



## Childhood and Schooling Abroad

### Statement by the Norwegian Mission Society and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

##### 1.1. Thanks to Contributors

First of all we wish to thank all those who have contributed so that the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) have been able to conduct a comprehensive survey.

Thank you for having spent time and effort answering questions and for having shared your experiences from childhood and schooling abroad.

For some of you, the process has generated many good memories, but for others it has been very demanding, because it has brought to life painful and deeply offensive experiences. It is admirable that you have still been willing to contribute.

The breadth of experiences reflected in the material is a cause for humility. We want to present both the good and the bad experiences and validate them as credible. The good stories do not trivialize the bad ones, and the bad stories do not invalidate the good ones. We want to let the stories stand side by side as valid descriptions of reality.

##### 1.2. The Purpose of This Statement

This statement is based on the report of the survey prepared by the International Research Institute of Stavanger (IRIS) as well as on the completed questionnaires and other comments that have been sent directly to the organizations. The organizational leadership has not had access to the answers in the questionnaires, only to statistically processed material. This material has been made anonymous so that it cannot be attributed to specific individuals. The leadership does have access to the letters that were sent directly to the organizations.

The purpose of this study is to paint as complete a picture as possible of the experiences of childhood and schooling abroad. We have been particularly interested in identifying the areas where the organizations have not been good enough, and in the causes of pain and unnecessary stress. The purpose of this statement is to say something about what the organizations have learned from this process, and to outline further action.

#### 2. PROJECT BACKGROUND IN NMS AND NLM

Questions about children's education have been of crucial importance throughout the history of missions. The matter has been discussed in principle, and a variety of practical arrangements have been tested. The solutions that were chosen at any given time largely reflected society in general, both in terms of curriculum and in terms of resources and expertise. The organizations differ from society in general, however, with respect to the rationale for the arrangements. The call to mission was the most important rationale for the organizations.

In 1988 we had a public debate in Norway about missionary kids. The debate made it clear that previous arrangements had not been good enough. Following the debate, the thinking about and the facilitation for missionary kids has changed significantly.

The organizations have done much in terms of improving the childhood of missionary kids,

but an expression of regret for past practices has been long in coming.

Both NMS and NLM had implemented their own projects when we decided to join together in sending out a questionnaire and offering follow-up to the respondents. The goal was to give former pupils an opportunity to come forward with their stories and have a place to turn to with their experiences. It is also important to us to make visible stories of pupils at the Norwegian schools and of missionary kids that are a part of our organizations' public history.

### **3. WHAT THE REPORT SHOWS**

#### **3.1. Those Who Have Responded**

Those who were given the opportunity to respond to the survey represent a diverse group. Forty-two percent of those who have responded have been associated with NMS, 38 percent with NLM. Other mission organizations are represented by 7 percent, and the remaining 12 percent come from development aid, business and other contexts (Report, Table 57, p. 99).

Thirty-four percent of those who responded state that they boarded for the entire time they went to school, while 25 percent alternated between boarding and living at home. Information about the length of boarding is therefore provided for close to 60 percent of all those who have contributed (Table 5, p. 44). Ninety percent of those who responded chose to respond to the questions based on the experience of attending the Norwegian school (DNS). Thirty-five percent of those who responded report that they also have experience from other school types (such as international schools, the local national school, home schooling, etc.), but the majority of these have chosen to respond based on their experience at DNS (Table 3, p. 35).

#### **3.2. Comparisons of Different Groups**

The report does not include comparisons based on organizational background. However, it does compare those who have boarded with those who have lived at home. When we compare these different groups, we see that children who boarded were in a worse situation than children who lived at home throughout their schooling. The report shows the effects in various areas.

Those who boarded during childhood

- had less contact with the local community at the schools abroad
- experienced poorer social integration when moving to the country of origin
- have more health problems and feel worse about their own health
- experienced more bullying
- were subjected to far more sexual harassment / abuse
- have to a higher degree sought help for psychological problems
- include a higher proportion of people receiving disability insurance

When we compare the different age groups, the tendency is that the older ones generally had more difficult experiences during childhood and schooling abroad than those who were in school more recently. This may reflect the fact that the arrangements have improved. At the same time, we are aware that the effects of separation and other forms of stress often become noticeable after a certain time, and that age can influence the answers.

We notice that the facilitation of contact with the local environment was different depending on the school type the responses reflect. Only 22 percent responded that they felt that the contact was well organized on the part of the school. Pupils that lived at home had better contact with the local community than those who boarded.

The responses indicate that the Norwegian schools facilitated contact with the local community to a lesser degree than other school types, but the responses also indicate a deliberate, positive change over time (p. 39).

Many feel that they did not learn the local language and acquired poor knowledge of local

culture through the school, which weakened the experience of belonging to the place where they grew up. We sadly note that restrictions were made to certain aspects of growing up abroad, aspects that were often cited as the most important elements of childhood.

### **3.3. Growing up Abroad and Moving Back to the Country of Origin**

Asked about the importance of a childhood spent abroad, a large group said that it has given them positive values and skills that have become a resource in adult life. Those who boarded and those who stayed at home give very similar responses and evaluations.

The statement that most strongly expresses a common opinion among those who have answered is: "The experiences make it easier to understand other ways of thinking and behavior" (p. 20). In addition, respondents mention that the experiences have stimulated learning of other languages, given knowledge of different cultures, and enriched their lives. The report also shows that those who have responded believe that their childhood has taught them tolerance of others, has made it easier to adapt to new environments, has been beneficial for their professional life, and has had a positive impact on their roles as mothers or fathers.

The report shows that moving to their parents' homeland presented major social challenges. Almost 60 percent felt like strangers that were not socially integrated well. They found it difficult to get in tune with the people in the community, and they missed friends with whom they could talk confidentially. As a result of their childhood abroad, they lacked common frames of reference with their peers in the country to which they returned.

A significant group made many good friends and felt that they were socially well integrated. At the same time the answers show that many - from both groups - longed to go back to the country from which they came. It seems to be common to many that the sense of belonging to multiple cultures in adult life causes an increased need to continue moving.

The material shows that many families chose to return to Norway when the children were about to begin middle school or high school. This means that many came to Norway during puberty, and for many it was an extra burden to have to find their place in a new country in this difficult phase of life.

NMS and NLM acknowledge that the challenges in returning to Norway have been underestimated and that the preparations for this transition have for many years been nonexistent or inadequate. This has especially affected children and youth, and caused greater challenges than necessary.

### **3.4. Complexity and Diversity**

The material shows a complex picture. This group of people is generally very resourceful. The education level among the respondents stands out in comparison with the Norwegian population in general. Eighty-three percent of them have a university or college education, compared to 25 percent among the general population in 2006 (p. 98). The group also has several characteristics:

- They are world citizens and master multi-cultural contexts.
- They partly lack common frames of reference with their peers.
- As a result, the issue of belonging and identity is challenging for many of them.

The respondents cannot be divided into clearly distinct groups. We see that many who say that they have had a good childhood are still struggling with long-term effects from their childhood and with consequences of separation. And inversely, in the large group of 25-30 percent who report that their quality of life has been reduced because of their childhood, there are many who say that they have benefited greatly from its cross-cultural experiences, that they can draw upon these experiences in their professional life, and that they have enjoyed having these experiences as they have gone through life.

Some painful connections are evident throughout the report: those who suffered sexual harassment, abuse, or systematic bullying, and those who have had poor emotional contact with

their parents while growing up have a significantly lower quality of life as adults and demonstrate a much higher degree of health problems and other difficulties.

### **3.5. Difficult and Abusive Experiences**

The survey traces disciplinary action carried out by the staff at the schools. "Although a majority of respondents have only experienced such incidents to a limited degree, the fact that about one fifth of the respondents have been subjected to disciplinary actions sometimes or often must have had a negative impact on their experience of the school environment" (p. 69).

Threats and actual corporal punishment have occurred. The organizations are very concerned that this happened.

The report reveals that bullying was widespread. Seventeen and a half percent of the respondents said they had been bullied by staff or teachers. The organizations are very concerned that some of those who had the responsibility for the care and safety of the children committed bullying themselves. Eighteen percent were bullied by their peers. Overall, 28 percent of the respondents state that they were bullied.

The numbers from the survey show that 7 percent of the respondents were victims of sexual abuse. Four percent experienced violence one to three times, and three percent more than three times. We have to assume that the proportion is actually slightly higher because experience shows that such incidents are always under-reported. Of those who were abused, about one third were boys and two thirds were girls. More than half were less than 10 years old when the first incident occurred.

Teachers and boarding staff totaled 32 percent of those who abused the children. Other staff in schools amounted to 11 percent and missionaries 9 percent. A little more than a third of the abusers were peers (35 percent). The proportion of "others" was 25 percent.

In more than half of the cases, no one knew about the incidents. Almost none of those who talked about the abuse were given help to process what had happened. Nothing was done about the cases; they were not reported to the leadership of the organizations, to children's services or to the police. Neither was there made any attempt to resolve them at the school.

### **3.6. Consequences for Health and Life**

Only a small proportion of the group that responded to the survey is comprised by people that are sick or on welfare. There is, however, a slightly higher frequency of mental health problems than in the rest of the population. But there is also a clear pattern here: those who were subjected to systematic bullying or experienced sexual abuse are also the group with the most health problems. These experiences also have consequences for their attitude to the Christian faith: those who experienced abuse and bullying have, to a greater extent than average, rejected the Christian faith and mission.

## **4. LESSONS AND CHALLENGES REGARDING THE FUTURE**

### **4.1. Understanding of Call, Systems, and Arrangements**

On the basis of the knowledge we now have, we must be willing to ask critical questions regarding how the call to missionary service has been conveyed in our organizations. We must also reject the understanding of the call that prioritized the call to missionary service higher than the call to be parents.

Until recently, boarding school was the only schooling option facilitated by the mission organizations. It has been painful gaining insight into the negative consequences this system has had for many children. It has also led many parents into a situation with difficult choices. They felt that they had no choice but to send their children away. If they did not, they saw it as a betrayal of God's call to service. No sacrifice - not even concern for the children's needs - was too great when it came to bringing one's life's mission to realization.

This attitude stands in stark contrast to the place our home should have in our faith and practice. According to Lutheran vocational ethics, the call to be a missionary is not more valuable to God than the call to be parents. The primary obligation for those who have chosen marriage and family life is to care for their children.

The organizations want to take a critical look at their own history, even with respect to the understanding of call. Among other things, the faculty at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger and the faculty of Fjellhaug Mission Seminary in Oslo will be engaged in this process, and they will work on thinking about call. This work is now underway through a study project at the School of Mission and Theology in Stavanger.

#### **4.2. Procedures and Recruitment**

As missionary organizations, we are still committed to mission and want to reach people with the gospel. We believe that God still calls people to serve him among other peoples. Nevertheless, the experiences we have had must have consequences for how we facilitate missionary service in the future. The organizations will work hard to ensure that our arrangements are justifiable. This means that missionary service will be organized so that children can stay with their parents. This may also mean that some families are not sent out, or that some families must end their service out of concern for their children. A consequence may be that our work will face different restrictions than before. But we believe it is necessary.

Based on the knowledge we have today, we realize that we at times have not had adequate procedures for recruitment and selection. Today, our selection of personnel is done more carefully. Both organizations have established personnel departments which take the whole family situation into consideration when hiring. The views of children and youth are taken into consideration, and the advisory bodies are consulted if necessary. Both organizations place a premium on adequate preparation of missionaries and good follow-up procedures throughout mission service.

#### **4.3. Preparation and Homecoming**

The report shows that the return phase has been extremely challenging for many. Its challenges, particularly related to issues of identity and belonging, have been underestimated. We have had insufficient awareness of the stress related to moving and to challenging transitions.

Both organizations will provide advice and guidance to its missionaries in connection with departure, period abroad, and return phase. It is important to cooperate with organizations such as NORUT (Organization for Norwegians having spent their childhood abroad), professional networks, and professionals that have developed expertise in the field. Important areas of focus include meeting points and venues for both children and adults. The course "Inn for landing" (Prepare for Landing) - a training curriculum designed to ease the transition when returning to one's home country - has proven to be an important tool. Work is also underway concerning a possible further development of the course: "Inn for landing 2" (Prepare for Landing 2), specifically designed for older participants.

#### **4.4. Inappropriate Behavior and Sexual Harassment and Abuse**

The material shows that many forms of violation have occurred, such as bullying, harassment, violence, sexual harassment, and abuse. The organizations have improved their preparedness and have drawn up guidelines to prevent abuse and to process reported instances of abuse in a professional manner. This is incorporated in NMS and NLM's regulations. In this respect, a wide-reaching cooperation now exists between many mission organizations and denominations. These guidelines also apply to the mission fields.

Issues related to inappropriate behavior and sexual abuse are regularly the object of internal discussions within the missionary organizations. We see that it is easier to report instances when we have good guidelines.

The organizations must constantly focus on these issues. All new employees and

missionaries must be made familiar with the guidelines. Leaders at all levels both in Norway and abroad must be educated. It is a challenge that several of our partner countries have a different culture and different views on gender, gender roles, and sexuality. We seek to address this challenge by making our policies known, among other things. They have been translated into English, and work is underway to have them translated into Spanish and French.

## **5. WHAT LIES AHEAD?**

We have tried to say something about how the missionary organizations wish to take a lesson from the knowledge gained through this project. The follow-up of those who were invited to respond to the survey is an equally important aspect of the work. With the survey, we enclosed a letter in which we asked you what follow-up action you wished to see. Many have responded to this letter, and we are therefore preparing a follow-up service in line with the answers. The results of the survey confirm, as we read them, that there is a need for this service. You still have the opportunity to indicate your desire or need for various forms of follow-up.

### **5.1. Facilitate Discussions with the Organizations' Leadership**

Several respondents have requested a meeting with the organizations' leadership. We invite all those who have requested this to individual meetings and discussions with the organizations' leadership. We will carry out these individual conversations in the course of 2010.

### **5.2. Individual Professional Follow-Up**

In working with this project, we have partnered with a broad range of professionals. Our organizations want to help you connect with health personnel, if desired. NMS and NLM have an arrangement where the cost of treatment is covered by agreement with the organizations.

### **5.3. Regional Meetings**

In 2010, we will arrange regional meetings where you will be invited to participate in conversations about the report, and to participate in the further development of the project. Many have already expressed their interest in this process. Information on dates, venues, agendas for the meetings and other things will be available online. All those who have expressed their interest in these meetings will be contacted. We will consider having different kinds of follow-up of these meetings, for example, organized by school or country. Work is also underway to arrange similar meetings for parents and former employees.

### **5.4. Financial Settlement**

For NMS and NLM, the desire to express our regret is an essential element of the projects that have been implemented. In this context, the question of the relationship between moral responsibility and financial settlements has been raised. We acknowledge that this is an important question. We will be ready to help those who wish to apply for support from the government, for example, through the government's restorative justice program. Moreover, we will make known the knowledge we have, and lobby to gain political support for the view that people who have spent their childhoods abroad should be able to seek financial restitution based on the same criteria as in similar cases in Norway.

Nevertheless, we believe that there are important differences between our boarding arrangements and public orphanages. Children in public institutions are either orphans or have been forcibly taken from their parents. They are, in other words, the responsibility of the public sector.

In our arrangements, the parents have always retained the responsibility for their own children. The missionary organizations have never assumed parental responsibility. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the children have had no choice. Nevertheless, we believe

that it is unjustified to equate the organizations' responsibility for the boarding schools with the public's responsibility for the orphanages.

Our schools eventually became officially approved institutions, a fact which also gives the public a certain degree of responsibility. The public will always have different financial opportunities than a non-profit organization. None of this frees us from the moral responsibility, but it does provide the parameters for how we will meet our responsibilities.

### **5.5. Dissemination of Results and Experiences**

Results and experiences will be made known internally within the organizations, particularly in leadership forums and to employees who serve abroad today. Furthermore, our experiences will be made known in networks where the organizations are involved: "Norsk råd for misjon og evangelisering (NORME)" (Norwegian Council for Mission and Evangelism), "Institutt for sjelesorg" (Institute of pastoral care), and The Federation of Norwegian Commercial and Service Enterprises's network of organizations with employees abroad.

The material that has emerged through the process will be of great interest for further research. A collection of articles is under preparation and scheduled to be released by the School of Mission and Theology in 2010.

## **6. CONCLUDING SUMMARY**

### **6.1. Convictions**

The survey clearly shows that children who have been separated from their parents and have boarded are at a disadvantage compared with children living at home (p. 87). Prolonged separation has caused deep pain, and many are left with heavy grief over the loss of their childhood.

NMS and NLM acknowledge today that the system of boarding schools was not organized on the children's and parents' terms. With increased knowledge, particularly related to the forming of relationships and the stress of separation, we acknowledge that the children's systematic separation from their parents necessitated by a boarding arrangement has had serious negative consequences. NMS and NLM acknowledge that the organizations were too slow to absorb this knowledge and to draw the necessary consequences.

The report reveals inadequate structures in the school and boarding operations, absence of control procedures that would have protected the children, and lack of preparedness to deal with difficulties. We recognize that some experienced considerable added stress because information regarding neglect, harassment, and abuse was not handled well. We see that a system that was supposed to provide a safe and sound environment did not function in that way. What were supposed to be safe and consistent structures for life were seen as the opposite.

### **6.2. Recognition of Many People's Pain**

It is evident from the survey that most of the pupils have experienced stress. A significant group has been caused unreasonably great stress, in the form of neglect, harassment, abuse, and disturbing transitions between very different environments, among other things

Although there are many nuances, and although many pupils have had positive experiences and have fond memories, we must nevertheless conclude that the report reveals a significant degree of neglect.

We as missionary organizations want to recognize the pain and the stress that many pupils have experienced as a result of this neglect.

### **6.3. Apology**

With sorrow, we recognize that our procedures have caused a significantly impaired quality of life for many. The boarding schools that separated parents and children did not provide for the children's needs for care from and closeness to parents. Oftentimes, the system also did not

protect the children against harassment or abuse.

The pain that was inflicted is a consequence of arrangements that did not provide for children's basic needs and that in many ways led to neglect. We realize that we have not had adequate follow-up procedures when missionaries return home, a fact which also has caused significant additional stress.

The contrast between Christian ideals of missionary work on the one hand and the pain that is inflicted because of the mission's arrangements on the other hand is a reality that the missionary organizations regretfully recognize.

We painfully note what has happened, and regret it deeply.



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8. December 2009