

B O O K N O T E

CASE REPORTS OF THE
MORMON ALLIANCE:
VOL. 1, 1995ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson
and Janice Merrill AllredMormon Alliance: Salt Lake City, 1996
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Reviewed by Brian Evenson



I RECENTLY attended a Church meeting in which an experienced LDS family therapist discussed abuse. The speaker herself was clear and approachable, and the meeting should have helped people to think concretely about a topic too often swept under the rug. What surprised me, however, was the direction the meeting took. Most questions were from people worried that they might one day be wrongfully accused of abuse by what one referred to as a "conniving child." Maybe the children were lying, someone suggested. Maybe abuse didn't really happen as much as some thought. Though several people objected to such views, the ultimate concern of many seemed less "How do we protect our children?" than "How do we protect ourselves?"

Lawyer and novelist Andrew Vachss has rightly suggested that now is a bad time for children. We have moved quickly from a recognition of the reality of child abuse to a severe backlash against it, a large-scale questioning of the validity of abuse. There are, it is true, cases in which abuse has been distorted or misremembered, cases in which memories of abuse might be implanted by therapists. Yet these do not change the facts that child abuse commonly occurs, that adults who prey on children often outwardly appear respectable, and that these predators are often aided by our willingness to push the issue of child abuse as quickly as possible out of our minds. Nor do such problems excuse some mishandling of cases by ecclesiastical leaders whom victims trust and respect. If mishandling of sexual abuse by Church leaders is, as President Hinckley has suggested, a mere blip on our radar screens, this is not because abuse is not common, but because our radar systems are inadequate. We are too busy protecting ourselves and the Church from "negative publicity" to read the

signs when they are present. It is not a mere blip to the abused children, however. Projects such as the Mormon Alliance's case reports are about making the inadequacy of the current radar systems known so they can be improved and about refocusing attention on the welfare of the abused. By focusing exclusively on sexual abuse, the volume brings into startling relief current problems in LDS church policy and practice. The book's first section is an introduction and a resource, describing past and current LDS church policies. In addition to official statements, there are less formal comments from general authorities and other Church notables, definitions of abuse, summaries of articles and books about abuse in the LDS church, discussions of ritual abuse, and resources of other kinds. From these documents, it is clear that the Church has verbally taken a strong public stance against child abuse; it is equally clear, however, that the Church has done quite a bit less than it might or should to support that strong stance with strong actions. Little has been done, Anderson and Allred suggest, to establish clear policies for dealing with abuse; too much has been left to local leaders' discretion. The result has sometimes been that bishops with little or no training have given advice that is ill considered, that blames the victim, or that allows the abuse to continue. In the second section, and in parts of the first, individual cases of sexual abuse in the LDS church community are discussed. Most of these are case summaries, though the volume's last 150 pages offer an in-depth look at several interrelated cases taking place in the same area: a father and a son both sexually abused in their youth by their respective bishops, a husband ritually abusing his wife and children. Though sensitively presented, these case studies are devastating reading. They reveal those realities of sexual abuse that are lost when victims are reduced to numbers and percentages and cold facts, the reality of personal devastation and betrayal. There are several evident purposes to the 1995 volume. From one perspective, Anderson and Allred want to create empathy. Linked with this is an attempt to nurture those who have been abused and to give them a voice, a forum in which to speak. Another purpose seems to be to convince people of the existence of sexual abuse, to reveal weaknesses in current Church policies, and to suggest changes. At moments, however, the volume's attempts at inclusiveness compromise its credibility and authority: some of the summaries of abuse situations (many incomplete and derived from news-

paper stories) are not completely convincing, thus weakening the argument as a whole. That the volume is edited by two now-excommunicated Mormons may make it dismissible to many rank-and-file Mormons, which would suggest that the volume is unlikely to reach those who could use it most, nor to be treated as seriously as it deserves.

At the conclusion of the theoretical section, the Mormon Alliance gives careful suggestions for reconsidering of LDS policies on abuse. These include encouraging the Church to announce "immediate, firm, and public measures that will reduce the ease with which perpetrators can use Church settings to find victims" (154). Related suggestions include making information on abuse available to all members; integrating lessons on sexual abuse into the Church curriculum; recurring and specific inservice training for ecclesiastical leaders and teachers; ready access to qualified professionals; and developing a more open and comprehensive support network for dealing with sexual abuse (154-55). By relatively simple means, Anderson and Allred suggest, the Church could do much more to prevent abuse.

Despite minor flaws, the presentation is generally clear and the information is vital. With the recidivism rate extremely high for sexual abuse, it is foolish to play roulette with our children. As organizations such as Baylor College of Medicine's CIVITAS work to give us better ways of understanding predation and sexual abuse, we must face the reality of abuse head on and work to improve our radar systems. The 1995 *Case Reports* is an important resource.

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Pontius' Puddle

