

Shattered dreams: When faith, abuse intersect

Written by By Tom Hartsock Sun Correspondent
Friday, 01 April 2016 01:21



Two adults share painful memories

Time can change beliefs. What was once thought to be correct converts easily to a much darker side of society over just a few years.

Examples are plentiful in the world today though we must never lose sight of basic rights and wrongs, regardless of the passage of time.

On March 24, a press conference was held in the offices of Keeler and Keeler to discuss the filing made the same day in the Navajo Nation District Court by attorneys Billy Keeler of Gallup, Craig Vernon and Leander James of Idaho, and Patrick Noaker of Minneapolis.

The attorneys hope that this suit will shine a “spotlight” on sexual abuse of Navajo children within the Lamanite Placement Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), which lasted from 1947 to about the mid 1990’s.

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Vernon and Keeler were present with their clients, identified only as MM and RJ, both enrolled members of the Navajo Nation, and both minors at the time their alleged abuse took place. The program had robust growth until LDS president George P. Lee stopped it.

According to reports, recognized beliefs of LDS members, Native Americans were in two separate groups: the righteous and civilized Nephites (light-skinned), and the idle, savage, and bloodthirsty Lamanites, cursed by God with a skin of blackness and became loathsome. (See verse in 2 Nephi 5:21, Book of Mormon.) Both fled Israel in 600 B.C.

With that belief as a starting point, it becomes easier to understand the abuse that came after, even towards children as young as eight, and both male and female.

Transported by buses at several locations on the Navajo reservation, the children were shipped to foster homes in Utah for education and training, and for skin lightening, as spelled out in a Conference Report entitled "Improvement Era" by Mormon Prophet Spencer W. Kimball in 1960. "... These young member of the Church are changing to whiteness and delightsomeness."

With general attitudes such as this, it is no wonder the leaders of the LDS Church felt driven to instruct the Lamanite within the Navajo Nation concerning their true ancestry and convert them back to the one true faith.

That's the background, but for RJ the past of those years haunts him. He was only 10 and in the fourth grade when his mother agreed to put him in the Lamanite Program. He was from a large, and poor family of 12, with little chance of getting ahead, or so his mother thought.

Placing him in this program must have seemed like a dream come true. Four other siblings also joined the program for varying amounts of time, three of them were reportedly sexually abused as well.

"(The sexual abuse) was like a monster," RJ said during the conference, and sobbing loudly.

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"I've struggled through this abuse, and being gay ... I'm not sure if that is what caused my being gay or if it was genetics ... being Native, becoming dependent on alcohol, (and being disoriented) this is what I went through. I just wanted to protect my sisters, but I was so ashamed."

RJ said he was abused in three of the homes where he was placed.

Reporting the abuse did little good as the adults, even the ones he should have been able to trust, did not believe him. And in the Navajo culture, talking about the subject was considered taboo.

MM is one of the sisters of RJ, and the other plaintiff in this case.

"I was afraid to come forward," she said. "Mom was poor but very traditional. I was 11 when I was placed in a foster home."

She said that she was raped by a friend of one of her step-brothers, who was approximately 40 years old. In her second placement she was sexually abused by her foster father.

Most difficult of all for both RJ and MM was being aware of the sexual abuse of their younger siblings, who were sometimes in the same foster homes as they were.

The lawsuit names as defendants: The Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, a Utah corporation; The Corporation of the Presiding Bishop of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, a Utah corporation; LDS Family Services, a Utah corporation; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, an unincorporated religious association.

Asked why the lawsuit wasn't filed in Utah, Vernon, who had been a practicing Mormon for most of his life, replied that the statute of limitations had run out in that state. Keeler mentioned that they plan to use the determinations found in the Supreme Court case against the Catholic

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Church.

“Church leaders should not cooperate in these matters,” said Vernon. “It was the same for the Catholics. They are all concerned about secrecy. I’ve dedicated my practice in the last five years to survivors of child sexual abuse.”

If any other area residents have gone through the same problems, especially in the Lamanite Program, and you would like to join this lawsuit, are encouraged to call Billy Keeler at (505) 979-0688 or e-mail him at: billkeeler@keelerandkeeler.com

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