

Alumni who are fostering and/or adopting

The following stories are the ones submitted in response to a request made to alumni in the spring of 2016. Parts of their stories appear in *The Messenger*, Summer 2016, Vol. 68 No. 3.

We are grateful for the stories that were shared and for the many more that are being lived out daily by our alumni.

LIFE CHANGERS – Changing Lives: In the Family

Nick '08 and Kelli '11 Alexander:

When I was eight years old, I learned what an orphan was and before I even knew who God was. He broke my heart for these children. I always knew adoption would be a part of my future, but I had no idea what that would truly mean in our lives. Adoption is a blessing; a beautiful, messy, scary, overwhelming, hopeful and heartbreaking blessing.

Adoption was the first choice for our family. When Nick and I had been married for two years, we began the lengthy process of adopting through the foster care system. When we flew out to Texas to meet the four-year-old boy that was to become our son, we were pulled aside and told that his birth mother had a very young baby that would most likely be in foster care soon. We had to make a decision then, before meeting our child, if we would take another as well. Christopher came to our family in 2008, and his sister, Abigail, followed 18 months later.

Adoption is not only taking in a child that needs a family, it is taking in every bit of that child's past also. Because of circumstances in their early years, both of our adopted children have intense special needs. We have dealt with fears and anxieties, we have been given diagnoses that we had never heard of before, and we have met more doctors than I thought was possible. Adoption is loving a child that may never fully believe they are worthy of love. It is that aspect of adoption that has helped me to better understand God's love for me. I wake up each day with the blessing of my children in my life and a love for them that could never end, and I'm reminded that even when I feel unworthy, God's love is never ending.

I know that adoption was not God's original plan for either Christopher or Abigail, but I'm thankful that it was God's plan for Nick and me. I'm amazed at the grace and mercy that God has shown in our adoption journey, and I'm continually reminded about God's providence in all areas of our life.

Mitch '90 and Melody '91 Caton

Five years ago Mitch and I decided that it was time to stop talking and make our words become action. We had felt for several years that we were feeling led by God to open our homes somehow to children. We had been exposed in a variety of ways – housing kids in our church, I worked for an adoption agency recruiting families for the large number of foster children in our

community who needed adoptive homes, and watching friends become foster parents. Every day I watched children desperate for permanent homes. Every day Mitch and I prayed that God would allow us to be part of something greater than ourselves, that we would not just serve “in” our local church, that we would be the church, and that we would not choose comfortable, safe lives. All of these factors moved us forward into action. We decided that we could impact our community by serving kids through our local department of social services. We knew the system was broken and could be challenging, but the greater good was serving children.

In five years we had seven placements. Two of these placements needed to stay and become permanent parts of our family. And so, after raising two biological children, we are beginning the parenting journey again. This journey is not an easy journey. It is probably some of the hardest work we have done. It is not comfortable or safe, but it is what God calls us to do and be. We love the children we have cared for and continue to care for. They have been hurt in ways that we hate to hear about. They need consistent love and structure and to be taught about God's unconditional love and plan for their lives.

We know that there are many children needing supportive, loving homes. We know there are many adoptive/foster families that need people to come alongside of them in practical, caring ways to support, pray for, and help meet needs. And we know that the God's church needs to be informed and not ignore this crisis that children face all over our country and all over the world.

James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Listening and Doing

Daniel '06 and Rachel '06 Voris

Daniel and I are the foster and soon-to-be adoptive parents of four children five years old and under. We have twin five-year-old girls, a four-year-old daughter, and a two-year-old boy. Our eyes opened up to adoption through the foster care system through two friends. My best friend, Vanessa, was a social worker in [location], and she would tell me bits and pieces of stories from the lives of some of her cases. This piqued my interest and broke my heart at the same time. I mentioned to my husband how we should take fostering classes and grow our family through foster care one day after we have “kids of our own.”

The following year a good friend of ours, Melissa, took a placement of an infant only a few days old whose mother used drugs while pregnant. She was a precious baby! I have the privilege of working in a childcare center at our church so I got to know this little baby, as she was one of my students. Soon after that, Melissa took in a two-year-old girl. I talked to Melissa quite a bit about her journey to adoption and listened to her talk about how long it can take but that it was so worth it.

Not too long after this Daniel brought up my idea again of taking the MAPP classes. Now that Daniel had it on his mind, we called Martin County Social Services and asked what to do. Our

first MAPP class was in March 2012. MAPP class (Model Approach to Partnered Parenting) is training you take either through an adoption agency or through your local social services. We chose to go straight through our county. After our classes were completed we began all the paperwork.

About this same time, Melissa took in another child, a little boy about 6 or 7 months old. Andrew started in our infant room at the childcare at our church where I served as director. After seeing Melissa's family grow so fast, I got even more excited and was impatient with our paperwork taking so long. One thing you learn is to hurry up and wait. What I didn't know at this time is that little Andrew had twin sisters who were 11 months older. And they would one day become my daughters!

The following spring – March 2013 – Melissa gave me a call. All she could tell me is that Andrew had twin sisters who needed an adoptive home ASAP because their foster mom was moving to another state. Melissa had already told the county about us and that we were close friends, that we would be a perfect fit and could also keep the sibling relationship alive between the twins and their little brother Andrew. My heart jumped, and I waited for a call from Social Services.

The call came about 20 minutes later, and all I could do was say YES we want these girls! The moment I got the call that we were going to be placed with the girls, I felt like a mom. We set up a plan to start weekend visits, which we did from the end of March through May. The girls moved in for good Mother's Day weekend of 2013. We celebrated by buying a minivan that they helped pick out!

Our girls came to us at two and a half years old and were full of love and laughter. They transitioned into our home so easily it was a little scary. We discovered some neurological delays and potential fetal alcohol exposure, among other drug use, suspected of their birth mom. This is why they bonded with us so fast. They suffer from disinhibited attachment disorder, along with other issues such as anxiety and ADHD. We started speech and occupational therapies, and we also do counseling targeted to trauma. All children who have been separated from their biological families no matter the age have gone through a major trauma.

After the girls moved in we began making memories to establish ourselves as a family unit. We are weekend trip experts. We find a place within an hour or two of our home, and we check it out – nature trails, museums, aquariums, zoos . . . you name it!

We felt our family was complete, but God knew better. In October of 2013 we took a short-term placement of an eight-week-old boy. I fell in love with him right away but knew he wasn't going to be "my" baby. We loved on him for the whole month until he went on to his forever family who was waiting to adopt him. This was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It gave us the opportunity to experience what true fostering is.

The following year – the summer of 2014 – I got a call from Amy, our licensing worker, asking if we were interested in a foster-to-adopt situation with a brother and sister. Not long after that

call, Aubrey and Skylar came to live with us. We went from a family of two people to six people in 1.5 years.

Fostering has been a blessing to us. Our lives are complete now that there are four kids in it. These are kids who were rejected by their biological parents, but loved by their adoptive parents. We couldn't imagine our lives without them. The Bible tells us that God adopted us into His family. That fact is seen in our family every day. Just as we took in four children who had no home and were in need of love and a family, God took us into His family. He gave us a place in His family and showers us with unconditional love.

Christian ex'98 and Melody '98 Smith

No matter how many times I witness it, I remain in awe of the way God has a plan for our lives and works out each detail unbeknownst to us. Psalm 37:23 (NLT) "The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives."

When I was three years old, my uncle came to visit. He was blind and attended a school for the deaf and blind where he had to learn the alphabet in sign language. The other students would sign into his hand one letter at a time and he could reply. Tedious as this may sound, it allowed them to communicate with each other. This fascinated my toddler self and sparked a desire to learn to ASL. There wasn't much opportunity in my small town for this and it became a back burner dream. As I finished high school, with no idea what I wanted to do, I went on a tour of then RBC and immediately knew I would attend for reasons I couldn't quite place. I had never attended camp, or even heard of the college prior, but could feel the Lord drawing me to this campus. When I saw they had a Deaf Education program it was a done deal. I was in!

Christian and I met and married after our first year there, so it took a bit longer to finish my degree, but I finally did. We moved around a bit. I worked mostly in retail and then administrative positions - never using my degree. During this time we tried starting a family, only to be told repeatedly we wouldn't be able to have children. Now what?

I had always dreamed of being a mom, and it took me a VERY long time to deal with the idea of not having children. I would tell people, myself included, that I was fine. But I wasn't ok with it for years. When I finally gave it over to God, and He gave me peace about the situation, Christian said, "You know we should think about adopting." Here we were, married for 16 years at this point, no previous pregnancies, I was finally ok, and NOW you want to adopt?!?! You might think I would have immediately jumped at the thought, but I didn't. I had to think and pray about it for a few weeks before I was ready to open my heart to the path laid before us. Starting the process, we were lucky enough to work with a Christian agency, in addition to an RBC alum's guiding us through the process and leading our foster care classes. I was excited about how God was going to give us a child. One. Singular. But again, He had other plans.

In our classes we learned how the foster system worked (or didn't), and how after a time, siblings would be separated to try giving them a better shot at finding a permanent home.

Christian and I looked at each other, and I'm not sure there were even words spoken, we just both knew we would be adopting siblings. Soon thereafter our social worker brought a brother and sister to our attention. She thought we would be a good fit. We were thrilled.

There are a LOT of steps when adopting from foster care, and while we were well on our way, we didn't quite have the final stamp of approval. The municipality where the children were located would not even consider us, and had in fact picked a different family to adopt them. I was disappointed but knew that God had brought us this far and wouldn't let us down now. Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV) "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

We went on an interview with a different social worker and while we felt the need to pray for the siblings discussed, we didn't feel like they were ours. We got our official stamp and sent out a letter about ourselves to every Department of Social Services in the state of Virginia. About two weeks later we got a call from our worker. There had been a development with the original children she felt we matched. Something had fallen through with the other family and their worker wanted to know if we were still interested, and if so, would we travel for an interview.

We rushed the three hours to the interview without our worker because she couldn't get away, and we were impatient. We had no idea what to expect. Six social workers grilled us with questions both hypothetical and realistic for two and a half hours. It didn't matter if we had covered a subject in answer to a previous question, if it was on their sheet, they were going to ask it again. It was surreal and tiring, and when we left I pretty much felt there was no way they were even considering us. They seemed cold and dismissive. One of the questions was, "Would you be open to continuing a relationship with our kids' grandmother and nana?" We said yes. This was one of the things they felt strongly the children needed, and in fact had reconsidered speaking with us because my degree in sign language would allow us to do so. Grandma was deaf and had adopted 29 children from all over the world, all deaf. Nana was her lifelong best friend who wrote the book "Joy of Signing." Uh, no pressure to remember everything I had learned in college!!

Two weeks passed before we got the call that they would like to come preform their own home inspection (which was beyond thorough - they even examined our underwear drawers!). After another two weeks with no communication, we received the amazing news that they would like us to meet the foster parents to discuss the children. Another three hour trip on a Friday led to a successful meeting. They asked if we'd be willing to stay over until Sunday so we would get to meet the children. No brainer!! We bought clothes at Walmart and crashed with family for the opportunity to meet our son and daughter!!

After three long months of traveling back and forth three to four times a week for visits, our kids came home on December 20, 2011. A date we now refer to as our Familyversary.

Our state requires you to be a foster parent before applying for finalization, so our family was made official September 4, 2012. I will never forget that date, it was the first day of school. I dropped the kids off and took pictures of them looking so small in their classrooms, and as I was pulling away I got the phone call. I drove straight to my husband's office with tears in my eyes to

tell him, "Our kids started school today." He replied, "Yeah, and? Why the tears?" I said, "No, you don't get it. OUR kids!" We hugged, cried, and celebrated.

That would be a great story if it ended there. But God wasn't done yet.

Excited that we were finally able to travel out of state with our kids, we went to visit family in Kansas City for the holidays. I was sick as a dog and blamed my sister for giving me the stomach flu. After a month and a half of not feeling well, I was sent for a diagnostic ultrasound. Standard question: "What are the chances you could be pregnant?" Standard reply: "None. Well, slim to none." But for the first time in 18 years of marriage I was wrong about that. Oliver joined our family August 4, 2013. Matthew 19:26 (NIV) *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

I loved sharing our story and would often quote Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV) "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." But apparently I hadn't learned that lesson the first time. Despite birth control measures, He saw fit to bless us a third time with a baby girl born September 26, 2015!!!

Our oldest son once asked me why we didn't have babies earlier. God gave me the words to answer him, and I believe this to be wholeheartedly true. God knew Oliver and Alexi needed Carlin and Mileena for a big brother and big sister, so He was waiting for us to meet them before we could have babies.

Thank you, Lord, for everything you did to bring our family together. Thank you for laying it on the hearts of others to finally follow your command. Often Christians hide behind the very religious sounding "I haven't been called to...." fill in the blank. Adoption is not one of those areas. James 1:27 (NLT) "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress..." There is no mention of "the right timing" in that verse. No, this was a command to do the right thing, and do it now.

There are 450,000 churches in the United States. If just one family from each church (with the support of other members- financially, physically, spiritually) adopted, there would be NO children left in foster care. None. How amazing, God even has a plan even for children without families or plans of their own.