

**Catholic Social Services of Montana**  
**50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**  
by Rosemary Miller

The last 50 years has brought many changes to Catholic Social Services which reflect the changes in society especially for women who have experienced an unplanned pregnancy. In the post WWII years the Catholic Church in Montana recognized the need to respond to the social needs of the time. From the very beginning Catholic Social Services (first known as Catholic Charities) was committed to serving the needs of children; a mission the agency has stayed true to throughout the 50 years. Along the way the agency has assisted in providing services for various other social needs such as the need for affordable housing for low income individuals, alcohol treatment and aftercare services, clothing, financial assistance for families experiencing an emergency, and advocacy for individuals who were unable to speak for themselves. Foundational to the agency has been the vision to provide for the best interest of children especially children who were in need of a permanent family.

The most dramatic changes have occurred in the field of child welfare over the last 50 years driven by an examination of what practices benefit children the most. In the 1950's adoption was a service that mostly met the needs of the adults involved. Adoption was clothed in secrecy. The societal mores of the times forced young pregnant women to leave their homes and communities to live in secrecy until she had delivered the baby. She felt compelled to chose adoption for her baby and often never even saw the baby after the birth. She returned to her home and community shortly after the birth and was told to "go on with her life." Many of these women never told anyone of this experience and suffered for years in silence wondering about the health and welfare of their child. The father of the baby was rarely involved in the decision of what to do with the baby. Many of the records from the early 1950's indicate the father was unknown because his role was not thought to be significant. A social worker selected which adoptive family the baby would go to and actually delivered the child to the adoptive family. The adoptive family often did not reveal to anyone outside the family that the baby was adopted. Sometimes the child was never told he was adopted and grew up believing that he had been born to his parents and shared their genetic history. James J. Flanagan, former director of Catholic Social Services wrote "Telling a child that he is adopted is perhaps one of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, duties which must be performed by adoptive parents." The secrecy surrounding adoption created difficulties for many adopted children. In the late 1980's and into the 1990's we saw a movement where many adopted individuals began to search for their biological roots.

The Open Adoption practices of today are very different from the practices of the 1950's. Both birth parents are encouraged to be involved in the decision making process of how to handle an unexpected pregnancy. If the birth parents chose to make an adoption plan they chose the adoptive parents from a pool of approved families who have been specially trained. Birth parents meet the prospective adoptive parents before the birth of the baby and begin a relationship that is expected to last a lifetime. Birth parents remain involved in the lives of the adoptive family much like extended family. When a child has

questions that relate to his genetic history he is able to ask the birth family. When adoptive parents have questions about the medical history of the family they are able to go directly to the family to have their questions answered. Children seem to fair better in open adoptions because of the honesty and openness.

Many families turn to adoption as a way to build their families. It is estimated that 1/3 of the nation is touched by adoption in their immediate family. Over 500,000 people turn to adoption each year. Catholic Social Services of Montana has assisted in the incorporation of over 2000 children into their adoptive families. Although there are fewer infant adoptions the field of adoption has grown to international adoptions, and the adoption of older children. It is estimated that 80 million children worldwide are in need of a loving home. Catholic Social Services responded to the changes in adoption over the years and has assisted many families to adopt internationally and many more to adopt older children. In an effort to find families for children who wait in Montana for a family Catholic Social Services developed in 1996 the Treasure Book, a photo listing of children in Montana who are in need of a permanent home.

The field of Child Welfare is a continually changing world as we all search for what is best for children. The staff of Catholic Social Services deals with people in difficult circumstances everyday and recommits to the mission to serve the needs of children for the next 50 years.