

An Open Letter to the Legislators of Idaho

Do children have a right to live?

To the Honorable Senators and Representatives:

I was raised in Idaho in a faith-healing sect that shuns modern medicine. Instead, when one of their members are sick or injured, church followers say prayers and perform religious rituals such as anointing with olive oil.

Adults are free to make such decisions for themselves, of course, but what about when a child is seriously ill? Do parents also have license to deprive him or her of potentially lifesaving medical care? According to Idaho law, some of them do. Because they can say they are simply adhering to their religious beliefs. The belief that only God has the authority to extend a child's life and for a man to try to do so is a sin. Astonishingly, Idaho law considers that reason enough to allow them to endanger children in this way.



Even if a child dies as a result.

My nephew Steven is only one of the many victims. He was born with spina bifida and Arnold Chiari syndrome. Both are very painful, hereditary and debilitating diseases. He received no medical care of any kind. Not even as much as an aspirin for pain or a wheelchair for mobility. He was paralyzed from the waist down and suffered from intense headaches every day of his short life. I had to watch him suffer without being able to help. Steven died from pneumonia a month before he would have been three years old. I called Child Protective Services when Steven was dying. I was told they couldn't intervene because the parents weren't breaking any laws. It was their right to deprive Steven of all medical care.

Even if a child dies as a result.

But what about Steven's rights? Didn't he have a right to be given the best life he might've had given his condition? Didn't he at least have a right to be made as comfortable as possible when he was dying?

The religious exemptions in current Idaho law are unconstitutional and discriminatory. They deprive children of their Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection under the laws, and they discriminate against every Idaho parent who is not a member of a faith-healing sect. The laws deny a child's right to live.

This is discriminatory on its face.

Most parents could be prosecuted for depriving a child of necessary medical care. But Idaho prosecutors file no charges when faith-healers let their children suffer, become disabled, or die because Idaho law lets them do what would otherwise be criminal injury or manslaughter. It is essentially a free pass or get out of jail free card for faith-healing parents.

I am not saying that people in faith-healing sects are bad people.

I have family who are still practicing members, and I care deeply about them. I am saying, however, that their indoctrination is so total that it makes it difficult, or perhaps even impossible, for them to make the best choices for their children's basic medical needs. I was in my twenties when I needed an emergency surgery. Even though I had been away from the church for four years, I was very scared. I was always taught that medicine was a sin and a product of Satan, and that doctors were evil. I told my husband that he would be responsible for my death and for me going to Hell because he took me to a hospital. But what he actually did, of course, was save my life.

There have been two more child "faith-deaths" within the last two months . . .

the press has reported. And a county coroner has publicly said there may be as many as "one or two a month." But they get swept under the rug of a legal tangle that makes even investigating them extremely difficult.

Many of you know who I am. For the last four years I have been asking the Idaho legislature to remove the language in Idaho's child protection laws that allows one special category of parents (faith-healing practitioners) to let their seriously ill or injured children suffer and die. Repeal of the religious exemptions is urgent and vital. You know the language I speak of:

"The practice of a parent or guardian who chooses for his/her child treatment by prayer or spiritual means alone shall not for that reason alone be construed to have violated the duty of care to such child."

Remove it—that's all you have to do. No more free passes.

This is not a freedom of religion issue; this is a right to live issue.

Thank you for your attention,

Linda Martin

Former Member, Followers of Christ

The Campaign to



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