

## **Sexual Abuse in Missions**

by Ah Kie Lim, PhD

This article addresses the disturbing issue of sexual abuse, which regrettably occurs far too often in mission settings, YWAM schools, and even within homes through acts of incest and leadership abuse.

How does sexual abuse occur? It's crucial to understand that every child and teenager is vulnerable to abuse. In some YWAM bases, children may be placed at risk when their parents entrust them to the care of other missionaries, instructing them to show respect and obedience without fully considering the potential for abuse. Typically, children and older teenagers are victimized by individuals they know and trust, such as relatives, family friends, or caregivers. There are also instances where sexual abuse takes place within the organization, especially when a leader exploits their authority to sexually abuse the staff under them. It's important to note that sexual abuse in missions isn't limited to children but extends to every level in the YWAM community. The term "sexual assault" is used to describe such behavior when both the perpetrator and the victim are adults. Considering this, Deuteronomy 22:25-27 could arguably be interpreted as describing sexual assault or sexual abuse based on today's standards, depending on the age of the "young woman."

What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse encompasses physical, verbal, and emotional harm and can involve sexual touching, fondling, and exposure to adult sexual activity or pornography for children. It may also involve coercing children to pose, undress, or participate in sexual acts on film or in person. For adults, sexual abuse includes physical, verbal, or emotional harm. Peeping into bathrooms or bedrooms to spy on a child or an individual, as well as attempted or actual rape, are also forms of sexual abuse.

The Silent Problem

Frequently, children or individuals enduring abuse may opt to remain silent for a variety of reasons. They might fear not being believed, feel ashamed or embarrassed, worry about causing trouble or implicating a loved one, and even blame themselves for the abuse, thinking that they are being punished for their actions.

Proverbs 31:8-9 urges believers to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy." In the case of sexual abuse, the victim likely has been coerced into silence and submission. They need an advocate to speak up on their behalf.

What can we do about it as a mission?

In addressing this issue as a mission, it is imperative to engage in open conversations with our children about appropriate and inappropriate physical contact. As a community, we have a responsibility to unequivocally reject any form of abuse. It is crucial to encourage individuals who have faced abuse to seek support and not to suffer in silence. We should also prioritize believing and standing by those who come forward with reports of abuse.

1 Timothy 5:20 urges believers to publicly rebuke unrepentant wrongdoers for the benefit of others. The verse states, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" (emphasis mine). This perspective is not commonly discussed, but the public rebuke of sin serves as a deterrent, illustrating to potential offenders the consequences of their actions.

In cases of sexual abuse, reporting the offense sends a clear message that such matters are taken seriously and addressed appropriately. For example, if a sex offender were prosecuted at a daycare center, it would act as a deterrent for other predators. Similarly, in a religious community, if a leader was found to have abused their power by sexually assaulting a member, reporting it to law enforcement would signal that such behavior is not acceptable, will not be concealed, and will not be tolerated.

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, believers are urged to remove those engaging in sexual immorality from their midst for the benefit of the immoral individual. Paul explains the process of excommunication as an act of compassion rather than vengeance or condemnation. Referring to the unrepentant member of the Corinthian congregation, he says, "Hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord." In essence, the individual is to face the consequences of their actions without the protection of the faith community, in the hope that they will eventually realize their wrongdoing and repent.

Furthermore, we need to consider the following practical measures to support the victim:

- Reaffirm our continuous support and reassurance
- Aid in scheduling a medical examination
- Take accountability and report the incident to the relevant authorities
- Seek guidance from qualified professionals, even if it's only for a brief period

When addressing instances of abuse within our mission, it is crucial to have an effective process for disciplinary action and restoration. Dealing with cases of sexual abuse requires the elders, leaders, and those in authority to take responsibility for confronting the offender. The ultimate goal is restoration (Matthew 18:15-17).

It's important to recognize that the impact of moral failure extends beyond the individual who committed the offense. If the individual is married, their spouse, family members, and the community they serve will also be affected. As part of YWAM, the organization and ministry will also bear the impact of such offenses, potentially causing long-term effects. Close attention to all those affected is vital in addressing such situations appropriately.

### **Process of loving confrontation and intervention**

Upon learning of an incident, leaders should promptly come together to establish a plan for reconciliation through prayerful consideration and communicate this plan to the individuals involved.

The offender must publicly confess and seek forgiveness while recognizing that forgiveness cannot be coerced from the aggrieved party; it requires time and guidance. The YWAM community should be informed of the situation and assured they are not alone, with overseeing leaders and elders providing support.

When addressing the perpetrator, it is advisable to involve only a small intervention group and disclose the information strictly on a need-to-know basis. It is also crucial to minimize the spread of news and the process while communicating appropriately to prevent rumors and gossip.

The individual involved should be willing to participate in discipline, counseling, and interaction with others who have also made similar mistakes. Potential disciplinary actions may include an immediate removal from all leadership roles and a prohibition from engaging in ministry for at least one year, during which the individual will undergo disciplinary measures. Additionally, the leadership should notify their pastor, sending church, and family. The disciplinary process should also include time for introspection and studying the Bible to address these serious transgressions.

A top leader who commits adultery may not be reinstated to their former position. It takes several years of pruning, restoration, and demonstrating genuine repentance.

The perpetrator should be willing to cover the costs of counseling for the victim's recovery process. They should not make claims about their former ministry. Rebuilding trust will take time, and the elders and overseeing leaders should remain committed to the family and community throughout the restoration process.

As member care providers, it is essential to work with leaders to facilitate the healing and restoration of both the victim and the perpetrator. Additionally, member care

providers must be aware of local laws regarding sexual abuse and understand the proper procedures for reporting to the relevant authorities.

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