

An Open Letter to Missionary Parents

By Rachel Steffen

Dear Missionary (or former missionary) Parent of a Boarding School MK,

Recently I attended a conference for MK abuse survivors and their families and friends. At the conference there were many adult MKs who experienced various types of abuse as children: sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual abuse. These MKs represented many countries and various mission board backgrounds. Their ages ran the gamut, from 20s to 60s.

As the conference began, I was struck by the atmosphere of immediate connectedness. There were no strangers in that group. We had a mutual understanding of the general MK experience: the lack of roots, the identity confusion, the pressure to be good for the sake of our parents' ministry, the lifelong strain in our relationships with family members from whom we were separated as children. As an MK myself I could relate to all of these issues and more.

In addition, the other MKs also shared the understanding of childhood abuse. The separation. The lack of safety. The secrecy. The silence. The inability to reconnect with people they love, to feel believed and validated.

At the conference, I witnessed the tears. Sometimes the tears could no longer be shed silently, and the anguish came pouring out in loud sobs. I witnessed the convergence of compassionate fellow MKs, who gathered around touching, hugging, and soothing those wracked by the lifelong grief that they carry.

I witnessed the power of safety. Several MKs spoke openly for the first time about some of their nightmarish experiences. They were brave, and they were believed. One said, "I have told a few individuals about the abuse I endured, but this is the first time I have shared my pain with an entire room full of people who believe me and support me." The empowerment bestowed by finally being able to tell their story without being shushed was clearly demonstrated.

I came away from the conference with a heavily burdened heart.

I keep thinking about this fact: In that gathering of adult MKs living with a great deal of pain, *I was the only mother of an abused MK*. The only missionary parent (to my knowledge) who had put their child in a boarding home.

Here is the question that is hounding me: **Where are the parents???**

For three years I have been intensely involved in communicating with MK abuse survivors. Over and over I have heard heartrending stories of families torn apart because of the long-term effects of childhood trauma. Parents not speaking to children. Children not speaking to parents. Siblings angry at one another.

I ask myself, how can this be? This disaster repeated over and over? The irony that we parents, whose goal was to promote the restoration of relationship between God and fallen man, did in the process destroy our own relationship with the greatest treasure ever entrusted to us, our own precious children?

And how many adult MKs do I know who have walked away from the faith of their parents? There was no solace there for them. Nothing made sense. They learned to sing Jesus Loves Me on their parent's knee, and after that, everything went black. How can they trust such a God? How can they trust such a parent?

In some of the cases I know of, adult MKs have attempted to restore a closeness with their parents by trying to explain some of their pain. Most MKs express to me a genuine love for their parents, and a longing to be heard and understood. Many struggle to explain the imbalance in their memories and feelings. Some of them are proud of their parents, and the things they accomplished in their mission work. They usually have a deep connection to the country in which they spent their childhood, and the local people who were a part of their young years. They have warm memories of the food, the culture, the climate and vegetation. Often when they dream of childhood, their dream starts out happy, and then becomes a terrifying nightmare.

Some MKs love their parents so much they do not want to burden them with pain from their school years which can never be entirely resolved. As adults they understand there is no way to turn back the calendar, to undo the damage done by the boarding home system, which took children as young as 6 or 7 and placed them in the care of others for most of the year. The parent-child bond was severed, and even during school breaks, home life was not really "normal". Something was lost forever, and it cannot be retrieved. Some MKs wish to spare their parents the pain of exploring this reality, and yet they still carry around with them, deep in their psyche, the knowledge that their Mommy and Daddy put them in the dorm and walked away.

For those of us who are parents who placed our children in a boarding home, it is my conviction that we should be the ones to initiate a conversation about this with them. They may be adults now, but they are still our children, and we must have the courage to approach this difficult subject and explore it together. I have seen adult MKs altered when speaking of their traumatic childhoods. When abuse has taken place, often even the recalling of it takes a child back to a young age. It is only right that we parents take on the role of being the mother or the father and reach out to our children. It places an unfair burden on them to expect them to take the lead.

I believe it is important to grapple with and accept this difficult truth: *No matter what abuse our child suffered at the hands of others, the deepest wound on their soul was inflicted by us, by our abandonment of them.* Look at a child who is 6 or 7 today. Some of us now have grandchildren that age. Really look at them, and force yourself to acknowledge the fact that when your child was that size, you pulled their little arms from around your neck and handed them over to your missionary colleagues, and then you drove away -- or flew away -- to your remote location, from where you only had occasional contact with this small child, who up until that point had for the most part been with you all day and all night for their entire life. Look at this. Remember this, and allow the horror of it to overwhelm you.

Step into the abyss. You will not go alone. Allowing yourself to feel deep grief and repentance over the damage done to your child is very frightening. I know. I have done it. Examining the system we participated in is terrifying. It has caused me to question the value of years and years of missionary service. Yes, good things of eternal value were accomplished. But what was the price paid by the innocent, vulnerable children I brought into the world? Stagger around in the reality of all this and give yourself permission to weep bitter tears of remorse. And then you will feel Him. You are not alone. This pain will not kill you. You will survive. You will come out of the abyss. And then you will be ready to reach out to your child.

Do not say things like this:

- *Well, that is just how things were done back then.*
As soon as you start making excuses, you are putting up walls that will hinder any attempts at true communication and connection.
- *That happened so long ago. Why talk about it now?*
It is likely that children who suffer trauma will not be ready to speak out about it for decades. Especially if that trauma has come from trusted family members, or from people who felt like family.
- *The mission pressured us to put our kids in the dorm.*
Some missions did require couples to place their first graders in boarding schools. Our organization did not. We might have felt pressured, but we were not forced. Our children know that. At any time, any of us could have gone against the system, or even resigned from the organization. But we didn't.
- *We didn't know you were unhappy.*
We trained our children to accept hardship. To be good soldiers. From a very young age they felt that the eternal welfare of native people depended on their compliance. Most children instinctively knew not to burden their parents with their pain over being abandoned for the sake of The Work. We did not see the tears they cried alone at night in their dorm room beds when we were far away.
- *Your brother, sister or other MKs aren't struggling.*
Every person is affected differently, even by shared experiences. It is also important to consider that some MKs may have buried the pain of abandonment very deeply, but may now be ready to examine it, if they are invited to do so in a safe environment.
- *Will you forgive us?*
When our child expresses great pain to us, it is not fair for us to add to their burden by pressuring them to give us something – forgiveness – because we ask for it. If they extend forgiveness to us of their own free will, we can accept it humbly and gratefully. But we have no right to demand their forgiveness.

Instead, say things like this:

- Putting you in boarding school as a young child was very wrong. I see that now. It was not natural, and it was not right.

- I see that my abandonment of you in the dorm set you up for further abuse. I am so deeply sorry for that. I will not deflect the attention away from my abandonment by turning the focus on the bad things others did to you. Your deepest hurt came from me.
- I am open to hearing whatever you have to say to me about this subject. I will not put up walls of protection. I will allow myself to feel your pain and take it into my heart. I will not argue. I will not correct your memories. I will listen. You do the talking.
- I have loved you all your life, and I love you now. I want to provide a safe place for you to vent and rail and show me your anger. Even if I cry, I don't want you to stop, until you are done.
- I will defend you and support you, in whatever way you need. I failed you years ago. I will not fail you now. I will not leave you. I am your parent now and forever.
- I will not preach or lecture. I have no spiritual agenda. If you want to discuss faith issues, we can do so. But I will not use religion as a weapon against you.

For the sake of our children, for the sake of our fractured families, please, fellow-parent, hear me now:

Step into the abyss. You will not go alone.

The way up is down. Humble repentance leads to forgiveness and restoration.

We have much to repent for. But we, of all people, should know the way.

Yes. We know The Way.