

World Church Says "No" to Abuse in Global Initiative

August 19, 2003 Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
[Ansel Oliver/ANN]



Heather-Dawn Small, associate director for the Adventist Church's Women's Ministries.

Eight Seventh-day Adventist church ministries are joining together to educate members about child abuse. On Aug. 23 the world church will hold its second annual abuse prevention Sabbath, or Saturday, in an effort to reduce abuse.

"The problems of society are the problems of the church--there's very little difference," says Heather-Dawn Small, associate director of Women's Ministries for the world church, the department that initiated the international campaign, "Breaking the Silence."

The problem was big enough that the entire church needed to deal with abuse, says Small. "We could have just sent out information packets from women's ministries or the family ministries departments, but we wanted our worldwide membership to know that the leadership takes this issue seriously." The church voted the abuse prevention Sabbath as an annual awareness event at the

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2001 Annual Council, a meeting of the church's global leadership.

Small says that some Adventists differ in how they view abuse: from those who say, "Abuse doesn't happen in the Christian home," to others who have left the church because they have been hurt or feel the church has not addressed abuse sufficiently.

The church is confronting the issue openly through leadership, says Ron Flowers, co-director of the Adventist Church's family ministries. He says this will bring a greater comfort level for those who need to be heard. "Without the direct intervention through leadership, the likelihood that people will talk is remote.

"Jesus stood up for people who were vulnerable," he continues. "We have gone beyond the point where we are just ashamed. We now want to address realities that are out there."

Eight years ago the Adventist Church's family ministries department released statistics of a study from seven of the church's then 12 world regions. Providing statistics for adults, the study showed that in some areas of the world, at least 15 percent of Adventist females reported being physically abused, and as many as 43 percent were abused in other regions.

"However, not everybody is willing to accept this as a problem," says Small. "Some people want to keep their heads in the sand. They think that if they don't acknowledge it, it's not real. But it is very real."

The Adventist Church's abuse prevention Sabbath is the fourth Saturday in August each year. For its first abuse prevention day last year, the church focused on abuse in general. This year the emphasis is child abuse.

In 1989 the United Nations adopted the "Convention on the Rights of the Child." A statement voted by leadership at the Adventist Church world session in 1995 says the church, "...affirm[s] the dignity and worth of each human being and decr[i]es all forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and family violence....We take seriously reports of abuse..."

In 2000, church leadership voted a statement on the well-being and value of children, including rights of children (see www.adventist.org/beliefs/main_stat51.html).

In broader abuse statistics worldwide, one in three women have been abused in some form. In England and Wales, one in four murder victims are wives killed by husbands. In

Latin America and the Caribbean, six out of 10 women have suffered physical or psychological abuse by their intimate partner. In Papua New Guinea, 67 percent of wives report they suffer marital violence. In Egypt, Jamaica and Greece, one in five divorces are granted on grounds of spousal cruelty. Domestic violence costs the country of Canada \$1.6 billion (Canadian) per year. In the United States, 200 women are raped or battered every hour.

"When a victim knows that their church cares enough to do something about it, they grow spiritually because they see the loving care they need," Small says. "They can then say, 'Yes, my church leadership cares.'"

Small says the church's South American region is taking the issue very seriously. Every department in the region is helping with the initiative.

Small encounters church members in her travels who ask for seminars on abuse, hoping to learn more about how they can receive help, or assist someone they know who has experienced abuse.

"When the church leadership says there is a problem, it gives it credence--it gives it more clout for the change to happen," she says.

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