

# Ministry: More Catholic foster families needed in state

written by Alesia Schaefer |



ROGERS — Answering God’s call can manifest in ways one might not expect. For Camas and Matt Maroney, longtime parishioners of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Rogers, listening to their hearts has taken them on a journey that they want to share with others.

It all started with Camas feeling God was calling them to grow their family.

“We couldn’t have more children, and I wanted to adopt,” Maroney said, “but my husband was hesitant and our two children, Annabelle and Aiden, were in high school at the time.”

“We realized that being a bridge is beautiful,” Maroney said of fostering children.

Worried they would regret the decision if they did not look into adoption, Maroney said making a connection with a foster family at her daughter’s soccer games inspired her to learn more.

“Then I heard a radio story on fostering and felt maybe this was the direction we were being called.”

In 2019, the Maroney family became a family of six with the addition of two foster children. After two years of fostering, Maroney said their path changed. The stage of their lives and their children’s lives brought them to the recognition that God was not calling them to adopt.

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Their prayers turned to finding a good home for the 1- and 2-year-old children they had brought into the family. Although the decision was a tough one, the two young children, then ages 4 and 5 years old, were both adopted together in 2021.

However, Maroney's journey was just beginning.

Maroney wondered if other Catholic families had struggled and needed support. Armed with this question and others, Maroney reached out to The CALL in Northwest Arkansas, a Christian organization that recruits and trains foster families, to inquire about other Catholic families.

"I wasn't seeing any other Catholic families fostering; we felt like we were on an island, so we wanted to help encourage Catholic families to foster because children in foster care do so much better in homes than shelters or group homes," Maroney said.

She and co-founder, Sara Bridges, who fostered two children who she and her husband Sam adopted, began the Holy Family Foster and Adoption Support Ministry. The Bridges are members of St. Stephen Parish in Bentonville.

The Bridges, who also have one biological child, have fostered several children.

"There are far more blessings than challenges," Sara said of their experience. "The challenges tend to come in the beginning of the placement in your home, as the current dynamic changes. The blessings are great, from the obvious of expanding our family, to the day-to-day of watching these children grow and thrive."

The ministry partners with The CALL and Project Zero, whose mission is to "enthusiastically" promote adoption through the foster care system, where her husband, Matt Maroney, now serves on the board. In August, the first adoption event was held since the pandemic at St. Vincent de Paul with 45 children and 38 families in attendance. The event brings foster children and licensed families who are looking to adopt together for a day of fun activities, food and a chance for the families and children to talk to one another. The kids are given free haircuts, backpacks and school supplies. The ultimate goal is to match families with children for adoption.

The ministry already has plans to host another event Aug. 5.

Maroney said of the 4,424 children that entered foster care in Arkansas in 2022, 52 percent came into the system due to neglect, while 48 percent needed to be placed in foster care because of substance abuse in their homes. Other reasons for foster care placement included parent incarceration, abuse, abandonment and caretaker illness. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, a child enters foster care in the U.S. every two minutes.

"The length of their stay in foster care in Arkansas can be as long as 36 months, but the more typical is a six-24 months stay," Maroney said.

"We are at a crisis level in the state of Arkansas," Maroney said. "We lost 130 foster homes during the pandemic. There are not enough homes for children. There are about 4,500 children in the state in foster care. In northwest Arkansas alone, there are about 513 children from Bella Vista to Fayetteville, with maybe 180 homes in the area, and we feel foster care needs will increase in the next three-five years."

According to Maroney, the sad news is there are not enough homes to the ratio of children.

"Our ministry goal is to educate the community," Maroney said. "We have 367 children in foster care waiting to be adopted, with most of the children being over the age of 6. Many people do not know you can adopt for free from foster care."

Besides providing foster care, Maroney said there are other ways to help.

"Snacks can be provided to the shelter because there are always children coming through, parents can also provide babysitting for those families who may need a night out or to travel for family emergencies," she said. "The need for translators for Hispanic children and families has also really grown, and we do not have any Hispanic foster families so we want to grow in that area."

In many ways, the journey has come full circle for Maroney, who said her grandmother was a foster child after she and her brother were abandoned in a movie theater during the Great Depression..

"Although I have never met her, it certainly made me understand more about her and my mother and the challenges they faced," she said.