

## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE FELLOWSHIP

Bob Williston

My personal experience with child sexual abuse within the friends and workers' fellowship has been as a victim, a witness against a convicted worker child predator, and ironically an advocate for an accused offender. I knew for years that the practice among the workers was to either reassign the offender to another area or just send him home. I also believed the workers had a policy of advising that the friends not report each other to the police. What I have learned is that the workers have had no set policy on anything, except that the reputation of the ministry must be protected. I also found an apparent willingness on the part of the ministry collectively to sacrifice innocent souls to accomplish that ministerial protection.

My insights in this respect began when I lived in northern Nevada in March of 1998 when \*[Bill Frost], a young man in our meeting, was arrested on a sex-related charge. He had come there from college in 1996 and a romance developed between him and \*[Mary Hale]. They appeared frequently together, traveled out of state together, and rumors of a future marriage and her mother's approval circulated. True, she was a teenager and he was in his twenties, but she was no child. She had been baptized, was no longer going to school, managed the family household, and supervised her three younger siblings while her parents worked outside the home. Their age difference was later claimed to be the reason for what was done to [Bill], but that reason only had credence in the spin control promoted among people who did not know the situation locally, because we also had an ex-worker in his thirties in the meeting who also had dated a teenager and no one expressed disapproval over that age difference. What the locals *did* notice and *commented* on was that [Mary] was very physically aggressive with [Bill] in public, to the point where she frequently embarrassed some people.

[Mary]'s father, \*[Greg], appears not to have approved of [Bill] and by the end of 1997 the romance was off and [Greg] had asked the workers to move [Bill] out of their meeting. But no sooner had [Bill] come to our meeting in January of 1998 than [Mary] arrived one Sunday unaccompanied by her family and sat beside [Bill] in the meeting room, *much* to the obvious horror of both [Bill] and Phyllis Munn, the worker who was sitting on the other side of [Bill]. [Mary] did not return to our meeting after that incident, but [Bill] was arrested in March anyway, and we were told that he had "assaulted" [Mary]. We were told that [Greg] had not wanted to go to the police, but that Linda Passage, the worker responsible for our field, had prevailed upon him and he had complied. Linda also sent letters to the elders in the field advising them that [Bill] was a danger to the children and a repeat offender, and they were asked to call the police should [Bill] attempt to go to meeting in their houses. Following his arrest, Linda and Phyllis kept watch outside the house Sunday morning to assure that [Bill] did not come to the meeting. I had no grounds to question the claim of assault, but the display of *guarding the friends against [Bill]* looked like hyperbolic overkill. I was mostly suspicious because, in the context of our social milieu, *[Bill] raping [Mary]* could not logically have been interpreted as a symptom of a child predator. A rumor even circulated that was actually *believed* by some that [Bill] had been controlling [Mary] from his jail cell by some kind of evil telepathic communication. I also learned [Greg] was attempting to coerce other teenagers in a manner to have them testify against [Bill] in court, and one mother complained to the district attorney about his efforts.

**BUT**, we also had a young married couple in the meeting who that April were allowed to re-profess – before the baby they had conceived out of wedlock was born. We considered that a liberal move in the circumstances, so it seemed [Bill] must have done far worse since he was banished. Furthermore, we'd had several outrageously hostile outbursts in our meeting that year both in testimony and after meetings, including the threat of imprisonment on Mike, a young man from outside the fellowship who had just professed two weeks earlier. I was distraught because not one person had expressed any concern about these events – not even the elder, who said when I asked him that he was afraid of getting in worse trouble himself if he did speak to the workers.

So being the alternate elder, I called Linda myself and explained what was happening in the meeting. She listened for a while, then suddenly, abruptly, said "someone is lying". She informed me that Mike had been "participating with [Bill]", and she would get back to me. So did we presume that a gang rape had occurred? And if so, why wasn't Mike arrested as well as [Bill]? Furthermore, why did Linda even let Mike profess in the circumstances? She had told another person who had professed in the same meeting as Mike that she could not recognize her profession. I was more confused than ever, and Linda never did get back to me. Instead, she advised us after Sunday meeting that Mike was not to associate with us, and we were tacitly advised not to extend kindnesses to him. Then the man who had threatened Mike with imprisonment after the meeting called me to read Linda's letter of excommunication to Mike. It went something like this. *"I have concluded, after talking to Bob Williston, that you should not be allowed in the company of the friends any more...."* He then volunteered that there had been a wild party at the [Hale]'s house and [Mary]'s parents had crashed it and called the police on [Bill] and two other guys. He named a young girl in California that [Bill] had also molested. So now it had become a full blown orgy – with a third guy present whom no one had identified yet! Incidentally, I knew the person in California that this man had named, so I discretely inquired if she'd ever met [Bill] and found she didn't really know who [Bill] was. And [Bill] claimed never to have heard of her. Meanwhile, a rumor repeated by the workers also had it that pornographic pictures of [Mary] had been taken from [Bill]'s apartment, as well as his diary which was reported to be a sick discourse of religious/sexual rantings.

In July I personally forwarded a request from [Bill] through Phyllis to Linda that he be allowed to meet with people in the meeting and apologize for what he had done. Linda took an hour to pray, and the message came back that it would be inappropriate for him to do that because it would be nothing more than a "ploy to get sympathy" from the church. Phyllis had to deliver that message to [Bill], but confided to us after the conversation that "[Bill] has not lied to anyone about anything." That startled me in its implication.

In September [Bill] was given six months in jail, so I went to visit him as often as I could. I talked to his mother, and she shared a letter that Linda had written to her about [Bill]. It was rude, it was insulting, and not only degraded [Bill] to a piece of filth but accused his mother of helping to develop his evil nature. She also said [Bill] had never made any attempt to come back to meetings – yet her letter was dated *after* the time when I personally had delivered one of his requests to her myself. I was aware of two other attempts he had made that were rebuffed.

My daughter, by coincidence, was a probation case worker at the time, and was assigned to supervise [Bill] when he was released from jail. She was so disturbed when she read his file that she told me I needed to investigate [Bill]'s case as much as possible, so with [Bill]'s consent I did. My daughter's summary was, "He's been shafted and we have all been lied to." The investigative report stated that both parties were still "virgins" (court record verbiage)! The

report *emphatically* stated that no force was used, and that there had been *no sexual intercourse*. Ironically, the court had also received a complaint that [Bill] had gotten Mexicans to harass the [Hale] children on their way to school. That was ridiculous – the [Hale] children did not even go to school. The prosecutor had recommended only a period of probation, and the judge had asked why the family wanted the court to exceed that punishment. The explanation was that people in the church were not comfortable with [Bill] being out on the streets.

I am not naive. What had actually taken place between [Mary] and [Bill] was graphically detailed in the investigative report. It was commonplace back-seat style *making out*. Trust me – I'm a sixty-year-old high school teacher and grandfather who's been married for forty years, and I wish I had a son who came through this experience as *cleanly* as did [Bill]. The most disgusting aspect of all was that *someone* had to have done what was necessary to simply discover such things had occurred. The police report smacked very loudly of the prurient exploits of some sick peeping tom to say the least. I decided at that point that I would never trust this ministry with my children again. I was physically ill and wept to think that the ministry I had trusted with the souls of my children would involve themselves in such a deception as I had uncovered. And I had not yet come close to witnessing the lengths they would go to to protect themselves from the consequences of having been discovered in such a collaboration.

Linda prepared and circulated a letter about fornication to all the young people in the field. She stated that parents were not giving their children proper instruction about sex, and two major points she made were that (1) the male has to be held more responsible than the female, and (2) there is no forgiveness for fornication. It was also reported that a meeting had been held with [Bill], the workers, the [Hale] family, the elder and alternate elder, and brother workers from California. Supposedly [Bill] was warned at this meeting to "stop what he was doing". But that meeting did not take place, or I would have been there myself. My meeting elder and the brother workers in California told me personally that meeting did not take place.

I wrote Linda a letter voicing my displeasure that she had used my name to excommunicate [Bill]'s friend, and reminded her that I had said nothing negative about him to give her that liberty. I also expressed my shock at the discrepancy between what she had told the friends about [Bill] and what the police investigation had revealed. I also begged her to do something about the continuing hostility being displayed among people in the meeting, and I protested the policy of banishing people as she had done. A month later she approached me after a Sunday meeting with a three sentence greeting: "Bob, I received your letter. About your concerns, the brother workers in California decided what was to be done. And I have to add that my companion and I are very disappointed and disapprove of the lifestyle you and your wife have chosen." I was horrified, so I wrote to Dick Middleton asking for help.

Then in December (1998) Jon, the elder of our union meeting, had to serve a short sentence for domestic battery. On union Sunday morning he was let out of jail at 6:00 a.m., came home and set the room up for meeting, and officiated as usual with the workers present. More interesting was the conversation he'd had the night before when he was in the Minden jail with [Bill]. Jon told [Bill] that Linda did not approve of him speaking to [Bill] because "[Bill] was evil."

[Bill] got out of jail just before Christmas, and we had him and his parents with us for Christmas that year. Among his belongings that were returned to him in a clear plastic bag upon his release was that incriminating pornography and diary we had heard about, and [Bill] offered all of it to me to see. No sexual predator is given anything resembling pornography and sexual

diaries upon leaving prison, and [Bill] was no exception.

In February of 1999 [Bill] and I were called to a meeting in the Bay Area with Dick Middleton and Eldon Tenniswood. [Bill] spent the morning alone with them and I spent most of the afternoon alone with them. They would not talk to us together. Highlights of my visit with them included: (1) I was told I was “out on a limb” with my concerns, and my own personal integrity was questioned and seriously scrutinized. (2) Dick said he had not told Linda to do what she did. (3) I got to point out in Linda’s letter to [Bill]’s mother that Linda had lied about [Bill]. (4) Dick suggested [Bill]’s family was “not all that moral – his parents are separated.” [Bill]’s parents were *NOT* separated, and I know of no one who thought they had ever been separated. (5) Dick kept insisting that [Bill] had raped the girl. He had read the same police report I had read, but according to his definition of *rape* I had been raping my wife routinely for thirty-five years – even when there’d been no sexual intercourse. (6) Dick admitted upon being accused that the ministry had sheltered workers from prosecution for doing far worse than [Bill] had done. (Dick and Eldon were both overseers during the sheltering of Ruben Mata, who was later sentenced to 36 years for repeated child sexual assault.) (7) Dick said he was told no one wanted [Bill] in their meeting. I informed him that [Bill]’s probation officer had letters from all but four parents in the field allowing [Bill] to attend meeting with their children. (8) Dick told me I was promoting immorality among our young people.

Later that month Dick and Harold Hilton flew to Nevada and requested a visit with me, so I took the afternoon off work to accommodate them. They asked me to relate my concerns. I asked them if they’d read my letter, and it seemed like they had, so I didn’t elaborate for them. Dick suggested again that I was promoting immorality among our young people. Other than that they had virtually nothing to discuss. The meeting lasted for exactly fifteen minutes, at which time they got up and left. I have not a clue what the meeting was for.

In March (1999) [Bill] wrote to Harold and asked what would be expected of him to be able to come back to meetings. Harold wrote back that he did not know. [Bill] wrote to Dick and asked the same question, and his answer was that an elder would have to report that [Bill] had showed appropriate signs of repentance. The problem: of the four local elders, two of them would not speak to [Bill], and a third was too paranoid to discuss the matter. In the fourth meeting there was a young unprofessing woman who frequently came to the meeting with a couple of small children and they did not want her to know what was going on, so they were not able to ask her to sign an agreement allowing [Bill] to go to meetings.

In April, I approached Mike Colson, a novice elder who had not written a letter for [Bill]. The next day he called me at 4:30 p.m. and literally screamed at me until 6:00 p.m. He told me I ought to be ashamed of myself for not obeying the workers; he had spent the whole previous day calling people to get an answer for me, he quoted scripture supporting the shunning and banishment of [Bill], he had spent a weekend in Oregon asking the friends what to do about people like [Bill], he had gone to the Bay Area so he could spend Christmas with Eldon Tenniswood.

After Linda went to convention preparations at Mountain Ranch that month, Harold Hilton came up for a visit. I was chastised for writing letters – I assured him I wrote only to workers and two local elders. He told me we’d been missing meetings – we hadn’t missed a Sunday or Wednesday meeting in over a year, we just didn’t go to Linda’s gospel meetings because she said she did not approve of us. He told me he “didn’t know what happened” in our meeting, he “didn’t want to know”, and he wanted me to drop "this thing" with [Bill] to keep

peace. I told him I would cooperate fully, except that I would not shun [Bill] at this point under any circumstance because I was the only person left in the field who dared speak to him. Still in April, [Bill] was summoned by his probation officer and asked about violating his probation restrictions. The gathering in question was one I had attended and I knew [Bill] had not been there. The probation officer also informed me that [Greg Hale] was complaining about both [Bill] and me for “conducting a campaign in the church against him, ([Greg]).” But she assured us [Bill] was in exact compliance with his probation.

In June Harold Hilton and Dan Nejely came to the field, and by November Harold got around to arranging meetings with the four couples who had not given permission letters for [Bill] to go to meetings. They all eventually agreed, but only after two of them had aired some vicious dislike for [Bill] personally and one of them for me as well, though I was not present. Interestingly, what offended them most about [Bill] was that he had refused previous requests to meet with them in violation of his probation requirements. This incident confirmed my suspicions that the friends and workers showed no compunction in defying specific orders of the courts when it inconvenienced them personally, and they had little patience with [Bill]’s compliance. In December, Harold called a gospel meeting and invited [Bill] by e-mail to attend.

By then [Bill] was not impressed, and told me he was afraid to go because he had already been jumping through hoops for two years and he could take no more of it. I convinced him to go, and he did indeed “reprofess”. This allowed him to go to a Sunday meeting and a Wednesday evening Bible Study, but he could not go to any other gathering of the friends because the [Hale]s were free to go where they wanted.

In May a relative of the [Hale]s shared with me that she had learned [Bill] had not gone to convention that month because he had “decided to stay home and work instead”. In fact, he had been told by his probation officer that he could not go to any convention that year because the [Hale]’s would be going to all of them.

The real backlash upon me and my family came following this point. Through the next year we found that the workers’ attention had become focused on my wife and I – me in particular. I have written much more about this in another account, but one thing we learned was that our professing friends as far away as Texas had been warned against visiting us by workers we had never met in states we had never been to, and I was chastised several times for things I had not even done. Twice John van den Berg had a crying spell with me over my misbehaviors, and I was quite beside myself with him because it was like talking to a brick wall – he seemed to either not listen to me or not believe anything I told him.

In July 2001 Lois Austin and Marilyn Denio came to the field, and to make a long story short, Lois was obviously in full collusion with the efforts to police us. Our relationship with the workers terminated abruptly in January of 2002 when I was called to a tribunal of sorts (with Harold Hilton, Lois Austin, Mike Colson, and Mike’s wife) and accused of disturbing the church. My wife had already had a complete nervous breakdown because of the stress we had been under. The Sunday previous Lois stopped giving her own testimony to chastise my wife for whispering and thus “interrupting her train of thought” while she (Lois) was speaking, was the last time anyone else in my family has ever attended a meeting. In my grilling session which followed that incident I was screamed at in my face by Mike Colson, and his wife told me twice that my wife “made her sick to her stomach”. I explained clearly and accurately every accusation they brought against me – not one of them had any merit, but I am sure they believed nothing I told them. Harold concluded by telling me that I had to stop “disturbing the church – or else.”

That March [Mary Hale] was married to another young man who had moved to the area from out of state, and in June it was learned that she was pregnant. We hoped this would end her obsession with [Bill], but in September [Bill] was again summoned to court to answer to more allegations that he was violating his probation. [Mary], now visibly pregnant, was there with her husband accusing [Bill] of numerous probation violations, but the district attorney and the probation officer both stated that all accusations were determined to be unfounded. So the judge promptly asked [Bill]'s attorney to prepare a petition to have [Bill]'s probation discharged. He went on to say that this case had been going on for five years, and from what he could determine it was much more about an internal conflict in the church than it was about [Bill] personally. He also ordered that [Bill] be allowed to attend all church worship and social functions as he chose, and [Mary] was directed to inquire before she went to any gathering of the friends and if she did not want to be there with [Bill] present she was ordered to stay away.

I informed Harold Hilton and Lois Austin of this development. Harold declined to address it. Lois would only consider this if she had a chance to review the court record. She obviously never bothered to check, because [Bill]'s status and association among the friends in Nevada was *never* adjusted to comply with that court decision. Harold and Lois also declined to write recommendations for [Bill] to be discharged from probation. But in January [Bill] did get a letter from the judge saying that he was honorably discharged from his probation. The judge went on to explain that he had concluded that the victim would never be satisfied with what the court would do with [Bill], and he had written her a letter advising her that [Bill]'s case is closed and he was not interested in any more discussion with her about it. I must add that it is virtually unheard of for a sex offender to be discharged from probation – probation officers are not permitted to recommend it under any circumstances. The discharge has to be initiated with the judge.

When it was learned that [Bill]'s probation was discharged, Dick Middleton came to town and apologized for not coming to the area when the first complaint was raised about [Bill] as early as 1998. But before Dick left, [Bill] asked him if he could now go to Special Meetings and Convention. Dick's answer was, "I don't know." Again, nothing changed.

This account is not intended to indict anyone or even solicit sympathy for my own position. I just feel compelled to point out some glaring inconsistencies in how the ministry conducted itself in my situation. I was disappointed. I hasten also to emphasize that I have **NEVER** asked [Bill] what he did. All the evidence I had in [Bill]'s favor I received from accusing sources. I have also on occasion stated my great respect and sympathies for the elder who was in jail with [Bill] – he trusted me enough to call me at 2:00 a.m. the night he was arrested. Neither did I go looking for improprieties with anyone, but quite inadvertently discovered every disturbing thing I uncovered. The bottom line is that I discovered that workers had lied to and about each other and to and about the friends. Undoubtedly many of the friends have repeated many of the lies as though they were *truths from the workers*. In any case, I have not heard from any of the many workers who were involved in this situation that anything was out of order except me for "promoting immorality among our young people". And all I did was insist on being told the truth.

The greater question is this: Why the prolonged and convoluted effort to squelch my understanding of what really happened? There is no acceptable explanation for that. The only consolation I got from any worker in this whole extended matter was from Lois Austin. She assured me that if I would wait a few years the friends would forget all the things the workers had

been telling them about us! Small consolation when the safety and salvation of our children is at stake.

**Update 2008:** [Bill Frost] moved to another state when he was discharged from probation. He is happily married and has two children. I have met people who go to meeting with him there and they were quite pleased to have him in their area. His life, of course, will always be inconvenienced by the continual need to register as a sex offender. Eldon Tenniswood passed away on May 23, 2003, and Dick Middleton passed away on Oct. 9, 2006.

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*\*[] Please note some names have been changed for privacy purposes.*