

# AdSAFE, South Pacific Division

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## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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AdSAFE is an entity established to address domestic violence and sexual abuse within the Seventh-day Adventist church community in Australasia. Its mandate includes providing information and resources concerning the various forms of abuse, training employees and church members to combat abuse, supporting victims of abuse, investigating allegations of abuse, and cooperating with law enforcement authorities in cases of abuse that appear in the civil courts.

## An Increasing Awareness

Prior to the 1990s, the Adventist church conducted counselling services with consulting rooms in conference offices. The arrangement had limited privacy. However, the interactions brought counsellors to the realisation that domestic violence and sexual abuse happened in Adventist homes and churches. Specific details remained confidential, but counsellors shared their general concerns with church leaders. One of the earliest responses from the South Pacific Division (SPD) Church Ministries Department, under the leadership of Bryan Craig, was to publish a Statement on Family Violence in 1989.<sup>1</sup> The Statement brought the issue to the attention of church members, even to those who denied that abuse could exist among professed Christians.

Craig continued his department's awareness campaign, publishing an article in 1991 about child sexual abuse in conjunction with the National Child Protection Week.<sup>2</sup> In the southern summer of 1991/1992 the Association of



Adsafesafe graphic

Photo courtesy of Milton Hook.

Adventist Women and the Trans-Tasman Union Conference sponsored awareness seminars about abuse in Adventist homes. Speakers were Jan Tully and Helen Last, clinicians who dealt with offenders.<sup>3</sup>

In 1994 the Adventist Church released the results of the second Valuegenesis study of Adventists age 18 to 25. Significant revelations included the statistic that 88 percent of reported abuse was perpetrated by males; one in seven Adventist women were subjected to physical violence from their husband; abuse cases were twice as prevalent in homes where family worship was conducted regularly, and Adventist pastors were not trained to counsel victims or abusers.<sup>4</sup>

To help remedy the lack of pastoral counselling skills, a 30-page manual titled *Understanding and Dealing with Family Violence* was assembled under the direction of Craig and distributed to ministers.<sup>5</sup> In 1998 the Christian Centre for Bioethics sponsored a closed seminar titled "Sexual Abuse Within the Church" at Sydney Adventist Hospital. A key guest speaker was Ray Wyre, director of the Lucy Faithful Foundation, a charity in the United Kingdom dedicated to the prevention of child sexual abuse.<sup>6</sup>

In Perth, West Australia, in 1999, a high profile sexual abuse case involved an Adventist church elder, culminating in a lengthy prison sentence. A committee of church members in West Australia convened a conference in July 1999 to discuss sexual abuse in the church, and the South Pacific Division subsequently established an Abuse and Harassment Committee to develop strategies to deal with the issue. The committee proposed a master plan, which included assigning David and Cheryl Robertson to work part-time in a new Office of Pastoral Support. Cheryl Robertson trained volunteer counsellors to answer phone calls from abuse survivors. A reporting system was established to provide emotional support and justice for both the abused and abuser. A professional standards committee was established, with a 50/50 mix of male and female members, including volunteer clinicians and legal experts from both Adventist and non-Adventist sectors. No Adventist Church administrator was a member of the committee. These arrangements were in place by February 2000.

The program's name was changed to Adventist Support, with the Robertsons now leading it full-time. After some years the name changed again, to Safe Place Services, reflecting its emphasis on preventing situations which could foster abuse within the church. For the next seventeen years David Robertson served as director.<sup>7</sup> His term included the government Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, announced by Prime Minister Julia Gillard on November 12, 2012. The final report of the Commission was given on December 15, 2017, after numerous hearings and the referral of 2,575 cases to police.<sup>8</sup>

Robertson engaged in a training program to shield church communities from sexual abuse, even before the Royal Commission convened.<sup>9</sup> It was, however, a daunting task to provide specific training events for all the churches in Australasia, many of them smaller groups in remote areas. An eLearning resource was therefore launched in 2016 to give the Church opportunity to provide a credible level of child protection.<sup>10</sup>

**AdSAFE**

In light of the Royal Commission, Adventist leaders made some refinements to their program to make it more robust and transparent. The title of the entity was changed to AdSAFE.<sup>11</sup> It began functioning in January 2017 with an increased staff that included a general manager, a policy officer, a training and development specialist, and two case officers, one to counsel the plaintiff and another to counsel the defendant.<sup>12</sup> When David Robertson retired, Raquel Greive was appointed general manager. In mid-2018 she was succeeded by Ann Wooldridge, who had first served in the role of officer for the plaintiff. Wooldridge had some years of experience in the New South Wales Police Force and the New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services.<sup>13</sup> As she took up her duties, she quoted Royal Commission chair Justice Peter McClellan: "The community will not accept the legitimacy of any institution which does not give priority to the safety and well-being of the children for which it has responsibility."<sup>14</sup> In 2019 Wooldridge announced that the Seventh-day Adventist church in Australia had agreed to join the National Redress Scheme, a program that offers an apology, on-going support, and *ex gratia* payments to victims of abuse.<sup>15</sup>

In 2020 the New Zealand Government has begun its own Royal Commission<sup>16</sup> and Adventist Church leaders in the country have pre-empted the findings by issuing a public apology to any abuse victim in their community.<sup>17</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in the South Pacific Division has made considerable advances in combating abuse and violence within its membership and the wider community. AdSAFE has been established as its primary vehicle of prevention, education, care, counselling, and policy development. Much remains to be done in the emerging island nations of the Division. AdSAFE still operates informally in the SPD office.

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