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The adoption option

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In love He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ... (Ephesians 1:5)



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Anglican bishop Tom Frame is among the many thousands of Australians who were adopted soon after birth. He wrote a book[1] about his experience of growing up with an adoptive mum who loved him dearly, and an adoptive alcoholic and abusive dad. His father's sadistic behaviour was part of the reason Tom left home at 16 to join the Navy. Tom dedicated his book to his mother Doreen.

Tom excelled as a Navy historian and gained a Ph D. He married, and later entered the Anglican ministry. He opposed the 1991 NSW Adoption Information Act because it broke promises made to adoptive parents that adoption records would remain confidential.

However after the birth of his first child several years later, Tom decided to use the law he had opposed in order to seek his birth mother and discover his family medical history. The search was not easy. Even when he found his biological mother "Diane", she was unable to tell him much about his birth father except that he had been tall, intelligent and married with children when she had a brief affair with him as a teenager. Tom's birth father never knew of Tom's existence.

After searching for the missing parts of his identity and receiving answers to some of his questions, Tom Frame concluded that he was very grateful for his adoption. His mother Doreen was "an entirely positive influence". Even his abusive father had taught him "a resilient spirit, a sense of determination and a strong will to survive".[2]

Tom wrote: "My father's example developed in me a natural affinity with underdogs and a spontaneous dislike for the privileged. I will always be grateful to my adopted parents. I enjoyed many good things while gaining just as much from the bad."[3]

Anti-adoption campaigns

Tom Frame's book mentions his research on adoption, including the bitter campaigns which led to overturning adoption laws around Australia. The media featured stories of mothers in deep grief after being forced to give up their babies, while some children, placed in inappropriate or abusive adoptive families, told of ongoing emotional problems. Despite opposition from adoptive parents, the campaigns changed adoption laws, along with government and society attitudes.

Before the mid 1970s, unmarried pregnant women were strongly encouraged to release their babies for adoption by infertile married parents. Adoptions of Australian children reached a peak of nearly 10,000 in 1971, but declined dramatically shortly afterwards as abortion and government support for single mothers became readily available.[4]

Adoptions declined further in the 1980s after anti-adoption campaigners publicised the cruelty of some past practices. The "adoption is bad" message was so effective that by 2006-7, only 59 Australian children were adopted by non-relatives.[5]

"Mandy", who contacted Festival of Light Australia during the late 1990s, said she and her husband "Peter" were among the lucky few couples on the long adoption waiting list who had received a child from the very small number available at that time. Community welfare officials had thoroughly checked Mandy and Peter before allowing them on the list. The relinquishing mother had chosen their profiles ahead of others higher up.

Unlike in earlier times, the adoption was "open". Mandy was required to send the birth mother regular photos, school reports and other news of her child. Social workers visited from time to time to check on the family, and Mandy was forbidden to use any form of physical discipline.

"Peter and I believe that physical punishment, when used wisely and with love, can be a biblical and valid form of discipline," Mandy said. "But we are happy to obey government discipline rules and keep in touch with the birth mother, if that is what we need to do to have the privilege of parenthood."[6]

Pro-abortion, anti-adoption 'research'

Sydney Morning Herald journalist Adele Horin typifies modern attitudes to adoption. "The stories told by mothers who gave their children up for adoption are unbearably painful," she said in a 2005 column. "For decades no one wanted to listen to these 'relinquishing' mothers who fell pregnant in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. They were often sent away from home, gave birth in cruel circumstances and then were expected to act as if nothing had happened... Surrendering a child to adoption is not a neat alternative to abortion. We have learnt nothing from recent history if society once again puts pressure on pregnant young women to take the adoption route by making abortions less accessible."[7]

Ms Horin claims that most relinquishing mothers suffer unending grief and that "reunions with an adult child ... do not necessarily end a mother's grieving for the baby she never knew." She acknowledges that some women suffer grief after abortions, but quotes a study of 100 women interviewed shortly after their abortions, most of whom said they felt "overwhelming relief".[8]

The study Adele Horin refers to was a report produced by feminist activists Lyndall Ryan (a founding member of the Sydney Women's Liberation Group in 1970), Margie Ripper and Barbara Buttfield, called *We Women Decide*.[9] Dr Buttfield worked at the SA government abortion clinic - euphemistically titled "Pregnancy Advisory Centre" - at Woodville Park in Adelaide's north west.

Unlike professional scientific research, *We Women Decide* is blatant in its pro-abortion advocacy. Ryan et al invited SA, Queensland and Tasmanian women who had sought abortions between 1985-1992 to participate, and later interviewed 89 women by phone or in person. Some women had answered media advertisements, but many others were recruited via pro-abortion women's information and health services and abortion referral agencies. Abortion providers were also interviewed. The authors note that "word of mouth" encouraged some providers as well as women to participate, indicating that pro-abortion networks may have played a significant role in recruiting for the survey, further skewing the results.[10] Moreover the authors announced, even before the survey began, that they expected the outcome to "challenge

popular mythologies and assumptions about abortion".[11] Much of the 200 page report consists of carefully edited extracts from anecdotal evidence, selected to support ideas and policies which the authors were promoting.

Anecdotes have their place. Several are included in this paper - but they do not constitute scientific research because there is no control group as a comparison. Research which surveys non-random, biased samples of volunteers and has predetermined outcomes has no scientific validity. Yet despite the glaring flaws in *We Women Decide*, the SA government's Pregnancy Advisory Centre continues to cite this study as an authoritative source for alleged "facts" - that abortion "does not cause emotional harm", in contrast with relinquishing babies for adoption, which according to *We Women Decide* results in ongoing feelings of regret.[12]

Christchurch Health and Development Study

Valid research on adoption and abortion does exist. Longitudinal studies, while expensive, are "gold standard" research, and Dr David Fergusson and his colleagues are world leaders in this field. They have followed up 1265 babies born in Christchurch NZ in mid 1977 from infancy into childhood, adolescence and adulthood. This large, random, unbiased sample provides ideal controls for any investigation. The Christchurch Health and Development Study has produced over 230 scientific papers, books and chapters on issues including breast vs bottle feeding, youth cannabis use and psychosis, and factors affecting youth suicide. The Study has also investigated adoption and abortion.[13]

The 2006 Christchurch Study on abortion and mental health[14] found that women who had had at least one abortion were twice as likely as others to drink alcohol at dangerous levels and three times as likely to use illicit drugs. Nearly half had experienced major depression in the previous four years - twice as many as those who had never been pregnant and 35% more than those who had continued their pregnancies. Separate analysis showed that the mental health problems followed the abortions - not the other way around. Dr Fergusson - who describes himself as "pro-choice" - said he was surprised by the results, but they were statistically strong. He said the link between abortion and mental ill-health had persisted despite adjustment for confounding factors.[15]

The Christchurch Study's 1998 investigation of adoption[16] found it had positive outcomes for the child. Dr Fergusson concluded that adoption is "a generally socially advantageous process in which children from relatively disadvantaged biological backgrounds entered relatively socially advantaged homes and families. In comparison to their peers who remained in single parent families, adoptees were an advantaged group in many areas of childhood and family functioning".

However while adopted children did somewhat better than peers brought up by their natural mothers, they did not do as well as children brought up by both natural married parents. Adoptees appeared to have higher ability and achievement scores than would be expected on the basis of their social background and parentage, but lower scores than would be expected on the basis of the social background and parentage of their adoptive parents.

Dr Fergusson said: "While it would be unwise to return to a situation in which all single mothers are advised that it would be in their child's best interests if the child was placed for adoption, there is still a place for adoption as a child welfare provision which protects the interests of children ... children placed for adoption are likely to enter generally good and caring family environments and ... such placements may mitigate, although perhaps not eliminate, the elevated risks of social and psychological problems in adolescence associated with children from high risk biological family backgrounds."[17]

Other research indicates that adoptees score better than their non-adopted peers in areas such as self-esteem. A 1994 study by Dr Peter L Benson et al of the US Search Institute[18] investigated 715 families who adopted babies between 1974 and 1980 and who reached the ages of 12-18 by 1993. The study involved 881 adopted adolescents, 1262 parents and 78 non-adopted siblings randomly selected from the records of 42 public and private adoption agencies in four US states. Participants completed extensive confidential survey instruments containing a wide variety of psychological and family measures.

The Benson study found that adopted teens were as deeply attached to their adoptive parents as their non-adopted siblings. Only 16% were not strongly attached to either parent. Only 11% of adopted children reported divorce or separation of their adoptive parents - compared with 28% of a national sample of adolescents. Adoptive families typically achieved high levels of warmth, communication, discipline and cohesion - reflecting greatly improved pre-adoption screening processes typically employed by adoption agencies post 1970. The adopted teens in the Benson study scored slightly higher on several measures of psychological health than a comparison sample of public school adolescents.

Grieving natural mothers

It is apparent from the Fergusson, Benson and other studies that adoption into supportive stable families is a very positive option for most children whose natural mothers would find it hard to raise them. However groups like the Association of Relinquishing Mothers (ARMS) do not agree.[19]

ARMS and similar groups reflect the negative experiences of some relinquishing mothers and their children in the decades before the 1970s when single mothers were often coerced by others to give up their babies, and adoptive parents were not adequately screened to remove those with unstable relationships or harmful behavioural tendencies.

Stories told by ARMS and others[20] are heart-rending, but they assume that every birthmother deeply regrets her adoption decision. An Australia-wide survey of 213 relinquishing mothers by Winkler and Van Keppel in the early 1980s found that approximately half experienced increasing psychological pain.[21] However the suffering was not universal, and seems to have been strongly associated with coerced relinquishment.

Anti-adoption groups such as *Birthmothers*[22] often also claim that the separation of a child from his or her birth mother always damages the child, and that every adopted child would have done better if raised by his natural parent/s. However longitudinal studies show the reverse is more likely to be true if the child is adopted from birth into well-chosen families.[23]

Public mood is changing

Is the adoption pendulum - greatly in favour until 1970, then swinging wildly against in following decades - finally heading back to the middle ground? Lawyer and social commentator Dr Janet Albrechtsen hopes so. In an article in *Quadrant*,[24] she points out the irreversible damage done by Australia's post 1970s anti-adoption mindset which has led to many children of non-coping mothers being abused and confused in a series of foster placements rather than being adopted into stable families.

"Caught in this maelstrom of social change, adoption stands like an ignored and forgotten remnant of the past despite a growing band of chronically abused and neglected children who cannot live safely at home with their parents," Dr Albrechtsen writes.

"These children endure a disturbingly large number of placements and many never return home. Yet adoption remains unfashionable in child welfare circles. In the year from July 1999 to June 2000, 33,000 children were in out-of-home care across Australia. Only 106 were adopted; two of these were indigenous children. Yet adoption provides many striking examples of children rescued from loveless, deprived childhoods. What has happened to cause such a powerful force for good to become unpopular, even demonised?"

Another voice for change is social commentator Bettina Arndt, who suggests that the 2008 movie *Juno* could prompt an adoption rethink. She says (in part):[25]

This funny, sweet, extremely moving film may have an impact on an important social agenda by getting adoption back on the teenage radar. It is about sixteen-year-old Juno who, faced with an unwanted pregnancy, briefly considers abortion but is put off when her placard-waving classmate, Su Chin, greets her outside the clinic, pronouncing "All babies want to get borned" and telling her the baby already

has fingernails.

Juno then turns to adoption after seeing advertisements placed by desperate adoptive parents. After a bumpy journey, Juno finally gives up her baby and returns with relief to her former life. The final scene shows her sitting on the front steps with her boyfriend, singing together and strumming guitars.

It's a modern fairytale, claim the critics, rightly slamming the movie for failing to acknowledge the lifelong grief often associated with relinquishing a baby. Others object to the fact that the modern open adoption approach gets short shrift with Juno blithely expressing her preference for an "old school" baby-in-the-basket hand-over. Yet the strong underlying message is babies need parents in a position to properly care for them and Juno needs to get on with her own life - hence adoption is a choice that works for her.

That's a mighty unfashionable message at the moment and that's what makes this movie so important. For the past 30 years or so relinquishing babies has been a total no-no. It all started back in the 1970s when anti-abortion groups successfully lobbied against unmarried mothers being coerced into relinquishing babies, a practice which often resulted in long-term trauma for the women concerned.

Rightly, the terrible bullying came to an end. But the result was adoption dropped off the list of choices for dealing with unwanted pregnancy and now women who consider this option meet fierce opposition.

Some years ago The Courier-Mail *published a story of a widow who was faced with raising the child of her 14-year-old daughter, after the girl was dissuaded from giving up the baby. The girl had decided she was too young to cope with the child but social workers persuaded her to rethink.*

Today, social worker training often focuses exclusively on the negative aspects of giving up babies but is strangely silent on the downside - for women and their children - of raising children in single parent families.

With this professional agenda driving public debate, it's hardly surprising that so few babies are relinquished - the most recent 2005-6 figures show only 38 babies given up for adoption in Australia that year. Compare this with the astonishing one in three babies now born to unwed mothers. Nearly half (44 per cent) of these women are under 25.

Here are still some young women making the tough decision to give up a baby, often after very thoughtful consideration. "What can I offer her at this time in my life? She's not there to fill the emotional holes in me," commented one relinquishing woman, spelling out her child's need for a good education, a stable supportive family and a father.

Since giving up her child, this 26-year-old constantly runs a gauntlet of negative comments from others keen to point out the error of her ways. But contact with the child through her open adoption shows her she's made the right decision for her child and for herself - enabling her to still pursue her own dreams.

Such dreams matter - as the women's movement has always known. What's really strange is that feminists have allowed the anti-adoption lobbyists to dominate the debate and deny young women the chance of starting adult lives free of the responsibilities of caring for a child. Giving up a baby is an extremely difficult choice but it will be the right decision for some women. Juno, *for all the fun and froth, may just open women's eyes to that possibility.*

Adoption stories

A Festival of Light Australia email forwarded to informal contacts in March 2008 resulted in over 50 individual stories from adopted children, adoptive parents and relinquishing mothers. Most accounts were positive - exceptions were cases where mothers were coerced into relinquishing their babies, and where screening of adoptive families was inadequate. A sample is included below, with names and some details changed to preserve confidentiality.

Christine

I was 18 and naive. I went with this guy for just three weeks. He had been engaged to someone else, but had broken it off - then he dumped me and made up with his fiancée. She got really nasty when I told him I was pregnant, saying her partner wasn't the father.

In 1968 I could have had an illegal abortion, but for me that wasn't an option. Instead, I saw going through with the pregnancy as a way of making a childless couple very happy.

After Sally was born I was interviewed by the welfare people and they asked if I wanted her to be brought up Catholic or Protestant. That was the only choice they gave me, but it didn't bother me. I went back to work, and later married and had two children. I would think about Sally from time to time - especially on her birthday - and wonder what she was doing, but I didn't suffer the deep ongoing grief that some relinquishing mums talk about.

After her 18th birthday, I contacted Jigsaw - the group that links up adopted children with their birth families - and gave them a letter for Sally with my details and medical history. I thought if Sally needed to know more she could always contact me, and two years later she did. I discovered that she had been brought up in the country and was very happy.

Her adoptive parents are lovely - everything I could have wished for - and we have a great relationship too. Sally's children get on well with my other grandchildren. They are very alike in some ways.

These days everyone is pushing open adoption, but I don't know that I would have wanted that if it had been available when Sally was born. I think it would have made life harder for me - she would have weighed on my mind.

I know two other relinquishing mums - a relative and a friend - and they have both placed vetoes on any contact with their adopted children. They look on the adoptions as something which happened in the past, and they want to keep it there. They have since married and had other children who don't know their half-siblings exist.

I have talked to someone from the Association of Relinquishing Mothers (ARMS) who said I was very fortunate not to have suffered grief after giving up Sally. I think they mostly see the unhappy ones.

Lynne

My husband and I could not have children, so we adopted two girls in the 1970s. We had no trouble with the older girl, but the younger one was very rebellious during her teens. She would scream at me, "You're not my *real* mother!"

Several years later she searched for her birth parents and actually lived with her mother for a while. Then she came back to me. She said, "If I had been given a choice about growing up - with my birth mum, or you - I would have chosen you." She finally realised all the good things in her adoptive family that she had previously taken for granted.

But she was a difficult child, unlike her sister. I think it may have been partly because of the emotional trauma her birth mother went through during her pregnancy. All that stress can affect the baby. There may also have been genetic problems too. Personality and moods can be inherited.

I do not think adoption is always the right solution for girls with unplanned pregnancies, but I do not support abortion. I think it is a good thing that single girls who become pregnant are no longer pressured to give up their babies for adoption. There is a lot of support available now which wasn't there 40 years ago. And for those who cannot cope with raising a child, there is open adoption - where the birth mother is given regular updates on her child's progress and in some cases may have occasional contact. Adopted children often yearn to know about their birth families, so I think open adoption can solve some problems.

Then again, some birth mothers do not want open adoption. They want to hand over the baby and get on with their life. That is why so many of them are choosing abortion. They should have the option of closed adoption if that is what they wish.

Carol

In 1971 when I was 18, I had a baby to a man I did not know. I gave up my baby for adoption of my own free will, as I could not afford to keep her and have a reasonable life. I thought there were people out there who would love and care for her better than I could.

I did not see her when she was born. I chose to mourn for her as

if she had died - because to me, she had. I never "looked at all the girls her age wondering if she was one of them". I just got on with my life. When they changed the law and said adopted children could find out their parents' details, I said I would accept written communications only.

Then one day, when she was about 23, my adopted daughter contacted me. Things had not turned out for her as well as I had hoped. Her adoptive parents were quite old, and her adoptive mum died when she was only five. Some years later her adoptive dad married again, but she didn't get on well with his new wife.

The sudden contact with my daughter was rather a shock. I was now married and had three girls with my husband. He knew about the adoption but I had not told the girls. My other daughters took a while getting used to the idea of a half-sister, but they eventually did.

Everything was going well - she got married, and had a baby. Then we had a problem. She could not understand how I could have given her up, even though I had explained I had no support to keep her.

But after a couple of years she worked it through and we now get on really well. She calls me mum and I have two wonderful granddaughters. I had released her for adoption, but she chose to come back and be my daughter. With abortion, there are no second chances.

Bob

I was adopted when I was two months old. I was happy, and enjoyed life very much. Although I was an only child, I had lots of friends. I had many aunts and uncles whom we used to visit a lot. I loved going to their homes. I also learned to play the piano and the trumpet and was in a brass band.

It was not until I was 14 that my parents told me I was adopted, but it did not change anything. I have never been interested in finding my birth parents, but my daughter-in-law has done some research. She found out where I was born and has a photo of the house. I am happy for her to do that.

I am very grateful to my birth mother for giving me the chance to have the wonderful experience of life.

Fiona

My birth mum placed me for adoption in 1973 because she was only 15 and couldn't cope with raising a child. Her family doctor said he would arrange an abortion, but my birth mum said that was out of the question although she still grieved. She and her family would celebrate my birthday year after year, not knowing where or how I was.

However adoption was the best thing for me. It was a great privilege to grow up in a Christian home, knowing I was deeply loved - even though I sometimes felt like an "odd fish". My parents were skinny, quiet and intellectual. I wasn't, but I was never made to feel different.

My adoptive parents had always told my brother and me that we had been adopted and gave us their full support in searching for our birth parents. I didn't feel the need to do this until after my son was born, but when I finally made contact with my birth mum, she was absolutely thrilled. We look and behave so much alike - mannerisms and all.

I now keep in regular contact with my birth mum and my half sisters. This hasn't changed my relationship with my adoptive parents, because to me they are my "real" mum and dad who were there for me 24/7 while I was growing up. I have been greatly blessed, and when I first met my birth mother, I thanked her for giving me the privilege of life.

Sarah

In 1980 I was a naive young Christian girl travelling overseas when I met a nice but non-Christian guy - and ended up pregnant. He said he would support me if I had an abortion. That was the end of our relationship.

I knew I would not be able to cope raising the child, but I found a Christian adoption agency. From profiles of married couples on their waiting list I chose a doctor and nurse who I believed would best love and care for my son. I then moved back to Australia, but my son was constantly in my thoughts and prayers.

A few years ago the adoption laws changed in the country of his birth and I was able to seek information - but to my great distress, I learned that my son had died of a rare form of cancer the year before. However his adoptive parents sent me a CD of the presentation given at his funeral, including photos and details of his considerable achievements despite his long illness which had begun in his teens. I realised how well his adoptive parents had looked after him and how difficult it would have been for me to do so. God indeed knew best.

But the real healing came at the end of the presentation. My son said: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7)." I knew that my son is with the Lord. One day I will see him again. God is good.

Conclusion

Unmarried teenagers continue to get pregnant, despite widespread sex education plus over-the-counter sales of contraceptives and "morning after" pills. Over half of these teens will abort their baby, while the others will opt to raise the child,[26] usually as a single mother or in an unstable de facto partnership. Abortion increases the risk of mental ill-health in the mother, affecting later pregnancies. Unstable or lone parent families are associated with high rates of child sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect. Neither option is ideal.

However there are two other options, rarely canvassed today. One, if carefully considered, is marriage - providing a more stable environment with much less potential for child abuse than less committed family arrangements.[27]

The other is adoption. Research overwhelmingly shows it is beneficial for the child if well managed. Adverse outcomes from adoption could be reduced by better counselling and proper screening and placement protocols.

As Tom Frame says in an article based on his new book, *Children on Demand*: "The need to relinquish children is always and everywhere regrettable, but it is preferable to abortion, which is always and everywhere harmful. One way of reducing the incidence of abortion is to promote the alternatives. In my view, adoption is much better managed now than when I was adopted 45 years ago."[28]

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