

The uncomfortable truth about Hillcrest

How missionary work can create the conditions for child abuse to thrive unchecked

From the Editors in the [February 2023](#) issue



The grounds at Hillcrest, a boarding school in Jos, Nigeria (Photo courtesy of the Hillcrest Survivors steering committee)

It would be easy to glance at [“Surviving Hillcrest,” the feature article we recently published about Hillcrest School in Jos, Nigeria](#), and see what you’ve seen before: people in positions of institutional authority accused of abuse. We accept such familiar stories as routine. But look more closely, and you will see a much broader indictment—one that includes all of us.

The few news stories that have been run about the physical and sexual abuse at Hillcrest suggest that people whose whole lives were dedicated to the Gospel had something go terribly wrong. Scandalously, the boarding school where parents left their children while they pursued God’s work had mishandled that sacred responsibility, allowing abuse to be rampant.

But with a close look at this story, another picture emerges: in this case, the missionary work itself—not a deviation from it—created the situation in which child abuse thrived unchecked.

Missionary activity places the doing of God's work over and above everything else, sometimes even over the welfare of children and telling the truth. The children at Hillcrest understood that they were less important than the mission field where their parents were dutifully engaged. They understood, even well into adulthood, that to cast a negative light on missionary work through the expression of their own experience was to soil the Word of God. They, rather than those who hurt them, would be blamed. They would be assumed responsible for the pain they caused by casting a shadow on God's work. When survivors did speak, the system doubled down, concealing the abuse, relegating it to the margins, and reasserting its central purpose: to do God's work, whatever the cost.

A missionary orientation can also lead to abuse through a deeply embedded sense of cultural superiority. We carry salvation to others, and often on urgent eschatological terms: we have to save souls before time runs out, even if it means sacrificing our own children. We are the givers. Others are the receivers of our beneficence. We use pity, urgency, and a sense of God-given power to justify our actions. Because we regard ourselves as bearing a unique truth that carries eschatological urgency and is a matter of life and death, we don't see the abuse that our colonialist theology permits at every scale—cultural, institutional, familial. This is an epistemological problem, an unrecognized and often unwitting form of falsehood that leads to violence.

It's true that many thriving churches around the world trace their roots in part to western missions. North American Christians often have resources that must be shared. We have mechanisms to provide relief in situations of dire need. But the bright side of the missions coin has a shadow side as well, and to see it, we need look no further than Hillcrest. The people caught up in this "scandal" were part of a system of abusive power that reaches so deeply into our culture that once we start looking, we see it everywhere—including in the institutions and traditions with which we are directly affiliated. And no less within ourselves.