

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Whistleblowing

Whistleblowers are people who expose information or activities that are illegal, unethical or not viewed as correct within their organization. They may bring the allegations to the surface either within the organization, by telling a supervisor, or reporting the problem to someone outside the organization, such as calling the police. Such people risk retaliations from those they accuse.

Most people do not want to even know about evil activities because knowing puts them in no-win situations. However, when they do find out, they must make choices, and even doing nothing is making a choice.

Boarding schools during the last century have provided some examples of consequences when people failed to be whistleblowers. These examples may help us know what to do, so we will consider both Christian and secular boarding schools. Here we are primarily interested in considering missionaries serving in mission agencies.

A Christian (missionary) Boarding School Overseas

The most widely known instance of the lack of whistleblowers in the 20th century is one of the abuse of children in a boarding school. This abuse involved missionary kids over the span of a century.

- 1920s. Mamou Alliance Academy began in West Africa, and it continued until 1971. This involved 200 children from

several agencies, students who came from hundreds of miles away and remained at Mamou nine months each year.

- 1950s. It is not clear when abuse began at Mamou, but it was rampant there by the 1950s when 10-year-old Wes Stafford became a whistleblower. As he was boarding the plane in New York on his way back to school in Africa, he told his mother that the staff there beat students all the time for everything. He was sobbing and pleading with her not to send him back. His father and some other fathers pressured their agencies about problems, and they finally began another boarding school; however, it was fully three decades before adequate changes occurred.
- 1990s. During the late 1980s the agency began receiving many reports that students were slapped, punched, fondled, and raped. In the 1990s a committee of 30 alumni met with the agency. Thorough investigations were conducted, and changes were made. *Christianity Today* published several articles about it during the next 15 years.

Secular Private Boarding Schools in the USA

During 2016 the *Boston Globe* published a series titled “Private schools, painful secrets.” The *Globe*’s series found that 67 private schools in New England had more than 200 students who were sexually abused by staffers. Abuse of students over a long period is not limited to Christian boarding schools. Here is an example.

Choate Rosemary Hall is an elite Connecticut boarding school with alumni such as John F. Kennedy, Ivanka Trump, and other

well-known individuals. In 2017 the school admitted to sexual abuse of students by staff between 1963 and 2010. In April they made a 50-page report from an independent firm to the Board of Trustees available on-line. The report names 12 former teachers and how each teacher victimized one or more of 24 students ranging from groping to rape.

The investigation showed that when people reported sexual abuse the Choate officials handled such complaints secretly. They received many complaints over the years; however, Choate did not make any reports to Department of Children and Families about adult sexual misconduct.

What does the Bible say?

Jesus was a whistleblower throughout his ministry. John describes his clearing the temple near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (John 2:12-17). Luke describes a similar clearing of the temple at the end of his ministry (Luke 19:45-46). Matthew devotes all of chapter 23 to Jesus telling the crowds and his disciples about the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Seven times he starts a section of the chapter with the words, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees....” He simply would not let religious leaders go on with their usual practices.

Whistleblowing among missionaries began with Paul shortly after the first term of missionary service in Acts 15. After he and Barnabas returned to their sending church, some men came to it and were promoting some faulty theology. Paul confronted these men and finally went to Jerusalem to report it to headquarters. After much discussion, those at headquarters agreed with Paul’s theology.

Later a personnel problem occurred in which a missionary had a spiritual problem.

Paul wrote to Philemon (verse 24) about Demas as a “fellow worker.” Paul also sent greetings from Demas to the Colossians (4:14), another positive thing about Demas. However, something happened with Demas so that Paul wrote to Timothy, a missionary pastor that Demas had deserted him because he loved this world, and Demas had gone to Thessalonica. Paul asked Timothy to come see him and bring Mark since Demas had left (2 Timothy 4:9-11).

Those who report

Wess Stafford, author of *Too Small to Ignore: Why the Least of These Matters Most*, was called to stand before his 70 classmates at Mamou when he was ten years old. The students were told that Wess was Satan’s favorite tool. Now his mother was not able to do her work on the field, and Africans would be in hell because of him. Then Wess was forced to hold a candle lighted at both ends so that it burned toward his fingers which blistered until a first grader knocked the candle out of his fingers.

People who become whistleblowers often find that harmful things occur: however, in long run they feel satisfaction that they did the right thing. Laws exist in the USA to protect whistleblowers, but those laws are not always applied, and it may be impossible to prove the wrong. The list of possible consequences is endless, but some common ones are listed here.

- Reprisal or retaliation
- Legal action, social stigma, or humiliation
- Firings or transfers to insignificant work
- Accused of being unethical or breaking promises

Those who do not report

The rest of the students at Mamou and all of the staff, (except for one junior teacher who was told to mind her own business) failed to report the abuse. The abuse continued for decades and involved more than 200 students. All went on as usual. As Wess put it in his book, years later, “The hall became a jumble of shrieks, pleas, cracks of the belt, and wailing children” (p. 134).

Some may ask why siblings did not report, but we must remember that these children were threatened with beatings themselves. They were told that if they told anyone they would destroy parents’ ministry, and Africans would go to hell. Wess said that his sister knew his cry, and she shed many tears every week for her brother.

Not reporting may seem best because one avoids the immediate consequences like being beaten or losing one’s position; however, later even worse things can occur.

Some of these later bad things include:

- Feeling guilt or shame when others suffer
- Dealing with rejection by others
- Dealing with legal issues that arise
- Wondering what God thinks of failure to respond and wondering if they had sinned

What can we do?

Of course, we must listen to the whistleblowers, especially children. Although they may fabricate stories, we must take time to check the stories out rather than ignoring them. Wess’s parents both took action even though they had questions about what he had said.

We must also break the silence and inform others as well as reporting to the authorities. Perpetrators are likely to look for similar positions. Some of the Mamou

teachers found other teaching positions, and the new employers did not know what they had done--and were likely to do again.

Most important of all is to get rid of the secrets. Remember that the *Boson Globe* titled its series “Private schools, painful secrets.” That title states what we must do. We must do away with the secrets.

Although this is generally true, it is especially important with sexual abuse. Physician Walt Larimore wrote *Bryson City Secrets* because his two children requested it, and they urged him again when he was reluctant. They had both been sexually abused by a babysitter, and they had told their parents the next afternoon. Walt immediately called Social Services, and the children were interviewed by counselors that afternoon and later as well.

After consulting with a lawyer, a theologian, and another professional as well as other trusted friends, he and his wife prayerfully decided to move to Florida where he had found a position. In a matter of weeks they moved.

Everything seemed to go well for nearly two decades. Both children were nearing the end of college, and one November evening Walt and his wife received a phone call from one of their children (now 24) pleading for them to come visit for Thanksgiving because of thoughts about the perpetrator. Five days later the whole family met in Washington D. C. for the holiday, and they thoroughly discussed the continuing consequences of abuse.

They met again for Christmas, and both children convinced Walt to tell their story to help others who have been abused. They hoped others could also find the healing they were beginning to experience. It is never too late to break the silence.

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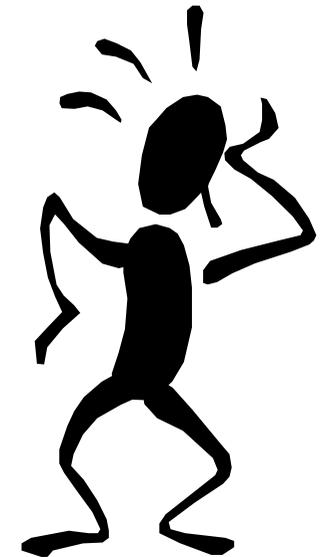
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