches should do more in talking about mental illness openly so that the topic is not so taboo
- 49% of pastors rarely or never speak to their church in sermons or large group messages about acute mental illness
- 70% of individuals with acute mental illness would prefer to have relationships with people in a local church through individuals who get to know them as a friend

A Baylor University study noted that 3 out of 10 attendees who approached their church for help related to a mental health condition for themselves or a family member reported that the church made

⁸ "Study of Acute Mental Illness and Christian Faith," Lifeway Research, September, 2014, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Acute-Mental-Illness-and-Christian-Faith-Research-Report-1.pdf>.

them feel that the mental illness was a result of personal sin. One out of 8 respondents said they are no longer involved in the faith as a result of their interaction.⁹

It's not only those with physical and mental disabilities who struggle to find a sense of belonging, however. In the Bible we see instructions to welcome the foreigner and visit those in prison. A true pro-life ethic will see the value of those who feel out of place and will seek to show hospitality to all.

Non-invasive prenatal testing

- Non-invasive prenatal testing (NIPT) analyzes DNA in a pregnant woman's blood to screen for chromosomal disorders caused by the presence of an extra or missing copy of a chromosome. NIPT primarily looks for Down syndrome, trisomy 18, trisomy 13, and extra or missing copies of the X and Y chromosomes. NIPT is considered non-invasive because the blood is drawn only from the pregnant woman, unlike some diagnostic testing. NIPT can give both false positives and false negatives. Because it is a screening test, any positive result requires invasive diagnostic testing, such as amniocentesis, to confirm the result.
- Some ethicists are concerned that the prevalence of NIPT screening will lead to an increase in abortions following a diagnosis of Down syndrome or other chromosomal abnormalities. A reduction in the number of people born with

⁹ Matthew S. Stanford, "Demon or Disorder: A Survey of Attitudes Toward Mental Illness in the Christian Church," Baylor University, <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/35617.pdf>.

these conditions could directly affect the care and research available for those who are living with such conditions, as well as the possibility for increased discrimination. A study published in 2020 found that the growth of prenatal screening in Europe has reduced the number of babies being born per year with Down syndrome by an average of 54%, and that study was conducted before many governments in European countries offered NIPT. The screening and abortion rates in Iceland have led to only one or two babies with Down syndrome being born each year on average (the population of Iceland is 330,000). NIPT could also lead to sex-selective abortions, since the sex can be revealed within the first trimester when abortion is more readily available.¹⁰

- There is also a concern that NIPT will eventually be used to screen for more conditions, including adult onset conditions or carrier status, meaning it could give some indication of issues that could affect the preborn child later in life or be passed on to the child's future offspring. The ethical problems that arise from this kind of screening are extensive, including the potential for pressure to have an abortion because of a possible condition that could affect the baby decades after he or she is born.

¹⁰ Tom Shakespeare et al., "Non-invasive prenatal testing: ethical issues," Nuffield Council on Bioethics, March 2017, <https://www.nuffieldbioethics.org/wp-content/uploads/NIPT-ethical-issues-full-report.pdf>.

What are the unique needs of those living with disabilities?

As a mother of a son with cerebral palsy, Jamie Sumner says every church has the possibility to be welcoming to those with disabilities, but it takes intentional actions to convince families impacted by special needs that a church wants to accommodate them.

“Until you have a plan in place that accommodates those with special needs all the way from nursery-age to senior citizen, then you can’t accurately make this claim,” said Sumner, author of *Eat, Sleep, Save the World*, a B&H Publishing book for parents of children with special needs.

When her son was born, Sumner said her church built a program for him when one didn’t exist. “They hired a team, did research, brought in volunteers and changed the layout of their Easter egg hunts and all of our other get-togethers in order to accommodate those with extra needs,” she said.

In the past seven years, Sumner’s church has built a ministry from the ground up, which she said is the best-case scenario. “They asked us what we needed and started slowly. Now we serve many families with children with special needs,” she said. “It’s a lot of work, but it has changed our lives.”

While some churches may believe it is a matter of attitude or politeness, that isn’t what matters most to those with disabilities and their families.

Sumner says the churches that have been less welcoming to her family haven't necessarily been less friendly than others, but those churches simply didn't consider the needs of her son or their family. "You have to make an extra effort," she said. "If that isn't done, we don't go back."

For Sumner this is a vital issue because "everyone deserves a church home. Jesus asks us to care for those in need, not only those in poverty, but those in need of fellowship, friends and support," she said.

"We must show those who walk through the world differently from us that we have thought about them and have made room for them. It's not their job to pave the way. It's our job to make the way easier for them first."

Churches seeking to provide a welcoming place for people with disabilities should begin by finding out from those with experience how they can improve.

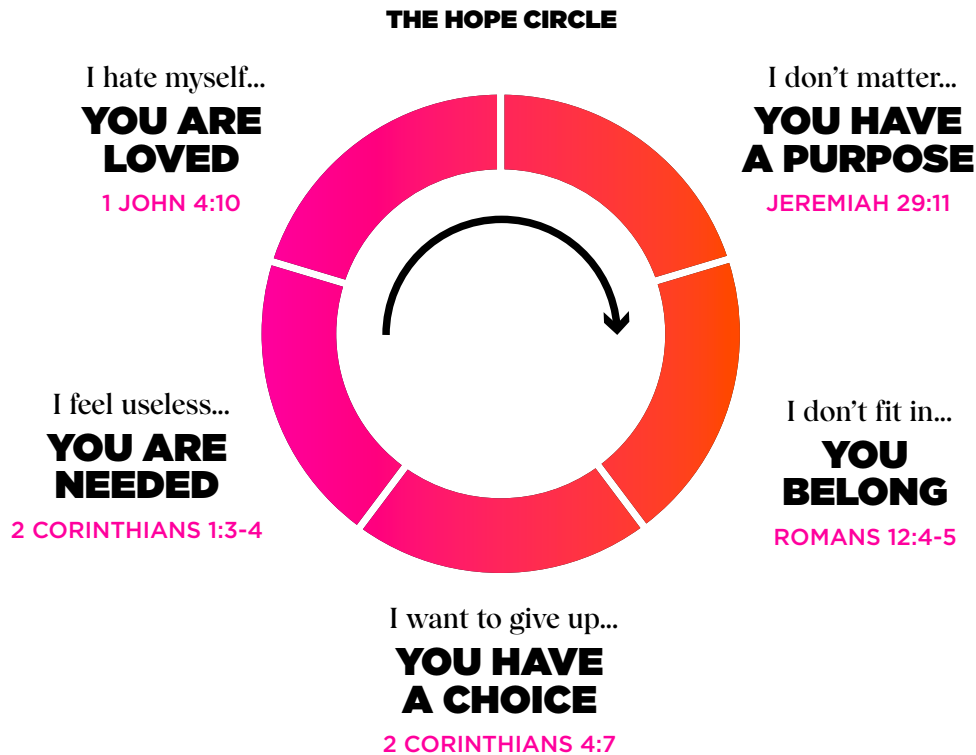
"Consider all the areas that must be met—spiritual, physical, social, and emotional—and then ask special needs coordinators at other churches how they meet those needs at every age level," Sumner said. "Bring in experts and be willing to listen to their feedback."¹¹

¹¹ Aaron Earls, "Churches believe they are welcoming to those with disabilities," March 11, 2020, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/churches-believe-they-are-welcoming-to-those-with-disabilities/>.

What are the unique needs of those living with mental illness?

While mental illness is just that—an illness that often requires treatment and medication from health professionals—it is also an opportunity for the church to love and care for people. Kay Warren provides helpful guidance to those looking to provide care and hope to those dealing with mental illness.

The Hope Circle includes five truths that counter things people with mental illness often feel:



Understanding these lies and the truth that counters them can help us to see the practical needs of those in our communities who suffer with mental illness: needs for belonging, purpose, love, and to feel needed.¹²

What are the unique needs of those dealing with trauma?

In order to welcome and serve those dealing with trauma, we need to understand what it is. Christian psychologist Diane Langberg says,

*[Horrible events and abuse] result in traumatized human beings. That means that they live with recurrent tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne. Memories that infect their sleep with horrific nightmares, destroy their relationships, their capacity to work or to study, torment their emotions, shatter their faith, and mutilate their hope. Trauma is extraordinary, you see, not because it rarely happens, but because it completely swallows and destroys normal human ways of coping and living.*¹³

For many, this kind of trauma begins in childhood. As we seek to create a church culture that values life, we need to understand that many of the children of adoption and foster care who come into our church may be dealing with trauma. They may act differently than their peers because of specific trauma that occurred, or perhaps because they lacked the necessary care and connection in their early years of life.

¹² Kay Warren, "Mental Health and the Church," accessed February 16, 2021, <http://kay-warren.com/mentalhealthandthechurch/>.

¹³ Diane Langberg, "Trauma as a Place of Service," Q Ideas, posted March 20, 2020, <https://youtu.be/YpDGzHb5DnQ>.

The late Dr. Karyn Purvis was a child development expert who developed TBRI: Trust-Based Relational Intervention®, which is “designed to meet the complex needs of children who have experienced adversity, early harm, toxic stress, and/or trauma,” whom Dr. Purvis called, “children from hard places.” TBRI gives parents and caregivers tools to use to parent the “whole child” in their care and to connect with them in loving and supportive ways.

Dr. Purvis once said, “If I could tell you my dream for every child in the world it would be to imagine a world where the cry of every child is met by a loving compassionate adult. Giving voice to children is the heart and soul of what we do.”¹⁴

This attitude also reflects the heart of Christ, who bears our burdens and takes our pain onto Himself. Men, women, and children who have experienced trauma will require patience and sincere connection to be made welcome in our churches and communities.

What are the unique needs of those in the criminal justice system?

More than one-third of Americans strongly agree that the goal of the justice system should be restoration for all involved in a crime. Sixty-three percent of evangelical Christians believe convicted offenders should be given opportunities for restoration (making amends for

14 Dr. Karyn Purvis, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://child.tcu.edu/karyn/>.

one's crimes). And approximately 3 in 4 Americans acknowledge that there are barriers that prevent the success of people who return from prison.¹⁵

According to Heather Rice-Minus with Prison Fellowship,

*A restorative approach that includes proportional accountability, constructive corrections culture, and second chances better equips people for success once they finish their sentence. That means fewer victims in the future. And it also gives people who have committed a crime the opportunity to transform and make amends for what they've done.*¹⁶

The Heart of Texas Foundation is a ministry that provides training and service opportunities through the Texas Field Ministries Program. In this program, men and women serving long-term prison sentences can receive theological training and then use that training to serve their fellow inmates, living out their faith and ministering through shared experiences.¹⁷

In addition to the ministries we can have in the prison system, there is also a strong need to show hospitality to those who are released from prison.

15 "A Survey of Christian Perceptions on Incarceration & Justice Reform," Barna Group for Prison Fellowship, October 2019, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Prison-Fellowship-Christian-Barna-Polling-Results-2019.pdf>.

16 Heather Rice-Minus, "Justice that Restores is Restoration for All," Interview, Prison Fellowship, April 2020, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2020/04/justice-that-restores-is-restoration-for-all/>.

17 <https://heartoftexasfoundation.org/>

There are more than 44,000 legal “collateral consequences” linked to a criminal conviction, including bans on receiving welfare benefits and being admitted to public housing.¹⁸ The lack of support for the approximately 700,000 prisoners who return to their communities every year leads to 2 out of 3 former prisoners being rearrested within three years. Much of the time, they are rearrested not because they committed a crime but because they broke parole. The opportunity for support and assistance with basic needs is great.

How to care for immigrants and refugees who live amongst us

Another vulnerable population living amongst us are new immigrants and refugees. Although these groups can quickly evoke political talking points and debates, Scripture is crystal clear about how we as God’s representatives are to relate to them. Over and over again, God’s Word specifically calls out how we treat the sojourner among us. We may not share the same nationality, but we share one important thing: We are all made in the image of God.

Scripture is full of examples of refugees. Many biblical figures were forced across borders. Joseph is sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. David flees the violence of King Saul and seeks asylum among the Philistines. Daniel and his friends are exiled from their homeland

¹⁸ “Collateral Consequences and Reentry Needs,” Prison Fellowship, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/advocacy/collateral-consequences/collateral-consequences-reentry-needs/#>.

and end up serving a foreign government. Even Jesus Himself, as a small child, is forced to flee, escaping to Egypt when Herod's jealousy threatens the lives of all baby boys in Bethlehem.¹⁹

Leviticus 19:33-34 says, "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Here we see a call to love of neighbor, even a neighbor of a different nationality, centuries before Jesus echoed the same command.

This call is not political. Those in your church may disagree on specific immigration policies, but you can unite around the biblical call for how to treat the vulnerable in your midst. You can pray that your church has a heart for all nations and for wisdom in how you can minister to those from the nations that reside in your own community.

Briana Stensrud previously worked in the traditional pro-life space and now spends her time advocating for the sojourner and refugee. Speaking on making a difference in the overall pro-life mission, she makes the point that "if you really, truly are wanting to change that narrative, you do have to get involved...Your proximity matters."²⁰

19 "A biblical view of immigrants - Part 1," ERLC, May 17, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/a-biblical-view-of-immigrants-part-1/>.

20 Briana Stensrud, interview with Jamie Ivey, September 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CGGEbv8gLN9/?igshid=1udw1g5zwskis>.

For example, one church member viewed immigration as an issue “out there” until she became involved in her church’s ESL program. There she met a woman who was about her same age and had children around the same age as her own. The difference between the two women? One was a refugee from Syria. From then on, the church member could picture a face and hear her story when it came to conversations about refugees and immigrants. Proximity changes our outlook.

GO

Choosing life is a decision that goes beyond refusing to have an abortion. It can be easy for the church to advocate for the lives of unborn children but forget the sometimes difficult implications for mothers and families who choose to protect the lives of their babies rather than to cling to what is comfortable or “normal.”

For Eric and Ruth Brown, there was no question that they would protect the life of their daughter, Pearl. But even though they knew her life would be a short one, they still experienced profound grief, as Eric shares:

Within the community of people saying “choose life” for kids like Pearl and children with special needs and poor prenatal diagnoses, I feel like within that community we’re very, very, very equipped at how to choose life and how to say yes and how to advocate for that life and how to support. But if we’re going to advocate that children like her be carried to term, we’ve got to know that these children often times are not long for this world. And so, I could be wrong, but I think we need to be equally as invigorated with

learning how and helping each other know how to say goodbye to these children. We kind of knew Pearl was never going to turn into a great mother at some point or grow into old age. It was always that she was going to have a short life. But when the grief hit, I was not prepared.

When we rally around those who choose life in difficult situations, we need to be people who can stay for the long haul. As 1 Corinthians 12:26 says, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

Use people-first language

Joni Eareckson Tada had an accident in 1967, at the age of 17, that rendered her a quadriplegic. Her ministry Joni and Friends presents the hope of the gospel to people affected by disability and encourages us to use “people-first language” when speaking about disabilities:

Some people look at me sitting in my wheelchair and say that I'm “mobility challenged” or “differently enabled” or “motion impaired.” And I don't like those terms. To me, they are awkward attempts to whitewash (understate) and make respectable the tough, harsh reality of a very painful disability. And as far as PC language is concerned, it even includes that term “physically challenged.” So, to me? I'm a woman with a disability. I'm the lady with quadriplegia. I'm the person who deals with paralysis. A good and golden rule of thumb is to remember that people with disabilities are just that: first, we are people; and then, yes, we've got this disability.²¹

²¹ Joni Eareckson Tada, “Good Language,” Joni and Friends, March 7, 2020, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/good-language/>.

How to make our churches accessible to people with disabilities

Ryan Faulk, Administrator of Church Engagement for Joni and Friends, says disability ministry should not be thought of as an additional ministry, but instead as a way of doing things in our churches. When seeking to serve a person with a disability, Faulk suggests asking questions like, “What are this person’s unique strengths, gifts, and abilities? What are the barriers they experience at our church?”

These barriers could be physical or social. Physical barriers include inaccessible buildings (no elevator), overwhelming sensory environments (loud music and flashing lights), or transportation needs. Faulk says social barriers are invisible and thus much more difficult to identify and remove.

These types of barriers might come in the form of expectations and assumptions,

- A person with an intellectual disability would not benefit from hearing the Bible taught.
- Absolute silence is required during the sermon, so people with tic behaviors cannot sit with everyone else.
- Invisible disabilities like autism are fictional or mere excuses for bad behavior.
- A person who is nonverbal is incapable of knowing God.

According to Faulk, there are limitations to the value of one-time workshops on “disability.” “However,” he says, “as people with disabilities are integrated into the life of the church through ongoing training of staff and volunteers in all areas of ministry, the culture of the entire church can change.”

Part of that integration is building friendships with people with disabilities and encouraging them to use their God-given gifts to build up and strengthen the church. To become an accessible church, we must seek to recognize and remove the barriers that keep people with disabilities from full participation in the church’s life and mission.

“Because believers with disabilities are an equal part of the body of Christ,” Faulk said, “including them is a matter of remaining consistent with what we already believe. Each member has a specific role and function within the body of Christ and preventing one of those members from working in concert with others impoverishes and disables the whole body.”²²

Provide respite care

Families raising children with significant disabilities face a high amount of stress every day. Respite care has been shown to drastically reduce that stress, giving the opportunity for families to recharge and maintain a healthy environment.

²² Ryan Faulk, “The Dysfunction in Disability Language,” *Joni and Friends*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.joniandfriends.org/the-dysfunction-in-disability-language/>.

Jill's House is a Christian nonprofit organization that provides families raising kids with intellectual disabilities, ages 6-17, with short-term overnight respite care in the Washington, D.C., metro area and around the country. Kids can come to Jill's House and enjoy activities tailored to their interests and abilities for 24-48-hour stays while their parents get a chance to rest. Parents credit this rest time with giving them the ability to keep their relationship strong in the midst of what is often a stressful home environment.

While there may not be a respite care organization in every community, it is possible to help provide this kind of support to families caring for those with disabilities. One simple way to do this is just to spend time with a family and learn the kind of care they are giving. Raising kids with intellectual and physical disabilities can feel isolating because often only the caretakers know how best to care for a family member. By coming alongside and learning an individual's needs, we can show love to everyone involved, whether by giving caretakers time off or simply providing companionship in the home.

Another way for churches to provide respite care is to provide a respite event. Dr. Stephen Grcevich, the founder of Key Ministry, which he began to help churches minister to families of children with hidden disabilities, describes these respite events below:

What do respite events look like? They generally look like a party! Respite events are typically held on weekend nights for approximately three or four hours. Each guest with a disability, (as well as their typically developing siblings) is assigned a volunteer buddy. The volunteer and the guest spend time doing fun activities throughout the

*church while the guest's parent(s) or caregiver(s) enjoy the evening out for some well-deserved time off. This might mean a romantic dinner and a movie, a nap, a trip to the spa, or time to complete errands...whatever the parent/caregiver desires.*²³

How to support ex-prisoners

Prison Fellowship gives the following lists of needs facing ex-prisoners:

Immediate Needs: Safe housing, adequate food, clothing and personal care items, transportation, a church home, emotional and spiritual support, proper identification, access to a phone, medical and dental care, psychiatric care, alcohol or substance-abuse treatment and rehabilitation

Ongoing Needs: Life-skills training and preparation, employment, income to cover ongoing expenses, further educational and/or vocational training, professional services (attorney, accountant, counselor, etc.), mentoring and spiritual guidance/support, counseling for family and marital problems, strong friendships with other Christian believers.²⁴

²³ Stephen Grcevich, "Churches, mental health inclusion and respite care..." Church for Every Child, June 8, 2015, <https://church4everychild.org/2015/06/08/churches-mental-health-inclusion-and-respite-care/>.

²⁴ "Needs of Ex-Prisoners," Prison Fellowship, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/reentry-ministry/ministry-basics/needs-of-ex-prisoners/>.

Look for a local organization that already has connections to provide these things, or consider starting a group that will meet some of these basic needs for men and women who are looking for a fresh start.

So how can we help those in immigrant and refugee communities?

How to love the sojourner among us

Pastor Eric Constanzo gives five ways that he and his church have employed in their International and Refugee Ministry:

1. Connect with international families by partnering with local schools. “In many cases, the initial connection through the schools leads to invitations into the homes and lives of our immigrant and refugee neighbors.”
2. Offer opportunities to learn and practice English as often as possible. Offering ESL classes allows your church to connect one-on-one with those in your community and meet a practical need.
3. Make friends, and get to know others just as you would with anyone else. “In order to facilitate these kinds of friendships between our American-born and foreign-born people, our church hosts

recurring events including family dinners with both American and international cuisine. You will never have better and more diverse meal choices!”

4. Focus on family strengthening like you would with American families. Their church offers a “Mommy and Me” program for refugees in a local apartment complex. This ministry offers post-birth resources and values both the lives of the woman and the baby.
5. Look for ways to help immigrants and refugees generate their own income or resources. “This one might sound harder than any of the others, but it need not be. It could be as simple as starting a food co-op, opening a clothing exchange, or helping others learn a trade or technique.” ²⁵

These lists may sound overwhelming, but the goal is to simply get started. Pray that the Lord would lead you on how to take the first step.

Here are some other ideas for how to get started caring for those in need in your community:

- Ask a member of your community with a physical disability to do a tour of your church and help show you any areas that might not be accessible.
- Train a group of volunteers to act as “buddies” for any children or

²⁵ Eric Costanzo, “5 ways your church can help immigrant and refugee communities,” ERLC, June 29, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/5-ways-your-church-can-help-immigrant-and-refugee-communities/>.

adults with significant disabilities so that their families can attend worship service.

- Create a sensory room or area for those who may be overwhelmed by the lights and sounds during your worship service.
- Create an on-going meal calendar for families who are caring for someone with mental illness. Often these families are forgotten as their needs may not be immediately apparent and may last for years on end.
- Think about ways you could equip and employ someone coming out of the criminal justice system.

Stories of Hope: We Carry Kevan

As a child, Kevan Chandler was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy, a rare neuromuscular disease. He uses a wheelchair for mobility and has very limited use of his arms. In the summer of 2016, Kevan and his friends left his wheelchair at home and trekked across Europe, with his friends taking turns carrying him in a special backpack. This journey spurred Kevan to start We Carry Kevan, a nonprofit striving to redefine accessibility as a cooperative effort of “people helping people.” Kevan has a team of friends who help him throughout his days, but he makes it clear that this relationship is built around friendship and community. “It really is just friends working together,” Kevan says, “both disabled and able bodied, pitching

in, in the ways that we've been gifted. So I can look out for them and feed encouragement in my own way, and they can be an encouragement in theirs."²⁶

Working with the Deuter company, Kevan has worked to develop the WCK Pack, a backpack specially designed to carry individuals with physical disabilities so they can go where wheelchairs cannot, with the help of friends and family. In addition to selling the WCK Packs, the organization has a scholarship program that gives families all over the world who are dealing with the high medical costs related to their disability the opportunity to apply to receive a pack free of charge. Since the program began in December 2019, more than 80 families in 10 countries have received scholarship-sponsored backpacks.

Heroes for Life: Wheels for the World

The cost of a wheelchair in many countries can exceed a year's wages. The World Health Organization estimates that 70 million people need wheelchairs, and for many, that cost is too high. But Wheels for the World, a ministry of Joni and Friends, seeks to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of those in need of wheelchairs around the world.

²⁶ Kevan Chandler, "Kevan Chandler, Founder of We Carry Kevan," Interview by Mark Miller, Interactive Accessibility, November 21, 2019, <https://www.interactiveaccessibility.com/blog/kevan-chandler-founder-we-carry-kevan#>.

“In Poznan, Poland, we found a 14-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who was being pushed around by his parents in a rusty, beat-up baby carriage,” said Joni Eareckson Tada. “In a mountain village in Albania, we delivered a wheelchair to a woman who had been unable to leave her bedroom for 15 years.”²⁷

The ministry collects used and discarded wheelchairs, then sends them to prison-based wheelchair restoration centers, where inmates work to restore them to like-new condition. Inmates participating in the program hear the gospel message and “readily connect with the liberation a restored wheelchair provides a wheelchair recipient in another country.”

The chairs are then distributed to individuals and families around the world. They are not merely dropped off, however; Wheels for the World works to fit each chair for its recipient and connect the recipients with local church and ministry partners for ongoing physical and spiritual care.

Speaking at a medium-security prison in Colorado as it began the program in 1997, Tada spoke to inmates, saying, “I’ve got a life sentence in this chair, and you have sentences, too. The idea is: What are you doing with that sentence?”

27 James Brooke, “Behind Bars, Reaching Out to Others; Inmates Restore Castoff Wheelchairs for Third World’s Disabled,” *The New York Times*, December 25, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/25/us/behind-bars-reaching-others-inmates-restore-castoff-wheelchairs-for-third-world.html>.

In 2016, an inmate in an Arizona prison restoration center that has restored more than 5,000 wheelchairs for the program, shared how the program has changed his life:

I feel that when given the opportunity to positively impact someone you have got to make the best of that chance. Wheels for the World continues to give me far more than I could ever give back. There is nothing quite like what we do here ... this job is far more than any job I have ever done inside or outside of the walls. ²⁸

28 Doug McMurdo, "Kingman Prison Reaches Milestone: 5,000 Refurbished Wheelchairs," Arizona Department of Corrections Rehabilitation and Reentry, February 8, 2016, <https://corrections.az.gov/article/kingman-prison-reaches-milestone-5000-refurbished-wheelchairs>.

WEEK 5: BUILDING A CULTURE THAT REFLECTS THE IMAGE OF GOD

Biblical teaching on hospitality and love for others:

- Romans 12:13
- Luke 14:12-14
- Matthew 11:28
- Galatians 6:2
- 1 John 4:19-21
- Leviticus 19:33-34
- 1 Corinthians 12:26

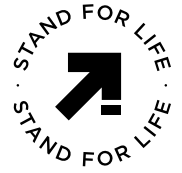
What is biblical hospitality?

Tell a story of someone you know who the world counted out, but you have seen the incredible ways God has used that person for His glory.

What barriers exist within your congregation or community that prevent those with disabilities from feeling welcome?

What stereotypes do you have of those in the criminal justice system, and how might God be challenging those through this week's study?

“Often in American culture, we tie people’s value to their productivity. People are seen as valuable when they are in the prime of their lives—working an important job or raising the next generation. But where does that leave the chronically ill child or the aging adult? If they are not physically able to ‘contribute’ to society, do we still communicate their inherent value?”



WEEK 6

IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY STAGE OF LIFE



When most people hear the term pro-life, their mind typically goes to the life of the preborn. As we have studied, God places value on people of every age and stage of life—that could be the child in the womb, the vulnerable woman facing abuse, or the man in the nursing home with dementia.

L I
F E

KNOW

Often in American culture, we tie people's value to their productivity. People are seen as valuable when they are in the prime of their lives—working an important job or raising the next generation. But where does that leave the chronically ill child or the aging adult? If they are not physically able to “contribute” to society, do we still communicate their inherent value?

As the church, we must communicate a different message. We are not just against abortion but we are *for* life. We must stand for life, from conception to natural death and everything in between.

God instructs His people to care for elders

Scripture speaks of preserving the dignity of the vulnerable elderly among us. Exodus 22:22 says, “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.” Justice is due to the widow and there is punishment for anyone who violates it. Deuteronomy 27:19 states, “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’”

In the early church, widows were a focus of ministry for the disciples. Acts 6:1 says, “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” The implication here is that, not only does the church have a responsibility to care for widows in their midst, but that this care must not show any signs of partiality. As the early church was growing, Jew-

ish Christians of different backgrounds were questioning the treatment widows from their community were receiving at the hands of the apostles. In our context, we must also take care that we not show partiality but instead must care for all those in need.

In the biblical context, widows were vulnerable since they no longer had a husband to provide for them. James 1:27 presents a clear call to care for these vulnerable women. It states, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

Scripture also calls us to honor our parents. Ephesians 6:2-3 says, “‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.’” On the cross, Jesus ensured His own mother would be cared for after His death by saying to John, “Here is your mother” (John 19:27). We then read that John took Mary into his home to care for her.

Read 1 Timothy 5:3-10. What principles do you see in the way the church was called to care for the widows?

From that passage, we see that the family is called to care for its own relatives, but when that support cannot be provided, the church has a call to step in and make sure that the woman is well cared for, in much the same way that she spent her life caring for others.

Robots and Health Care

By C. Ben Mitchell

- Mary has been a resident of West Valley Assisted Living Center for three years. She has a new caregiver named Harvey. Harvey visits Mary's room every morning at 8:30 a.m. sharp. He says, "Hellllooo!" and slowly pushes open her door. Harvey brings Mary her morning medication, takes her blood pressure, and asks, "How are you feeling today, Mary?" Mary responds, "Just fine," and Harvey gives her a big wink and replies with a very happy, "That's what we like to hear."
- Mary and Harvey always talk about her children who live in different states. Harvey always seems interested. Then Mary gets updates from Harvey on the weather forecast and a reminder of the day of the week. After a few minutes, Harvey pivots, offers a snappy, "Well, off to my next client!" and motors himself out of the room, carefully pushing the door closed behind him and exclaiming, "Toodle-oo Mary!" Harvey is West Valley's newest technology, a service robot.
- Although the story is fictional for the moment, robots are increasingly being called on to assist in health care, doing tasks like decontaminating rooms through UV rays.
- Soon other aspects of caregiving will be delegated to medical robots. In a September 2020 story in the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, Robert Booth reported that robots will be deployed in British care homes (nursing homes) to help boost the residents' mental and emotional health.
- Even if programmed by human beings, and even if very efficient, are robots appropriate for truly human care? Robots do not care. They cannot provide care. They do not have the capacity to do so either emotionally or existentially. That is not to say that robots cannot perform important tasks. And it is also not to say that they might not be able to do some tasks more efficiently, more frequently,

and more accurately than some humans; but they cannot provide care. Human care is a uniquely human gift, just as human touch is a uniquely human experience.

- If Christians are going to resist the robot revolution in health care, respect human dignity, and support the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death, they will have to rededicate themselves to patient-centered care, including senior adult care, palliative care, and hospice. We must not allow human senior communities to devolve into old people factories.¹

Standing against euthansia

If all people at every stage of life have dignity, how do we grapple with end of life issues, especially when a person is no longer “productive” or is in chronic pain? Some would see giving a person the option to choose how and when they die as the merciful response. This practice can be referred to as ‘death with dignity’ or euthanasia.² “Euthanasia is generally defined as the act, undertaken only by a physician, that intentionally ends the life of a person at his or her

1 C. Ben Mitchell, “Can robots provide human care?,” ERLC, March 31, 2021, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/can-robots-provide-human-care/>.

2 Luc Deliens, Gerrit van der Wal, “The euthanasia law in Belgium and the Netherlands,” *The Lancet*, 2003 Oct 11;362(9391):1239-40, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/14568754/>.

request.³ The physician therefore administers the lethal substance. In physician-assisted suicide (PAS) on the other hand, a person self-administers a lethal substance prescribed by a physician.”⁴

When discussing these issues, it’s imperative that we differentiate between the terms euthanasia/PAS and natural death taking its course by not employing medical intervention. We know that death is a natural part of life and that until Christ returns, it will come for all people. While we are thankful for many life-saving medical interventions, abiding by advance directives such as a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order allows sickness or injury to take its natural course. In contrast, euthanasia or PAS involves actively taking a life.

As of June 2019, in the United States, nine states have allowed physician-assisted suicide since 1997.⁵ Dan Trippie notes that this practice “was once called doctor-assisted suicide, then it progressed to Right to Die, and now the language takes on a more positive and upbeat tone in death with dignity.” He goes on to say, “However, the goal of the death with dignity legislation is to allow people to calculate and control the timing and conditions of their own death. And this is

3 Rory Watson, “Luxembourg is to allow euthanasia from 1 April,” *BMJ*, 2009 Mar 24;338:b1248, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19318441/>.

4 J. Pereira, “Legalizing euthanasia or assisted suicide: the illusion of safeguards and controls,” *Current Oncology*, 2011 Apr; 18(2): e38–e45, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3070710/>.

5 “Map: Assisted Suicide in the States,” Charlotte Lozier Institute, June 13, 2019, <https://lozierinstitute.org/map-assisted-suicide-in-the-states/>.

quite different than ending a treatment plan when it no longer can provide hope for life. There is a vast difference between allowing nature to take over and actively reaching for godlike actions.”⁶

Contrary to these ideas, the biblical call is to trust God in our lives and with our deaths.

*Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from before your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save.” (Isaiah 46:3-4)*

⁶ Dan Trippie, “Why the death with dignity movement is troubling,” ERLC, July 10, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-the-death-with-dignity-movement-is-troubling/>.

GROW

Counseling someone interested in assisted suicide

Theoretical and philosophical arguments have their place, but they are tested when a real life situation is before us. For example, how would you respond to a friend who has a parent who is contemplating assisted suicide? Dr. Matt Arbo, professor of theology, answers a similar question,

On the one hand, it is understandable why someone of advanced age with a terminal illness might view euthanasia as an attractive “medical” option. The person ostensibly has not long to live, and that short bit of life will likely be overwhelmed with physical and emotional pain. It will seem as though the less painful, frightening thing to do is terminate one’s life in advance so as to avoid going through trauma in the first place. Why live through several months of intense pain and suffering, the assumption goes, when you die at the end anyway and could just as well avoid it all? ⁷

We understand these thoughts on a personal level. We want to avoid pain. We don’t want to be a burden on others. We want control.

⁷ Matthew Arbo, “How would you counsel someone interested in assisted suicide?” ERLC, February 28, 2018, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/how-would-you-counsel-someone-interested-in-assisted-suicide/>.

However, as believers, our thinking must not end there. Are we our own? No, our lives belong to God. Arbo goes on to write,

The Christian moral tradition, by contrast, has stressed the importance of “bodily integrity.” Human beings should in principle live whole, productive, and loving lives. That was Augustine’s emphasis, for example. Each of us has a duty to self-love and to love others (‘love your neighbor as yourself’). Love of self is natural and can be ordered or disordered. Only love of God leads to a properly ordered love of self and others. On this Christian theological basis, suicide is impermissible because it denies the fact that our lives belong to God and therefore are not ours to take. God alone brings final integrity.⁸

Eldercare

If you have decided that life is valuable at every stage of life, how does that belief work itself out at the end of one’s life? How do you value someone’s life even as they are in the process of dying?

8 Arbo, *ibid.*

As we consider end of life issues, surgeon Kathryn Butler calls us to consider these four principles:

- 1. Life is Sacred.** As we have continually studied, every human being is made in the image of God and reflects His glory.
- 2. God is Sovereign.** She noted that “even though we are called to preserve life, God is ultimately sovereign over our life and death and has authority over our days. While we might stalwartly try to preserve life at all costs, when we do that, we ignore that death comes to everyone. It is inevitable because the wages of sin is death.
- 3. Care for the afflicted.** When considering treatment options, Butler stated, “God does command us to preserve life, but He does not mandate that we doggedly chase after interventions that are brutal without any hope for cure.”
- 4. Hope in Christ.** Even when we have no worldly hope, we can trust the work of Christ on the cross and eternal life promised for those who believe.⁹

We must differentiate between true end of life issues and disability. “Physical and cognitive disability should not mean one’s situation is considered ‘end of life,’ yet too many persons who are not dying

⁹ Kathryn Butler, “4 principles for making critical end-of-life decisions,” ERLC, June 20, 2019, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/4-principles-for-making-critical-end-of-life-decisions/>.

are described this way.”¹⁰ For example, providing food and water to someone with a severe disability is not a medical care decision, but instead caring for the basic needs of the vulnerable.

As Christians, we are called to serve the elderly around us. If we haven’t already, many of us will be called to serve our own family at the end of their lives. Whether taking care of a grandparent, a parent, or a spouse, we can care for the person physically, spiritually, financially, and emotionally. Dr. Benjamin Mast said, “We can be a manifestation of God’s presence and God’s care for those people in that particular stage of life.”¹¹

When caring for an elderly parent, the parent/child relationship is often reversed. The child has spent the vast majority of his or her life with the parent taking care of him or her. Now, the child acts as the caregiver of the parent.

For some, this will mean making personal sacrifices to care for elderly family members in our homes. This can be a grueling, thankless job. But truly “honoring” our parents calls us to value them even when they have nothing to offer us in return. In fact, in this giving we identify with our Savior, who gave Himself for those who had nothing to offer in return.

10 Bobby Schindler, M.S., “Basic Care, Human Dignity, and Care for Medically Vulnerable Persons,” Charlotte Lozier Institute, November 21, 2017, <https://lozierinstitute.org/basic-care-human-dignity-and-care-for-medically-vulnerable-persons/>.

11 “Finishing well: Grandparents, widows, and caring for family in their final days,” ERLC Podcast, December 11, 2018, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/erlc-podcast/id1114609591?mt=2>.

For others, it will be impossible to care for family members at home, but sacrificial love will require frequent visits to a long-term care facility, sitting with loved ones, ensuring they are receiving competent and compassionate care.

If you are a caregiver, as much as possible, surround yourself with friends and family who can support you and on whom you can lean on for guidance. Trust the Lord that He is sovereign and that He will equip you every step of the way. By caring well for those older than you, you set an example to the next generation of how to care and honor our elders.

Question: How have you seen your own family or community care well for the vulnerable in your family? What did you learn from their caregiving example?

Widows and widowers

According to the U.S. Social Security Administration, in the 1990s 12-15% of women became poorer after widowhood. “Nevertheless, widowhood remains an important risk factor for transition into poverty. Faced with the loss of resources in widowhood, women have only a few options available to improve their economic status. Remarriage is difficult because of the demographic imbalances caused by shorter male life expectancy.”

Not only may widows face financial hardship, they often encounter immense grief and loneliness. Professor Karen Ellis spoke on the value of widows to the church and how they teach the church to

live in a difficult world. She said, “Let the bereft of the world, including the widow, show us the way. How should we love the widow? To encourage the widow is to love her. To empower the widow is to love her. To sit at the feet of the widow and learn is to love her. And they will remind us of who we are.”¹² They remind us who we are in Christ and that we are part of a kingdom that is not of this world.

While in America the elderly may have some safety nets available to them in situations where the family, church, or community does not step up to help. That is not the situation in other parts of the world. In India, for example, this stark reality can be seen in the city of Vrindavan, which “has become the home of at least 20,000 widows, forced to live out the rest of their lives away from family and friends. In some Hindu communities it is believed that a man’s death is the fault of his wife—that she has brought misfortune to his family. Having lived with her in-laws, once a woman’s husband dies, she is cast out.” Thankfully, Christian ministries have stepped in to help these widows find a way to make a life for themselves, now that their husbands are gone.¹³

¹² K. A. Ellis, “Loving the Widow,” The Gospel Coalition, June 16, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/loving-the-widow/.

¹³ Catherine Parks, “A city of vulnerable ones: India, widows and how we can respond,” ERLC, November 25, 2016, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/a-city-of-vulnerable-ones-india-widows-and-how-we-can-respond/>.

GO

What does practical ministry look like to the vulnerable?

As members of the church, we can honor the elderly who are part of our congregations through the following:

- Ask them how the members of the church can practically serve (yard work, home repairs, etc.).
- When speaking to the congregation, include them in examples. Honor their experience and wisdom.
- Provide ways for them to serve without physical hindrances.
- Provide opportunities for multi-generational fellowship.

Read Proverbs 16:31. What other ways can we serve the elderly in our church?

So many older adults are no longer able to be active in the life of the church or even live independently. By visiting the homebound or those in nursing homes, we bring Christian fellowship to them. Through conversations, reading Scripture, and “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19), we can remind them of the beauty of the gospel. Even those with dementia can sometimes remember memorized Scripture or favorite hymns when prompted. What a gift that, regardless of age, physical or cognitive ability, the church can still be united through shared truth.

Validation Therapy

- If you've spent any time in a nursing home, you may have seen people in wheelchairs with vacant stares on their faces. It's difficult to know how to interact with those with this type of cognitive decline or dementia. Validation therapy "motivates older adults with cognitive decline to communicate more, relieve stress, and enhance dignity and happiness in their final stage of life." The creator of the therapy, Naomi Feil, developed this approach from growing up surrounded by disoriented older adults, in a home for the aged where her parents worked.¹⁴
- The powerful video of Feil working with Gladys Wilson, a non-verbal Alzheimer's patient, paints an incredible picture of the approach. Feil addresses the patient by name and uses intentional touch. She speaks empathetically and acknowledges the patient's suffering and emotions. She goes on to sing "Jesus Loves Me," which connects to Wilson's Christian faith. Wilson then pulls Feil's face to her, and what follows is a personal connection between the two of them. When Feil begins to sing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," Wilson joins in the song as well. Watching the patient progress from disoriented and non-verbal to connected and singing is a powerful reminder of the dignity of each individual regardless of outside appearance.¹⁵

We can also speak up for the vulnerable by promoting the value of all life when it comes to public policy. If "death with dignity" legislation is being considered where you live, contact your representative and stand for life.

14 Validation Training Institute, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://vfvalidation.org/>.

15 Gladys Wilson and Naomi Feil, Memory Bridge, May 26, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfZXz10FcVM&ab_channel=memorybridge.

Both Hands is a ministry that allows participants to get their hands dirty in the work of caring for the vulnerable. Their mission is to not only fund adoptions but help widows at the same time. Instead of simply asking for support from family and friends, the adoptive family reaches out to a widow and creates a list of labor-intensive tasks like cleaning, painting, and yard work. The family then forms a team who sends out sponsorship letters to their network of contacts. The team comes together for a work day at the widow's home, and in one day makes a tremendous improvement to her home and also raises funds for the family to adopt. What a unique way to fulfill James 1:27 and care for widows and orphans.

Author Ann Voskamp tells of how our pro-life convictions lead to action, recounting a conversation with a Lebanese pastor whose church was ministering to Syrian refugees in their country. When explaining why they ministered to people who some would consider their enemies, he explained how the Lord Jesus had passion for the multitudes. Voskamp describes thinking He must have meant compassion instead of passion but then discovered, “passion and compassion are one and the same. Passion literally means to suffer and compassion literally means to co-suffer. That is always the call on our lives. If you are passionate for Christ, then you are compassionate for those in crisis....Because this is us—we are a people of a robust pro-life ethic. We are for both humans in utero and humans in crisis.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Ann Voskamp, “The Gospel and the World’s Deep Brokenness: Global Compassion and Refugee Care,” Evangelicals for Life 2018 Conference, January 29, 2018, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/event-messages/the-gospel-and-the-worlds-deep-brokenness-global-compassion-and-refugee-care-2/>.

Whether that passion leads us to volunteer in a pregnancy resource center, provide respite care to a family raising a child with disabilities, or visit an elderly friend, our call is to care for every person created in God's image. We cannot do everything, but we can pray for opportunities to serve and love—to be the hands and feet of the One who welcomed little children, spent time with outcasts, and valued the least of these. And as we do, we will experience the joy of following our Savior's example, whose sacrificial love has given us a hope and a future.

Stories of Hope and Dignity: GuideStone

When we think of widows in the church, many of us think simply of ministering to them, but we often fail to consider how widows can minister to others. Susie Hawkins and her husband, O.S. Hawkins, president emeritus of GuideStone Financial Resources®, realized that widows were not finished serving the kingdom as they grew older. GuideStone is a financial services provider, offering retirement services to the Southern Baptist Convention and the wider evangelical Christian community. Through the Widow's Might ministry, widows are able to participate in a prayer effort. "Not only that, but we also knew that widows often feel 'out of the loop' after their husband's passing," Susie said.

Prayer requests are gathered from churches across the country, including mission organizations and seminaries, and are compiled into a newsletter which is then sent to widows on a quarterly basis. "We recognize that these women have years of ministry in their past and

know how to pray,” she said. “They are eager to pray for all our requests and to be a part of the... work in that way.” In 2020, Widows’ Might had 355 members as prayer warriors.

At GuideStone, staff pray for the widows as well. They “frequently get notes from them, usually in shaky handwriting that indicates their age. Some of the stories break your heart, as many widows’ families have financial stresses, serious illnesses, and heartbreaking tragedies that they grieve over...One thing almost every note from one of our widows says, ‘My husband was one of the best preachers!’ Of course, this is so touching and we can’t thank them enough for their service and faithfulness.”

Another Guidestone ministry that strives to honor retirement-age Southern Baptist ministers, workers, and widows struggling to meet basic needs is Mission:Dignity®.

“Through this ministry, more than \$9 million is distributed annually to help retirement-age Southern Baptist ministers, workers and their widows whose income is insufficient to meet their needs. These men and women have faithfully served God’s people and now find themselves struggling to meet even basic needs. Many served small, rural churches that paid only modest salaries and couldn’t afford to contribute to their pastor’s retirement.”¹⁷

17 <https://www.guidestone.org/Mission-Dignity/About-Us>

Currently more than 2,400 individuals receive assistance from Mission:Dignity annually. Of those individuals, approximately 60% are widows, with one out of four recipients being a pastor's widow age 85 or older.¹⁸

Heroes for Life: Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home is a skilled nursing facility in Atlanta operated by the Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, who are dedicated to providing palliative care to persons afflicted with incurable cancer. Supported solely by voluntary donations from the public, it is a free home for those who cannot afford to pay for needed care. No payments are accepted from patients or their families, or from third parties such as insurance companies or government agencies.

The organization's mission statement describes their commitment to ethical care:

*As a Catholic Home, we respect the sanctity of life and the dignity of each human being. Thus, the Home is operated according to "The Ethical and Religious directives for Catholic Healthcare Services" promulgated by the national Conference of Catholic Bishops, and euthanasia and assisted suicide will never be practiced in the Home.*¹⁹

18 <https://www.guidestone.org/Mission-Dignity/About-Us>

19 Our Lady of Perpetual Hope Home, <http://www.olphome.com/about-us.html>.

Care is not just for those of the Catholic faith, but for any in need. The Home provides care to many homeless patients who have untreatable cancer and nowhere else to turn. “Oftentimes I’ve seen patients come in so troubled and upset and angry, and somewhere along the way God has touched them through us, but it’s Him that’s doing it,” said Sister Damian, one of the nuns serving in the Home.

“They give me everything I need, from medical treatment, to love, to everything,” said Robert Brannon, a patient at the Home. “They won’t take a penny from you. They do it out of love. There’s no way I would even be able to come close to paying for a small portion of what they do.”²⁰

This love that compels the Sisters to do this work was what compelled the Home’s founder, Rose Hawthorne, in this mission of hospitality: “We must make our guests as comfortable and happy as if their own people had kept them and put them into the very best bedroom. We must love them.”²¹

20 “Nuns explain their love for the cancer patients they treat,” WSB-TV, December 29, 2016, <https://youtu.be/bWorznQ8Edc>.

21 Our Lady of Perpetual Hope Home, <http://www.olphome.com/about-us.html>.

WEEK 6: IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY STAGE OF LIFE

Biblical teaching on caring for widows and the elderly:

- Exodus 22:22
- Deuteronomy 27:19
- Acts 6:1
- James 1:27
- Ephesians 6:2-3
- John 19:27
- Isaiah 46:3-4
- 1 Timothy 5:3-10
- Proverbs 16:31

How have you seen the culture, or even the church, value youth at the expense of honoring the aged?

Share a story of a person who continued to serve the Lord, regardless of age or physical ability.

In what area do you feel challenged to learn more from Scripture and other resources?

Where might God be calling you to serve the vulnerable in your community? How can you stand for life?

LEADER GUIDE

UNNECESSARY UNITING TO MAKE
ABORTION

WEEK 1: IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY PERSON

As you begin this study, you may have a group approaching this topic from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs. Terms like “pro-life” can mean different things to different people. In such cases, it’s important to be sensitive and guide the group to be humble and kind. You will likely have someone in your group who has been personally affected by abortion, and a gentle tone will go far to make it a place where they feel loved and safe.

As you prepare through the week, pray for:

- those who may bring emotional, physical, and spiritual burdens with them.
- those who have experienced abortion or who love someone who has.
- those who are learning some of these things for the first time.
- those who, like the Brown family, have lost a child.

WEEK 2: IMAGE OF GOD IN PREBORN CHILDREN

This week dives into the humanity of the preborn child, and it also touches on the reality that many of the people in our churches have a first-hand experience with abortion. We know there is forgiveness and mercy in Christ for those who may be carrying guilt and shame. This is an important message to communicate to your group, whether they have personal experience with abortion or not. We all need the hope of the gospel. Try to steer the tone toward gentleness and away from any condemnation, especially as you look at the reasons why women choose abortion.

As you prepare through the week, pray for:

- those who have personal experience with abortion.
- those in your community who are abortion-vulnerable, meaning they are in danger of choosing abortion as they face unplanned pregnancies.
- those who need to understand the reasons why women choose abortion.
- those who work and volunteer at local pregnancy resource centers.

WEEK 3: IMAGE OF GOD IN WOMEN

This week discusses the difficult topic of abuse. Statistically, it is quite likely that at least one person in your group is a survivor of abuse. It is possible someone in your group is currently a victim of abuse. If you know of someone in your group who has experienced abuse, consider speaking with them in advance of the meeting to let them know what you will be discussing in case it is too difficult for them to be present. This week also discusses the ways in which men suffer after an abortion and how we can care for post-abortive men and women. Again, be sure to steer the tone toward love and gentleness.

As you prepare through the week, pray for:

- post-abortive women and men in your group and community.
- those in your group who have experienced abuse.
- eyes to recognize those who may currently be experiencing abuse, and that they would have the courage to reach out for help.
- single mothers in your group, church, and local community.

WEEK 4: IMAGE OF GOD IN CHILDREN

This week looks at historical and biblical views of children. It shows how Jesus was radically different from the surrounding culture in how He viewed and treated children. Because of this, the early church was known for treating children with dignity and love. As with last week, this week covers some difficult topics like child abuse. Be sensitive to those who may have experienced abuse as children and teens and those who have experienced other forms of childhood trauma.

As you prepare through the week, pray for:

- those in your group who are survivors of childhood trauma and abuse.
- those whose lives have been touched by adoption in both redemptive and hard ways.
- those in your church who set policies for protecting the children in their care.
- those in your church and community who are caring for children who are survivors of abuse and trauma.

WEEK 5: BUILDING A CULTURE THAT REFLECTS THE IMAGE OF GOD

This week covers a spectrum of topics around valuing all life. It touches on disability, mental illness, trauma, criminal justice, and issues surrounding immigrants and refugees. There is a section on how churches can be more hospitable and welcoming for those with disabilities or trauma. Sometimes these discussions can trend toward criticism of your local church. To avoid this, consider validating a group member's concerns and then asking if they might want to be part of the solution to that problem. Often those who recognize and are passionate about a need are the best ones to work to meet it.

As you prepare through the week, pray for:

- those in your group who are affected by disabilities, mental illness, and/or trauma.
- those in your group or community who have had experiences with the criminal justice system.
- immigrants and refugees in your community.
- the leaders of your church as they seek to build a culture of hospitality to all.

WEEK 6: IMAGE OF GOD IN EVERY STAGE OF LIFE

As you discuss caring for the elderly this week, you may have people for whom this topic is difficult. Perhaps some of your members have recently lost parents or loved ones, or they may be exhausted from caring for elderly family members. If you have elderly members in your group, they may be feeling the effects of aging or be experiencing loneliness. The topics of euthanasia and assisted suicide can also be difficult for some, and you may have people expressing different opinions. Point group members back to Scripture and dependence on God for wisdom and strength in our weakness.

As you prepare through the week, pray for:

- those in your group who have lost loved ones.
- those who are caring for elderly family members.
- those who have been affected by issues surrounding euthanasia or assisted suicide.
- those who are weighed down and exhausted during this season.
- widows, widowers, and the elderly in your church and community.

