



## CHURCHES 'FOSTER' NEW FAMILY TIES

A Queens family services agency discovers that with the help of churches in the community, new foster parents can be recruited and nurtured. > *By Lindsey McCormack*



Forestdale executive director Anstiss Agnew, in her office at the Forest Hills agency. *Photo by Elise Kirk*

After a three-decade career in social work, Anstiss Agnew decided to take one last job at Forestdale, a former orphanage turned foster care agency in Forest Hills, Queens. In 2006 she became the agency's director, but with trepidations. "My impression was that foster care is an abysmal system," she recalled. "It seems the same things repeat for generations."

Agnew threw herself into the job, overhauling the staff and recruiting a new board. But outside Forestdale's leafy campus, more daunting challenges loomed. The agency works primarily in the southeast Queens neighborhood of Jamaica, which has the third-highest rate of foster care removals in the city. Currently about 20 percent of Jamaica children in foster care are placed with foster families in the same community, a better record than the citywide rate of one in 10, but far from ideal.

Agnew knew the agency couldn't work in isolation, and as an outsider — a white woman commuting in from Connecticut — her thoughts turned to the church. Her grandfather had been a minister, and she had collaborated with Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church during eight years as director of Inwood House, a haven for pregnant teens. "I was grasping, like in the bottom of a well," she said. "The church seemed like it was going to be a lifeline."

Her instincts, it turned out, were on the mark. Almost three years later, Forestdale is tapping a network of over 40 religious institutions, from storefront mosques to a mega-church, whose leaders are interested in foster care as a spiritual mission. Nor is Forestdale alone, as the Administration for Children's Services encourages partner agencies throughout the city to build alliances with faith communities — a new chapter of the tradition of religious institutions caring for New York City's most vulnerable children.

### Training resilient parents

In her search for collaborators, Agnew turned to the Greater Allen African Methodist Episcopal Cathedral, or Allen A.M.E., which boasts a congregation of more than 20,000 members and is known for taking the lead in community development projects. Rev. Floyd Flake received Agnew, but she remembers he was initially reluctant to commit. "He'd had parishioners who were foster parents and didn't have enough money for clothing. The parents were isolated," Agnew said. "I told him, 'Let me take care of the bureaucracy. What we need are people in your church who care about children.'"

Flake eventually agreed, and put Agnew in touch with Andre and Helen Broady, a husband-and-wife team of lay ministers. By day, the Broadys run a transitional home for homeless adults in St. Albans. They are also foster parents, and a few years ago began recruiting members of Allen A.M.E to take in foster kids. With Forestdale's assistance, they re-launched their foster care ministry and are currently training their third cohort of foster parents.



Helen Broady, left, leads foster parent recruits in a training at Allen A.M.E. earlier this month. *Photo by Lindsey McCormack*

On a recent Friday evening, Andre and Helen were busy setting up for a three-hour class, the third in a 10-week cycle, in a room in the cathedral basement. They first became foster parents after Andre's brother died, when they took in and eventually adopted his two sons. Since then, they've fostered some dozen teenagers, though neither could remember the exact number. Both Helen and Andre seem burnished by years of parenting — their demeanor is warm, yet something in their voices hints they can lay down the law. "I don't candycoat," said Helen, as she taped a poster of Erikson's Eight Stages of Development to the wall. "Sometimes the agency makes a mistake by not telling the whole truth about fosterparenting. Our people go in with their eyes open."

Once the class arrived — 11 potential foster parents, some towing their own kids — Andre let out a rousing “Hallelujah!” and launched into a praise song. After a brief prayer, the class reviewed an assignment on personal strengths and needs — “They’re needs, not weaknesses,” Andre stressed — then began a role-play on the interactions between children, birth parents, and foster parents. The exercise is part of Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP), a curriculum that all New Yorkers must undertake to become foster parents. “In the church, we’re allowed to be who we are,” said Andre. “We do the technical training, but there’s also a spiritual component.”

So far the Broady team has graduated 20 new foster parents, among them a member of the Allen A.M.E. choir named Patricia Heaven. She decided to try foster parenting after hearing the Broadys’ pitch at Sunday service, and has taken in two children since graduating from MAPP training earlier this year. The first, a girl the agency said was 6 but who Heaven thought looked closer to 10, arrived at her house clamoring for what she called “fire milk.”

“She was strung out,” Heaven recalls. “The first night she had an episode — she did everything but levitate.” The girl was placed in drug rehab after a week, and Heaven never heard of her again. In August, Heaven took in a second child, a baby girl, whom she hopes to adopt. In the evenings, while Heaven rehearses with her choir, the baby stays in the Allen nursery; sometimes her mother brings her to rehearsals, where the little girl bobs to the music. “She’s teaching me a lot about myself,” says Heaven. “My own patience, what are the really important things. This is about what Jesus did for us — he put down the values we’re supposed to live by.”

Built-in support networks make religious institutions a natural home for first-time foster families — and it doesn’t hurt that congregants are likely to be driven by a sense of mission. “It’s a huge issue to find committed foster parents who are in this for reasons that go beyond money and the desire to move toward adoption,” said Andrew White, editor of the quarterly *Child Welfare Watch* (a joint project with the Center for an Urban Future, City Limits’ sister think tank). “The city desperately needs to find caring foster parents who live relatively close to the neighborhoods where kids are coming from, and who are willing to do this for altruistic motives.”

## A tumultuous history

New York has long tapped houses of worship to care for abandoned children. In the nineteenth century, the city’s major orphanages were run by organizations such as the Protestant Episcopal City Mission Society and the Foundling Asylum of the Sisters of Charity. Religion and child welfare made for an explosive mix, as Catholic and Protestant charities clashed over the right to baptize abandoned children, according to Julie Miller, author of “Abandoned: Foundlings in Nineteenth-Century New York City.”

In the early 20th century, as the city closed down orphanages in favor of foster care, religious charities shifted to accommodate the new system. Today, many agencies contracted by ACS — the Catholic Guardian Society and Home Bureau, Episcopal Social Services, and the Jewish Child Care Association, to name a few — maintain their religious roots while serving a secular population. Still, the border between church and state is not always peaceable. In the late eighties, Roman Catholic leadership threatened to shut down services for thousands of foster teens rather than fulfill contractual obligations to provide access to birth control. As recently as 2005, the New York Civil Liberties Union sued the Salvation Army, a major foster care provider, for religious discrimination against its employees.



The Forestdale campus in Queens -- adorned with a Christmas tree this time of year. Photo by Elise Kirk

## A community network

The budding foster care ministry in Jamaica has less in common with the old religious agencies than with movements like One Church, One Child, an organization launched in 1980 by Chicago minister George Clements. The idea was simple: given the large numbers of black children in foster care, black churches should help provide for their care. The organization has since moved beyond its African-American roots to address all foster children, and was an inspiration for former ACS commissioner Nicholas Scoppetta, who established a task force on faith community outreach after consulting with One Church, One Child.

The Jamaica foster care ministry also taps into a recent trend toward community involvement in foster care. Forestdale and five other foster agencies are part of the Jamaica Community Partnership Initiative, an ACS-sponsored coalition of hospitals, schools, and nonprofits that serve neighborhood children. ACS sponsors 11 such initiatives around the city, and encourages religious organizations to participate by recruiting foster parents and hosting trainings. The city has even begun to purchase ad space in Sunday church bulletins, according to Jairo Guzman, director of the Office of Parent Recruitment and Retention at ACS.

Guzman stressed that faith-based outreach is not meant to supplant the role of foster care agencies, which are ultimately responsible for the children in their care. “We want to make sure that the relationship between the house of worship and our system is through an agency, and we’re here to bridge that relationship,” said Guzman. “You can’t bypass the work the agency does.”

Others see a more expansive role for faith communities in shaping the agenda for foster care. Rev. Alfonso Wyatt, vice president of the Fund for New York City, has consulted with various ACS commissioners on the role of religious communities in foster care. “Most community change efforts have centered on faith communities,” said Wyatt, who is also a member of Allen A.M.E. “I’d love to see a faith community as a hub, and by that I mean a fiscal conduit like Forestdale. That would be daring, that would be groundbreaking.”

Ultimately, the success of Jamaica’s foster care ministry will rest on people like the Broadys, who go through the rigors of state certification in order to return to their congregation and train new foster parents. Anstiss Agnew continues to visit churches, mosques and synagogues in southeast Queens, hoping to draw out these future leaders. “It will become a church-based movement, rather than people coming to Forestdale to get certification,” said Agnew. “We do the fingerprinting and other technical stuff, but we won’t interfere in the spiritual aspect.”

- Lindsey McCormack