The Importance of Caring for and Protecting Children on the Mission Field from Physical Abuse and Sexual Exploitation

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Missionaries need to become more informed about how to protect their children from sexual abuse. This last year three different expatriate families contacted me at Missions Resource Network. In each case their daughters had been sexually molested by contacts with whom, they (the parents), had been studying the Bible. The allegations of a 19 year old missionary volunteer allegedly sexually abusing orphans as young as four and as old as 10 at an orphanage in Nairobi made news this last July, 2014. As of this writing, he has been indicted and will be prosecuted in an Oklahoma Federal court. In the past missionaries have been uninformed about tribal initiations and practices and have allowed their children to participate in tribal activities which were abusive to their children. William Paul Young, author of The Shack, was sexually abused by Dinka tribal members in West Papua when he was four years old and at the Missionary Boarding School he attended after age five. 1

In the late 1980s, news of abuse of missionary children in missionary boarding schools became a national news item in the United States. As abuse was reported, more adult missionary children came forward with stories of their own abuse. Adult missionary kids reported being “slapped, punched, raped and fondled and threatened with undoing their parents’ mission if they told.”2 In 2011 the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) reported that four mission agencies had investigated their own employees for charges of child abuse in the field.3

Since 2006 about 50 of the more than 200 mission agencies around the world have worked with an umbrella group, the Child Safety and Protection Network, to collectively address the issue.4 Rich Darr, a minister for the Methodist Church and founder of M.K. Safety Net, an organization for abused, neglected and sexually exploited missionary children, stated, “I don’t know of one case where the person bringing a case was welcomed and listened to and dealt with appropriately. All we want is for the church to be the church”5 (www.mksafetynet.org). Boz Tchividjian, grandson of Evangelist Billy Graham and a former sex crimes prosecutor, has formed the group Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE)

1 Blade Religious Editor, The Blade, February 8, 2008
4 ibid
5 Brashear, Manya A., Chicago Tribune, June 17, 2013
through which he investigates allegations of missionary child sexual abuse and reports his findings to the public. Tchividjian stated:  

"There has been a culture of silence as it relates to abuse in the mission field. What we're encountering are so many adults now whose lives were completely devastated by this abuse in the mission field, and also sadly the failure of family members or mission agencies to do anything about it. They were so focused on evangelizing and reaching souls for Christ, sometimes their own children were being sacrificed."

Here are several steps we recommend to address this hidden but ongoing tragedy:

1. **The church must be proactive.** We must not be silent. We must have the same regard for missionary children and the children with whom the missionaries work as we do with our own. The church needs to be sure that their Child Protection Policy includes their missionary staff and the volunteers engaged in short term missions.

2. **Missionaries should be fully informed** about the Child Protective Policy of their stewarding church. They should be fully informed about reporting policies. Allegations must be investigated promptly and thoroughly. The alleged perpetrator (missionary, missionary family member or missionary volunteer) should be asked to withdraw from ministry or be placed on leave while the investigation takes place. The response to allegations should be carried out with great care and sensitivity as unfounded allegations could damage a person's future ministry.

3. **The first priority of an investigation is to protect the alleged victim and other children.** When abuse is reported, an immediate response needs to be enacted that honors the alleged victim, prevents further injury, and protects the church from charges of negligence. It promotes a fair process and quick outcome for the alleged offender, who may be innocent. Showing care and concern will help prevent further harm.

4. **The first step for the stewarding church is to put together a fact-finding team.** The team should be made up of godly, wise, mature individuals with professional experience in the fields of child sexual abuse, law and missions. A member of the team should be trained in cognitive interview techniques with children. The danger of implanting

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6 ibid
7 Churches who do not have a Child Protection Policy can find a template on the web: Child Protection Sample. [Child Protection Policy Sample - SafeChurch.com](https://www.safechurch.com/.../sc/ChildrenYouth/protectionpolicy.doc)
memories is well validated. If criminal charges are to be filed, evidence must be handled carefully and remain uncontaminated.

5. The task of the fact-finding team, first of all, should be to do no harm; further injury to the alleged victim, their family and friends must be avoided. Because allegations of sexually abusing a child, even if they are found later to be false, can ruin the ministry of a missionary, the committee should handle all aspects of their investigation with care and fairness. Second, the team has the task to discern truth. The team must probe deeply and ask the hard questions: Who has been harmed? Who else may be in harm’s way? Once all the evidence is in and has been weighed, the team must make a judgment about the alleged perpetrator. At this point an attorney should be consulted about further steps.

6. All alleged sexual abuse that takes place overseas should be reported to local authorities where missionaries reside, in accordance with local law and culture. U.S. citizens, whether they live in the U.S., live overseas, or are visiting a foreign country, are subject to prosecution for sexually abusing a child and such abuse should be reported to federal authorities for possible prosecution under the Federal PROTECT Act of 2003, which criminalizes “illicit sexual conduct” abroad by U.S. citizens and permanent residents.  

7. Confidentiality, privacy issues, litigation issues are key to the investigative process. Churches need to consult an attorney about the handling of information, with whom it will be discussed and with whom it will be reviewed.

The church should be proactive in her outreach to victims and provide therapy and other assistance that leads to healing. These situations can become extremely complicated and costly, but protecting children should be our number one priority. The church will see that missionaries receive the spiritual and emotional care they need if they have been adversely affected by exposure to stress and trauma through their work. Church resources will be made available as needed, including counseling, finances and other practical support.

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10 Moran, Lee, New York Daily News, January 30, 2014 Missionary in the Amazon, Warren Scott Kennell, befriended the girls of the Katukina tribe in Brazil and sexually abused them over several years. He was arrested in May 2013 and was sentenced to 58 years in prison by a Florida Federal Court.
For further information, I would recommend churches read the following articles on the Missions Resource Network website (http://www.mrnet.org/library/missionarycare):

1. *Sending Church Crisis Protocol for Moral Failure* by Dr. Becky Holton, Director of Missionary Care, Great Cities Missions
2. *Care Teams and Their Responsibilities* by Dr. Dorris Schulz, Co-Director for Missionary Care, Missions Resource Network

Child abuse prevention is preferable to intervention. Therefore, we must exercise due diligence in all of our interaction and care of missionaries and their children. As stewarding churches we must commit - to the best of our ability - to apply the following principles of missionary care:

**Principle One**

*The sponsoring congregation has a written missionary care policy that accepts the overall responsibility for helping the missionary and his/her family and team deal with the rigors of cross-cultural ministry."

The congregation does this by educating their missionaries about the rigors of the work on the field, specific risks involved, and offers appropriate strategies for dealing with both normative and non-normative stresses inherent in mission life.

**Principle Two**

*The church systematically screens and/or assesses the suitability of cross-cultural ministers as part of the process of employment."

This means that the sponsoring congregation has the responsibility to understand the minimum physical, spiritual, and emotional health requirements for mission assignments. Prospective cross cultural workers are screened with respect to the factors possibly affecting the likelihood of adverse or inappropriate adjustment responses to the risks and stresses of mission work. Assessment in each of the areas – physical, spiritual, emotional – should be carried out by responsible, appropriately prepared individuals with expertise in each area. Screening should also include information about past criminal activity and crimes against children. Missionaries seeking sponsorship are to be held responsible for failing to reveal information that may be relevant to assessing the risks involved in an assignment.

**Principle Three**

11 www.mrnet.org/library/missionarycare

www.mrnet.org
The church sends spiritually mature, emotionally stable, prepared, and well-trained missionaries to the field.

**Principle Four**

*The church maintains interest in the missionaries on the field and monitors their work.*

The church is aware of the missionaries’ living environment and provides ongoing, appropriate care as the missionaries, their families and team adjust to cross-cultural living and ministry.

**Principle Five**

*The church provides training and support, on an ongoing basis.*

Team building and management of any team conflict are high priorities. Family care is not neglected. The church understands that missionaries live in ongoing cultural stress even after adjustment. The church intentionally seeks ways to nurture their missionaries spiritually.

**Principle Six**

*The church provides missionaries with specific support in any critical incident (traumatic event) and other unusual and unexpected sources of severe stress.*

**Principle Seven**

*The church provides both practical and emotional support of missionaries during furloughs and upon final re-entry.*

This includes understanding the missionaries’ pain of saying good-bye to people they have worked with closely, the concrete tasks of relocation, and the practical, interpersonal and cultural difficulties in readjusting to life ‘back home.’

**Principle Eight**

*The church will see that returned missionaries receive the spiritual and emotional care they need if they have been adversely affected by exposure to stress and trauma through their work.*

Churches would be wise to adopt a policy of zero tolerance for child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse devastates the soul. The consequences can be profound and can last long into the life cycle. The Christian community takes Jesus’ words seriously: “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my
name welcomes me.” For that reason we will confront and respond to the sin of child sexual abuse.