

CHRISTIAN ALLIANCE FOR ORPHANS WHITE PAPER

# On Understanding Orphan Statistics

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If we are to communicate with humility, credibility, and integrity, Christian orphan advocates must both accurately understand and carefully present orphan-related statistics. Failure to do so undermines the strength of our advocacy and can misguide the actions that organizations, churches, and individuals take on behalf of orphans. Meanwhile, an accurate grasp and communication of the true nature of the need provides a strong foundation for an effective, well-focused response.

## Current Global Estimates

Although reflecting only broad projections, the estimated number of orphans globally currently reported by UNICEF<sup>1</sup> includes:

*15 million children worldwide*

have lost both parents to death (“double orphan”).

*140 million children worldwide*

have lost either one parent to death  
 (“single orphan”) or both parents.

## Missing From the Estimates

Any data that claims to be truly “global” has many inherent limitations. While such data can help us gain a clearer picture of the size and scope of need, it can also be misleading.

One of the greatest weaknesses in these global orphan estimates is that they include only orphaned children currently living in family households. Estimates do not survey the estimated 3 to 9 million children living in institutions, orphanages, or children’s homes.<sup>2</sup> Nor do current estimates include the vast number of children who are living on the streets,<sup>3</sup> exploited and trafficked for forced labor,<sup>4</sup> or forced to participate in armed conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, global orphan statistics significantly underestimate the number of orphans worldwide and fail to account for many children who are among the most vulnerable and most in need of a family.

## Orphan Vulnerability

Sweeping statistics reveal nothing about the distinct needs of each individual child. Losing one or both parents increases a child's statistical vulnerability greatly. But to seek the best outcome for each child requires knowing much more than orphan status alone. What we can say definitively, however, is that children who lack consistent parental care are among the most vulnerable beings on earth.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

## Who Cares for Orphans?






With more than an estimated 15 million children having lost both of their parents, who provides care for them? Around the world, the vast majority of double orphaned children are cared for by their extended family members in kinship care arrangements.<sup>9</sup> Of the rest, some children live in alternative family care (such as foster care or adoption) or residential care,<sup>10,11</sup> while others will live in youth-headed households<sup>12,13,14</sup> or on the street.<sup>15</sup>

## Who Lives in Orphanages?









If most double orphans live with extended family, who are the estimated 3-9 million children living in orphanages? It turns out that the majority of children living in residential care centers such as orphanages and children's homes have one or both living parents. The reasons these children have been separated from their parents<sup>16</sup> vary widely.

A review of 132 studies of residential programs, including 60,683 children in 47 nations, explored the reasons children are placed in residential care. The findings resulted in 14 categories of circumstances that led to the placement of children.<sup>17</sup>

## Reasons Children are Placed in Residential Care:

Category	Definition
 <b>Abandonment</b>	Related to the parent leaving the child and/or family, relinquishing parental rights, and/or voluntarily placing a child in residential care
 <b>Disability</b>	Related to any child disabilities or special needs, including but not limited to physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral challenges
 <b>Education</b>	Related to education, including the lack of access, desire for, or hope of education
 <b>Crises</b>	Related to immigration, displacement, natural disasters, geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, or refugee experience
 <b>Family Stress</b>	Related to feelings of intense strain, fear, worry, and/or instability, those caused by unplanned pregnancy
 <b>Health</b>	Related to parent or child health or healthcare impacting a parent's ability to care for the child

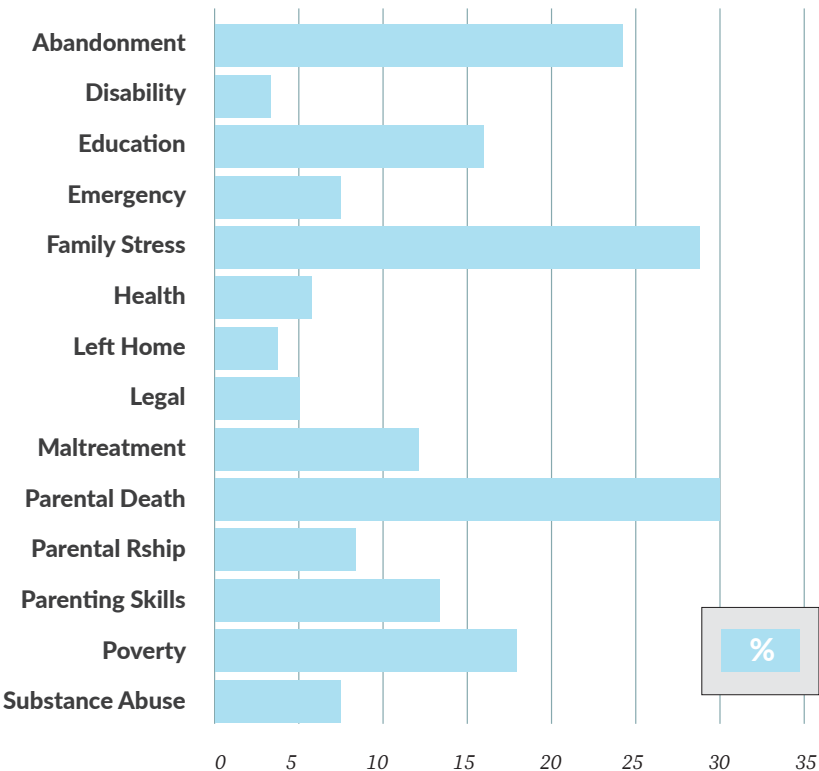
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Category	Definition
 <b>Child Left Home</b>	Related to a child or adolescent choosing to leave their family or home
 <b>Legal</b>	Related to crime, corruption, detention, imprisonment, and/or legal proceedings
 <b>Maltreatment</b>	Related to the inappropriate treatment of the child, including but not limited to abuse, neglect, violence, and exploitation
 <b>Parental Death</b>	Related to the death of one or both parents
 <b>Parental Relationship Status</b>	Related to parental significant-other relationships, including divorce and remarriage
 <b>Parenting</b>	Related to limited parenting skills or inappropriate parenting behaviors
 <b>Poverty</b>	Related to the child's family lacking sufficient material resources and/or being unable to provide for the child's material needs
 <b>Substance Abuse</b>	Related to abuse, overuse, or dependence of alcohol, drugs, or other mood-altering substances

# Why are Children Separated from Parents?

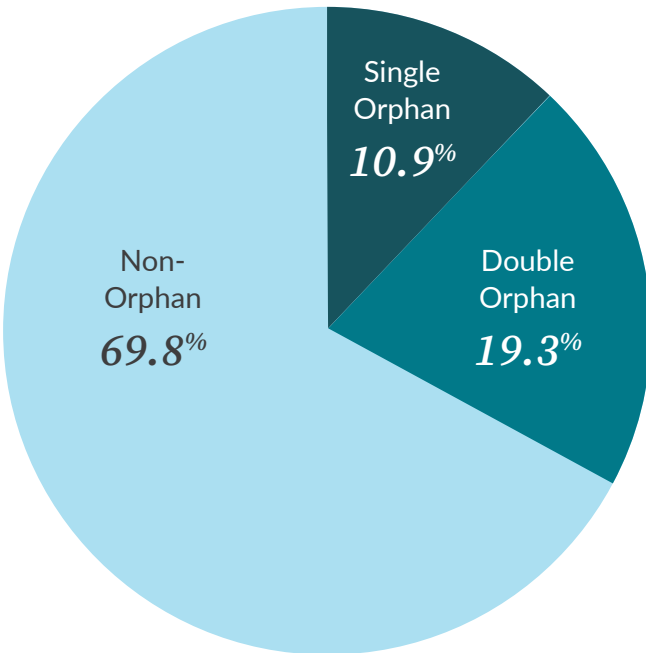
Very often, factors leading to family separation are interwoven and interdependent, varying widely by family and context; it is rarely possible to point to one antecedent alone.<sup>18,19,20</sup> A study of 1,054 adults in 19 nations who had experienced placement in alternative care (residential care, foster care, adoption, kinship care, or a combination) for at least six months during childhood examined reasons for separation.<sup>21</sup>

The following graph displays the percentage of respondents who indicated that each category was a reason for separation. Participants were allowed to select all categories that applied to them.



As demonstrated in the previous graph, there were a wide variety of reasons for placement in care. For the majority of children, the death of both parents was not the reason they were placed in care.

More than 80% of participants who had experienced alternative care had at least one living parent.






*Single Orphan: Having lost one parent to death*  
*Double Orphan: Having lost both parents to death*  
*Non-Orphan: Having not lost a parent to death*

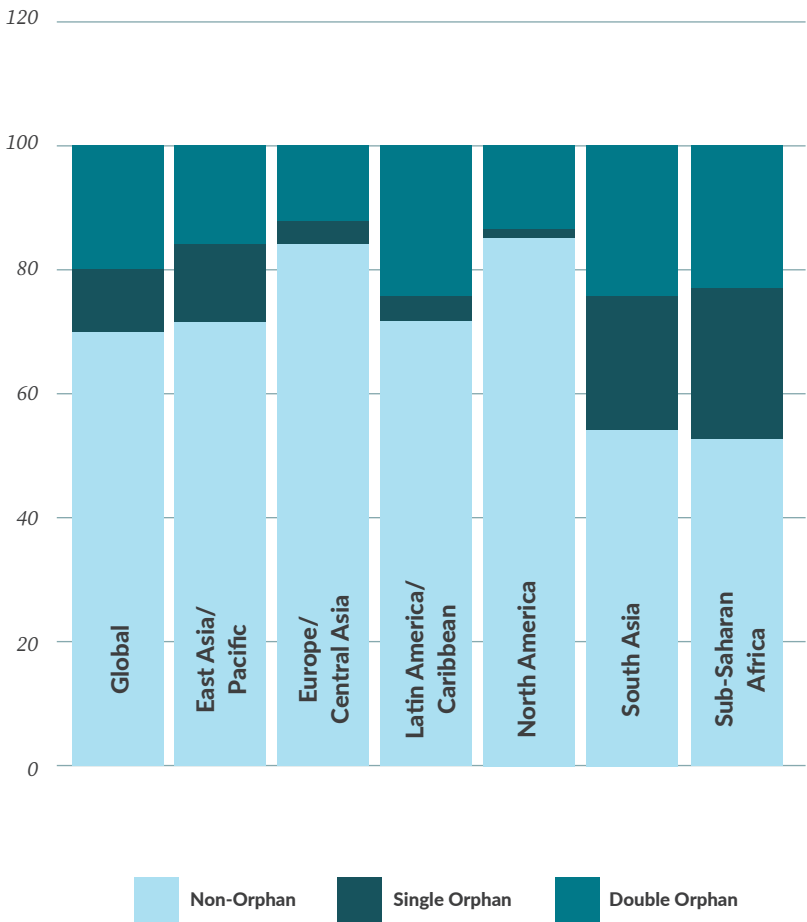


# Orphan Care by Region

This study also looked at reasons for separation, common types of placement, and orphanhood status by region.

 Region	 Common Reasons for Separation	 Common Types of Placement
Global	Parental death Family stress Abandonment	Residential care Kinship care
East Asia / Pacific	Abandonment Poverty Family stress Parental death	Residential care Adoption
Europe/ Central Asia	Family stress Education Abandonment	Kinship care Independent living
Latin America/ Caribbean	Family stress Parental death	Kinship care Residential care
North America	Family stress Abandonment Maltreatment Parenting skills Substance abuse	Foster care Adoption
South Asia	Parental death Abandonment Poverty	Residential care Foster care
Sub-Saharan Africa	Parental death Poverty	Residential care Foster care

There was variability in orphanhood status by region:



# Orphan Care by Human Development Index

Finally, the study looked at variations in the types of out-of-home placements in relation to the Human Development Index (HDI) score of individual countries. The HDI is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living<sup>22</sup>.

The type of placement tended to vary by HDI:



## Low HDI Nations

Residential care  
Kinship care



## Medium HDI Nations

Residential care  
Kinship care  
Foster care



## High HDI Nations

Kinship care  
Residential care



## Very HDI Nations

Kinship care  
Adoption  
Foster care

Even though there was some overlap between the reasons for family separation across HDI, there was still a substantial variation:



## Low HDI Nations

1. Parental death
2. Poverty
3. Education



## Medium HDI Nations

1. Parental death
2. Poverty
3. Abandonment



## High HDI Nations

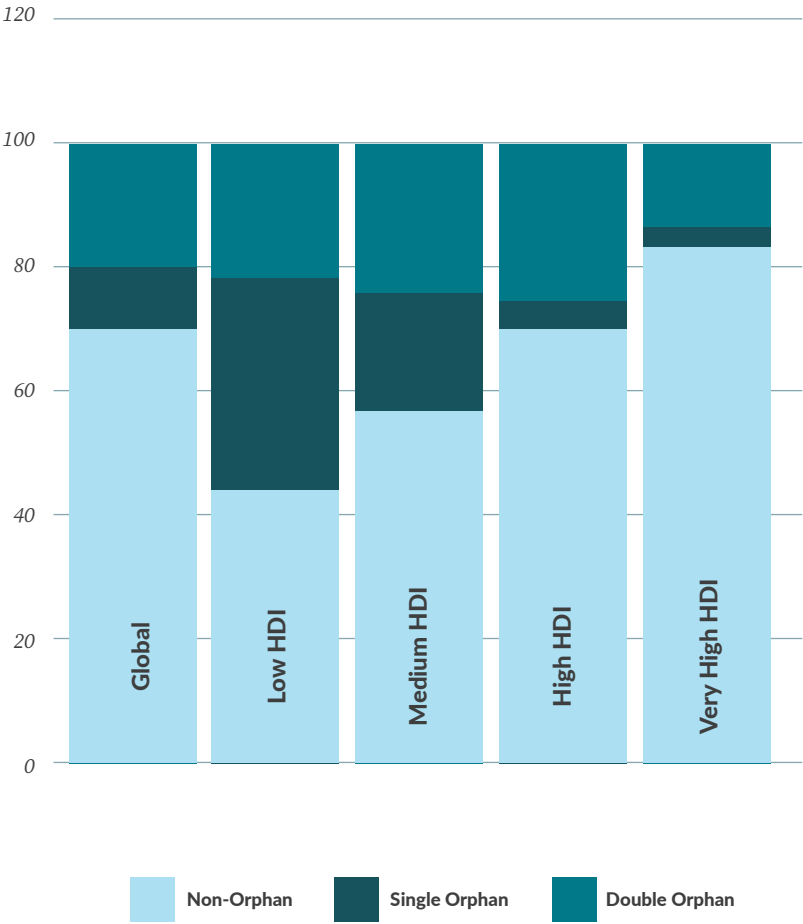
1. Parental death
2. Family stress
3. Abandonment



## Very HDI Nations

1. Family stress
2. Abandonment
3. Parenting skills

There was significant variation in orphanhood status by HDI, with the percentage of non-orphaned children rising with HDI:



Factors impacting vulnerable children can vary tremendously by region and community resources. In some places, strong extended family networks can readily absorb orphaned children. In others, that historic safety net has been shredded.

A host of other factors – from the strength of the local economy to the prevalence of child maltreatment and exploitation, to the quality of public and private social services—can each dramatically increase or mitigate the vulnerability of children. For this reason, great caution must be taken in applying and comparing statistics across various contexts.

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Finally, it should be noted that the fact that a child has a living parent or relative may or may not mean there are safe, welcoming caregivers willing and able to receive him or her. Indeed, around 99% of children in the US foster care system have at least one living parent,<sup>23</sup> but social workers and courts have determined it is not currently safe for them to live in their family of origin.

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Even when material poverty has been a key factor in family separation, there are often also other more complex issues beneath the surface. So, while reunifying children with their family of origin should be a defining objective whenever possible, great care must be taken to ensure that reunification is always safe, appropriately guided, and in the best interest of the child.

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## Summary of Existing Data

- ➡ An estimated *15 million children worldwide* have lost both parents to death (“double orphans”).
- ➡ An estimated *140 million children worldwide* have lost either one parent to death (“single orphans”) or both parents.<sup>24</sup>
- ➡ There are many different situations that can lead to a child being separated from his or her parents and placed into alternative care.<sup>25</sup>
- ➡ Most double orphans reside with *extended family members*.<sup>26</sup>
- ➡ The majority of children living in orphanages are not double orphans.<sup>27</sup>
- ➡ Most of the time, a family experiences *multiple situations* that lead to child-family separation.<sup>28</sup>
- ➡ These reasons for separation vary by region, Human Development Index, community, and individual family and child.
- ➡ That a child has one or more living parents or relatives may or may not mean there is a *safe, welcoming home* that is *willing and able to receive him or her*.

# Priorities in Response to Orphan Need

The needs are vast, requiring well-conceived, highly-localized support. As a result of available data, we can prioritize our efforts in the following areas:

## 1 | *Preserve and Strengthen Existing Families*

- Prioritize keeping single parents and other struggling families together through targeted support services
- Address root causes of family separation through case-by-case assessment and assistance
- Prevent unnecessary separations through early intervention and family strengthening programs

## 2 | *Pursue Family Reunification*

- Recognize that many institutionalized children have living parents or extended family
- Support efforts to reunite children with birth families whenever safely achievable
- Promote kinship care with extended family members as a viable alternative reunification option

## 3 | *Provide Quality Alternative Care*

- Prioritize permanent family placement for children without viable family reunification options
- Develop high-quality adoption and foster care systems and small group homes for children awaiting family placement
- Maintain focus on transitioning children to permanent family settings whenever feasible

In each of these approaches, it is essential that we take a holistic approach, taking into account both the unique situation of each child and the wider family and community context. This includes creating individualized case plans that move a child to family care, involving children and families in decision-making through family group conferences and other methods, balancing immediate care needs with long-term family placement goals, and investing in both prevention and intervention strategies.

The Christian Alliance for Orphans affirms the historic Christian understanding—conveyed in Scripture and affirmed by social science<sup>29,30</sup>—that God intends the family as the essential environment in which to raise children. Parents and permanent caregivers most naturally provide the love, protection, structure, and guidance children need to thrive. When children are separated from family, they experience negative consequences in virtually every aspect of their being.<sup>31,32</sup>

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*We believe the ideal outcome for every child is to know the love, nurture, and protection of a safe, permanent family.*

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Our world's brokenness at times makes this goal unattainable. Thus, alternative forms of care are sometimes necessary. This reality calls us to affirm two seemingly opposing convictions at the same time.



*First*, while family care is always the ideal and should be actively pursued for every child, there are challenging situations globally where small, family-like residential care may be necessary. This is particularly evident in regions where war, disease, or other factors have severely impacted community infrastructure and social support networks, or in cases where children require specialized therapeutic support beyond what local families are currently equipped to provide. The goal remains to strengthen families and develop robust family-based care alternatives, while recognizing that residential care may serve as a transitional solution in contexts where these systems are still developing.

*Second*, the need for alternative measures should not obscure the ideal of family or diminish our pursuit of it. This includes:

1. Understanding reasons for placement outside of family care to assist in creating effective interventions to prevent family separation and aid in family reintegration.
2. Strengthening families at risk of separation through education and training, material and social support, and more – enabling families to stay together whenever safely possible.
3. Reintegrating families that have been separated, always with due caution and sufficient support and oversight.
4. Providing alternative family care for children, always as close as possible to the ideal of a safe, permanent, nurturing family.

Certainly, no individual can perform all of these tasks, nor do they need to try. No one organization can do it all and do it well. Rather, working together allows organizations to provide their own distinct contributions and specializations.

Each can be an indispensable part of a web of support for vulnerable children and families that includes government systems, NGOs, churches, and other actors working in coordination for family strengthening, family reintegration, and a variety of forms of alternative care.

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## Conclusion

In all of this, it should be clear that statistics regarding orphans, and even the definition of the term “orphan,” have inherent weaknesses. This does not mean they are not important. Good data can help us understand the nature and extent of the need. And the term “orphan” itself helps a society—perhaps especially those that have been influenced by a Judeo-Christian vision—to connect the needs of vulnerable children with the clear mandate in Scripture to protect and care for the “fatherless” and the “orphan.”

At the same time, we should understand that the biblical concept of the “orphan” and “fatherless” includes more than just the boy or girl who has lost one or both parents. Rather, it describes the child who faces the world without the provision, protection and nurture that parents uniquely provide. No statistical analysis will ever perfectly capture the global number of children fitting this description. Regardless, God calls His people to reflect His heart and character in choosing

to “defend the cause of the fatherless (Isaiah 1:17; Deuteronomy 10:18),” to “visit the orphan and widow in their distress (James 1:27),” and to “set the lonely in families (Psalm 68:6)” —whatever the details of his or her situation may be.

In living out this high calling, it is our firm desire to see the local church in every region increasingly play the central role in meeting the needs of orphans in distress—from family preservation and kinship care; to foster care and adoption; to provision for specific physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs; to advocacy for government policies that help advance the priorities expressed in this paper.

*Ultimately, our final hope is in this:  
that Christians in every nation will  
rise as the primary answer to the  
needs of the orphans in their midst,  
glorifying God as a reflection of His  
great love for the orphan and for us.*



# Christian Alliance for Orphans

## Guiding Principles

### 1. God's Heart and Ours

God is vested, deeply and personally, in the plight of orphaned and vulnerable children – and in all who are destitute and defenseless (*Deut. 10:18; Psalm 10:14; Psalm 68:5-; Isaiah 58:5-12*). God calls his people to reflect His special love for these children in both word and deed (*Isaiah 1:17; James 1:27; Matt. 25:40*).

### 2. Responsive Love

To act upon God's call to care for orphans is not merely a matter of duty, guilt, or idealism. It is first a response to the good news, the Gospel: that God, our loving Father, sought us, adopted us and invites us to live as His sons and daughters (*John 1:12; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 1:15; 1 John 3:1*). We love because He first loved us (*1 John 4:19*).

### 3. Well-Informed Action

Good intentions alone are insufficient. All care for children must be guided by both knowledge and wisdom (*Proverbs 19:2; Philippians 1:9-11*). In our broken world, no solution will be without flaws. Yet our aim must always be to offer the excellent care we'd desire to give Jesus himself – informed by Scripture and the best available research, knowledge and proven practice.

#### **4. Commitment to the Whole Child**

To meet only spiritual or only physical needs is incomplete (1 John 3:17; James 2:16; Mark 8:36). Christian love seeks to address both, just as Jesus always did. Nothing is of greater value than to know Jesus Christ and one's identity as a child of God (*Philippians 3:8*). Yet even a cup of water given to a thirsty child is of eternal worth (*Matthew 10:42*).

#### **5. Priority of Family**

Both Scripture and social science affirm that the best environment for children is a safe, permanent family. When this is not possible, the goal for each child should be – as a general rule – to move as far as possible along the “spectrum of care” toward permanent family. Care for children should always be safe, nurturing and as close to family as it feasible for the given situation.

#### **6. Family Preservation**

Children that have a surviving parent, or other relatives willing to care for them, should be helped to remain within family whenever safely possible. Likewise, when families have been separated, reunification is of first priority whenever safely possible. Efforts that enable struggling families to stay together are a vital part of the Bible's call to care for orphans and widows in distress (*James 1:27*).

#### **7. Residential Care**

Care within a family is our unequivocal ideal for children. Yet we also honor the devoted care and protection provided by many quality residential facilities. We further recognize that

therapeutic group settings can play an essential role in the healing of children with intensive needs. We urge that new programs prioritize family-based care. We encourage existing residential programs to grow as close as feasible to the ideal of family and to promote family-based solutions whenever possible.

## **8. Centrality of the Local Church**

The local church in every nation possesses both the Christian mandate and many other resources needed to care for the world's orphans in a nurturing, relationship-rich environment. Every initiative to care for orphans should prioritize and honor the role of the local church, carefully pairing what foreign resources may be necessary with local believers willing to open their hearts and homes to orphans in their community.

## **9. Unity**

Scripture overflows with calls for unity in the Body of Christ (*Psalm 133; 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 4:3, Colossians 3:11-15; Philippians 4:1-3*). Such unity yields special strength (*Ecclesiastes 4:9*), welcomes the presence of Christ (*Matt. 18:20*) and confirms that Jesus was sent by God (*John 17:20-23*). Disagreements are inevitable and sometimes even necessary. Yet amidst all that strains unity, we commit to honoring each other above ourselves (*Romans 12:10*) – and labor in unison to see every child experience God's unfailing love.



# Christian Alliance for Orphans

## Core Commitments

### **1. Love God**

Love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, seeking to grow daily as earnest disciples of Jesus Christ.

### **2. Love Our Neighbor**

Love our neighbor as ourselves, seeking good for every individual as one made in God's image and bearing profound dignity, regardless of any trait, choice or history.

### **3. Honor Scripture**

Honor Scripture by holding it as our highest authority and guide against which all other claims are weighed.

### **4. Uphold and Strengthen Family**

Uphold and strengthen family as God's provision for the nurture of children, and the lifelong covenant of marriage between a father and a mother as God's design for the stability and flourishing of families.

### **5. Respect Government**

Respect government by following all laws, as long as they do not require violation of conscience, and by encouraging policies that allow people of faith to maintain their convictions as they serve others.



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