

## **Amazing Grace: A Different Perspective**

*Frances Schander, Superintendent, Ontario Conference, Oshawa, ON*

*“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.” Matthew 18:6*



It's clear that Jesus loved children. Many of us have a Nathan Greene-like picture in our minds of Jesus, surrounded by adoring children and fluffy, docile animals which are attracted to His natural loveliness. We have all sung “Jesus loves the little ones like me, me, me” with fervor and believed it. But the Matthew 18:6 text seems to have unusually harsh words for a “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” At least that's what it seemed like to me, until a recent seminar I attended taught me more about child molestation than I ever cared to know.

Yes, I was aware that child molestation happened. As educators, all of us somewhere have or will learn of this ugly crime. But I can't say I had given much, if any, serious thought to the whole matter for an entire day. A recent Ontario Conference teacher in-service opened my eyes both to the prevalence of the problem and to our closed-eyes vulnerability. The statistics speak for themselves. Among other things, I learned that

- 1 in 4 girls has been sexually molested.
- 1 in 9 boys has been sexually molested.
- 1 in 20 men are molesters (some reliable sources peg this lower at 1 in 10).
- 5% of molested children “tell.”
- sex offenders commit an average of 120 separate crimes before being caught.
- 76% of molesters began molesting as children.
- only 30% of abusers are arrested.
- just 3% are ever prosecuted.
- 25 years later, 52% of offenders will have re-offended.

According to Cory Jensen, co-director of the Center for Behavioral Intervention, Beaverton, OR, all churches are magnets to sex offenders. However, churches with schools and camps tend to have the highest percentage of abusers because “they're safe.” Jensen, not a Seventh-day Adventist, says that churches attract sex offenders, and the Seventh-day Adventist church and school system is right up there near the top of the list. “Churches probably have twice as many offenders as the regular community,” she says, “and that's largely because denial runs deeper in the faith community due to one very simple reason: Christians can't stand the idea that other Christians would commit these types of crimes.”

So what can we do to keep this from happening? For years, as educators and parents, we have held children responsible for their own safety. We promoted the “No, Go, Tell” strategy first developed in the 1980s. This placed the responsibility upon the child to say

“no” to an adult or older child, and then leave to tell a responsible person. Closely following on the heels of this programme was the “Stranger Danger” which taught child to avoid strangers.

Unfortunately, the abusers are not strangers, but usually are well known to the child. It is well-documented that only one in five children actually “resists” molesting. That’s because the would-be molester has the child’s trust, and often has groomed a relationship with not only the child but with the child’s family. One of the most difficult issues is that molesters look and act just like everybody else. They could be the next door neighbor, the church “pillar,” the “teacher of excellence,” the to-all-appearances self-sacrificing pathfinder counselor, or the chief financial supporter of the school.

Most vulnerable are children who come from single parent homes or “unhappy” homes. Also vulnerable are children with an unemployed father or parents that work different shifts, who live in a home with a stepfather or a mother’s boyfriend, or who have inadequate parental supervision. These “loser” children are highly attractive to pedophiles because few will believe them if they do tell.

I have lived long enough to know that, as a church, we have often extended grace to the errant pedophiles of our church community. Molesters – self-confessed and otherwise— have generally been viewed as rehabilitated. They have been prayed over and welcomed back into the fold. I believe that all persons can and should experience God’s forgiving power. But statistics indicate that child molestation is deeply engrained – a life- long addiction. Such individuals require constant vigilance – for everyone’s sake. While God’s grace is freely given to all, as a church and school community we must be careful about whom we are trying to protect most: vulnerable children or those who prey upon them.

One thing has become clear: protecting our children is an adult responsibility. Educators and parents cannot expect a child to be able to protect himself from a child molester. Instead, parents and educators must have close communication with their children. Parents especially must educate their children about healthy views of sexuality and give their children specific information about where on their bodies they should not be touched or touch others. Adults must be vigilant regarding children’s friends and the homes in which children play. Both educators and parents should have “safety” talks periodically to reinforce correct procedures and values.

Finally, all schools systems and churches should require a Vulnerable Sector Check for all employees and volunteers on a regular basis (3-5 years). This goes far beyond the standard Criminal Background Check required by most employers. It includes convictions and charges pending under the Child and Family Services Act, along with a record of all accusations (not just convictions), including charges where no finding of guilt was made and incidents where no charges were laid. A lengthy “trail,” even though no guilt was established, establishes a pattern that will alert a potential employer.

One thing Jensen made clear was this: a child molester is always a potential child molester, until his last breath is taken. In short, the responsibility for protecting our

children falls on us – the adults of the school, church, or community. As an educator, my perspective about the need to protect vulnerable children has changed.