

RELIGION

Missionary group admits Senegal abuse

By *Annyssa Johnson* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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A Christian missionary group with ties to Wisconsin said it will purge its ranks, strengthen its personnel policies and set aside \$1 million to aid victims, in response to a [new report](#) that found dozens of missionaries' children endured physical and sexual abuse at its boarding school in Senegal in the 1980s and '90s.

Florida-based New Tribes Mission, which operates New Tribes Bible Institute in Waukesha, acknowledged the abuse and subsequent coverup and said it was in the process of implementing all of the recommendations in the report by the faith-based child protection and advocacy firm GRACE.

"We are not defending ourselves. We are realizing what took place in the 1980s and '90s, and the coverup," said Ron Lindsey, president of the Bible Institute, who also sits on the New Tribes board of directors.

"New Tribes is across the board apologizing for what happened, and we're making every commitment to make sure it never happens again."

New Tribes is one of the nation's largest mission organizations, specializing in training Christians to spread the Gospel in some of the most remote corners of the world. It is supported by churches across the country, including 182 in Wisconsin, and has dispatched more than 13,000 missionaries over five decades.

Six of the people named in the report as being abusive or failing to report abuse had studied at the Bible Institute in Waukesha, said New Tribes spokeswoman Nita Zelenak. She declined to identify them.

Victims for years have been working to hold New Tribes accountable for the abuse they suffered at a boarding in the village of Fanda in Senegal.

"We're pleased with the report, and I think it was a shock to a lot of people in the mission," said Kari Mikitson, a self-described "MK" or mission kid, who says she was molested by her dorm father at Fanda from 1985 to '89.

"I'm hopeful about New Tribes' response. It could be groundbreaking for the Christian community," she said.

According to the Grace report, children as young as 5 were separated from their missionary parents and sent to live at the dorms with a civil war raging around them. There, it says, dozens of children were sexually assaulted, beaten and subjected to emotional and spiritual abuse, much of it criminal, by other missionaries assigned to the dorms.

The report says New Tribes officials may have known of abuse as early as the 1970s; that the group failed to act; protected offenders over children; and in some cases appears to have destroyed documents.

The report says New Tribes and its Senegal staff created a culture where children and parents were afraid, even ashamed, to complain.

Parents were warned against the "idolatry" of making their children their priority, and were told that "Christ sacrificed his only son, and missionaries should be prepared to do the same," it says.

"Children were told that complaining would hinder their parents' work and result in Africans going to hell."

None of the victims who've come forward to date is from Wisconsin, said Mikitson, who lives in Seattle and operates the Web site www.fandaeagles.com.

Zelenak said none of the offenders was ever criminally charged and no lawsuits have resulted from the abuse. She and Mikitson said efforts to report the offenses were complicated by the fact that they were perpetrated by Americans on Americans on foreign soil.

Zelenak and Lindsey, of the Bible Institute, said New Tribes implemented new recruitment and other policies in the mid-1990s to protect children. And Zelenak said New Tribes is in the process of implementing all of the recommendations put forth by GRACE, including severing its relationships with those involved in the abuse or coverup; creating the \$1

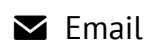
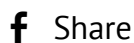
million fund for medical treatment and counseling of victims; and funding an arbitration system for victims seeking additional compensation.

"We know what happened, we know that New Tribes failed to take responsibility," said Zelenak. "At this point, we just want to do what's right."

About Annysa Johnson

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