

A Safety Net for MKs

By

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Good morning. We are pleased to be invited to this mission conference at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. We are two of the founding members of MK Safety Net, a not-for-profit advocacy group for abused children of North American, evangelical Protestant missionaries.¹ Rich Darr's parents served with the Gospel Missionary Union (GMU), now called Avant Ministries, and Beverly Shellrude Thompson's parents were missionaries with the Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA).² We attended Mamou Alliance Academy in Mamou, Guinea, West Africa, a boarding school for missionary children run by the C&MA. The abuses of missionary children at Mamou Alliance Academy (Mamou) have been documented in a recently released film titled "All God's Children" and in a 94-page Final Report to the Board of Managers of the C&MA by a professional Independent Commission of Inquiry.³ Physical, spiritual, sexual, and emotional abuse was endemic at Mamou over a span of several decades from the 1950s to 1971 when the school was shut down due to political instability in Guinea.

Abuse at Mamou Alliance Academy and the Mamou Steering Committee

In 1987, Beverly Shellrude Thompson reported abuse to a C&MA board member who immediately told the president of the C&MA. In 1990, Rev. Ralph Shellrude and his daughter, Marilyn Shellrude Christman, spoke to officials of the C&MA asking them to address the abuses at Mamou and to hold a retreat for Mamou alumni. Nothing came of these early attempts of asking the C&MA to investigate reports of abuse and of reaching out to alumni and their families.⁴ In 1993 and 1994, siblings from another family, Rich and David Darr, contacted Beverly and Marilyn Shellrude.

From the synergy that developed among us, we organized a retreat in Libertyville, Illinois, attended by nearly a dozen Mamou alumni. The retreat was led by Dr. Marilyn Cassis, a family systems counselor and the Rev. Jim McDonald of Libertyville United Methodist Church. A lawyer, Mr. David Laidley of Libertyville, also addressed the group. He had served as legal

counsel for the Archdiocese of Chicago under Cardinal Bernardin and was instrumental in shaping the Archdiocese's policies and responses to numerous allegations of child abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. These three professionals served as our consultants over the ensuing years as we confronted C&MA officials. As a result of this retreat, the Mamou Steering Committee was formed in an effort to contact other Mamou alumni and move forward with addressing the leadership of the C&MA.⁵

Several weeks after this retreat, the Mamou Steering Committee contacted the President of the C&MA, and its leadership agreed to meet with us months later in Libertyville, Illinois. At that first meeting the five Steering Committee members each told our stories of Mamou. We also made it clear that we did not wish to take the matter public but would do so if C&MA was uncooperative. Our requests of the C&MA were straightforward: Appoint a professional Independent Commission of Inquiry to conduct a thorough investigation of Mamou Alliance Academy; help victims with past and future therapy bills; encourage alumni to come forward with any reports of abuse; host a healing retreat for alumni; and make concrete changes in the way C&MA ran their current boarding schools for missionary children.

The Steering Committee's hopes for progress were soon dashed, however, as the leadership of C&MA resorted to tactics of DIM thinking (delay, ignorance and minimization), stonewalling, and silence.⁶ When the leadership of the C&MA once again brushed off meeting with us due to their busyness preparing for their upcoming Annual Conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Steering Committee traveled to Pittsburgh in May 1995 and went public with the abuses at Mamou. Finally, in response to the bad press, the board of managers of the C&MA charged the headquarters staff with mishandling the Mamou case and took the matter directly into their own hands. A subsequent meeting of the Steering Committee and representatives of the C&MA board of managers resulted in the appointment of an Independent Commission of Inquiry (ICI) selected by the Steering Committee and approved by the board to study the Mamou situation, hear reports of injuries suffered, and offer findings and recommendations.⁷

The Independent Commission of Inquiry first met in March 1996 and began a thorough, eighteen-month investigation of Mamou. They found the allegations of the Mamou Steering Committee to be true. The ICI was key to the success of the Steering Committee. The five-member panel was composed of practicing Christians from both evangelical and mainline churches. Four were professionals: two psychologists (one with extensive experience with clergy abuse and the other with family systems counseling), one lawyer with many years' experience as a judge specializing in child abuse cases, and a clergy person experienced in dealing with clergy misconduct and ecclesiastical conflict resolution. The fifth member of the ICI was a C&MA lay person whom the Steering Committee felt would lend ICI credibility to C&MA laypersons.

In its eighteen months of meetings, the ICI considered more than eighty-five reports in person and by letter, reviewed an additional thirty brief communications, and conducted extensive review of archival material and other reports. The largest subgroup of witnesses was some seventy alumni of Mamou, but testimony was also received from missionary parents and former staff members. The ICI found conduct to be abusive with respect to seven adults and two former students.⁸ Of these perpetrators, three were deceased, and two were not members of the denomination or subject to C&MA authority. The types of abuse suffered by victims included sexual, physical, psychological, and spiritual abuse.⁹ All four missionaries were found guilty by unanimous vote of a tribunal of respected C&MA clergy.

In the words of the ICI Final Report:

Were children abused at Mamou? As this report will demonstrate, the answer is unequivocal. Yes, a significant number of children were seriously abused at Mamou...However, it was evident from numerous accounts that many staff were aware of the harmful actions taking place, were in a position to address their colleagues, and did not do so. Several staff members expressed deep regret about this...Some reported that the milieu of submission to unquestioned authority at that time silenced them. Some stated that they did not have the skills for such delicate confrontation at that time. When one or two staff members did address their concern to each other, they seem to have done it in a highly cloaked way which was ineffectual. Regardless of the reasons, the ICI

found that abusive conduct was permitted to continue long after it should have been stopped and that non-offending staff members are complicit by their notable silence and inaction.

It is clear, though, that throughout the period in question there was a lack of appropriate authority and responsibility on the part of the C&MA, which resulted in poor leadership and oversight. No training was provided in appropriate child care or discipline, no evaluation or supervision occurred from the administrative office, and no accessible avenues existed for the processing of complaints. Complaints, when they were made, were dismissed. These factors contributed to the fact that, when abuse did occur, it was overlooked and neglected. Despite the passage of time, the C&MA must take responsibility for this pattern of negligent administration which permitted serious, widespread, and ongoing abuse to continue.¹⁰

Formation of MK Safety Net

As news spread through the media regarding the ICI and its results, former MKs from other denominations and mission groups contacted us, asking for assistance and support in approaching their mission agencies with reports of abuse. And so rather than disbanding the Mamou Steering Committee, we evolved and expanded into a not-for-profit organization called MK Safety Net, incorporated in the state of Washington. The purpose of MK Safety Net is to promote justice and healing for MKs abused within the North American evangelical missions community. The Safety Net has two primary goals. The first is to assist former MKs who wish for their mission agencies and denominations to acknowledge the abuse that occurred while in the care of the mission and to find a sense of justice and healing. As attorney David Laidley explained to the leadership of the C&MA at the first meeting of the Mamou Steering Committee with them: All that most victims of clergy abuse want is for their church to be the church to them, to acknowledge wrongs done, and apologize and assist with the healing process while working to correct the system.

To date, MKs from twenty-four denominational and interdenominational mission agencies have reported various types of abuse to the Safety Net. A partial list of these organizations is listed on our website. A full list will be there in one week. In addition, alumni from eight boarding schools and dormitories for missionary children staffed by the C&MA have reported abuse. In

response to these allegations, only two denominations established professional ICI's (the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Methodist Church) and a third (a Mennonite board) responded positively to the recommendations of some forty MK victims of one perpetrator.¹¹ After years of wrangling with the Gospel Missionary Union (Avant Ministries) over allegations of abuse by a male dorm parent at the GMU dorm at Ivory Coast Academy in West Africa, the GMU was finally coerced into a meeting with several victims and their parents by the Conservative Baptists who had oversight of the school. While several professionals were invited to participate in that process, the investigation was neither independent of the mission boards nor did it result in a public written report that would have surely benefited the victims and the broader evangelical community.

Typically, the response of most of the 24 mission agencies mentioned above to allegations of abuse has been one of denial, ignorance, minimization, stonewalling, shooting the messenger, and blaming the victims. Common, inadequate responses to allegations of abuse include:

1. Silence. Letters, e-mails, phone calls from victims go unanswered.
2. Minimization. For example, mission agencies often state that there were different standards of discipline "back then."
3. Ineffective internal investigations. Generally, investigations of alleged abuse are conducted internally. Within a closed community such as the mission's subculture, this means that allegation is investigated by colleagues and peers of the alleged abuser. And since the alleged abuser is a "brother and sister in Christ," it is extremely difficult to believe that he or she could be a sexual predator or be physically or emotionally abusive with children. These types of internal investigations are generally very inadequate.
4. When missionaries are found guilty of abuse, too often they are simply transferred to another ministry on the field or back home to North America. There is a very strong

theology of “the call of God” on a missionary’s life, and it is very difficult to override “God’s call” and tell someone they can no longer serve as a missionary or a minister. In short, the abuse of a child is not dealt with as a crime, and the abuser is not considered a criminal.

This leads to the second goal of MK Safety Net, which is to promote paradigm shifts in the policies and practices of mission agencies and denominations relating to the care and protection of the children of their missionaries. Such a paradigm shift has a chance for success if mission agencies, their supporting churches, and mission training schools 1) take preventive action by educating themselves regarding child abuse; implement effective policies and procedures to safeguard missionary children; and retain trained personnel at headquarters and on the field who can effectively implement the policies and procedures and 2) respond swiftly to present allegations of abuse, whether from past or current situations.

Investigation of the Systemic Nature of Abuse at MK Boarding Schools

Of special concern to MK Safety Net is the systemic nature of the abuse of missionary children at MK boarding schools. The fact that over 100 such schools for MKs are still in existence with over 10,000 students behooves the evangelical missions community to examine the systemic nature of the abuse.¹² MK Safety Net believes that further independent investigations and careful research will demonstrate that the abuses that occurred at boarding schools such as Mamou Alliance Academy in Guinea, West Africa, and at the Presbyterian Central School and the Methodist-Presbyterian Hostel in the Congo are not mere isolated incidences caused by a few “bad apples” in the mission community. Sociologically, the situation is ripe for abuse when children are sent many miles from their parents to boarding schools in isolated settings for lengthy periods of time with poor access to communication and inadequate oversight of mission authorities.

In addition to research on the sociological dimension of abuse at MK boarding schools, MK Safety Net would like to see sustained research conducted on the nexus of evangelical mission

theology (core beliefs and values) and the social structure (patterns of behavior) of the MK boarding school system past and present. The theological dimension underpinning the evangelical boarding school phenomenon sorely needs examination. Any paradigm shift in the sociological dimension of mission boarding schools will entail grappling with the theological beliefs and values that drive these schools and keep the system in place. For example, the Safety Net would like to see further research conducted regarding the nexus of the following beliefs and values and abuse within MK boarding schools.

Separation, Suffering and Sacrifice

The pain of separation of missionary children is an undeniable aspect of the MK boarding school situation. For example, according to the Final Report of the ICI regarding Mamou Alliance Academy,

Over and over again MKs expressed enduring feelings of grief related to separation from their parents. Even students who reported most positive experiences and outcomes from their time in Africa commented on this reality, as did the parent witnesses. Most felt the separation was premature since the children were too young to comprehend or cope with it, and the separation was destructive to the children, to families, and was unnecessary.

One MK described the experience this way: The abandonment that we felt was profound. And it was made more so because it didn't occur just once in our childhood. Year after year we felt the ripping away of that tender cord. There was a progression of emotions that became familiar by its repetition year after year. We went from grieving the fresh loss at the beginning of the school year, to a routine that helped deny the loss and yet produced guilt for trying to feel normal in an abnormal situation, then moved on to an anxiety that bordered on fear that we may have actually forgotten what our parents were like and, finally, just when we may have actually forgotten what our parents were like, just when we were starting to feel comfortable with that stress, the countdown and accompanying excitement about going home began.

Once we were finally home, all the impossible fantasies about our parents were inevitably dashed upon the rocks of everyday family living, complete with busy parents, necessary discipline, normal disappointments, and boredom...We hardly knew our parents, and we had only four months to reestablish those bonds. The first eight weeks we spent getting to know them and tenuously placing our trust in the relationship. The last eight weeks we spent with a growing knot in our

stomachs as we began to prepare ourselves to leave them again. I remember the rage of pricking my fingers as I sewed name tags on every new article of clothing I had for the new school year. The physical pain was annoying, but it was the insult added to injury that hurt most. So we began our grieving then, only to have it climax in the inevitable trip back to Mamou. And the process would repeat itself every year.¹³

Separation from parents at boarding school along with the suffering and sacrifice it entailed were part and parcel of what it meant to be a child of evangelical missionaries in West Africa. What set of beliefs and values drove this kind of behavior? At the heart of Christianity stands the central symbol of the cross. And at the core of evangelical mission theology is the belief in a God who sends his son far away to suffer and sacrifice his life. Research needs to be done on the nexus of these core beliefs and the practice of missionary parents not only sending their own sons and daughters away to boarding school, but in the high value placed on the suffering and sacrifice such separation entailed, a suffering and sacrifice which made heroes out of missionary parents in the eyes of their supporting churches back home.

Dr. James Dobson is one voice within the North American evangelical community who has opposed the separation of MKs from their parents at boarding schools. He fully understands that this separation occurs in the context of suffering and sacrifice that missionary service entails.¹⁴ His firm conviction, however, is that the missionary family should remain intact and the separation of missionary children from their parents at boarding school can be an overwhelming experience for the child. Furthermore, he “can think of no better method of producing emotional (and spiritual) problems in a vulnerable child” than by sending them off to boarding school, adding that even “a lifetime of successes on a foreign field will be rather pale and insignificant to those who lose their own children.”¹⁵

Voices from outside of evangelical circles likewise address the issue of suffering and sacrifice as a Christian virtue. In her book titled *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, psychotherapist Carolyn Holderread Heggen draws upon the work of Marie Fortune in discussing sexual abuse in various Christian settings.¹⁶ She points out that while the crucifixion has become the central image of Christianity and may be appropriately seen as a symbol of the

redemptive nature of Christ's suffering, unfortunately some have made the cross a symbol of the virtue of all suffering. She goes on to make an important distinction between voluntary and involuntary suffering. Voluntary suffering is pain and affliction that someone chooses to accomplish a greater good. In contrast, involuntary suffering is the result of another person's sin that results in no greater good. She correctly states that "the struggles of childhood victims of abuse to reconcile their experience of violation sound hauntingly like those of survivors of concentration camps. "Where was God?" "Why did God allow this to happen?" "How can I integrate this experience into the rest of my life and keep on going?"¹⁷

The ICI Final Reports to the C&MA and the PCUSA refer to the connection between missionary parents' voluntary suffering in sending their children to boarding school and their children's involuntary suffering as a result of their boarding school experiences. MK Safety Net would like to see more research conducted that explores the nexus of theological beliefs about separation, suffering and sacrifice, and MKs' involuntary suffering and abuse at boarding school.

Salvation and the Second Coming

The Safety Net would also like to see research done on the possible connection between an evangelical mission theology built upon the foundation of an exclusivist understanding of salvation and a firm belief in the pre-millennial, imminent return of Christ on the one hand, and the proliferation of MK boarding schools on the other hand. Is there a connection? And if so, how have these doctrines affected the role of mission leaders both on the field and at headquarters in terms of the selection of boarding school staff, oversight of boarding schools, and the implementation of policies and procedures related to the care of missionary children?

Separate and Silent

Is there a connection between an evangelical ecclesiology that stresses the radical separateness and purity of the church from "the world" and the silence that seems to surround abuse at MK boarding schools? The ICI Final Report to the C&MA, for example, reveals the highly authoritarian atmosphere of the missions community in which Mamou personnel found it

extremely difficult, if not impossible, to report cases of abuse to their missionary colleagues, much less to mission leaders. And even when reports were made, the leadership clearly failed to take timely and appropriate action. How widespread has this been in the evangelical missions community? The abuse of children in the Roman Catholic Church in North America has been clearly linked to a highly-authoritarian, closed system in which the institution has gone to extreme measures to shield itself from outside intervention. It would be enlightening for comparative studies to be conducted on abuse of Protestant MKs at boarding schools and similar situations in the Roman Catholic Church.

Forgive and Forget

One of the most painful things for abused MKs to experience when they come forward with reports of abuse is the advice from parents, peers, and mission leaders that the first order of priority is for the MK to forgive and forget. In contrast to this advice, noted psychotherapist Marie Fortune argues that the topic of the victims' forgiveness should be last in the process of ecclesial response to abuse within the church.¹⁸ A more appropriate sequence would be for the mission institutions to begin with truth telling, acknowledge the violations, express compassion, protect the vulnerable, hold the perpetrator(s) accountable and expect repentance, ensure restitution, and vindicate the victims.¹⁹ Forgiveness as a process should be offered by the victim on his or her timetable.

Practical Recommendations for the Missions Community

1. We would recommend that the IFMA and EFMA jointly create a standing Independent Commission of Inquiry (ICI) which would be funded by member missions and denominations. One of the concerns mission agencies have had about an ICI is the cost of having an independent investigation of abuses. However, having one centralized ICI is more cost effective and, therefore, more viable than each mission agency or denomination having their own, e.g. minimization of start-up costs. With this arrangement, when a particular mission agency finds there are many allegations

surfacing, that agency would cover the additional cost of the ICI's investigation. A standing Independent Committee of Inquiry is our first recommendation.

2. Our second recommendation is to continue developing policies and practices regarding the safety and well-being of MKs. We feel hopeful because more mission agencies and denominations are developing such policies. We would like to stress the importance of using the same standards which would be required if the schools and community groups were located in North America and were under the jurisdiction of State and Federal law.
3. Our third recommendation is to continue to evaluate the theology of mission that impacts decisions made regarding the care of current MKs and responses to former MKs. And so we are hoping that in both academia and the mission community there will be an ongoing scrutiny and analysis of the relationship between mission theology and mission practice.

We are concluding this paper with these three recommendations. This is the first time that we have been invited to the evangelical table, and we would like to thank you for including us in the dialogue today.

Endnotes

1. Visit our website at www.mksafetynet.net
2. Rev. Dick Darr served in various leadership roles with GMU including field chairman in Mali, West Africa and as Vice-President of Public Affairs and President of GMU. Rev. Ralph Shellrude served as field chairman for the C&MA in Guinea, West Africa and as a District Superintendent in the USA.
3. See www.allgodschildrenthefilm.com for information regarding the documentary film and The Final Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry to the Board of Managers of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, November 15, 1997.
4. Later on, it came to light that others besides the Shellrudes had contacted the C&MA officials to no avail.
5. In its early stages the Mamou Steering Committee received tremendous support and counsel from two Chicago-based victims advocacy groups, The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) and Clergy Abuse Linkup (the Linkup). David Clohessy

and Barbara Blaine of SNAP and the Rev. Tom Economus of the Linkup were especially helpful.

6. In her book *How Little We Knew*, Southern Baptist missionary, Dee Miller recounts her experience of abuse at the hands of a Southern Baptist missionary in East Africa. She summarizes the tactics of many ecclesial bodies to reports of abuse as DIM thinking: Denial, Ignorance and Minimization.
7. The major sections of the ICI's Final Report explain how to use the report for healing, the process of the ICI, its findings, answers to the question "How could this have happened?," recommendations and appendices on the personnel of the ICI, therapy guidelines, spiritual care guidelines, and a recommended reading list.
8. According to the Final Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry to the Board of Managers of the Christian & Missionary Alliance, "charging criteria included the number of witnesses, reliability and accuracy of memory, influence or lack thereof of reporting parties, cross-corroboration of reports, and other considerations of witness credibility and trustworthiness of reports. In general, the ICI required more than one witness and more than one reported incident, and gave no weight to memories that had not continually existed since the incident in question, e.g. memories recovered in therapy of otherwise. Particular weight was assigned to cross-corroborate reports coming from different students of different ages, with little to no contact with each other since their Mamou attendance." Final Report, p. 34.
9. See Final Report page 34 for the ICI's definitions of the types of abuse.
10. Final Report, page 36.
11. See the 173-page Final report of the Independent Committee of Inquiry Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), September 2002, regarding abuse that took place against children of Presbyterian missionaries at a boarding school and hostel in the Congo. The report also confirmed abuses against children and adults in the United States by the same missionary perpetrator from that Congo school while he was serving a prominent PCUSA church in the United States. That inquiry has in turn spawned formal investigations of two additional boarding schools for missionary children staffed by PCUSA missionaries. These investigations are ongoing. In addition, the General Board of Global Missions of the United Methodist Church is currently funding an ICI investigations of abuse of missionary children at one of their hostels in the Congo. Updates on that investigation can be found on their official website. Furthermore, it is not lost upon the members of MK Safety Net that the only full-blown independent investigations of allegations of abuse of missionary children have occurred in mainline denominational mission agencies, not by North American evangelical missions.
12. "MK School Directory" by Janet Bloomberg in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 31, Number 2, April 1995, pp. 210-217.
13. Final Report on Mamou, page 44.
14. James Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers Your Questions About Raising Children*. (Tyndale House Publishers. Wheaton, Illinois, 1982), pp. 43-45.
15. Dobson, *Dr. Dobson Answers*, pp. 44, 45.
16. Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1993), pp. 94-96.

17. Heggen, *Sexual Abuse*, p. 95.
18. Marie Fortune, "Forgiveness as the Last Step," in *Violence Against Women and Children*. Edited by Carol J. Adams and Marie Fortune. NY: Continuum, 1995.
19. Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989), pp. 113-119.

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