



Eleanor Meade is mum with a mission. Having seen the desperate shortage of secure, loving homes for children taken into care and seeing a church full of potentially superb foster carers, Eleanor has begun to put the two together. Last year, Eleanor and her husband Antony set up Family Matters Ltd, and independent fostering agency to recruit, train and support new foster carers.

"Our aim is to recruit people who haven't thought of fostering before," says Eleanor Meade, co-founder of Family Matters Fostering Ltd.

"The Church is filled with excellent potential foster carers and we as a Church are commanded to care for people in need; it's not a request! But we felt that the level of support given to carers was inadequate. When we became foster carers ourselves, we discovered that we would be responsible for the children placed with us 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That inevitably leads to burn out, particularly if a child is being difficult. At the end of four or five years we were exhausted and struggling to keep going.

Setting up the agency was Antony's idea. He felt we could do things better ourselves. We had run businesses together before, but I resisted the idea to start with, because we would have to stop fostering. The Lord had given me a promise that we would affect the lives of hundreds of children, and I thought at the time that it was through fostering the children ourselves.

**"WE SET UP THE BUSINESS TO MIRROR GOD'S BLUEPRINT OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY"**

Then two things changed my mind. First I went to the fostering agency we were with, to request financial help for a sporting activity that I felt would really help a young lad who was living with us at the time. It was expensive, but I knew they had the money. I was really hacked off when they said they couldn't afford it. I could see what sort of cars they drove- to be honest I felt they just weren't interested. After that I began to wonder if Antony was right. The children deserved more and so did we!

Then when, quite separately, three families came up to me at church and said they were impressed with what we were doing and that they were thinking of fostering themselves; what should they do? I was tempted to say, 'Don't do it!' Not because I didn't think they would make good foster carers - I felt they would be superb - but I didn't want to see them struggling like we had. So I asked them if they could hang on for a while. I thought the Lord might be saying something"

Eleanor looked into all the legalities of setting up a fostering agency and Family Matters became a reality in February 2000. The first people to attend its Choosing to foster course were the three families from the church! Since then, they have between them successfully fostered several children. While many local authorities are struggling to recruit new foster carers, Family Matters is attracting 10 to 15 enquiries from potential carers every week and over 50% of

the carers on its books are Christian. Much of this success is due to Eleanor's determination to give the best possible care to both the families and the children placed with them.

"We set up the business to mirror God's blueprint of the extended family," Eleanor explains. "Just as , in a real family, there are people to help and encourage new parents, each foster family has experienced foster carers looking after them in a sort of 'grand parent' role. Because the supervisory carers have fostered themselves, and in some cases still do, they know the problems faced. They are in daily touch with the family and are always available, not just for crises. Sometimes all that is needed is a word of encouragement! They are also registered to have the child overnight, so he or she can have a weekend away with their supervisory carers to give the family a break. This is great; everybody benefits from the change!

We also provide each family with supplementary carers, who are more like 'aunts' and 'uncles' and who baby sit for the family and can take the child out for the day. All foster carers have at least one night off every week, to go out on their own or to take their children out. We were never able to do that!"

However, running a new business with such high standards also took its toll on Eleanor, who herself is Mum to Deborah, 21, Naomi, 19, and Emily, 13. "After a few months I went up for prayer at the Church, totally exhausted," she admits. "The leaders of the Church were concerned and set up a prayer group specifically for us, to 'wage warfare' on our behalf. Of course, I myself pray too!

Often I don't know what to do and God tells me. I couldn't do this job without my faith. The worst part of the job is that the buck stops with me. If a child is breaking up a placement, there are some very difficult decisions to make. I constantly have to rely on prayer and wisdom from God."

Does Eleanor ever get tempted to stack supermarket shelves instead? "Frequently!", she laughs. "But I love my job and, although it's demanding, it's what God has called me to do - how could I do anything else? When I look back and consider that five children have become Christians recently and many more have been touched by the Lord and are enjoying the life of the Church, it makes me feel humble. It is exactly what God promised he would do."