

Do You Suffer in Silence?

Three letters.

Letters from three survivors of sexual abuse sent to the Independent Panel for Review of Child Abuse in Mission Settings, The United Methodist Church. See also the panel's open letters sent on September 29 and December 5, 2007.

Survivor's Letter # 1

I am writing to share my experience as a missionary kid who attended boarding school in Kinshasa, Zaire from 1966-1970.

Our parents had to make very difficult choices about our education. Their desire to serve God by serving in the mission field they were separated from us for most of the year by sending us away to school. They trusted that we would be safe and that they would insure that we would receive a good education.

I attended T.A.S.O.K. (The American School of Kinshasa and lived in the M.P.H. (Methodist Presbyterian) Hostel. It was an amazing experience and I made friends for life.

Unfortunately, the experience was not all positive for me and for many others. I was repeatedly sexually molested by one of the hostel parents who molested many other girls at our hostel as well as in the mission field.

I never told my parents and in fact I used to laugh it off by referring to the perpetrator as "that dirty old man who felt me up". I came back to the United States my junior year in high school and I was terribly shy and insecure. I put up walls around myself and was not comfortable with boys and did not date. I was miserable and lonely and felt dirty and ashamed.

When I did become sexually active, it was not a positive experience and I decided I was "frigid" (a term that we don't hear very much anymore).

My parents were busy re-establishing their lives in America and because I had been in boarding school we had a difficult time reconnecting and I tended to keep them at arms length.

When the Presbyterian Church contacted me a few years ago while investigating reports of the abuse, my carefully constructed world came crashing down on me. It was as if "Pandora's Box" had opened up and all the terrible memories I had so carefully hidden came back and I realized that I needed to stop running and to face what had happened to me.

When the investigation started, many of us were asked why we could not just let “bygones be bygones”, why we could not “forgive and forget”. I believe that most of us spent 30 years trying to do just that. We pretended that we were fine, we made excuses for being depressed, for not being able to have fulfilling sexual relationships with our husbands, for constantly trying to control everyone around us, for watching our children like hawks, for hating our bodies and for keeping people at arms length.

It was a revelation to me to learn that I was not alone and that by opening up those memories, reconnecting with my former classmates and entering therapy I could start healing the wound that has festered for so long deep inside of me.

The journey was not an easy one and it may never be over. The wounds may never completely heal, but at least I am developing the skills I need to start to regain the pieces of myself that were buried under the shame and pain.

The Methodist Church is now undergoing a similar investigation. You may have seen letters about this investigation and you may have cast them aside assuming that they are not relevant for you or for your loved ones. My father received similar letters and he also cast them aside. He and my mother were stunned when they finally contacted me to hear me tell them that “yes” I had been molested. It is a very distasteful subject and it challenges all of us to overcome our instinct to avoid it altogether.

I encourage you to put aside your fear and to reach out to each other and to the church. My personal journey has brought me much closer to my parents, husband and family. It has also helped me to feel more whole and complete in ways I never imagined were possible. Knowledge IS power!

Blessings to any of you that have suffered in silence. I hope that you will choose to come forward into the light and I want you to know that the Church and many of us that have taken this path that are willing to speak to you and support you. The Presbyterian Church has produced a DVD about this subject that I encourage you to view if you have doubts about whether you want to come forward.

Thank you for taking the time to share my story,

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Survivor's Letter # 2

I was a missionary kid in Zaire who attended Central School in my elementary years and TASOK for High School, living at the Methodist-Presbyterian Hostel (MPH) 1968-1972.

Boarding school had it's exciting times, it's fun times, scary times and lonely times. We children raised each other and cared for each other to the best of our innocent, young, inexperienced abilities. Some of my deepest friendships are ones made in boarding school!

While living in MPH, I was sexually abused by a man who was supposed to be a parent for me away from home! I held on to this secret for over 25 years, feeling that I had no one to go to, no recourse, no options. It remained hidden in the archives of my life.

Although I thought it was of no more consequence to me, my life was very much affected by this abuse. I experienced periods of depression, feelings of extreme worthlessness, low self-esteem and difficulty enjoying the physical sexual experience.

When I finally found the courage to come forward, to share my experience with other mish kids, the ICI committee and to seek the counseling they offered, I began to heal. I finally realized that I deserve to experience life to the fullest and to feel as special as God has made me, one of His children.

I encourage you, if you have experienced abuse as a missionary child, take that courageous and difficult step to reach out to other mish kids who will understand and to the Methodist Panel, who are very open, loving, and non-judgmental and only want your healing. You are important and special. You are deserving of the chance to experience healing and wholeness in your life.

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Survivor's Letter # 3

From the time I was very young, I was taught that God was a God of love and wanted the best for me. He is my protector from evil, I was told. So when I attended boarding school in the Congo at a school called Central School at Lubondai and was molested by one of my "uncles," it was a mortal blow to my faith. Where was God when this was happening to me? How could He let it happen, and how could someone whom I trusted and respected, who was a minister and represented God, do this to me? I lost my trust in God and everyone else, for that matter.

This happened when I was just entering adolescence, so it was also a mortal blow to my development as a person and as a woman. My interpersonal relationships were affected. I lost my enthusiasm for life and friendships. My trust for my parents disappeared. I didn't tell anyone of my shameful secret – how could I explain it and not be blamed, and besides, who would believe me? It was many, many years before I reached out for help.

An investigation by the Presbyterian Church into abuse in the Congo located me and showed me that I wasn't alone – I had sisters in the Congo who had suffered the same molestation! The Presbyterian Church provided an opportunity for healing that would never have been possible otherwise. Sure, it was difficult to come forward. The pain from my experiences was just as raw now as it was over 30 years ago. Yet, to my absolute joy, it is possible to experience healing and to get life back on a normal track.

The relief is impossible to describe. If this has been your experience, or similar in any way, I urge you to take the risk because it is so worth it! Maybe you were molested and are still suffering the effects without realizing the reason. Healing is possible! And no one needs to know; you are guaranteed anonymity. You would be amazed at how much of a difference it make for you and for your family!

Mary Henk Turnbull

Global Ministries: Connecting the Church in Mission

These letters and other documents distributed by the Independent Panel for Review of Child Abuse in Mission Settings, The United Methodist Church, may be downloaded from the General Board of Global Ministries' web site at gbgm-umc.org.