

# **FAMILY RE-UNION 13:**

## **FAMILIES, FAITH & FOSTER CARE**

**October 18, 2007**

**Nashville, Tennessee**

**Hosted by Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center**

**&**

**Mayor's Office of Children & Youth**

# **PROCEEDINGS**

**the 13th Family Re-Union conference hosted by:**

Funded by  
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

**“A vocation is the intersection of the world’s greatest needs with your inner graces.”**

*Elizabeth Black, Executive Director, Tennessee  
Department of Children’s Services Office of Child Permanency*

**“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” (Proverbs 22:6)**

*Karl Dean, Mayor, Metropolitan Government of Nashville and  
Davidson County*

**“Perhaps children touch us as angels – reminding us of how imperfect we all are and ... yet how amazingly mysteriously, beautiful we all are.”**

*Renita Weems, Founder, Something Within*

**“Grandparents are ‘silent saviors.’ They don’t brag about what they’re doing, but they’ll go without their own medicines to help these kids.”**

*Rev. Clifford Barnett, Pastor, Brighton Rock AME Church*

## **Acknowledgments**

---

The Family Re-Union Conference Office would like to thank the following for their contributions and support in making this conference possible.

### ***Funding***

Annie E. Casey Foundation

### ***Steering Committee***

Elizabeth Black, Servella Terry, Reverend Neely Williams

### ***Logistics Support***

John Brassil, Vanderbilt ITS Network Engineer

Michael Lusk, Library Technical Services

Georgia Varble, Library Event Manager

### ***Volunteer Support***

Sean Baetjer, Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center

Charlsey Gibson, Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center

Heather Jolly, Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center

Danielle Mezera, Mayor's Office of Children & Youth

Errin Phiffer, Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy Center

Jen St. Clair, Vanderbilt Jim Casey Youth Initiative

*Conference Staff*

Kim Crane Mallory, Program Coordinator

Dennis Freeman, Logistics Coordinator

James Harvey, Proceedings Coordinator

Mary Kay Matthys, Website Coordinator

Debbie Miller, Event Director

Alice Raver, Registration Coordinator

Mona Lisa Warren, Event Coordinator

## Contents

---

Introduction .....	06
Agenda .....	33
Setting the Stage .....	10
Families, Faith & Foster Care: Views from the Front Lines .....	
..... 14	
A Children's Sabbath .....	18
Partnerships & How to Get Started .....	21
Speaker Biographies .....	35
Conference Supporters .....	03

## **Introduction**

*“If how we are treating children is how we treat the divine, what are we doing with our faith?”*

**Matt Rosen**  
**Children’s Defense Fund**

---

Every year between 1992 and 2002, under the leadership of the Honorable Al Gore, Jr., a former U.S. Senator and Vice President of the United States, and his wife, Tipper, an unusual conclave convened in Nashville, Tennessee. Known as Family Re-Union, the gathering pulled together advocates of children, families, and the elderly to talk about the changing nature of American life, the changing shape of the American family, and how to rethink policy to help families stand up to the new pressures on them.

Each of the Re-Unions took a slightly different lens and applied it to a critical issue facing families (see Sidebar A). Different Family Re-Unions examined different issues, ranging from work to entertainment, from the role of fathers to intergenerational issues. Family Re-Union 10, in 2002, went “back to the future” in many ways, re-examining all of the issues explored in the prior gatherings.

### Sidebar A: Family Re-Union: A Track Record

Over the years, Family Re-Union conferences have quite a track record:

- Family Re-Union 1, April 1992, explored the need to examine families holistically. It helped launch “Care Fairs” throughout Tennessee to bring services together for families in one location.
- Family Re-Union 2: *Reinventing Federal Policy* examined the need to reshape national policy as it influences families. It encouraged communities across the country to hold after school resource fairs to help families find out about high-quality after-school activities.
- Family Re-Union 3: *Role of Men in Children’s Lives* put men in the center of the family discussion. It helped launch a National Practitioners’ Network for Fathers and Families, the National Center on Fathers and Families, and a presidential memorandum directing federal agencies to help strengthen fatherhood.
- Family Re-Union 4: *Family and the Media* called for “V-Chip” legislation, led to a White House Summit, and put the issue of children and televised violence and adult-content on the nation’s agenda.
- Family Re-Union 5: *Family and Work* tackled the tension between the demands of work and families. It proposed “comp time” to allow workers to take time off in lieu of compensation for overtime and called for expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act.
- Family Re-Union 6: *Families and Learning* established the Family Education Network; secured new funding for after-school; and involved parents and communities in designing new schools, including a National Symposium on Designing Schools as Centers of Community convened by Vice President Gore.
- In 1998, Family Re-Union 7: *Families and Health* helped expand efforts to provide health insurance for children, helped design Vanderbilt University’s new Children’s Hospital. Among the announcements at the meeting were new Medicare tests for Diabetes and Osteoporosis, and a new federal Center for Mental Health Services at the national Cancer Institute.
- Family Re-Union 8: *Family and Community* produced an academic commitment to educate a new generation of community builders, the SafeCities Network to help reduce gun violence, an expansion of HUD programming for communities, including a partnership with Boundless Playgrounds to make parks in public housing communities fully accessible.
- Family Re-Union 9: *Families and Seniors, Across the Generations* explored inter-generational issues. Out of it came further work on the Community-Building course outlined the prior year, a National Community and Academic Consortium, and a National Teleconference on Intergenerational Issues.
- Family Re-Union 10: *Back to the Future* was a capstone of sorts, reviewing each of the topics examined during the prior decade and laying out a vision for the future.
- Family Re-Union 11: *Families and Youth* explored the many ways adolescents can contribute to their families and their communities. At the meeting, the International Youth Foundation, 4-H clubs and others committed to greater collaboration in the future to advance a youth agenda.
- Family Re-Union 12: *Families and Education* took place after a one-year hiatus. It focused on helping schools reduce the achievement gap and offered modest mini-grants for promising practice.

Many of these meetings attracted close to 1,000 people from around the country— young people and parents, along with experts working on issues affecting children, youth, and families. Throughout the life of this on-going conversation philanthropic groups and individual donations have generously supported it. Each year, it aimed to stimulate discussion, cooperation, and hands-on responses to whatever issue happened to be on the table.

Family Re-Union 13: Families, Faith and Foster Care focused on very vulnerable young people and the role faith groups can play in developing their talents. Largely but not entirely through the perspectives of Nashville area and Tennessee institutions and organizations it explored the challenges facing the most vulnerable young people in our communities and the role churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and their congregations can play in helping them face those challenges.

A startling recitation of data in mid-day from Matt Rosen, Children’s Defense Fund, cut to the heart of the matter. Every day in the United States, said Rosen,

- four children die of abuse and neglect;
- five children or teenagers commit suicide;
- 383 children are arrested for drug abuse;
- 1,879 babies are born without health insurance;
- 2,261 high school students drop out; and
- 2,411 babies are born into poverty.

These troubling numbers also play themselves out in Davidson County, Tennessee, according to Nashville Mayor Karl Dean. Just one indicator of the challenges in Davidson County, which includes metropolitan Nashville, can be found in foster care statistics, according to Dean. In any given month there are about 1,000 children in foster care in

Davidson County – a figure that totally ignores children being cared for by kinship families (aunts, uncles, older siblings and grandparents.) “Whether from neglect, abuse, or the behavior of the children themselves, the parents and adults who are to keep these children safe from harm are no longer able to so,” noted Dean, urging congregations to consider the role they could play in helping guide vulnerable young people safely through the perils and temptations of adolescence.

## Setting the Stage

*“I remember so well, as a child, wondering where are we going to live? Are we getting ready to move again? When I come home, will I find all of our furniture on the street again?”*

### Renita Weems, Founder, Something Within

---

Most Americans have for so long been accustomed to thinking of the United States as the land of plenty that is hard for many to acknowledge the existence of severe and chronic poverty in this society. It is so difficult, indeed, that it is easier to blame the poverty on the victims than it is to explore its causes and consequences.

Renita Weems, founder of Something Within, would have none of that. Something Within is a consulting service providing guidance for women of faith interested in connecting with their inner wisdom. Weems herself, a theologian and former faculty member at Vanderbilt University, has been celebrated by *Ebony Magazine* as one of America’s top 15 preachers. Her mesmerizing presentation illustrated how richly she deserved the honor.

How, she demanded, can communities of faith support the 10,000 children in the custody of the state of Tennessee? How can they put them higher on the public agenda? And higher on the faith agenda?

Weems didn’t need to read about indicators of failure and broken promise to understand them. Homelessness? “I was very familiar with that as a child.” Broken families? “I knew all about that.” Multiple homes in a two-year span? Oh yes, she was

there. Family unable to protect and provide? Yes, unfortunately that was familiar too. But a great aunt stepped in, begrudgingly perhaps, but she stepped in and saved Renita Weems.

Where is the faith-based community in all of this, asked Weems? “Most of us have never heard a sermon about foster care or at-risk children.” And yet UNICEF reports that the United States is almost the worst place to be a child in the developed world. According to UNICEF figures, the US ranks 20th out of 21 advanced nations on national indicators of child well-being.

Averages conceal almost as much as they reveal, reported Weems. There are really two childhood tracks in the United States. On one track, the children are healthy and wealthy and parents delay childbearing until they are financially and emotionally capable of rearing a child. On the other track, the children are poor, often unhealthy, and too many parents bear children as teenagers before they are prepared for the rigors of parenting. It is this bifurcation in childhood that produces the widening gaps between the haves and the have-nots.

Children who are abused by relatives, abandoned by parents, abused by teachers and pastors and priests wind up in the state system. There are now nearly 900,000 children in public child welfare systems across the country, and more than half a million of them need out-of-home placements. They are disproportionately male (56%) and minority (32% are African-American).

Foster care is a solution of sorts, but a temporary one. Children thrive in loving, permanent families, said Weems. Foster care is a sort of no-man’s-land that saves some young people, but not all. The data indicate that 50% of former foster children are unemployed, she noted. About one-third run afoul of the justice system and one-third or

more are diagnosed with three or more psychiatric problems. It's little surprise that foster children are at greater risk of dropping out. While the average foster care term runs to three years, "parental rights have to be terminated before these children are free to be adopted."

Weems spoke approvingly of the "One Church, One Child" Program initiated in the early 1980s by Rev. George H. Clements at Holy Angels, a predominantly black Catholic church in Chicago. Within a decade churches in 32 states were using the program, designed to encourage adoptions by black families. "But it's been years since I've heard anything in black churches about 'one church, one child,' " lamented Weems.

She attributed the lack of interest in foster care and adoption issues among African American churches to several factors. First, clergy and congregations are not really aware of the dimensions of the challenge. So church leaders have been "left off the hook" and encouraged to "lecture about 'the family' and the 'disintegration of the family' without understanding how urgent it is to deal with this issue."

Second, pulpits have been largely male. "Men aren't accustomed to viewing the world through the eyes of children. People who preach are not involved in the pace, repetitiveness and tedium of child rearing. That's dismissed as women's work."

The same is true of government officials. Warning to her theme, Weems drove home the point: It's easy, she argued, to make decisions about children's health care and education in Congress, state houses and White Houses for people who never walked the floor at night wondering if their child would live through morning or helped them understand why the denominator goes into the numerator. "\$35 billion? Cut it out. They don't need it." Politicians and government officials deal with abstractions, not people, was

Weems' message. "They can sit in their congressional office or their presidential office or their governmental office because they don't have to deal with real children."

In closing, Weems asked churches to help the world develop a "theology of children." We should "take care of children because they are gifts of God, not to satisfy our egos, and not as a reflection of how good and great we are as parents...but perhaps because a child is the voice of God, touching us as angels and reminding us of how vulnerable we all are, how broken we all are, how imperfect we all are ... and yet how amazingly mysteriously, beautiful we all are."

## Views from the Front Lines

*“Without being wrapped in the arms of the church, I wouldn’t have a family today.”*

**Nikki Williams, Youth 4 Youth**

---

If Weems provided the broad context, the discussion got very real when a panel moderated by Daryl Chansusthus, Executive Director of the Tennessee Center for Child Welfare, explored the role of the faith community in opening doors, offering a brighter future to youth at risk, and providing more support for birth parents and foster families. Made up of advocates for children and immigrants, and including former foster children, the panel engaged in an interactive back and forth that provided compelling evidence of the challenges and complexities facing at-risk youth and the opportunities the faith and foster care communities can provide.

- **Abdelghani Barre**, a native of Somalia who has served as immigrant services coordinator for Davidson County since 1964, reported that Americans are not familiar with the attitudes and beliefs of other countries. Immigrants, simultaneously, have to struggle with a culture that is unfamiliar to them. Some immigrants wind up, he reported, running afoul of the criminal justice system for practices that are considered routine in some countries (including Muslim societies) but can be looked on as abusive in the United States (e.g., toilet training practices).

Barre described a complex set of issues involving intergenerational disputes within immigrant families that complicate integration into American life. Many of these immigrants are here permanently, he noted. They are not returning home. But adults often maintain inherited traditions, perhaps providing traditional food on a take-it-or-leave-it basis for their children (since the Somalian tradition is to provide food and people are expected to eat it if they are hungry), while the children want more

traditional American fare. The result is that children can arrive at school hungry, alarming their teachers about potential neglect at home.

Public and private agencies need to be very sophisticated in dealing with immigrant communities, Barre warned. Immigration is not simply one more barrier for a low-income family; it is a defining characteristic of these families. Sending written materials home in English is not helpful, since many immigrants are unable to read, in any language. “Sending home notes or a list of 100 things that make for a good parent? Hopeless,” he said. Child welfare agencies? “We don’t know the difference between DPS and Homeland Security.”

- **Rev. Clifford Barnett**, pastor of Brighton Rock AME Church recalls one of his seniors telling him after a sermon that she was going to be a parent all over again and expected to receive three granddaughters from Chicago. “Wow, you will need help!” answered Barnett, who responded by setting up grandparent support groups and extending them through the 21 schools in his local district.

“We started a respite care program because we found that grandparents would not talk openly about the stresses of their situation with the grandchildren around.” Barnett brought college students into the church to play with the children, while he worked with the grandparents. “We told them we know you love these grandchildren of yours, but love is not enough. You need a bag of tricks to help them and we’re going to provide you with what you need to know to deal with the schools and the social services systems around here.”

“Grandparents,” said Barnett, “are ‘silent saviors.’ They don’t brag about what they’re doing, but they’ll do without their own medicines to help those kids.”

- **Mary Bissell** of ChildFocus in Washington, DC brought a lawyer’s perspective to the discussion. Her first client, she said, echoing Barnett’s points, was an 83-year-old woman raising three grandchildren under the age of eight. The grandmother wanted Bissell’s help in restoring the children’s benefits but did not mention she was going without her kidney medication until one of the worried children brought it up.

After the grandmother died, Bissell realized that she had been one of the bastions of her local church, but the two roles – church leader and provider for her grandchildren –

were separate. Embarrassed by her daughter's failures as a mother, the grandmother never involved her church in her struggle to raise the children.

"It is hard for faith groups to figure out what they're good at," said Bissell. "We need to find churches that will pound the table over these issues. Everyone says, 'the church will help.' And it will help. But churches are approached by everyone, so we have to be careful what we ask for."

- Turning to **Elizabeth Pritchett**, a child psychiatrist and founding member of the Trinity Coalition in Clarksville, Tennessee (a family support coalition of churches, social service and mental health agencies) moderator Chansusthus invited Pritchett's expert insights into what is going on in today's families.

What we see, responded Pritchett, are the emotional and physical traumas of difficult childhoods and all of the behavioral and spiritual responses involved with those traumas. The professions (and churches) need to understand they are dealing with people, not diagnostic labels, suggested Pritchett. "As a child psychiatrist, I find a system that says I need to find a diagnosis in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). But we're not dealing with something called a 'depressive disorder,' which is the label, but a depressed person, who is not living in my office, but out there, with all the issues these children have to deal with."

Beyond that, said Pritchett, the professions need to understand that the black church is the most trusted source of information in the black community. Psychologists and psychiatrists are not respected in African-American communities, she noted. The attitude is that if you are "seeing a psychiatrist or going into a mental health [clinic] you must not have enough faith." We need to get beyond this, argued Pritchett. "Let's be honest and open with each other, and put those conflicts on the table so that we can remove them as a barrier to working together."

- **Nikki Williams**, Youth 4 Youth and, and **Simone Moore**, Tennessee Youth Advisory Council, described harrowing childhoods in which neglect or abuse on the part of birth parents led to their being put in foster care, Williams at age 6 and Moore at age 16. It was hard to be a teenager without established friends, noted Williams, and difficult to establish friendships amidst constant residential change. As for Moore, she found that

her foster family did not like her and she moved from Michigan to Tennessee to rejoin her mother.

Both young women credited churches with bringing them through the turmoil. “I had my first child at 18,” reported Moore. “That woke me up. I joined the church and the church members made me feel part of the family. Today I’m working, taking care of two kids, studying for my GED, and working with the Tennessee Youth Council.

Williams reported equally grave challenges fighting depression and rejection. But she joined a local church, became active in the choir, and was adopted by a family in Indiana. “I now have six siblings. Without being wrapped in the arms of the church, I wouldn’t have a family today,” she said simply.

From this rich discussion, several themes emerged. The many complex challenges facing foster youth deserve responses that are equally varied and sophisticated. The system is so confusing, especially for immigrants, that families can be ineligible for benefits they believe they are entitled to and entitled to benefits they did not know existed. Coalitions of groups (such as Trinity) provide an umbrella under which many faith groups can offer assistance. And when approaching churches, be very specific about what it is you need and the terms under which you need it. How much time will it take? When does it begin? And when does it end?

## **A Children's Sabbath**

*"Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."*

**St. Augustine, quoted by Matt Rosen**

---

A keynote presentation during the day focused on creating a Children's Sabbath, a national weekend that aims to unite religious congregations of all faiths in shared concern for children and common commitment to improving their lives and working for justice on their behalf.

Matt Rosen, Religious Action Coordinator of the Children's Defense Fund, the sponsor of the Children's Sabbath, described this 16-year effort by CDF to put children and justice for children at the heart of domestic policymaking.

Each day in the United States, said Rosen, four children die of abuse or neglect, five commit suicide, nearly 400 are arrested for drug abuse, while 1,870 babies are born without health coverage and more than 2,200 drop out of school. Each day.

The numbers add up to a flood of lost human potential. Why is it, CDF wonders, that nine million children are adrift without health or mental health coverage? Why are nearly 13 million children struggling in a sea of poverty? Hunger, homelessness, disease and preventable illness – the face of some American communities resembles what would be expected in a Third World nation. "All faith traditions hold that children are sacred and that how we treat them is how we treat the divine," said Rosen. "If how we are treating children is how we treat the divine, what does that say about our faith?"

All congregations, he noted, need to ask themselves several fundamental questions:

- What is my faith tradition in children?
- How do we use these traditions and belief systems?
- How do we distinguish between charity and justice, because both are needed?
- And does our understanding show itself in specific ways in this faith community?

The Children's Sabbath aims to unite the interfaith community to demand justice for children, to serve as long-term advocates for children's needs, and to make a transforming difference for children at risk. It does so by organizing events, congregation by congregation, that let children know they are loved and that there are families available to them.

A detailed planning manual exists to help congregations plan their Children's Sabbath. A lengthy step-by-step guide, it urges beginning with prayer and then moving sequentially through an accelerating series of actions to get the Sabbath underway and successfully concluded. Bring in religious leaders...mark the date on the church calendar...create a committee to get started...identify community leadership...focus your vision...plan the format for your Children's Sabbath...involve children and youth...involve resource people... recruit volunteers to help...plan follow-through... take care of 'wrap-up' details...and begin planning next year's Sabbath.

What do these events look like? Many involve worship and prayers. Educational programs, advocacy and outreach programs, and commitment to longer-term responses to children's needs – all of these and more may emerge in individual congregations.

This is important, life saving work, stressed Rosen. There's an urgent national crisis at the intersection of poverty and race, a pipeline running straight from the cradle to

prison. Young African-American boys have a one in three chance of going to jail; for Latino boys, the figure stands at one in six. “The only guarantee a child in America enjoys is the promise of a prison cell if they mess up. No faith group should be satisfied with that.”

We have in the United States 342,730 houses of worship, noted Rosen. Churches... synagogues... temples...mosques. Imagine how transformative it would be if every one of them adopted a child, hosted an after-school program, promoted foster/kinship care awareness, and advocated for public policy based on their beliefs?

We need to do so, noted Rosen, because, in the words of one of his colleagues at the Children’s Defense Fund: “We are not called to advocate for children because or when it is convenient or comfortable, or even because we know the difference it makes. We are called to advocate for children because God never says, ‘I don’t care’ or ‘It doesn’t matter.’”

God, in the words of the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, believed that the “ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves to its children,” concluded Rosen. God, in short, to recall Renita Weems’ powerful comment, would never say, “\$35 billion? Cut it out. They don’t need it.”

## **Partnerships & How To Get Started**

*“A lot of families in need of services are as intimidated by DCS as we are by the IRS!”*

**Pastor Connie Booker, Cathedral of Faith, Memphis**

---

A second powerful panel opened the afternoon. Moderated by Elizabeth Black, director of the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services Office of Child Permanency, the panel examined local partnerships for foster youth and the hopes children’s advocates hold for the children in their care. Throughout the discussion, what stood out was the importance of relationships and person-to-person human contact.

- **Connie Booker**, serves as co- pastor of the Cathedral of Faith in Memphis, located in Shelby County. When she heard about the need for foster and kinship care, she immediately mobilized the Cathedral of Faith congregation to put its oar in the water. “We can identify families needing help better than the state.” The result is that “almost no kid in our ZIP code is now entering the protective services system.”

It’s a remarkable thing to be able to report. In cities and communities overwhelmed with the need for child protective services, this partnership with a faith community has helped address the need.

Booker reported that one woman was taking care of five grandchildren, ranging from three months to six years old. “We began placing advocates at the child and family meetings.” The agency tried to give this woman an appointment in three weeks, but Booker insisted on moving the appointment up and taking the woman’s problems seriously, which produced results. “Just being there is huge. Embrace the people. They need to know someone cares. A lot of these families are as intimidated by DCS as we are by the IRS!”

- **Vanessa Coburn**, family to family coordinator with Shelby County Department of Children’s Services spoke of the intense need in Shelby County to do something about

the large numbers of children requiring services who were underserved. “If you want to build successful programs,” she said, “it’s about relationship building.”

The good news, according to Coburn, is that people respond when they hear about the challenges. “We have never presented a need in any community without people saying, ‘What can we do?’ ” Coburn’s work with Connie Booker’s Cathedral of Faith is evidence of a powerful a community response built around partnerships. Coburn has clearly taken to heart a message from Booker: “I often tell people not to be timid,” she reported.

- **Dennis Ford** is pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Oneida, a rural community, not at all like Anderson County, just seven miles from the Kentucky border. “These are God’s children. We’re just privileged to take care of them for a little while,” said Ford. He reported some frustration around engaging the faith-based community in Scott County in this work. “We’re a bit clannish around faith-based things,” he lamented. Here people have been complaining about what the Methodist minister should do to straighten out families and communities, but when invited to participate by DCS, some congregations resist.

That attitude is: “Churches should collaborate with DCS? Why that’s awful!” What we need to understand, he said, is that “it’s not about changing people’s faith, it’s about getting the faith-based community to come to the table. God is calling us to rise up in support of these children,” and Ford acknowledged being “encouraged and impressed” by the passion at the Re-Union and the willingness of DCS to engage communities of faith.

- **Carla Kimble**, deputy regional administrator for DCS’s East Region, reported that drugs and truancy were big issues in her region when she assumed her position. “ We were getting 40-60 kids a month put into care under court orders.” It was frustrating to learn from Judge Meldrum that there was little or no coordination between the school system and the police and fire departments. Working hard to build partnerships with the different entities involved with children’s growth and development (school board, juvenile justice, district attorney’s, police department, social service agencies), Kimble has managed to reduce the number of children put under care orders to about a dozen a month.

Kimble is responsible for eight of 15 counties in the area and has worked to spread this strategy beyond her jurisdiction. “We came up with the community strategy meetings where we would go to Anderson, Scott and Campbell to include not just the judges, but the Board of Education, teachers, police departments, and district attorneys. We meet monthly to talk about concerns in their area and what DCS can do to better serve them and what they can do to better serve us. What I have found is the continued need for trust and working on these relationships.”

- The Honorable **April Meldrum**, Anderson County Juvenile Court Judge confirmed just about everything Kimble reported. “There was a lot of complacency in the old system,” she said. “Case managers would come in unprepared; they would not even have the case record.” Meldrum refused to tolerate it. “We’ve been very clear in communicating high expectations from case managers.”

Anderson County, with a population of 80,000, including 20,000 children, has about 250 children in custody, noted Meldrum. It is also, unfortunately, the county with the highest number of methamphetamine labs in the country. “Well, when you have statistics like that, preventative efforts are not going to save a child who’s in a house with people making meth.”

Meldrum, newly elected a year ago, was troubled to come across records of up to seven referrals for services for some families in which no services were provided. “I can’t save the kids by myself or from the bench. I’ve kicked down doors for Carla Kimble and she’s walked through them. We’ve built new relationships with the schools so that people can go to Carla before these children reach me and she can intervene before I’m asked for a removal order.”

- **Vickee Syes**, director of programs for the South Memphis Alliance, spoke of the inter-relatedness of the challenges facing many families and the complex responses required. The Alliance is a community-based organization working in partnership with DCS to advocate for families. Syes reported that being part of a child and family team that “agreed in May that three children needed to be taken from the home reduced me to tears.” But she noticed “some other issues going on within that family.” So she took the family in hand and worked with the two parents on budgeting issues, planning time, Dress for Success, and helped them find new housing. Just two weeks before Family

Re-Union convened, “I got the phone call from mom that the family was reunited and the children were back in the home.”

- **Servella Terry**, director of community partnerships and support services for the state department of children’s services, emphasized the need to make sure regional offices engage meaningfully with the community. “Talk to the people in the community...show your heart,” was Terry’s message.

Elizabeth Black brought it all together at the end. “We all understand the need. We all know examples of success and things that worked. We also all know of community resources that are available and have been ignored. How did you guys succeed?”

Among the many strong answers offered up, Vanessa Coburn’s stood out: “I say to be persistent. Don’t give up. And recognize that it is not about you. If they don’t receive you, that’s OK.... If they didn’t receive you this time, there are other ways to skin a cat. It doesn’t always happen over night. Relationships take time and you need to recognize that it just takes time.

## **Next Steps and Getting Started**

Following the panel, the Re-Union separated into eight breakout groups by DCS region or county. Each of the groups was asked to discuss four questions and return to the group with some suggestions about how to proceed:

- What stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?
- How can the strengths of the faith community be leveraged to meet those needs?
- What three things will you leave with to move this agenda forward in your region?
- What else do we need to succeed?
- What are your next steps?

The detailed responses from each of these regions are contained in Appendix A. The commonalities in the responses are striking. Time and time again, the importance of establishing relationships, educating congregations to the great need, sharing solutions, and raising awareness of these issues in the faith communities emerged as pressing needs and challenges.

Perhaps surprisingly, while no one volunteered to reject funds, when offered the opportunity to identify needed resources, money rarely led the list and was often not even mentioned. The resources that are most needed are partners, information, and a sense of community support for this work. Speakers, material, information, and success stories to share with the community often trumped funds as the essential resources.

The essential next steps in getting started, then, revolve around making sure that communities of faith understand this issue and the depth of the challenge. Foster care may be a sort of silent epidemic in many communities because the stories behind the need for foster care often revolve perceptions of family failure. Breaking that silence in

communities of faith may be the essential and critical first step because very few people of faith will walk by on the other side knowing of a child in need.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Appendix A – Regional Breakout Session Reports**

### **Northeast Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

Parenting issues, budgeting, ongoing relationships with caring adults, support, permanency, resources and referral

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Establish relationships

Educate the congregation of the need

Reach out

Share solutions to impact community

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Share the need with community members

Contact interfaith hospitality network

Network regional resources

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. *Partners that need to be involved* - Community advisory board, DCS, DHS, school systems, court system
- b. *Resources that are needed* – Partnerships
- c. *Information* – resources available in each county
- d. *Training* – parenting, budgeting
- e. *Support* – community, faith-based, school, everyone working together

### **Southeast Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

Raise awareness in faith community of DCS/foster care system (possible health fair for children, Children's Sabbath)

Engagement of community relationships with foster children

Rural areas need more activities for youth interaction

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Draw from community strengths and build on them

Have a neutral area for the event

Have give-aways

Build relationships with local clergy

Have a youth voice

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Offer Sunday school classes, choirs, church events, etc, the information on foster care and the need for adoptive homes

More media spots

Give out information to community advisory board members

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. *Partners that need to be involved* – families, churches, partners with history, agencies, mentor groups, everyone. Persons are not limited
- b. *Resources that are needed* – people, speakers, new terminology for DCS (Layman’s terms), materials, money
- c. *Information* – stats broken down per state, region, zip code; what are the reasons children are staying in custody; needs assessment
- d. *Training* – way to measure outcomes
- e. *Support* – (blank)

### **Mid-Cumberland Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

Awareness of foster care system

Court system

Needs of children and families in local communities

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Sermons in church

Path classes in church

Volunteers (mentors) from church

Tell others about their story

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Share information with agencies

Volunteer cards to be sent out to local churches or organizations

Mr. Martinez will start a respite program at church

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. *Partners that need to be involved* – greater number of people from DCS, schools, court, faith-based, United Way, police/law enforcement
- b. *Resources that are needed* – assessable way to communicate barriers
- c. *Information* – data of children and families; success stories and examples; greater values on advocacy
- d. *Training* – quicker PATH turnaround
- e. *Support* – support

## **Northwest Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

Support

Permanency

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Provide mentors for the families

Each church adopts one family and mentors them for permanency

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Attempt to engage the faith-based community more effectively

Engage courts more effectively

Engage other community members as a whole

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

a. *Partners that need to be involved* – (blank)

b. *Resources that are needed* – transportation services

c. *Information* – public knowledge

d. *Training* – for all staff

e. *Support* – (blank/unclear)

## **Southwest Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

To be embraced by faith-based community/organizations

A sense of belonging

DCS needs to educate faith-based community/organizations on the needs of the children/families in own communities

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Faith-based community/organizations will be committed to help children/families and be mentors to children/families

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Raise awareness in the faith-based community (at least 1 meeting/month)

Educate the faith-based community/organizations on the needs of children/families in own communities

DCS become partners with faith-based community/organizations in the Southwest Region and develop a better working relationship

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. *Partners that need to be involved* – knowledge of programs/services (DCS, DHS, schools, churches, etc.)
- b. *Resources that are needed* – uniform message sent to everyone. All DCS staff needs to be knowledgeable of all services
- c. *Information* – data reports
- d. *Training* – ongoing to empower all staff
- e. *Support* – commitment to get the job done at all levels

### **South Central Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

Raise awareness

The need to educate church on the needs of the children and families and embrace the community

Convey to the faith-based community that all children need love

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Faith community will be more committed to help children and families

Remind them that it is a part of their ministry

They can be relied on to be dependable

Let faith community mentor children and families

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Raise awareness in faith community by each team member committing to having 1 meeting per month with faith community

Build one relationship with one faith based partner

Coordinate with those collecting information to develop accurate data to present to faith based community partners

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. *Partners that need to be involved* – all workers need to be committed partners. All workers need to be knowledgeable of problems
- b. *Resources that are needed* – accurate data reports, formal presentation, uniform message
- c. *Information* – accurate data reports
- d. *Training* – ongoing to empower all staff
- e. *Support* – support at all levels

## **Shelby Region**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

Raise awareness

The need to educate church on the needs of the children and families and embrace the community

Convey to the faith-based community that all children need love

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

Faith community will be more committed to help children and families

Remind them that it is a part of their ministry

They can be relied on to be dependable

Let faith community mentor children and families

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

Raise awareness in faith community by each team member committing to having 1 meeting per month with faith community

Build one relationship with one faith based partner

Coordinate with those collecting information to develop accurate data to present to faith based community partners

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. *Partners that need to be involved* – all workers need to be committed partners. All workers need to be knowledgeable of problems
- b. *Resources that are needed* – accurate data reports, formal presentation, uniform message
- c. *Information* – accurate data reports
- d. *Training* – ongoing to empower all staff
- e. *Support* – support at all levels

## **Davidson County**

*Question #1: Out of everything you have heard here today, what stands out as a need for foster youth in your community?*

The need to make more connections other than just with DCS (i.e., church, extra curricular activities, more things to do)

Make general public aware of the need for foster parents and let them know what works to bring down the number of kids in system

The need to follow through with partnerships between community and DCS (some interest in collaboration falls through the cracks)

The desire for collaboration but the inability to do so due to lack of knowledge on how to go about doing that

*Question #2: How do you think the strengths of the faith community can be leveraged to meet the needs you just identified?*

(no answer)

*Question #3: What are 3 things we can walk away with that we are going to do as a regional team, working together?*

One-day seminar so faith community can gather information about foster youth in their area

Commit to reconvene this group to continue conversation

Community Advisory Boards

*Question #4: What else do we need to succeed? (be specific)*

- a. Partners that need to be involved*
- b. Resources that are needed*
- c. Information*
- d. Training*
- e. Support*

## Conference Agenda

---

- 9:30 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.**      **Registration**
- 10:00 a.m. - 10:10 a.m.**      **Welcome & Introduction**  
Debbie Miller, Director, Vanderbilt Child & Family Policy  
Mayor Karl Dean, Metropolitan Nashville & Davidson County
- 10:10 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.**      *The Role of the Faith Community in Foster Care, National Perspective and Promising Practices*  
Reverend Dr. Renita J. Weems, Something Within
- 11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.**      *Panel – What’s Love Got to Do with It? The Role of the faith community in permanency, opening doors, supporting birth parents and foster families.*  
Moderator: Daryl Chansusthus, Executive Director, TCCW  
Panel Members:  
    Simone Moore, Tennessee Youth Advisory Council  
    Nikki Williams, Youth 4 Youth  
    Abdelghani Barre, Nashville Immigrant Services  
    Rev. Clifford Barnett, Virginia One Church, One Child  
    Dr. Elizabeth Pritchett, Trinity Coalition, Clarksville  
    Mary Bissell, Childfocus™, Washington, DC
- 1:00 p.m. – 1:45 p.m.**      **Lunch & Presentation**  
*The Children’s Sabbath*  
Matt Rosen, Children’s Defense Fund
- 1:45 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.**      **Break**
- 2:00 p.m. – 3:15 p.m.**      *Panel – Working in Partnerships for Foster Youth*  
Panel Members:  
    Elizabeth Black, Director, DCS Office of Child Permanency  
    Servella Terry, Director, Community Partnerships & Support Services, DCS  
    Hon. April Meldrum, Anderson Co. Juvenile Court Judge  
    Carla Kimble, Deputy Reg. Administrator, East Region DCS  
    Vicki Syes, Director of Programs, South Memphis Alliance  
    Connie Booker, Co-Pastor, Cathedral of Faith, Memphis  
    Vanessa Coburn, Family to Family Coordinator, Shelby Co. DCS  
    Pastor Dennis Ford, First United Methodist Church, Oneida
- 3:15 – 4:30 p.m.**      **Discussion Groups**  
Faith community’s role in Permanency

Faith community's role in opening doors for foster youth  
(health, education, employment, etc.)

**Survey:**

What can your region do?

What are the training/resource/other needs?

What are the next steps?

**4:30 p.m. – 5:15 p.m.**

**Closing Session**

Elizabeth Black, Director of Child Permanency, Tennessee DCS

Pastor Dennis Ford, First United Methodist Church,

Oneida, Tennessee

## **Speaker Biographies**

---

### **Abdelghani B. Barre**

Abdelghani Barre came to the United States in August of 1989 from his home country Somalia to pursue graduate study at Vanderbilt University. After completing a Masters in Economics, civil war in Somalia forced Mr. Barre to file application for political asylum. Mr. Barre has been a United States citizen since September 2002.

Mr. Barre is currently the Immigrant Services Coordinator of Metropolitan Social Services of Nashville and Davidson County and has been since 1994. The unit is responsible for identifying the needs of immigrants and coordinating resources to remove barriers they face. Among other things, the unit conducts best practices in working with immigrants and refugees training to businesses, service providers, and to other groups.

Mr. Barre holds a Master of Arts, Economics from Vanderbilt University.

### **Reverend Clifford Barnett**

Several years ago Reverend Barnett was greeting his congregation at the Brighton Rock AME Church after his sermon. One of the seniors in his congregation stopped him on her way out and said, "Reverend, I am getting three of my granddaughters from Chicago. I am going to become a parent all over again." Reverend Barnett thought for a moment and said to her, "You're going to need some help!"

This first conversation with a grandparent caregiver became the foundation for citywide, statewide and national outreach to kinship care families. Reverend Barnett began his efforts by starting a support group that met at this church. The group was so successful he resolved to expand support groups to everyone who needed them in a place where everyone could access them....the Portsmouth Public Schools. Reverend Barnett has established a kinship care support group in 14 local schools and created two new programs, Grand's Place and Grand's Pals where local teenagers and college students provide activities for the children while the grandparents participate in the support groups or take some badly-needed personal time for themselves. His work in Portsmouth has become nationally recognized as an outstanding example of how community and faith-based organization can better serve kinship care families.

Reverend Barnett speaks often about the importance of encouraging individuals to find an "issue that makes them pound the table"- an issue to which they are passionately committed. Quite simply, Reverend Barnett has made the issues facing kinship care families the issues that make him pound the table and the reverberations of his work can be felt across the country.

### **Mary Bissell**

Mary Bissell is an attorney, child advocate and founding partner of ChildFocus™, a consulting firm specializing in policy research and planning, program development, government relations, and strategic communications. For the past three years, she has also been a Fellow at the New America Foundation, a nonpartisan public policy institute in Washington, DC.

Bissell was formerly an attorney and lobbyist at the Children's Defense Fund and a legislative assistant in the Office of Senator John D. Rockefeller IV (D-WV). Prior to her experience on the Hill, she directed The Kinship Care Project at the Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia and the DC Kinship Care Coalition, Inc., a non-profit organization she founded.

Bissell has published extensively in a broad range of publications including *The Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Miami Herald*, and *The Philadelphia Enquirer*. She has spoken on CNN, the *TODAY* Show, CBS, NBC, and National Public Radio.

A graduate of Yale University and the Georgetown University Law Center, Bissell is a member of the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Supreme Court Bars.

### **Elizabeth Black**

Elizabeth Black was appointed to the position of Executive Director, Office of Child Permanency in March 2004. She oversees the Foster Care, Adoptions & Kinship Care, Permanency Planning, Child Placement and Private Providers and Community Partnerships and Support Services Divisions. The Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) is the public child welfare system in the State of Tennessee providing services and protection to abused and neglected children including prevention and custodial services to support children within their own families.

Prior to this appointment, she was both the Kinship Care Program Coordinator and the Family to Family Co-Coordinator for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services. Ms. Black also co-coordinated implementation of a child welfare reform effort known as Family to Family with the assistance, support, and guidance of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Prior to her work at DCS, Ms. Black coordinated a collaborative effort to support kinship families in Nashville, Tennessee between the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program, Family and Children's Services, and the Vanderbilt University Law School. Ms. Black was accepted into Teach for America in 1993, and completed her two (2) year commitment to teach school in an under resourced public school system as a special education teacher at Borgnemouth Elementary School located outside of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Ms. Black has spoken extensively on the benefits of children being cared for within their own families and communities as well as the challenges that many kinship families face each day when involved with the public child welfare, welfare, judicial and educational systems.

Ms. Black completed her undergraduate studies at Millsaps College and her graduate studies at the University of Tennessee.

### **Connie Booker**

Connie was born in Memphis, Tennessee, graduated from Northside High School and continued her education with undergraduate studies for three years at Rice College in Memphis, Tennessee.

She is the wife of Rev. C. L. Booker, Sr. (19 1/2 yrs.), who pastors Cathedral of Faith Community Church, and the mother of two beautiful children. She serves as the Co-Pastor of Cathedral of Faith Community Church in Memphis and is an evangelist, as well.

Booker is the former owner of Prosperity Staffing Service and Co-Founder of Second Chance Outreach Ministries that housed the homeless, recovering alcoholics, drug users and ex offenders.

Currently, she serves on the board of A New Beginning Community Organization; Affiliate Missionary with The Neighborhood Christian Center; Youth Sunday School Teacher; and collaborative Leader with The Department of Children's Services Family to Family Initiative; Community Partner with Springdale Elementary School and Cypress Middle School; Community Representative, and the Building Community Partners Workgroup Chair person and Collaborative Leader.

### **Daryl Chansuthus**

Daryl Chansuthus, MSSW, is currently the Executive Director of the Tennessee Center for Child Welfare (TCCW) and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work at Middle Tennessee State University. Daryl came to TCCW from the Department of Children's Services (DCS) where she most recently served as the Executive Director of the Office of Performance and Quality Improvement.

Daryl has worked for 25 years in higher education and social welfare, spending 17 of those years in Thailand, where she served on the faculty of Chulalongkorn University and as International Liaison to the Thai Red Cross.

A mother of five and grandmother of two, Daryl nurtures her children's and her grandchildren's pride and understanding of both their American and their Thai cultural heritage.

### **Vanessa Coburn**

Vanessa Coburn was born and raised in Memphis, TN. Following graduation from Douglass High School, Vanessa began her college education at Rust College of Holly Springs, MS in 1974 where she pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. She received her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Xavier University of New Orleans, Louisiana. In an effort to help finance her college education Vanessa was employed during those years as St. Elizabeth Girls Home-for abused abandoned and neglected girls as well as with Catholic

Charities where she worked with unwed mothers. Following college Vanessa returned to Memphis to begin her career with the State of Tennessee. Vanessa began her employment with the Department of Human Services where she determined eligibility for TennCare, Food Stamps and Families First Benefits.

Vanessa began her career with TN Department of Children's Services in February 2001 as Shelby's Family to Family Coordinator. To date Vanessa has led Shelby County in the successful establishment and contracting of 2 Neighborhood Collaboratives that each serve several zip code areas. Vanessa continues to serve as mentors for Collaborative Leaders who embrace the Family to Family concept of improving outcomes for children and families by providing community services in an effort to improve outcomes and strengthen communities.

### **Pastor Dennis Ford**

The following is a brief testimony of my life:

Born May 27, 1947 in Knoxville Tennessee to two precious, but not perfect parents. I am the oldest of three children. My father was a brick layer and my mother a home maker. I was brought up in church and made a profession of faith in March of 1958 at New Prospect Presbyterian Church. I graduated from Young High School in 1965. Went off to the U.S. Army in 1966 - 1968 serving in Vietnam. Returning from the Army I married my helpmate and partner in life Sharon Frazier Ford.

I pursued two careers: The first was in law enforcement. I worked as a Deputy Sheriff for the Knox County Sheriff's Department. The second was as a Criminal Investigator for the Knox County Attorney Generals Office. I earned a Certificate in Criminal Justice at Walter State community College. I also completed the apprentice program to be a Journeyman brick layer. I started my own construction business and continued in it until answering the call to preach in 1991. I then attended and graduated from Duke Divinity School's Course of Study for the Ordained Ministry.

I was ordained a Methodist Pastor June 15th 1999. I belong to the Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church and now service my fifth church as pastor of First United Methodist Church of Oneida Tennessee. God blessed me with being the first Chairperson of the Local Pastors of Holston. I also served as chairperson of the southern region Volunteer Labor program. I have served as a citizen committee member of inspecting the Knox county jail for 10 years. I served as a charter member of the Knox count E-911 system and was Chairperson when my term expired. I have also been a boy scout, belong to the Optimist club, the Kiwanis club and many other civic organizations.

However, I believe every thing in my life past and present has brought me to a place of helping. Helping the people God created all across the world, but most importantly helping God. For we know not the hour the Son is coming back! I just want every one to be ready.

### **Carla Kimble**

Carla Kimble serves as the Deputy Regional Administrator for the Department of Children's Services. She has been an employee with the State of Tennessee for 7 years.

Kimble returned to Tennessee with her family after exiting the United States Military. She graduated from the University of Tennessee College of Social Work with a Master's Degree.

She is currently living in Maryville, Tennessee, married with three children.

### **April Carroll Meldrum**

April Carroll Meldrum was elected to the office of Juvenile Court Judge for Anderson County Tennessee in 2006. Meldrum holds an A.B.A. in business from Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee and received her J.D. from Cumberland School of Law in 1977. She is the former president of the Anderson County Bar Association, member of the Tennessee Trial Lawyers Association, the Tennessee Lawyers Association for Women and an Ombudsman for the U.S. Department of Defense and a board member of the North Anderson County Boys and Girls Club. Judge Meldrum is married and has two children.

### **Simone Moore**

Simone Moore, originally from Michigan, is a mother of two sons. She is a former foster youth and a member of the Tennessee Youth Advisory Council which is a group of current and former foster youth who are interested in changing the conditions for youth in state custody. Simone is specifically interested in raising awareness about the experience of youth in state custody and dispelling myths about foster youth as “delinquent”.

Simone is working toward a GED and has plans to attend Tennessee State University and earn a degree in Business Management.

### **Dr. Elizabeth Pritchett**

Dr. Elizabeth Pritchett is a Board Certified Child Psychiatrist currently serving as Medical Director of the Family Guidance Training Institute, Inc. In this role, she is an architect of the Institute's Trinity Families, "Keep Our Kids at Home" program.

She is a founder of the Trinity Coalition, a unique faith-based community partnership that actively engages in the development of family solutions utilizing a social-medical integrated model.

### **Matt Rosen**

Matt Rosen is the Religious Action Coordinator at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, DC. Raised in a nurturing community in the suburbs of Kansas City, Missouri, Matt Rosen learned that he and all those around him are children of God, worthy of love and respect. Matt carried this perspective to Texas Christian University where he graduated with a degree in Social Work.

Continuing to increase his capacity for doing public ministry, Matt engaged in community service at the Coro Leadership Center in St. Louis, Missouri. After successfully running a

city-wide political campaign, Matt headed to Chicago for graduate school and received his Master of Divinity and Master of Public Policy.

Matt is a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and serves on the Decision Team for the Disciples Justice Action Network.

### **Victoria “Vickee” Syes**

Vickee serves as the Director of Programs for South Memphis Alliance (SMA) by overseeing the development of SMA’s programs including the DCS Family to Family Initiative.

Vickee recently returned to her hometown of Memphis, TN after spending over 15 years in Houston, TX. She has also lived and worked in Washington, DC, and Tallahassee, FL impacting lives in those communities.

This former high-school teacher, journalist, and media/pr director and program director in higher education and non-profit sectors, carries valuable information that she wants to share with others. She has worked on Capitol Hill for a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, taught some of the brightest minds in the public school system, and even served as an AmeriCorps\*VISTA for one year in an underserved community to help kids get involved in making a difference in their own communities.

Vickee is a graduate of Texas Southern University and a member of several national organizations including the Association for Women in Communications, American Association of University Women, AmeriCorps Alums, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a public-service organization.

### **Servella Lee Terry**

Servella Lee Terry is the Director of Community Partnerships and Support Services for the Department of Children’s Services in the Office of Child Permanency. She also oversees the Family to Family initiatives that are currently piloted in three regions within the state. She provides training, consultation, and support to field staff, supervisors, and serves as the Department’s legislative liaison.

Mrs. Terry is involved with program development and faith-based initiatives for the Department of Children’s Services. Mrs. Terry has been a state employee for over 29 years. She has served in many capacities during this tenure with several departments (Department of Youth Development, Department of Corrections, Adjunct Instructor for Austin Peay State University, and the Department of Children’s Services).

Terry is a member of Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church, Clarksville, TN, where her husband Pastor Jimmy Terry Sr. is the founder and pastor. She is the mother of two sons, James Vaughn and Jimmy, Jr.; the grandmother of four beautiful granddaughters and one handsome grandson. She received her BSW degree from the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio and her masters from Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio.

### **Dr. Renita J. Weems**

Dr. Renita J. Weems is a nationally-renowned theologian and an ordained elder in the African Methodist Church whose scholarly insights into modern faith, biblical texts, and the role of spirituality in everyday lives have made her a much sought after author and speaker. Dr. Weems, formerly a member of the faculty of Vanderbilt University and Spelman College, has been celebrated by Ebony Magazine as one of America's top 15 preachers.

She is founder of Something Within, a consulting service providing guidance for women of faith interested in connecting with their inner wisdom as well as interested in balancing faith and work, and their values with their vocation.

Dr. Weems is a popular radio and television personality, regularly providing expert commentary on religion, gender, race, and sexuality. A guest speaker for numerous national gatherings of religious, civic, and sorority organizations, local churches, community wide events, and radio and television programs, Dr. Weems is in much demand as a speaker, preacher, and workshop leader. Ebony Magazine named her one of America's top 15 Her work as a scholar and a religious thinker has led to invitations to serve as a panelist for Bill Moyer's 1995 PBS award-winning Genesis Project, for various A&E, BBC, National Public

Radio, the Michael Baisden radio show, and Hallmark cable programs on topics as wide ranging as miracles in the Bible, women, violence, and spirituality, and male-female relationships. She appeared on "FlashPoints" with Bryant Gumbel and Gwen Ifill to discuss matters related to religion and public life.

Dr. Renita Weems is the author of several widely acclaimed books on women's spirituality and wholeness: *Just A Sister Away* (1987) and *I Asked for Intimacy* (1993), *Showing Mary: How Women Can Share Prayers, Wisdom, and the Blessings of God* (2003), and, more recently, *What Matters Most: Ten Passionate Lessons from the Song of Solomon*.

She taught from 1987-2004 on the divinity faculty at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN as a professor of Hebrew Bible.

### **Reverend Neely Williams**

Reverend Neely Williams is the *Chair* of the Nashville Community Coalition for Youth Safety (NCCYS) and serves as the Community Liaison to the Nashville Urban Partnership Centers of Excellence (NU PACE) a Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funded project for youth violence prevention. Rev. Williams is also the *Program Director* of the Interdenominational Ministers' Fellowship (IMF) Peniel Initiative. She serves on the pastoral support staff of Metropolitan Interdenominational Church and the Old Ship of Zion Baptist Church where she serves as *Assistant to the Pastor*. Rev. Williams completed a one year program of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at the Veterans Administration Medical Center; obtaining Chaplaincy Certification, while preparing to receive the Bachelor of Arts in Sociology/Theology from American Baptist College and graduated Magna Cum Laude (1994). After completing her undergraduate work, she continued her pursuit of higher education and completed the work for a Master of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt University Divinity School (1998).

Rev. Williams has served as Program Director of the First Response Center in its earliest years of development, and the Administrator of the IMANI Coalition where she provided leadership to the development of a 35 agency member coalition, and the design and implementation of a linked network of services for HIV, STD and Substance Abuse services and prevention strategies, a CDC funded project. Experiences to the role of Program Director at IMF Peniel Initiative and all crime victims.

Williams is the proud mother of two and equally proud grandmother of eight. She continues to serve out of her love and passion for all people through her work in the community, as well as her work of preaching and teaching.

### **Nikki Williams**

Nikki Williams is a 20 year old former foster youth in her third year at Cleveland State Community College. She is majoring in International Business and Social Work and is employed full time at P.F. Chang's China Bistro.

Nikki is a founding member of the Youth 4 Youth Board and a representative for the Southeast/Hamilton regions, and is one of the primary statewide core leaders for the Youth 4 Youth Board. She is an active member of the East Ridge Church of God, where she participates in choir and youth ministries.