

Safe Families: A Way to Love Our Neighbors

By Trisha Williams

The call might come at 2 a.m. “Are you available and willing to provide a few weeks care for an infant girl born at CDH last night?” Or it might come in the middle of the day. “Twenty-five year old single mother has a work related injury and needs to go to physical therapy. Can you provide housing, shelter and care for her twin boys?” What would prompt you to say “yes” to these radical, open-ended requests from strangers in need?

Philoxenia. Love to strangers. Paul uses this word in Romans 12:13 when he urges the Church to care for the needs of believers and to show philoxenia—a word we translate as hospitality. I’m not sure we associate a love for strangers with that word anymore. I went to a Christian workshop on hospitality recently. There, the topics covered decorating on a budget, cooking on a budget, teaching your children table manners, handling dinner conversation, even tips on getting your guests out the door in a timely manner. While this kind of hospitality is good, and these tips practical and helpful, I noticed no mention was made of specifically entertaining strangers or having these strangers stay in your house as a houseguest. And they definitely didn’t mention how to be hospitable to the houseguest who has no known departure date. What has opened up my eyes to a more radical, messier, and, perhaps, a more gospel-centered definition of hospitality than any I’ve understood is my role as a family friend with Safe Families.

Safe Families is a non-profit organization that works to intervene in family’s lives before children are taken away and permanently placed in the foster care system. Once in the foster care system, many children in the U.S. are never placed for adoption. There are many reasons children need to be taken away from their parents and placed in foster care, but there are also some situations where parents and children are unnecessarily separated because they have no sufficient support system. Ideally, Safe Families aims to keep parents and their children together through temporary relief support known as host families and parent coaches. Who better to show love to families in danger of falling apart than the church?

Many of our own DuPage County neighbors may be identified as families in danger. As of January 31, 2017, 331 children were registered in the foster care system in DuPage County. Right now there are only 106 Safe Families registered in the same county. Who knows how far the number of new foster care children might drop if the number of Safe Families were to increase? Host families are needed as well as family friends, resource friends and parent coaches.

Over the past few years, I’ve had the great privilege of getting to know some of our College Church Safe Families, and I pray for these families, help them gather supplies from car seats to highchairs and anything in-between. I provide babysitting and meals as an official Safe Family “family friend.” I don’t have the means to host a child myself, but I have been so thankful to discover ways to “care for the needs of the saints” who just happen to be loving little strangers.



Here is a testimony from one College Church Safe Host Family:

“The biggest challenge for our family was stepping out in faith and becoming a host family for Safe Families. As a Safe Family, we brought an eight-month old little boy into our home for almost six months this past year. He lived with us for three months then went back to his mom for the summer, then came back to our family from August to October. God challenged us to love him as our own even though we knew we would give him back. He was energetic and full of life, bringing many laughs to our home. Our kids readily loved him and cared for him in so many ways. We could not have provided for him without their help and support. He will always have a place in our hearts, and we are trusting God to work a miracle in his life and in his mom’s life.”

And here is a testimony from a Safe Family to a “Family Friend”:

“Thank you for the wonderful meal you provided for our family. It was delicious. Everyone loved it! You provided physical nourishment for which I am grateful, but more than that you nourished my spirit by being the hands and feet of Jesus. Your caring for us provided encouragement to me at an overwhelming time and enabled me to continue loving this young ‘stranger’ in our midst.”

We as a church body (both single and married adults) must pray for and care for our neighbors and each other in radical ways. Our love for our neighbors also knits the hearts of church members closer together as Paul very well knew when he paired caring for the needs of the saints with showing love to strangers. When a family agrees to the difficult job of hosting, the rest of the church needs to rally around them to offer support. One of the many advantages of hosting these children is that they can become part of our church for a time. It brings me such joy to be able to share Jesus’ love and his Word with these children at Bible school each week. I know host families are sharing Jesus’ love everyday with their little “strangers,” and when the opportunity arises, sharing Christ’s love with the parents of the children in their care. Safe Families is one ministry that provides a framework for getting everyone in the church involved in these rescue attempts.

Visit safe-families.org for more information or contact Becky Sandberg or myself about how you can get involved.