An Entrustment Service for Families Participating in Open Adoption

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While serving as a clinical pastoral education (CPE) resident, I was asked by an adoptive family to perform an entrustment service for their child, which would include both the birth family and the adoptive family. I was familiar with baby dedications from my own Protestant tradition and yet could not find ritual that recognized the unique needs of this situation. Out of my research, I developed an entrustment service that may be used for open adoptions such as this.

An open adoption means that birth parents and adoptive parents have some knowledge about one another. The birth parents even may help choose the adoptive parents. Adoptive parents and their children know medical and genetic information about the birth family. Informal open adoptions have occurred for centuries, in which relatives or close family friends have raised children not born to them but whose parents were known to them. However, the concept of formal open adoption is quite new, having been established within the past twenty years. Openness may mean that birth parents choose the couple or person they feel would give their baby a good home even though they may never meet the adoptive family. At the other end of the openness spectrum, birth parents may meet the adoptive parents, visit their home and have ongoing contact throughout the child’s life. The degree of openness usually depends on the comfort level of both the birth parents and adoptive parents. (See www.openadoptions.com).

The families of the baby girl I have chosen to call Grace plan to have occasional contact throughout the child’s life. In addition to birth family members (mother, maternal grandmother, maternal aunt) and adoptive parents, the hospital social worker attended the entrustment service detailed below. We sat in a circle in the hospital chapel.

The adoptive parents held the baby the entire service. We had discussed this, and both families were comfortable with this decision. In other situations, it may be appropriate for the birth family to hold the baby during the first part and, following the sharing time, to transfer this care to the adoptive family. I had tissues ready as we all shed tears at different moments during the service. My hope is that this service provided a ritual for this pivotal moment in the lives of these families.

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Liturgy for Entrustment Service

Opening Words
The Psalmist reminds us of the special care God takes in our creation as babies in Psalm 139. Verses 13 through 16 read: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” (NIV)

Praise and Presentation
God creates all things; all life is a gift from God. For this we give thanks. This service will be a time when we will offer thanks to God for the creation of the life of Baby Girl Grace and the gift that she is to all the significant people present here today.

This day is an important milestone in Baby Girl Grace’s young life as she transitions from her birth family into her adoptive family. It has been a privilege to get to know her birth mother, Name, and her grandmother, Name. It is also a joy to meet Baby Girl Grace’s adoptive parents, Names. (Other members of the birth and adoptive families may be named here as well.)

The scripture story that comes to mind today as we think of the transition taking place is that of baby Moses. His mother hid him for three months and finally was forced to hide him among the reeds in an attempt to save his life from Pharaoh who wanted every baby boy killed. Moses was discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter as she went to the river to bathe. Moses’s sister was able to get his own mother to nurse the him, and he was raised by Pharaoh’s daughter as her son.

This story reminds us of how different circumstances happen in our lives and how important it is as a child, to have loving, caring persons in our lives. Both Moses’s birth mother and Pharaoh’s daughter and their extended families were significant persons in his life. Each of the families represented here have a significant relationship with Baby Girl Grace, and thanks to the openness of this adoption process, as in the story of Moses, both families look forward to special moments to support, encourage and love this dear baby in the days and years ahead.

This service today recognizes more than the legal adoption process. Our time together helps us to acknowledge the intentional decision of Name of Birth Mother to entrust her baby into the care of Names of Adoptive Parents. The legal adoption process is taking place, and here we recognize the spiritual bond and the gift of God as Baby Girl Grace begins her young life.

Family Sharing
I’d like to give a few moments now for each family to share any thoughts they have with the others present here today.

(You may want to prepare the families by mentioning that this sharing opportunity will be offered. Be willing to sit in silence and to allow tears or other expressions of emotion as they occur.)
Musical Sharing

In the service I conducted, the adoptive mother was a musician and had written a special song, which she shared. Any appropriate musical selection could be played to celebrate the joy of this occasion. Any of the following would be appropriate for families from the Christian tradition:

“Jesus Loves Me,” Anna B. Warner, 1859
“For the Beauty of the Earth,” Folliott S. Pierpoint, Lyra Eucharistica, 1864

Words of Commitment

Will each of you gathered here as birth and adoptive family members and significant persons in Baby Girl Grace’s life pledge, to the best of your ability and with God’s help, to provide a loving environment and relationship of trust in which she can grow in love, loyalty and obedience to God?

If so, please answer, we will. (We will.)

Blessing

(The chaplain may place a hand upon the baby’s head or hold the baby)

Baby Girl Grace, may the Eternal God bless you and watch over your life. May you grow strong, yet remain sensitive. May you gain wisdom, yet never lose the sense of wonder in life. May your heart know great joy. May your hands embody love, service and praise. May your feet carry you down paths that nurture and call forth the gifts God has given you. And in time, may you come to love God the way that God, even now, surrounds you with love. Amen.

Prayer and Benediction

O God, we thank you for this moment. You know how much Names of Adoptive Parents wished for a baby and how they rejoiced when their prayers were answered this week with the birth of Baby Girl Grace. You know the wrestling and decision that Name of Birth Mother made to entrust this baby into their care. Be with these families in this important time of transition. Give peace to Name of Birth Mother and her family as they know your grace, and bless them as they continue to offer support to this child. Grant guidance and understanding to Names of Adoptive Parents as they build a loving home and help Baby Girl Grace learn what it means to be loved. May this home be filled with happiness and laughter as they receive this gift from you, a precious daughter to love and care for, nurture and hold tenderly in their arms. Bless all gathered here as we pledge to stand by these families and embrace them with our love and support. Amen.

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26) Go in peace. Amen.