

A Response to Child Abuse & Our Commitment to Child Protection

TRAINING LEADERS. PLANTING CHURCHES.
LAUNCHING MISSIONS MOVEMENTS.

abwe



Historical Overview

For more than 90 years, ABWE missionaries and staff have shared the good news of Jesus—multiplying leaders, churches, and missions movements through evangelism, discipleship, and church planting.

While the eternal impact of these life-changing ministries is worth celebrating, we would be remiss to not also acknowledge a dark time in our history where ABWE leaders failed.

Over the past decade, our mission unearthed historical policies and leadership decisions that ultimately led to the harm and abuse of children in our mission, primarily in the 1970s and 1980s.

This abuse was first widely revealed in 2011 by the now-adult victim survivors. As a result, ABWE hired a third-party firm to investigate what happened and why. After a multi-year investigation, ABWE was able to provide the victim survivors with—and then publicly release—an in-depth report in 2016.

The report found more than 20 cases of historic child abuse and sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by an ABWE missionary and physician serving in Bangladesh, that occurred in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

The investigation highlighted a lack of oversight and action by past ABWE leadership in confronting the offender, which provided him opportunities to perpetuate his abuse of children. Furthermore, it determined that previous leaders failed to respond appropriately to victims in the years that followed.

Child Safety and ABWE Today

After the abuse was publicly revealed, ABWE walked through the report to identify important areas of change and transparency; and leadership walked with the survivors and their families toward reconciliation and restoration, if they desired it.

All of these experiences have helped the organization to build a new way forward.

We've seen how different organizational cultures and policies can either harm or help to safeguard families. We've seen how organizational transformation and accountability—born out of experience—can be channeled to educate others and eliminate opportunities for abuse.

As a result of our collective experience, ABWE has created a framework of policies and guidelines that serve to protect and strengthen our ministry's teams, families, and partnerships.

ABWE: Current Child Safety Strategies

Keeping children safe and preventing child abuse requires proactive diligence. Today, ABWE's policies and procedures enable us to foster a culture of transparency, accountability, and visibility, and to enact swift and potentially severe consequences when those policies are broken.

Our ongoing child safety strategy is built around the following foundational pieces:

Strong Policies: We are responsible to create organizational culture and define acceptable behaviors in that culture. Good training helps our teams to understand acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Adding an additional level of accountability protects our missionaries and partners by removing opportunities for both allegations and actual abuse.

Robust Screening: ABWE requires anyone serving in ministry on our fields, regardless of the length of time, to have a background check. They are also required to take child safety training, regardless of the type of ministry work they might perform. This comprehensive screening process helps us discover and prevent offenders from accessing our teammates and signals how seriously we take child protection.

Monitoring and Supervision: Supervision, training, and safety education exist so that every teammate can both identify violations and understand their responsibility to report them. A dedicated child safety team resources our missionaries and responds to concerns, allegations, and incidents of suspected abuse.

Internal and Constituent Feedback: We invite feedback from our teams and partners to help us constantly evaluate our current practices and make sure they are effective in real-world, ministry scenarios.

Informed Board: Our board is informed of risks and ongoing implementation of child safety best practices¹ and adds another level of accountability and transparency to the decisions and policies we enact.

CHILD PROTECTION STRATEGY: Background Checks and Clearances

ABWE requires child safety training and background checks for **everyone**—regardless of their state of residency, and even if the individual does not have direct care or supervision of children.

In cases where people are serving with children at our International Headquarters based in Pennsylvania, we comply with Pennsylvania ACT 153—which requires childcare workers to have a state police check, child abuse clearance, and FBI fingerprint search.

All ABWE missionaries, staff and adult volunteers are required to perform a background check every five years. However, we know that not all background checks are equal. To ensure quality, we do not accept previous background checks, and typically require all staff members, missionaries and adult volunteers, interns, or teams to complete background checks through Proforma, an NAPBS-accredited background screening company.

While minors are not required to have background checks, our “two-adult policy” does not permit minors to watch children in a ministry setting alone.

CHILD PROTECTION STRATEGY: Training

All ABWE staff, missionaries, and adult volunteers are required to take child safety training through Praesidium Armatus. This training includes an ABWE Policies Course developed to help those in our ministry understand our child-protection policy, as well as requirements for mandatory reporting and applicable laws.

In addition to the online Praesidium training, all missionaries are trained in ABWE’s child-protection policy twice on-site at ABWE before they ever even leave for the field—including how to apply the policies in real-life ministry scenarios.

We are proactively training parents and our teams on awareness and prevention for the sake of children and the safety of the communities where we serve.

We work with and look to experts in the field to continue to create and implement child safety training, because we fully acknowledge that we are not the experts. We have gone to some of the very best in the business to train our missionaries and staff on the unique circumstances of working in international ministry in different countries and cultures.

We also partner with the Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention, a non-profit, accreditation entity that helps to ensure an organization's child abuse policies and procedures are effective and implemented in accordance with best practices and legal standards.

Sharing What We've Learned

Our child safety policy is available in French and Spanish so that national partners and other ministries can also take the training.

Our international schools and ministry affiliates have an agreement with ABWE and an affiliate child protection policy that they are required to follow.

Each affiliate has a primary child safety advocate and a secondary child safety advocate for local reporting, who is required to know the local reporting laws as well as how to apply the child safety policy in their ministry context.

We also make our trainings available to partner churches to help the evangelical church learn more about how we can all play a role in the safety of our children.

In instances where partner churches couldn't afford the training fee, but were interested in the training, ABWE has covered the cost.

Our Board Commitments

The ABWE Board remains committed to:

Jesus Christ: Because we are followers of Jesus Christ, we are committed to treating others in ways that reflect the teachings of Jesus found in the Scripture, which is authoritative for every decision ABWE makes.

Humility: We are committed to continually listening to, learning from, and compassionately serving those within our sphere of influence.

Transparency and Accountability: We are committed to creating leadership structures and policies that generate transparency and accountability.

Best Practices: We are committed to finding and implementing best practices in child safety, and to create them in areas where best practices do not exist.

Responding to victims of abuse: ABWE has privately responded to all the victims found in the report, and worked with them to the extent they desired, to repent, restore, and if possible, reconcile.

We are committed to providing support to any victim/survivors and their families in instances of abuse perpetrated by current or former ABWE employees and missionaries.

Our policies are built to enact swift and potentially severe consequences for those caught in violation of our child safety policies, to the extent that ABWE is able.

If there are any allegations of abuse, in the future - and we hope and pray that there aren't - we remain committed to swift action, proper reporting, and helping victims to obtain holistic care and support.

Looking to the Future

ABWE is steadfast in our commitment to create a culture where every church, home, hospital, school, and crossroads within our ministry community is a place where all people—but especially children—are protected.

While we wish that we could completely eliminate child abuse in our world, we have created policies and a culture of accountability and carefulness to diligently prevent predators from accessing children in our ministries. Through consistent training, clear roles and responsibilities, and clear reporting structures, we're eliminating opportunities to prey on the vulnerable in our midst.

If our team can help you or your organization in your work toward building a stronger culture for child protection, or answer questions for other elements outlined above, contact us at: childsafety@abwe.org.

¹ Adapted from Praesidium's Safety Equation <https://website.praesidiuminc.com/wp/>

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