

## **Systemic Abuse Within Mission Communities/Organizations**

*By: Beverly Shellrude Thompson*

The mission community, on both an agency-level and as a collective community, functions as a closed family system. Closed family systems have some inherent characteristics which have allowed abuse to go unchecked in many settings. The followings are some key areas where this is true, particularly regarding systemic abuse.

In a closed family system, the authorities set the rules. These rules are to preserve the integrity of the organization. Outside input, e.g. civil law, psychology, etc. is seen as irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst when the input is perceived to threaten the organization. The primary directive of leadership is to protect the organization at all cost. The key prerequisite for systemic change in a closed system is referred to as —intentional effort|. Even with intentional effort there are many blocks which make change difficult. Some of these blocks come from within the personal history of mission leaders and staff members, other barriers come from organizational structures.

Leadership of a closed system almost always comes from within, and has been inculcated with the values and norms of the organization. In the case of mission agencies and denominations, almost all mid and top-level leadership fall in one or more of the following categories:

- a. MK's who were raised primarily by people other than their own parents and—as a consequence—this is normative for them,
- b. their own children attended international boarding schools
- c. they were themselves abused as children in settings where abuse was not considered criminal and/or was never discussed.

I believe the personal and family history of mission leaders is one of the reasons so little has been done to actually implement child protection policies and practices, and to treat child abuse as a crime, rather than as a sin. In Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma, Peter A. Levine talks about the three common responses to danger or trauma: Flight, Fight or Freeze. In his theory, when we have experienced trauma we often retain, both in our muscle memory and our brain memory, whichever of these three responses we used to survive the trauma. And when we encounter dangerous situations in the future, we instinctively, and unconsciously, use the responses that allowed us to survive the previous trauma.

These responses, Flight, Fight or Freeze may have worked well for past trauma; but they can be very counterproductive in our lives moving forward. There have been times when, as an adult, I heard about events happening which were abusive, and did not speak out. Levine's theory resonated with me (it did not excuse my silence and inaction, it explained it – I was, and still am, responsible for my silence). My response to danger was to freeze...and that changed only as I became aware of the reasons for my silence and inaction.

There is a reason I mention this in the present context. Many mission leaders were brought up through a closed family / mission system, and experienced abuse or neglect in one form or another. I suspect

many of them are incapacitated by their own survival mechanism of Fight, Flight or Freeze. Because this is one of the contributing factors to why so little change has been implemented, the approach to change requires - out of necessity - some inner healing on the part of mission leaders and staff.

In a closed family system, there is little room for intellectual development done outside the context of —approved|| institutions. This makes it very difficult for leaders (who grew up in the mission system) to study in educational institutions outside of the sphere of their religious environment. One salient example of this is that many are not aware of current Trauma Therapies. In part because of this lack of education, victims of abuse seldom receive funding for trauma therapy from the mission organization that employed their perpetrator.

Deviation from the norms within a closed system is quickly and effectively dealt with through shaming and rejection. Although group members may not agree with the values and norms in a closed system, they often find that it is overwhelmingly difficult to leave the safety and predictability of that organization. A person who strongly challenges the norms becomes an outcast of the system. In his book, [The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People turn Evil](#), Philip Zimbardo explains this dynamic very well. I found the book helpful a number of years ago, when I frantically was trying to understand why almost no one in mission organizations (even good people) was proactively attempting to stop abuse or was dealing with it as criminal behavior.

Those are some of my thoughts about why there has been so little systemic change in mission organizations in relation to the care and protection of children. One of the goals of MK Safety Net is to go to colleges where people are studying before they become missionaries. We want to introduce some of these concepts to candidates before they enter mission communities; once the candidates are within the mission system it is very difficult to —"reach" them.

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*(Updated December 30, 2013)*