

## **Interview with MK parent Ann Beardslee**

Ann Beardslee and her husband Howard were very supportive at the beginning of the forming of MK Safety Net encouraging MKs who had been abused. She and Howard are also interviewed in the film, "All God's Children," a documentary by Scott and Luci Westphal.

### **Ann, how did you find out about the abuse at Mamou, the missionary children's school in the Guinea?**

We served as Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries from 1954-1963 in Mali, West Africa and sent our sons to Mamou beginning 1957- end of 1962. In 1992, we retired and moved from NJ to NH so that we could live near our three children who lived in NH and MA. In the mid- 1990s, a clergy friend with the United Church of Christ phoned Howard one day about an article he read about MKs being abused when they were students at Mamou Alliance Academy. We were shocked when we read the article as our sons had never mentioned the abuse. We knew they were glad we returned to the States in 1963 but we didn't know the depth of their relief at leaving Mamou.

### **How did you respond to that information?**

We wrote a long letter to the Alliance headquarters expressing our surprise and our concern. We didn't get a response and the letter was on our computer so we resent it a year later. At that time, we heard that the investigation was ongoing and that there would be a report.

We finally found the article in another publication that mentioned the name of one of the MKs and included the information that he was a pastor of a United Methodist Church in Illinois. We searched the internet to get a phone number of the church. The contact with him led to phone calls with him and his brother and other MKs who had been trying to get a response from the C&MA for about 10 years.

We were overwhelmed with grief when we read the "Independent Committee of Inquiry" report. When we asked our sons about the report and they both said that it was accurate and that they thought we knew about the abuse! We were shocked. They had never told of us of the abuse. We apologized and told them how much we regretted being so involved in our mission to save souls that we were insensitive to their unspoken needs. When the Alliance organized the MK retreat near Atlanta, GA, we urged them to go with us and they agreed. It was a deeply emotional experience. We had not seen these missionaries and MKs for over 30 years and it felt like being among the walking wounded.

### **What was the reaction of fellow missionaries learning about the abuse at Mamou?**

Since we had left the Alliance in the 1960s we were thought of as "outsiders" and not close to the missionaries. At the Retreat, we listened and wept when we heard similar stories about abuse from many, many of the MKs. Most had not seen each other for 20 or 25 years but they told of the same kinds of experiences. One missionary felt the MKs were exaggerating and declared that her children had a positive experience. One expressed some idea about regretting the pain of the children and she expressed anger at the staff and house parents. However, she felt positive that because of her mission work, "many souls were saved" and that would not have happened if the children had not been at Mamou. We observed that some missionaries were as heartbroken and angry as we were. One missionary parent was a part of the Alliance network but was strong enough to demand that the Alliance authorities address the abuse. Some MKs felt the Alliance was sincere when they asked for forgiveness and expressed regret for their negligence in dealing with the abuse. Other MKs expressed anger that the

Alliance did as little as possible to deal with the abuse that had occurred since the inception of the school in the 1930s and lasted until the school was closed down in the 1970s.

### **What are some of the long term results of childhood abuse?**

Some of the emotional “gut” reactions continue throughout life. Maybe the adult MK is surprised as the unexpected flow of tears when their child starts school: the happy occasion has unexpected memories of their departure for school and the pain that followed. Maybe it is their small child eagerly packing their little suitcase for a vacation and the adult MK is suddenly overcome with unwanted memories of packing for Mamou or another boarding school. Maybe they are served oatmeal and they gag with memories of breakfast at boarding school. Often it is in a church service when certain hymns are sung and their tears flow as they are suddenly back in the church service at Mamou when the preacher scared them with the threat of hell and they couldn’t sleep. Or the memory of the trauma of being molested by the houseparent who, only 2 hours before was reading the Bible and leading the prayer at evening devotions. Maybe the memories are so great they can’t attend a church service without feeling overwhelmed. Many MKs have dealt with these issues intellectually but at an unexpected moment their body has a negative emotional reaction to a current expression of love by a spouse and their body unwilling “remembers” the unwanted touch many years ago! They have to get back in touch with present reality and know they are now safe. This is not easy.

Maybe the adult still can’t talk about difficult circumstances. One MK said, “Somehow the adults created a climate so that none of us told our parents what was happening.” The MKs were warned that “natives” will go to hell if you tell your parents about Mamou and they get upset. The adult MK doesn’t “think” that way anymore but might still keep his troubles to himself!

For some MKs it is a theological conundrum: How do I think about God? One adult MK reflected on his experience at Mamou and remembers thinking: “God was all powerful. Everything happening is God’s will. This is what we were taught. I thought that this is what God’s got in mind for me. It is what I deserve.”

Sometimes it is a feeling: I’m not really “at home.” My children had to remind me that although I felt at home in the States, it really wasn’t their childhood home.

Long term results of abuse vary with each individual and every MKs struggle to become a survivor, not a victim, is unique.

### **What are some of the things parents can do to support their abused children?**

I hope a parent can be sensitive to their child’s reality – to their experience which is very different than that of the parent. The parent can’t remove the abuse experience but they can take responsibility for putting their child in a boarding school and sincerely express their regret that their actions as a missionary parent caused the children harm. The adults at Mamou tried to make the children accept their experience as normal and they convinced the children not to talk about what was happening with the other kids or with their parents. Now, many years later, we parents need to listen to our children tell about their experiences and be open to them discussing their abuse with other MKs or anyone else if they find that helpful. They don’t need any advice about forgiving the abusers but we parents might need advice about accepting our responsibility for the decision we made that had the unintended consequences on our children, those we love with all our hearts, suffer.

**What circumstance brought you to the place to help form MK Safety Net?**

We were in almost daily contact with MKs who began speaking out to the C&MA for so many years in the 1980s/90s. We remembered that the Alliance ignored and then denied the accusations. We knew that the abuse at Mamou boarding school was not unique but rather that it was happening in most Mission Agencies and denominations. The MK Safety Net provides a forum for MKs to communicate with those who had similar experiences and those who want justice for themselves and change for the current missionary community. Now as an elderly parent, I am not a part of the conversation except to affirm that the MKs are speaking truth to power and I want to be as supportive as possible.