

REDEEMING SUFFERING

We don't always know why bad things happen, but we do know the One who brings good from them.

Followers of God have long wondered why he—omnipotent and completely good—allows evil and suffering if he can stop it. The New Atheists have thrown this argument at Christians in recent years, with varying degrees of success. And of course the issue of theodicy—the branch of theology that defends the ways of God—is of perennial interest to students, clergy, and the laity. But the existence of suffering in God's world is much more than an academic question or an intellectual conundrum. Just ask someone who's faced unjust suffering—like Wess Stafford, president and CEO of Compassion International.

"[The] story was so painfully confusing that I did not speak of it for 35 years," Stafford writes in "A Candle in the Darkness," an article in *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*. "Where did my prayers go, my cries for mercy and rescue screamed into my pillow? Did I have the laziest guardian angel in all of heaven?"

Scripture: Genesis 37:12–36; 50:15–21; Psalm 44:1–26; Isaiah 55:1–9; John 9:1–7; Acts 3:11–21; Romans 8:18–39

Based on: "A Candle in the Darkness," by Wess Stafford, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, May 2010



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.



- 1** Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them instead.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to leader: Provide each person with "A Candle in the Darkness" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

The heartfelt, desperate, and perfectly reasonable questions of a boy facing abuse at a missionary boarding school in Africa—where he should be safe—can go unanswered for many years. Some never receive an answer in this life. But that does not mean that God is not present or that, if he is, that there are no answers. Yet many of us turn our backs on God, at least for a time, if he does not respond as we expect. Many of our so-called “intellectual problems” with the Bible or with God’s existence are really questions of trust in the face of pain and disappointment. And they are not at all new. God’s people have always had to wrestle with questions of theodicy. This study may not help you sort through the why of suffering and evil. But we pray that it will help you with the *Who*.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q]** Tell us about a time when God clearly and dramatically answered your prayers for deliverance.
- [Q]** Name a period in your life when your prayers for help seemingly got no higher than the ceiling. Did you doubt God’s goodness?
- [Q]** What do faithful followers of Christ deserve in this life? What can they expect? Why this gap?
- [Q]** How would you attempt to help a friend experiencing either suffering or doubt?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: God brings good out of the evil done to his people.

Wess Stafford suffered in silence for years. Then, for many more years, he followed a code of silence, unable to explain why his loving Lord had permitted adults who claimed to follow that same Lord to abuse him physically, mentally, and spiritually. “The school’s MKs limped away from their childhoods, many with lifelong scars,” Stafford recounts. “Thankfully, for me, my story—a story that Satan intended for evil but that God redeemed for good—has a different ending.”

That ending, unimagined by an abused little boy at the time—but clearly evident now—came decades later. “My story is what has fueled my passion against injustice, my crusade against abuse, my fight against poverty,” Stafford now says. “It is what drove me

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to Compassion International. For 32 years, I have fought for little ones who have no voice and no choice. The passion that gripped me at age 10 still rages within me today.” The Old Testament character Joseph could tell a similar story.

Genesis 37:1–11 shows us the stirrings of sibling rivalry and jealousy. As in Wess Stafford’s story, those who could be expected to protect and care for Joseph—his own flesh and blood—instead torment him for their own depraved reasons. Their evil comes to fruition with the brothers’ plot to harm and sell Joseph into Egyptian slavery. Read Genesis 37:12–36 and 50:15–21.

[Q] Joseph is sold into slavery and the brothers deceive their father (37:25–36). Human depravity always involves some level of cover-up and deception, as Stafford experienced at the boarding school. Stafford also discovered that the truth began to set him free from the lies of his abusers. How do we encourage those who are suffering to face the truth of their suffering?

[Q] Years later, the truth has come out, and the brothers fear Joseph’s retribution (50:15–18). How should we as Christians respond to repentant abusers?

[Q] What reason does Joseph give for his unjust suffering (v. 20b)? How does this help us put our suffering in perspective?

Teaching Point Two: Sometimes we will feel that God has forgotten us.

Stafford cried out during four years of abuse at the boarding school in Guinea. He figured there was no way out. If he spoke up, Stafford’s young mind may have reasoned, no one would believe his word over that of a trusted authority figure. And besides, his abusers constantly warned him that speaking up would jeopardize the missionary ministry of his parents—and put the souls of the Africans they were trying to help at risk of eternal damnation. So it appeared that God had provided no way out. This has happened to God’s saints before, and indeed is played out in the pages of Scripture. Read Psalm 44:1–26.

[Q] In verses 1–8, the writer recounts all the faithful blessings he and the people of Israel have seen from God’s hand over the centuries. Why is this a good way to begin our petitions in times of trouble?

[Q] The psalmist now turns to his complaint (vv. 9–16). What complaints do you have against God? Do you expect, like the psalmist, for God to step in and solve all your problems? What kind of theology does this thinking evidence?

[Q] The psalmist then pleads his case (vv. 17–22), saying that the people have not brought these problems on themselves. If that is also the case, at least some of the time, in our lives, how do we deal with God’s silence?



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- How might the righteous suffering of other believers help us when we suffer similarly?

[Q] The writer makes a final plea for the Lord to act, based on his power and goodness (vv. 23–26). There is no assurance, however, that God will do what the psalmist wishes, only a reminder that God is a God of love (v. 26b). How does this knowledge help us hang on when God does not appear to care?

Optional Activity: *Have each person draw up a list of blessings he or she has clearly received from God in the last week ... month ... year ... five years ... ten years. Then have each person draw up a list of unanswered prayers and problems. Discuss how the lists balance out.*

Teaching Point Three: God calls us to seek him and promises that we will find him.

Wess Stafford found God at his point of greatest need, and that encounter fueled his life's passion to help children. "My job now is to champion the cause of these children, to help them understand the love Jesus Christ has for them," Stafford writes. "Imagine my joy when every day hundreds of children accept Jesus as their Savior, at the knee of their pastor or with a Sunday school teacher under the mango tree. Imagine my joy that we daily vaccinate thousands of children. Imagine my joy that I get to challenge the church about the importance of children."

Joy is available to all of God's children—even you—no matter the tangled circumstances of our lives, no matter the scars. God promises that if we seek him, we will find him.

Read Isaiah 55:1–9.

[Q] To whom is this passage addressed (v. 1)? How do these descriptions fit us in our sin and suffering? What are we invited to do?

[Q] What reasons are we given to come to the Lord (vv. 2–3)? List them. How do they apply to us today?

[Q] When we come to God, we are to bring others along as well (vv. 4–5). How does going through suffering equip us to serve others?

[Q] List the commands and benefits given in verses 6–7.

[Q] Why are we told we cannot understand the ways of God (vv. 8–9)? What comfort does this bring?



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Teaching Point Four: God can display his glory and purposes in our suffering.

Why was Wess Stafford abused? Why do we suffer? Why doesn't a good and omnipotent God put an immediate end to evil in this world? Such questions don't always have answers—or at least answers we can understand. Yet the questions will come, as they always have. Even the disciples asked them, and Jesus was not offended by them. In fact, he gave an answer that believers can take to the bank, trusting in him to redeem our suffering.

Read John 9:1–7.

[Q] The disciples ask if sin has caused this man's blindness. Do you struggle with believing that suffering is punishment for sin?

[Q] Jesus denies that sin is the reason and points to the divine opportunity that the man's disability presents. In other words, Jesus directs their gaze from the past to the future. Give an example of how you might do that in your circumstances.

[Q] In verses 4–5, Jesus invites the disciples to seize the opportunity. Give an example of how you can do the same for someone you know is suffering?

Teaching Point Five: God redeemed the suffering of Christ for the world.

We saw how God redeemed Wess Stafford's unjust suffering. Stafford, in his own words, turned from a victim to a victor and received a calling to help other suffering and exploited children. That kind of example, perhaps, is reason enough to give the Lord the benefit of the doubt when we face painful seasons in life. But how might our perspective be deepened by the knowledge that even Jesus faced unjust suffering—and that his heavenly Father used it for the redemption of the world?

Read Acts 3:11–21.

[Q] Peter accused his Jewish listeners of killing Jesus and calls on them to repent (v. 19). Is there a time when you were so bold? How can we tell the truth and still exhibit love?

[Q] In the midst of such human wickedness, God already had a plan. Name its elements (see vv. 13, 15–16, 18–21). What the people ignorantly intended for evil God redeemed for the good of the world, using that evil to accomplish his purposes. What perspective does this provide for our own suffering?



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Teaching Point Six: God's promised blessings will far outweigh any suffering we experience.

Skeptics often dismiss talk of heaven as “pie in the sky when you die,” and say we should not include it when examining God's actions. This, however, is not a biblical view. The Bible assures us that when we look at the sufferings of Wess Stafford and innumerable other saints, we are seeing far less than half the picture. The apostle Paul makes the point that we have not examined suffering from every angle until we acknowledge that this life is not the end. Regardless of whether we see our good and powerful God redeem our pain in this life, we can rest assured that he will do so in the next.

Read Romans 8:18–39.

[Q] Paul says that not only will God's blessings far outweigh our current sufferings, but the difference in magnitude is so great that they are not even worth comparing (v. 18). Tell us of a time when a payoff—a good job following long years of education, the thrill of athletic victory after the agony of training, etc.—far exceeded the pain of preparation.

[Q] We are told that not only do we suffer, but in a sense creation suffers along with us (vv. 19–22) as it waits for our revealing. While our pain is usually intensely personal, our blessings will be cosmic. How do we begin to enjoy that destiny now, even as we suffer?

[Q] What is the connection between hope and patience (vv. 24–25)?

[Q] What are the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our times of suffering (vv. 26–39)?

- How can we draw confidence from and cooperate with the ministry of God to prepare us for the glorious life to come?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Suffering and evil are all too real in this world. While God is both loving and omnipotent, he sometimes allows them to break in like armed intruders against us. Even those of us who are young, weak, and inexperienced—such as the boy Wess Stafford—must grapple with these enemies. Stafford faced seemingly hopeless manipulation and abuse and saw no way out. Yet God gave him the grace to stand up not only to his tormenters but for exploited children around the world. God redeemed his suffering, and he can do so for you.



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The story of Joseph tells us that when people try to hurt us, God can use their hatred to accomplish blessing through our lives. Psalm 44 reminds us, that we might sometimes feel abandoned by God, but this doesn't mean God has forgotten us. Isaiah points out that God's ways are far above ours but that we can trust in his love. In the story of the man who was born blind, we learn that suffering presents an opportunity for God to be glorified. Peter's sermon comforts us with the knowledge that Jesus also faced and triumphed over evil, so he understands. Romans tells us that while our suffering may indeed be horrible now, such trouble pales in comparison with the glory that will be revealed in us—a glory that will sweep up the whole world in its train.

Does God redeem suffering? Yes, indeed he does. The question is not whether God is good or powerful. The question is whether we will let him work amidst our pain for our good and the good of the world.

Action Point: *Choose someone in your church or group who is sick or suffering. Pray for that person and agree to do something practical to meet a need. Cook a meal, take out the trash, do some grocery shopping—whatever seems most necessary. And be available to listen to this friend pour out his or her heart.*

— Stan Guthrie is author of the forthcoming *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* (Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Perspectives on Suffering** This 4-session Bible study emphasizes how to remain faithful in the midst of suffering more than it emphasizes why suffering exists. Scripture gives us a small glimpse into why God allows suffering, but more importantly it gives great resources for persevering in the midst of suffering.
- **Job: God Is in Charge** Learn about themes of suffering, wisdom, and trust in this 9-session study on the book of Job.
- **Suffering** This 5-session study will help you and your group explore the topic of suffering and discuss recent tragedies with questions like: What is the nature of suffering? How can we learn and grow through tragedy? Where is God in all this?



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- **2 Corinthians: Hard Knocks, Unbreakable Faith** Second Corinthians speaks about the harsh realities of life and the unbreakable faith that sustains us through difficult and dangerous times. Paul wrote this letter both to establish his credibility as an apostle and to teach the Corinthians a proper perspective on hardship and suffering—a perspective we very much need today.
- **Can I Trust God with My Health?** This 5-session course will challenge you to address a variety of questions about health: How does God use pain and suffering in the lives of his children? How do we deal with the stresses of life without letting them negatively affect our health? Is it biblical to define prosperity as physical health, material wealth, or earthly success? What can the church do to answer these questions and help those in poor health?

📖 **What's So Amazing about Grace? / Where Is God When It Hurts?** Two volumes in one, by Philip Yancey, Zondervan, 2007. Classic treatments on core questions.

📖 **What's So Great about Christianity**, by Dinesh D'Souza, Tyndale, 2008. Apologetics geared to the questions skeptics are asking today.

📖 **Joni: An Unforgettable Story**, by Joni Eareckson Tada, Zondervan, 2001. How God redeemed the suffering of a young woman and launched a worldwide ministry to the disabled and their families.

🌐 The website of International Christian Concern, www.persecution.org, describes the suffering of Christians worldwide for their faith—and how you can help.



A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a blue button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hands are held out in front of him, palm up, holding a small, white, cylindrical object with a red band, possibly a candle or a small container. The background is dark and out of focus.

A Candle

{ COVER STORY }

A

AT A TURNING POINT

in my life in 2007, I realized that I needed to allow God to redeem the story of my childhood. That story was so painfully confusing that I did not speak of it for 35 years. Where did my prayers go, my cries for mercy and rescue screamed into my pillow? Did I have the laziest guardian angel in all of heaven?

I received my calling, my purpose, and my life's mission in my darkest and most painful moment, in about 90 seconds at age 10. The moment involved a pink birthday candle, one that had been trimmed with a pocketknife at the blunt end so that it could burn from both directions. The wicks were lit by the man who had authority over me, the houseparent of a boarding school for the children of missionaries in West Africa. The school had been my home for nine months of each year since I was 6 years old. My whole life can be divided into two parts: B.C. (before the candle) and A.D. (after the damage).

'AFRICANS IN HELL BECAUSE OF WESLEY'

The houseparent had marched me to the school's dining hall, dragged a metal chair across the concrete floor, and slammed it down in front of my schoolmates. He threw me up on the chair and jammed the candle in my hand.

"Children," he said, "you cannot serve both God and Satan. Wesley has tried. You cannot burn a candle at both ends without getting burned. Watch what happens when you try."

Fifty children stared in silence. Nobody dared even breathe.

Striking a match, the man lit both wicks.

"Watch!" Standing on that chair, my knees knocking, I stared incredulously at the candle in my shaking fingers as I contemplated what this would mean. Beyond the two flames, I could see the faces of my friends—children who, like me, had been gathered up from villages and mission stations throughout West Africa.

Mission policy dictated that all MKS leave their parents at age 6 and travel 700 miles (a week by truck) to this isolated jungle school. They, like me, had experienced unspeakable cruelty in this place. The people in charge were missionaries who had gone to Africa to save souls but, I don't know, perhaps did not measure up linguistically or cross-culturally, so instead had been assigned to the least desirable task on the field: taking care of other missionaries' children. Unsupervised, they took out their frustration and rage on their most convenient targets: the children in their charge. I learned early that terrible things can happen when children are deemed unimportant, the lowest of priorities.

The stage for this horrendous moment had been set by four years of abuse.

The president of
Compassion International
tells his story
of childhood abuse
and deliverance in
a West Africa
boarding school.
By Wess Stafford

in the Darkness

ERIK STENBAKEN

For all my young life at the school, I had endured beatings daily. Belt buckles and tire-tread sandals had bruised and torn my flesh since age 6. There were a million ways to earn a beating here—infractions like a wrinkle in a bedspread or an open eye during naptime. At age 9 we learned in math class how to average. The most recurring event in my life I could think of was how many times I had been beaten. For a span of weeks, I kept track of my beatings, hiding the tally under my pillow. When I did the math, I discovered that I was being beaten an average of 17 times per week.

The boarding school staff abused us in every way a child can be abused—not only physically and emotionally but spiritually as well. We were terrified of their powerful and vengeful God, reminded daily that we were little sinners in the hands of their angry God.

I won't dwell on the sexual abuse we endured, but wherever evil reigns unchecked, this favorite weapon of Satan's always lurks. The people who read us Bible stories and beat us during the day prowled the dorm halls at night, preying on the defenseless. Older boys, victims themselves, learned to mimic their elders in that depraved environment to serve their own lustful desires, and they used blackmail and physical pain to silence us.

There was no one to protect us. We had no advocates, no arms to run to. The very people who should have been our defenders were in fact our attackers.

Our houseparent spoke angrily to the children. 'This boy here is Satan's tool. He told, and the Devil used him to destroy his parents' ministry. There will be Africans in hell because of Wesley.'

And now, standing on that chair with the candle gripped between my fingers, I was at my lowest, darkest moment. I cannot describe the cumulative hurt, rage, and hopelessness that welled up and wracked my 10-year-old soul. At this man's hand, I had always lost. Plain and simple, he was bigger and stronger. He was a man; I was a boy.

He spoke angrily to the assembled children. "This boy here is Satan's tool. He *told*, and the Devil used him to destroy his parents' ministry. There will be Africans in hell because of Wesley."

Hearing those words, there arose in me a rage, a passion as I had never experienced before and have not since. I had felt I could endure almost any treatment at his hands—I had for years. But the candle incident was different. Never had words cut so deeply.

Yes, I had *told*. As a desperate boy, I had cried out to my mother for help. For years, 50 of us children had courageously maintained our silence. We were repeatedly told, "If you tell what happens here, you will destroy your parents' ministry." Our abusers used our love



Right-Hand Man: Stafford (middle) helped his mission-ary father (left) bring the gospel to Africans on the Ivory Coast.

for God, for our parents, and for Africans to secure our silence about the horrors of that place.

Oh, we wrote letters home every Sunday. But we couldn't even hint at our loneliness or the abuse. Our

letters were censored, and the slightest attempt to cry out resulted in a beating, then a forced rewriting of the letter. We learned to be as silent as lambs. We had no idea that our silence perpetuated the evil against us. Even during the three months home with our parents every year, we all kept silent. We loved them so much. We knew how passionately they spread the gospel, and I loved my African village friends. If my silence could win their salvation, I would endure anything.

At school, we were not allowed to have pictures of our parents

or to cry from homesickness. Each year, my mind would capture a final image of my parents saying goodbye. For the first month, I could see them every time I closed my eyes, and at the tender ages of 6, 7, and 8, I couldn't help crying myself to

sleep every night, as silently as possible. But by the ninth month of school, I could no longer remember what my parents looked like. I was so afraid I would break their hearts by not recognizing them when I went home.

THE CODE OF SILENCE BROKEN

The crime that led to the burning candle happened at age 10, after a year on furlough in the United States. I found myself at the airport with other MKS saying goodbye to our parents. We were about to board a propeller plane that would take us back to Africa, and our parents would follow by ship.

At the gate, I took my mother's face in my hands and couldn't let go. I stared intently at her beautiful, kind face. "What are you doing, Wesley?"

"Mommy, I just don't want to forget what you look like."

She dissolved into tears, and so did I. I saw a moment of

opportunity, a glimmer of hope for rescue. In 30 seconds, I blurted out my plea.

"Mommy, please don't send me back! Please don't send me back! They hate me . . . they beat me . . . I'm scared." I begged, "Please, please!"

I will never forget the look of horror in my mother's eyes.

"What?" she gasped. She held me tightly. "What . . . what can I do?" I could feel her sobbing in my embrace.

Not a minute later, my sister and I were whisked away with the other children. My friends, who had overheard, looked at me with DEAD MAN WALKING in their eyes. They didn't want to even be near me for fear of sharing in my imminent punishment. I had done the unthinkable—I had broken the code of silence.

During my parents' month-long voyage at sea, my mother, brokenhearted and confused, had an emotional and psychological breakdown. Upon arriving in Africa, she was soon sent back to the U.S. for treatment. Word of her illness and what had caused it spread like wildfire. When the news reached the boarding school, the staff was enraged.

I had resigned myself to the coming humiliation. In minutes I would scream and throw down the candle—until I heard his last phrase: ". . . parents' ministry ruined . . . Africans in hell because of Wesley." That broke my heart more than the humiliation, more than any pain that may come my way ever could.

I loved Africans. In my heart I was African. Every summer my

spirit was restored by the loving-kindness of the poverty-stricken Africans in my village. I never fell down during those three months without an African woman swooping in to pick me up and wipe tears from my eyes. I used to pray every night in that village, "Lord, if you love me, let me wake up black tomorrow, like all my friends. I know you can do this!" I would check every morning to see if I had been turned black, only to be disappointed. But maybe tomorrow.

I was my dad's right-hand man. Together we opened villages to the gospel where no white person had been since the slave trade. I lobbed stones with my slingshot into the trees to keep noisy birds away so that my father's voice could be heard as he shared the gospel. I watched Africans' faces when they first heard the word *Jesu*. And I saw the hope that was built in them. I was a missionary as far as I was concerned. So, Africans in hell because of me?

As the flames licked closer to my skin, from deep within me arose a gust of strength I cannot fully explain to this day. I had a desperate thought: *I could win this time*. This time, the houseparent had unwittingly put himself in a place where I could actually win, if I could endure enough pain. I knew in my heart that he was wrong. He was lying, and I felt the evil and injustice to the core of my soul. I was not Satan's tool. I was a little boy with a broken heart who had found his voice and cried out for rescue. So, *enough*—enough shame, enough abuse, enough lies. It had to stop somewhere, sometime. I made my decision: It stops now! I'm not letting go!

Nothing was going to make me cry out or drop that candle. This is

A Badly Broken Boarding School

The story behind the cover story. By Katelyn Beaty

Nestled in the temperate mountains of Guinea, West Africa, Mamou Alliance Academy had all the appearances of a haven away from home. Run by the Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA) denomination from the 1920s to 1971, the school boarded over 200 children of missionaries working in the surrounding regions. Starting at age 6, the children lived there for nine months of every year. Defunct for decades, Mamou is remembered, in the words of one alumnus, as "the Auschwitz of missionary kid boarding schools."

In the late 1980s, the Colorado Springs-based C&MA began receiving reports of rampant abuse at Mamou: children slapped and punched, raped and fondled, and threatened with undoing their parents' mission if they told. In 1995, a committee of some 30 alumni approached the C&MA for an investigation and restitution. It responded by forming an independent commission of inquiry (ICI) the following year. After hearing 80 testimonies, the ICI released a report in April 1998 identifying nine offenders—four retired, three dead, and two no longer with the C&MA. It found the denomination negligent in monitoring Mamou and training teachers. Contributing editor John W. Kennedy

extensively covered the story for *Christianity Today* in 1995 and 1998.

Since the report, the C&MA has drastically changed its educational system. Starting in 2000, parents are not required to send children to boarding schools, and today 75 percent of MKs live with their parents year-round. Those who board remotely are mostly teenagers and attend schools certified by the Association of Christian Schools International. The C&MA board of directors drafted policies and procedures should accusations arise. "We've tried to really change so that the sins of our past are not repeated," vice president for international ministries Robert Fetherlin told CT.

Meanwhile, Mamou's survivors have arrived at varying degrees of resolution. Retreats, including one held by the C&MA in 1999, have provided support and forums for truth-telling. A handful of survivors formed the MK

Safety Net, a group that follows the denomination's efforts to change its missions culture. *All God's Children*, a 2008 documentary comprising interviews and live footage of Mamou, reveals that many survivors are no longer believers, though a few are pastors; all have fought psychological and spiritual angst. But going public about the past has helped. "I've always carried in my head a deep shroud of secrecy that allowed the pain . . . to go on," said Beverly Shellrude Thompson, president of MK Safety Net. "[But] the story needs to be told. There's healing in the story." ☪



Unsafe Home: Mamou Alliance Academy was shuttered in 1971 after decades of abuse. The C&MA no longer operates overseas boarding schools.

where I would take my stand—this was my little Masada.

I shook violently, tears brimming in anticipation of burned flesh. He turned his back on me, his tirade growing in intensity. But I could no longer hear his voice. All I could hear was the pulsing of blood in my ears. I clenched my teeth, tightened every muscle in my body, and pinched the candle as fiercely as I could. I stared as the edges of my fingers turned red. A blister popped up. I was transported out of my body. I floated above this terrified boy, watching as if it were happening to someone else. I saw a wisp of smoke rise up on either side of my fingers. I would *not* let go.

Just then, a child in the front row couldn't stand it any longer, and he jumped up and slapped the candle out of my hand. The children scattered in all directions. The meeting was over. But standing there alone on my chair, I had received my *calling*. In an instant, I had gone from *victim* to *victor*. From that day forward, I would protect children. I would forever speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

The school was eventually shuttered, and many years later, the abusers were held accountable—not jailed like they would be today

For 32 years, I have fought for little ones who have no voice and no choice. The passion that gripped me at age 10 still rages today.

due to the statute of limitations, but after an official inquiry, when they were “censored” by the mission and no longer allowed to work with children. The school's mks limped away from their childhoods, many with lifelong scars. Thankfully, for me, my story—a story that Satan intended for evil but that God redeemed for good—has a different ending.

THE ONGOING END

My story finally emerged when I wrote a book, *Too Small to Ignore: Why the Least of These Matters Most*, in 2007. My idea was to present a manifesto—strategically, statistically, and scripturally sound—about the importance of championing children, one that would awaken the church. But my publishers challenged me: “Wess, they won't care what you know until they know why you care. Are you going to write a book, or are you willing to really fight a battle for children?” At that crossroads, I realized that I must allow God to redeem even the painful parts of my story.

My story is what has fueled my passion against injustice, my crusade against abuse, my fight against poverty. It is what drove me to Compassion International. For 32 years, I have fought for little ones



Friend and Advocate: For 17 years Stafford has been president of Compassion, which uses a 1-1 sponsorship model to provide holistic care to over 1 million children.

who have no voice and no choice. The passion that gripped me at age 10 still rages within me today.

Poverty and abuse speak the same message into the heart of a child: “Give up. Nobody cares about you. There's nothing special about you. Nothing will ever change. You always lose, so give up!” As I travel across the world, I see the fingerprints of Satan; he is using the same weapons he used on me. In children the world over, I see empty, hollow eyes where the flame of a spirit created in the image of God is reduced to a smoldering ember.

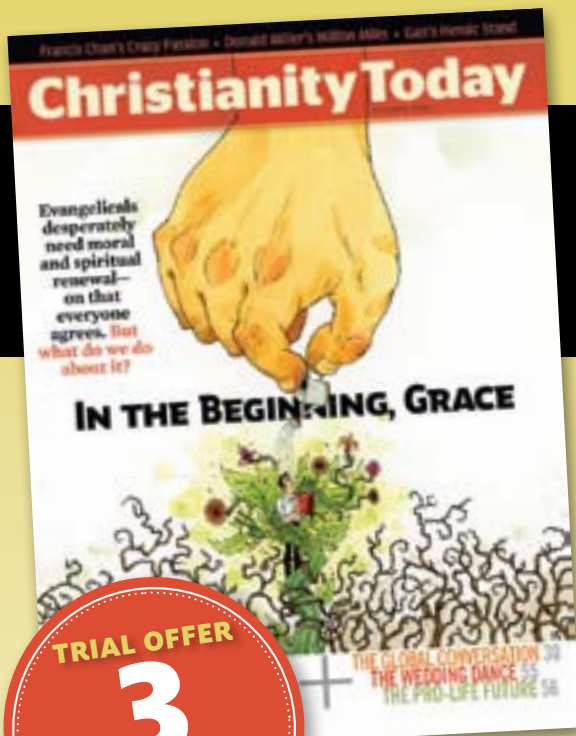
My job now is to champion the cause of these children, to help them understand the love Jesus Christ has for them. Imagine my joy when every day hundreds of children accept Jesus as their Savior, at the knee of their pastor or with a Sunday school teacher under the mango tree. Imagine my joy that we daily vaccinate thousands of children. Imagine my joy that I get to challenge the church about the importance of children—to explain, for example, that budgets that devote 10 percent to children's ministry make little strategic sense considering that 85 percent of people who come to Christ do so before the age of 14.

All these years later, I am still never more than 10 seconds away from tears. But not all my tears are from sorrow. Just as easily, I can be moved to tears of great joy at what I get to do. I see victories in children's lives as evil is defeated, just as it was defeated in my own life.

In finally telling my whole story, I have discovered the other side of my life's tapestry. Where I once saw only knots and tangles, I now see a beautiful picture of God's grace—his deliberate orchestration in a life lovingly entrusted to me. Sure enough, he had heard every scream, felt every blow, and wiped every tear as, through the pain, he crafted me into a tool he could use, redeemed for his glory. ✚

Wess Stafford is president and CEO of Compassion International, a Colorado Springs-based child development organization that sponsors children. This article was adapted from a talk Stafford gave at Woodmen Valley Chapel in July 2009.

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for “A Candle in the Darkness,” a Bible study based on this article.



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