EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PREPARED BY

GRACE
Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment

FOR

FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH

NEWTON, KANSAS

PRESENTED ON JULY 24, 2017
AND JULY 25, 2017

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Scope of Assessment

GRACE ("Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment") was engaged to provide an assessment with recommendations for First Mennonite Church of Newton, Kansas (hereafter referred to as "FMC"). FMC asked GRACE to review the responses by FMC and its representatives after learning of child sexual abuse allegations involving Michael Combs, including reviewing and considering any relevant factors that contributed to the response by FMC. In addition, FMC requested that GRACE provide analysis and feedback along with recommendations regarding this matter and how similar situations can be better addressed in the future. After a thorough review, GRACE prepared this Executive Summary along with Recommendations for FMC.

Methodology

GRACE first prepared a survey which was offered to any person who wished to participate in the review, regardless of whether the individual had previously attended FMC or not.[1] The survey was available online beginning April 7, 2017 through June 30, 2017. Hard copies of the survey were also made available for those who did not wish to access the survey online.[2] GRACE received a total of 154 responses to the survey. After receiving survey input, GRACE offered any individual an opportunity to provide additional feedback to GRACE via an in-person interview or a phone interview. GRACE conducted a total of 35 interviews. GRACE also collected and reviewed all available documentation relating to the matters at issue.[3] After collecting and reviewing all available relevant documentation and conducting interviews, GRACE prepared this Executive Summary with Recommendations. This assessment was first presented to the Church Board on July 24, 2017. The entire church body was invited to attend the same presentation on July 25, 2017. GRACE's work has at all times been completely independent and GRACE has not made any changes to the content of the presentations between the two above-referenced dates.

Introduction

The impact of Michael Combs' crime has produced a significant trauma in the lives of countless individuals. But for the hope of our Lord, Michael Combs' actions have had a devastating and far-reaching impact not only in the life of FMC and in the Newton area, but unfortunately, around Kansas. Michael Combs' criminal actions serve as a tragic reminder of the chaos and devastation that ensue as a result of sexual crimes. Michael Combs now stands convicted of the felony crime of Rape and is currently serving a 93 month prison sentence in the Kansas Department of Corrections.

Michael Combs attended FMC for more than 20 years. He was considered a trusted lay leader at FMC and regularly led the congregation in worship by playing the organ. In addition, he was a Sunday School teacher for four years in the Life Sharing class. In the absence of the Pastor during the summer of 2015, Michael Combs was invited to preach during a Sunday morning worship service and his sermon was very well-received by the FMC congregation. By all accounts, Michael Combs was a highly respected church member at FMC. Before coming to FMC more than 20 years ago, Michael Combs was an Episcopal priest in several parishes, including St. Matthew's in Newton and St. Paul's in Leavenworth, Kansas. Michael Combs' current wife was and continues to be an active participant at FMC. Before Combs' arrest and

[1] The survey permitted any person, even individuals who had never attended FMC, with an opportunity to provide answers to the survey questions. FMC made several public announcements about the survey, encouraging any individual with information to complete the survey. Instructions were also given about accessing the survey online and where to retrieve a hard (i.e., paper) copy of the survey.

[2] The hard copies of survey responses were individually mailed to the GRACE representative.

[3] All evidence collected was voluntarily produced, and in many cases, the materials were publically available. These materials included items such as the criminal felony Complaint filed by the State of Kansas against Michael Combs; the Plea Agreement related to Michael Combs' case; newspaper articles from the Newton Kansan related to Michael Combs' case; Church Board, Commission and Committee agendas and minutes; the Sunday bulletins with announcements regarding "Monthly Remembering" relating to sexual abuse; worship leading notes; and emails voluntarily produced by church leaders and parishioners.

conviction and, even now, she continues to lead a variety of children's activities including Vacation Bible School. Michael Combs also assisted his wife with some of the children's activities and therefore completed FMC's Safe Sanctuaries training as required by the church policy. The shocking nature of his crime to the FMC church body is impossible to underestimate. Likewise, it is impossible to quantify the pain and hurt which victims, their families, and various parts of the FMC church body have endured.[4] Michael Combs' criminal, deceitful, and selfish actions continue to impact individuals and communities around Kansas.

After the initial (and normal) reactions of shock and denial upon learning the news of Michael Combs' crime, a number of other reactions to this trauma were reported by parishioners as well as by those in church leadership. While some reported that these events had no significant impact on them, others disclosed negative emotional, spiritual, and/or physical effects including anxiety, grief, anger, embarrassment, sadness, shame, feelings of loss, betrayal, depression, fear, helplessness, worthlessness, dissociative episodes, sleeplessness, overeating, despair, suicidal thoughts, and a decreased interest in attending church. At least three individuals reported seeking therapy and another reported beginning medication as a result of this crisis and the way in which it was handled.

Each person who had a role in how this matter was handled can and should own what part he or she played in responding well or in responding poorly to this matter. *But let us first remember that the primary person responsible for producing layer upon layer of untold trauma upon his victims, his family, this congregation, and his surrounding community is Michael Combs. Much of this trauma may never be reported to GRACE or to law enforcement. But all who read this Executive Summary should remember that the first and primary responsibility for the chaos, trauma, and devastation that has resulted rests at the feet of the one who committed these atrocities.*

FINDINGS REGARDING MICHAEL COMBS, HIS SEXUAL CRIMES AND MISCONDUCT, AND OTHER VICTIMS[5]

An important aspect of this review was to aid FMC in determining whether Michael Combs may have sexually abused any other individuals apart from the victim for which he has already been convicted.[6] No information was provided to GRACE concerning any person from FMC being a victim of Michael Combs. However, during the course of this review, other information bearing upon Michael Combs' history as a sexual offender came to light. This information is relevant, particularly as FMC considers whether to allow Michael Combs to return to FMC, should he be released after serving his prison sentence for rape.

Michael Combs was born in 1945. He graduated in May of 1967 with a BA in Music Education from Northwest Missouri State. In July 1967, he married first wife. From 1966 to 1971, Michael Combs and his first wife attended Christ Episcopal Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. During this time, he taught at Bishop LeBlond, an all-girls school, in St. Joseph, Missouri. In 1970, his son was born. And in either 1973 or 1974, Michael Combs graduated with a Masters degree in Guidance Counseling.

In approximately 1973 or 1974, the Rector at Christ Episcopal Church told Combs that he was being inappropriate with a high school girl who had also been their babysitter. Combs denied it, but confessed the Rector's accusation to his first wife. In 1975, he and his first wife began attending St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Leavenworth, Kansas. In May of 1976, Michael Combs told his first wife that he was being called to the priesthood. In 1977, Michael Combs and his family

[4] A church leader told GRACE, "The level of trauma caused first by Michael and his unthinkable actions, and second by our inept response, and our blaming each other, and our broken relationships has made for a very hard year full of sorrow, anxiety, sleepless nights, endless discussions about how to go forward and how to offer each other grace and questions about whether we can come out of this a better safer church or just a broken church…all of this and more."

[5] See Appendix A for "Summary Outline of Findings Regarding Michael Combs, His Sexual Crimes and Misconduct, and Other Victims."

[6] Question 18 of the survey stated, "Do you have any information about whether or not Michael Combs may have sexually abused any other individual(s) at any time, other than the crime against the individual for which he was convicted? (Please note that this question is *not* limited to information pertaining only to individuals having an association with First Mennonite Church.)"

moved to Austin, Texas so that he could attend Seminary of the Southwest. At this time, they attended First Presbyterian Church in Austin where he was employed as an organist and the choirmaster.

In 1980, Michael Combs was ordained as an Episcopal priest. For three years between 1980 and 1983, he was employed at Grace Cathedral in Topeka where he and his first wife served as youth leaders in the church. From 1983 to 1986, Michael Combs became employed as Assistant Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Leavenworth, Kansas. It was during this time that, according to his own confession to Newton police, Michael Combs sexually abused two teenage girls. One of the girls was 15 years of age and one was 18 years of age. The 15 year old sexual abuse victim, now an adult, reported to GRACE that Combs sexually abused her for a period of about six months while she was the youth group president. The abuse ended only because her father was in the Army and they moved. The 18 year old sexual abuse victim died at the age of 40 in a car accident in April of 2007. According to a witness, the 18 year old abuse victim's life took a completely different course after Combs' sexual abuse, and she was never the same. This witness stated that Combs' sexual abuse of the 18 year old was "extensive" and as a result, it "ruined" her life.

In addition, Michael Combs admitted that he engaged in numerous affairs with married women, at the time when he was a married priest. In fact, Combs told police he was "fortunate that somebody's husband didn't shoot me or something." An active member of the church in Leavenworth who was very close to the events at that time described Combs as "a serial adulterer"[7] and the Senior Pastor once remarked to his first wife that "Michael sure likes his ladies." It was also during this time that, according to Combs' own admission and while serving as a priest, he abused his role as counselor by engaging in sexual activity with counselees.[8]

In 1986, Michael Combs received a call to become the Rector at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Newton. His wife stayed behind in Leavenworth for a few months to allow their son to complete the school year before moving to Newton. His first wife drove to Newton each weekend during that period until she was able to move with her son to Newton full time. After moving to Newton, she got a job teaching in special education and from approximately 1988 to 1989, she worked with and became best friends with Michael's current wife. Combs' first wife spent a lot of time with Combs' current wife and his current wife often came to their home for visits. On January 4, 1990, Michael Combs announced suddenly to his first wife that he was leaving her and filed for divorce. On June 13, 1990, his divorce from his first wife was finalized. Combs' first wife then left Newton. Within six months, on December 24, 1990, Combs publicly announced his engagement to his current wife to members of St. Matthew's church in Newton.

At some point in 1991, and while the he was the Rector at St. Matthew's in Newton, the Episcopal church in Leavenworth learned about Michael Combs' multiple affairs. They also learned that he had sexually abused two teenage girls, ages 15 and 18, while in Leavenworth. The criminal statute of limitations for prosecuting the sexual abuse of the teenagers had expired but they still initiated ecclesiastical proceedings against him and his credentials as priest were revoked. Due to "privacy concerns" the Episcopal church did not provide his first wife with any of this information. However Combs did share this information with his current wife before they married.[9] In June of 1991, he and his current wife were married.

Sometime in the early 1990's after he left the priesthood, Michael Combs applied for a job at Methodist Youthville[10] and

[7] This witness stated, "[Combs] had women in about every town he'd ever been in" and stated that he knew of affairs Combs had with women in Topeka, Leavenworth, and Newton.
[8] Michael Combs told police "That's how the problem started when I was in the ministry. In seminary, they all- they taught us, you know, don't shut the door- you know, if some woman comes in and wants to talk to you, leave the door open. Well, some of the things they wanted to talk about weren't the kinds of things you can talk about with the door open. And, they'd be coming in, and pretty soon, if I was attracted to them and they were attracted to me, and then pretty soon I'd go calling at their house. And somewhere we'd have privacy, and then it would become an affair."
[9] In his interview with Newton police, Michael Combs stated that before he married his current wife and once they became "serious", he wanted her to know "the whole story."
[10] Methodist Youthville is a local nonprofit faith-based agency in Newton, KS that is "committed to developing innovative programs that inspire change in at risk youth and families."

was hired. A person from the Leavenworth parish called the personnel director at Methodist Youthville and suggested they call the bishop at Leavenworth to find out specifically why Michael Combs had left the Episcopal church. After learning the real reason Michael Combs left, he was terminated from employment at Methodist Youthville. Around 1997, the Combs became active members at FMC.

Around 2005, approximately ten years before his arrest for rape, Michael Combs was contacted about his sexual abuse of one of the teenage girls from Leavenworth. The victim who had been 18 years old at the time of the abuse had been in therapy and desired to confront Michael Combs about his sexual abuse. A meeting was set up with the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program.[11] Michael Combs' current wife attended the proceeding with him.[12] Combs told Newton police that he apologized to the victim and to her husband when she confronted him about his abuse of her. As previously mentioned, this victim of his abuse later died in 2007.

In 2006, FMC's Safe Sanctuaries policy was initially adopted. Michael Combs completed the Safe Sanctuaries training at some point after the policy was adopted.

Michael Combs befriended a neighborhood family that, for 18 years, lived on the same street as the Combs. Combs engaged in activities with the children such as fishing. One of the boys in the family disclosed to GRACE that Combs sexually abused him and his younger sister. The witness stated that Combs sexually abused him around 2005 to 2007, when he was approximately 12 to 14 years old. He also stated that his younger sister has disclosed that Combs sexually abused her when she was between the ages of 12 and 15 (around 2011 to 2014). After the boy became aware of Combs' arrest for Rape and Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a minor, he disclosed his sexual abuse to an individual who reported the abuse to the authorities.

During this timeframe, Michael Combs also assisted his wife in her work with disabled children (such as swimming at the Rec Center and outings to the zoo). No person has disclosed that Michael Combs abused a child while at the Rec Center. However in speaking of the disabled children in her care, Michael Combs' wife admitted, "Those boys can't remember anything. They can't even remember what happened yesterday." While all of this was happening, Michael Combs regularly engaged in church activities such as playing the organ, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, and assisting his wife with various activities such as Vacation Bible School. According to his current wife, however, he was "never alone with kids." On one occasion during the summer of 2015, he was invited to preach a sermon at FMC while the Pastor was away, which was very well received by the FMC congregation.

After seeing a video about safe touches, the victim in the case for which he was convicted told her family what Combs had done. The victim in this case is a family member who was between the ages of 8 and 10 at the time of the offenses. She had visited the Combs' home in Newton on many occasions. During these visits and between approximately 2013 and 2015, Michael Combs repeatedly touched the victim all over her body, including her breasts on numerous occasions with his hands.[13] According to his videotaped confession to Newton police, Combs touched the victim's genitals (under her clothes) with his hand on approximately two occasions while they were under the covers together in his bed. Combs' wife and another small child were in the bed asleep at the time. Michael Combs claimed that he could not remember a lot about the sexual abuse but affirmed that "whatever she says is, is what happened. There's no reason for her to lie or to make things up." Michael Combs also said that the victim's disclosures to the police are accurate because "her memory is a whole lot better than mine."

[11] This entity still exists, but now it is called Offender/Victim Ministries, Inc.
[12] As previously noted, Michael Combs told Newton police that his current wife attended the meeting with him. Michael Combs' current wife also acknowledged to GRACE that she was present for this meeting.
[13] At one point during the interview when describing how the abuse first began, Combs told police, "… and I honestly don't know where the line is where something like that becomes improper."

When the victim's father learned of the abuse, he confronted Combs who confessed that he had sexually abused the child. Shortly thereafter, the police were notified of the crime, and on November 19, 2015 Combs was invited to discuss this matter with the police. At that time, Michael Combs confessed a number of sexual crimes to the Newton police, which resulted in his arrest and subsequent criminal conviction. On that same day, a Newton police officer who attends FMC called to inform the Pastor of the arrest. After the call, the Pastor informed the Youth and Young Adults Pastor and the Worship and Visitation Pastor of the pending criminal charges against Michael Combs. Combs did not return to FMC for any worship activities following his arrest; however, he was permitted to return to play the organ on a few occasions on days when children were not present. In addition, his name was removed from the Safe Sanctuaries list of approved adults.

On November 23, 2015, Michael Combs was officially charged with four felony counts of sexual crimes: two counts of Rape and two counts of Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a Child under the age of 14.[14] Eventually on March 22, 2016, Combs pled "no contest" in open court to one count of Rape (sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 14). And as previously stated, a neighborhood boy, after learning of Combs' arrest for sexual crimes, had also disclosed being sexually abused by Combs. However because the victims' father considered Combs a type of "grandpa" figure, the father asked that the charges against Combs be dismissed. As articulated in the Plea Agreement, this charge was dismissed in exchange for Combs' plea to Rape.[15] On June 13, 2016, Combs was sentenced and taken into custody for a period of 93 months (7.75 years) in the Kansas Department of Corrections. He will be required to register as a sex offender for the remainder of his life.

FINDINGS REGARDING FMC AND HOW IT RESPONDED TO MICHAEL COMBS' CRIMES[16]

FMC is a church that loves people. This crisis involving Michael Combs has been particularly painful on many levels because it involves so many different individuals who genuinely care for each other and who have known each other for a very long time. FMC's desire to love the vulnerable, the weak, the oppressed, regardless of gender, nationality, age, sexual orientation, legal status, and more, is evident. Several strong components of the Mennonite tradition are also readily apparent: love of community, a desire for peace, and where possible, the healing and restoration of broken relationships. All of this is palpable. And yet this crisis (or this "mess" as many have called it) plainly exists here. Reflecting on the past helps to process "lessons learned" as FMC moves forward.

Michael Combs was a trusted leader, Sunday School teacher, organist, and an active member at FMC for more than 20 years. After confessing a number of sexual crimes to Newton police on November 19, 2015, Michael Combs was arrested and booked into jail for felony charges. A police officer who attended FMC informed the Pastor of his arrest so that she could tend to Michael Combs' wife. The Pastor immediately told the Pastor of Youth and Young Adults and the Pastor of Worship and Visitation about the charges. The Pastor decided to wait until after the newspaper[17] reported his arrest before discussing it with church leaders. Once the arrest became public, some church leaders began discussing how best to inform the congregation.[18]

[14] The Complaint filed against Michael Combs on 11/23/15 in the District Court of Harvey County, Kansas is a public record and it details these felony charges.
[15] The Plea Agreement is a public record and was filed in the District Court of Harvey County, Kansas on 3/22/16. The Plea Agreement states that in exchange for Combs' plea of "no contest" to Count 1, Rape, the State of Kansas would dismiss "Counts 2, 3, and 4, and not to file charges related to an investigation/reports involving [name] as a possible victim of the Defendant."
[16] See Appendix B for "Summary Outline of Events Related to FMC's Handling of Michael Combs' Crimes."
[17] The local newspaper reported Michael Combs' arrest on 12/4/15.
[18] In one such conversation, a church leader told the Pastor on 12/6/15 via email "I don't know that I personally am completely committed to running everything by nurture, or presenting a statement that includes a notation indicting [sic] approval from nurture. I might need to think about that more. I

On Thursday, December 9, 2015, the Pastor emailed members of the Nurture Commission, the Safe Sanctuaries Committee, the Chair of the Caregiving and Membership Commission, and the Church Board Chair regarding Michael Combs' arrest and asked for feedback about the wording of an announcement she planned to make to the congregation on Sunday. The perpetrator's wife chaired the Nurture Commission and was a member of the Church Board at the time these events occurred.[19] Though Michael Combs' wife was not included on the previously mentioned email, the email from the Pastor to church leaders reflects that "[the offender's wife] and Michael will also give feedback on this statement ([she] preferred not to be included on this email), and they will also pass it by their lawyer. My suggestion is that the statement come from the pastoral staff. I also suggest, following conversation with [the offender's wife], that this be given orally during Sunday morning worship and neither emailed nor made available electronically. Would you please look at the statement below and make any suggestions for improvement that you might have?"[20] The Pastor received positive feedback from several individuals about the email as well as accepting the recommendation to include a reference to the victim in the prayer.[21]

On Saturday, December 12, 2015, the Pastor informed the same group of church leaders via email that she had shared the statement with the offender's wife who had shared the statement with their attorney. In addition, she returned a call to Combs' defense attorney who opposed her making any public announcement until after the case was finalized, but as a last resort, asked her to wait a week before making any public statement. The Pastor then asked these church leaders for feedback about whether waiting a week to make the announcement would be wise.[22] During this time, there were a

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very much want something said publicly, but maybe it needs less to be a policy statement on behalf of a certain group and more of a calling of all of us to remember who we are and who God is as we walk together through this. I really like the things you were saying in our conversation."

[19] The Nurture Commission is charged with overseeing children and youth activities and programs such as the Safe Sanctuaries Committee, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Church Family Night, and more. Michael Combs' wife's term on the Nurture Commission expired at the end of 2015 after six years of service, however she was invited to return to the Nurture Commission in April 2016.

[20] The email dated 12/9/15 from the Pastor on this matter states, "To the Nurture Commission [names omitted], the Safe Sanctuaries Committee [names omitted—a member of the] Caregiving and Membership Commission), and [name omitted] (Church Board Chair),

First of all, I ask you to hold this email in confidentiality and not to forward it to anyone else. Thank you—I am indeed grateful for the caring people that you are. You have likely heard that Michael Combs was arrested just before Thanksgiving as the statement below explains. There has been appropriate encouragement to say something to our congregation about this and below is a draft of what such a statement would say. [The offender's wife] and Michael will also give feedback on this statement ([The offender's wife] preferred not to be included in this email), and they will also pass it by their lawyer. My suggestion is that the statement come from the pastoral staff. I also suggest, following conversation with [the offender's wife], that this be given orally during Sunday morning worship and neither emailed nor made available electronically. Would you please look at the statement below and make any suggestions for improvement that you might have? Please do not hesitate to ask any questions that you might have. This is a heavy-heart situation in our congregation. Again—I'm grateful for each of you. [Signed Pastor, with the two other Pastors too]

Statement: On Friday, December 4, you may have seen a notice in the newspaper that Michael Combs was arrested for aggravated indecent liberties with a child. There are several things we want to share with you in regard to this. First of all, we ask you to hold both Michael and [his wife] in prayer as this works its way through the courts. As a congregation, we are committed to be a place of hope and of healing. Until it works its way through the courts, however, Michael will not be able to attend full congregational events. Second, and equally as important, our congregation has been and will continue to be committed to the safety of our children. That is why we have Safe Sanctuary policies in place, and that is why we live by them—they are not "in name only" policies. Our congregation is a safe place for children. Third, which is like the first, we ask you to refrain from gossip. Instead, we again ask you to be both prayerful and caring as you hold this in your heart and mind. Let us pray: Beginning thoughts about what the prayer would contain: Prayer for Michael and [his wife] and for the situation. Prayer and thanksgiving for the children of the congregation. Prayer for continuing to follow the way of Jesus in offering hope and healing in every situation."

[21] Email from Pastor to email group on 12/10/15. "Thanks to those of you who have responded. Here is another try based on what I've heard:

Statement: On Friday, December 4, you may have seen a notice in the newspaper that Michael Combs was arrested for aggravated indecent liberties with a child. There are several things we want to share with you in regard to this. First of all, we ask you to hold Michael and [his wife] and all those involved in prayer as this works its way through the courts. As a congregation, we are committed to be a people of hope, of healing, and of restoration. Second, as this works its way through the courts, Michael will not be able to attend full congregational events as a condition of his bond. Third, and so very important, our congregation has been and will continue to be committed to the safety of our children. That is why we have Safe Sanctuary policies in place, and that is why we live by them—they are not "in name only" policies. Our congregation is a safe place for children. (The allegation does not involve a child from our congregation.) Fourth, which is like the first, we ask you to be careful with your speech and to refrain from gossip. Instead, we again ask you to be both prayerful and caring as you hold all of this in your heart and mind.

Let us pray: Beginning thoughts about what the prayer would contain: Prayer for Michael and [his wife] and for all involved. Prayer and thanksgiving for the children of the congregation and their priority in our congregation. Prayer for continuing to follow the way of Jesus in offering hope and healing in every situation."

[22] Email from Pastor to group on 12/12/15 states, "Some more work to do… On Thursday evening, I sent the statement we had worked at to [the offender's wife], and she shared it with her lawyer, both of which we had agreed I would do. Yesterday, I had a retreat day and so was away from my cell phone for a chunk of time in the afternoon. When I got to it again, I had a voicemail message from Michael's lawyer, [name]. I called him back, and we had quite a lengthy conversation. The long and the short of it is that he really, really, really does not want us to say anything until the whole

number of back and forth emails between the church leaders about what to do and whether an announcement should be made in the worship service, in Sunday School classes, and/or via the individual church mailboxes. The mailbox idea was rejected because the Pastor had "committed that we will not put anything in writing (widely), so the mailboxes are not an option."[23] Some, including the Church Board Chair, advised the Pastor to wait a week[24] to make the announcement and others advised it was better to go ahead and make the announcement.[25] One leader who privately wrote to the Pastor raised the issue asked, "If the congregation needs to know does waiting do more damage? Does it make it look like the

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process finishes in the courts, and there is no statement that he would approve. I, however, told him that we needed to say something, that our intention was to bring the arrest out into the open within the congregation, discourage gossip, and reassure people re the safety of the children. He's not convinced; he believes it will encourage gossip and raise more questions. As a last effort, he asked for us to wait one more week—although he also said that nothing would change his mind. I said that we could maybe wait a week, but that I needed to consult with others—that would be you. In addition, because of the conversation we had, I heard some concerns that I am addressing in the re-write below. It is shorter and so is less detailed. What I need from you now are responses to waiting a week and to the rewritten statement below. I hope you see this today (Saturday) and respond as quickly as possible! Thank you for your care, [Pastor].
Statement:
On Friday, December 4, you may have seen a notice in the newspaper that Michael Combs was arrested for aggravated indecent liberties with a child. There are several things we want to share with you in regard to this. First of all, this is an allegation, and it will need to go through the court process. During this time, we ask you to hold Michael and [his wife] ~~and all those involved~~ in prayer ~~as this works its way through the courts~~. ~~Second, as this works its way through the courts, Michael will not be able to attend full congregational events as a condition of his bond.~~ Second, and so very important, our congregation has been and will continue to be committed to the safety of our children. That is why we have Safe Sanctuary policies in place, and that is why we live by them—they are not "in name only" policies. ~~Our congregation is a safe place for children.~~ [ayk—Prior sentence removed because we said it already in the sentence beginning "Second."] (The allegation does not involve a child from our congregation.) Third, which is like the first, we ask you to be careful with your speech and to refrain from gossip. Instead, we again ask you to be both prayerful and caring as you hold all of this in your heart and mind. Remember that, as a congregation, we are committed to be a people of hope, of healing, and of restoration. Thank you. Let us pray: The prayer will include: Prayer for Michael and [his wife] and for all involved. Prayer and thanksgiving for the children of the congregation and their priority in our congregation. Prayer for continuing to follow the way of Jesus in offering hope and healing in every situation."

[23] Email from the Pastor on 12/12/15 to the group stated, "Quick response: I have committed that we will not put anything in writing (widely), so the mailboxes are not an option. Sunday School classes might be an option???"

[24] The email from the Church Board Chair on 12/12/15 stated, "[Pastor], sorry for catching this late in the morning. First, none of us can speak with authority about the legal aspects of this. So I have nothing to counter the advice of the lawyer. Second, The piece I'm missing here in this discussion is what do Michael and [his wife] say about this? Do they support an announcement and have they read the announcement that is proposed to be read? If they don't support it then I would say we should be very cautious about doing this and should find another way to achieve the objective of assuring people in the congregation that their children are safe. If, on the other hand, Michael and [his wife] support this kind of public statement out of an understanding of the nature of the congregation and sharing things for prayer, etc. then I would say go ahead either this Sunday or next. If there is any indication that we simply need more time to work at this, then I suggest putting this off till next Sunday at the earliest. As for unhealthy gossip, I think one announcement on one occasion from the pulpit is best rather than sharing this for Sunday school classes to deal with. There will be too many questions in class settings that don't have answers. In addition it is my understanding from theories of crisis management that in such matters, controlling the amount and style of information given is more positive than allowing hearsay and gossip to speculate quietly and usually unhelpfully. I have no idea how many people in the congregation know something about this already and what they are saying. Or whether the majority is in the dark about it. I don't think there is any perfect way to handle this but I would reiterate that Michael and [his wife] ought to express themselves about this, and if they support it then maybe give another week to evaluate things we haven't thought of yet and then go ahead with it with an announcement from the pulpit next Sunday not this coming Sunday. This is tough. Prayers for everyone." In addition, another church leader emailed the group on 12/12/15, "If reading something in front of the whole congregation would be detrimental to [offender's wife] and Michael, then we should not do that- UNLESS you have had parents coming to say that they are removing their children from programming, etc- but then you could speak to them privately. I think the statement to SS adult classes is a good third way/middle ground. And then those who read the statement could give the written paper back to you. And teachers might be advised that there will be NO follow-up discussion of this during the SS hour. I do wonder if it would be OK to pause in the adult SS classes for prayer, as per the prayer you had suggested in the worship setting."

[25] On 12/12/15 a church leader emailed, "I don't know why another week would make any difference- if we are planning to make a statement to the congregation, I think sooner rather than later. [The defense attorney] says he thinks it will encourage gossip and raise more questions- but I would counter that there is ALREADY some gossip, speculation and questions. If anything, this statement would be a way to remind everyone to refrain from more gossip, and assure everyone that this allegation does NOT involve a child from our church- a very important fact. As for how to present this, I think the statement read by one of the Pastors to each adult SS class is a very viable option." On 12/12/15 another church leader responded, "I concur with [Church Board Chair] as well. I would add that in my mind there are two objectives. One is to reassure everyone that our church is a safe space. The other is to set an example and tone for the all of us to follow of acknowledging in a healthy way that a big thing has happened to a member of our church and that we will refrain from gossip and speculation and will turn to God with our prayers. The reassurance that the church is safe space could be done easily in Sunday School classes, but the second objective not so much. I think there is a sense of unity and resolve that comes from acknowledging hard things and praying together corporately. So I guess my gut instinct is that there would be less unhelpful talk if we went ahead as planned with the newly revised statement. At the same time, this effects Michael and [his wife] the most. And I recognize that others have much more knowledge than I in the dynamics of a congregation. So this is my long-winded way of saying I'd like a statement this week but I would gladly yield and would support other decisions."

issue is being hidden from the church?"[26] The Pastor responded via email, "Thanks for this, [name], and for all you've done in a helpful, caring way. I am grateful."

The primary issues raised by church leaders from these emails were about seeking to do what would be most helpful for Michael Combs and his wife, reassuring the congregation that the church is safe and that child safety is a priority, and telling parishioners to avoid gossip. The Pastor acknowledged the group's feedback and told them that she would make a final decision about what to do after speaking with the offender's wife.[27] Approximately 30 minutes later and after speaking with Michael Combs' wife, the Pastor ultimately decided not to make a public announcement in church that week because his wife was too anxious about saying anything publicly.[28] After meeting with Michael Combs and his wife on December 17th, the Pastor emailed the group on December 18th and recommended to the email group that no public statement be made until after a plea was made.[29] The Pastor explained in this email, "I recommend to you that we not make a public statement until after a plea has been entered in February. A new element has come into the situation, and I guess it tipped the balance for me. I did tell them that I thought it would be healthier the whole way around if we were able to make a statement, and they understood that." When asked what the "new element" was, the Pastor told GRACE she could not recall specifically, but speculated that it could have been "something about the Combs' fear about how the victim's family would react if they heard that anything was made public in our church." After receiving the Pastor's email, the church leaders in the email group affirmed that it was the Pastor's decision to make and they trusted her in doing whatever was the appropriate thing.[30]

In February 2016, Michael Combs' court date to plead guilty was postponed. On March 22, 2016, Michael Combs pled "no contest" in open court to one count of Rape (sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 14). The Pastor took a trip to Israel for two weeks at the beginning of April. After Michael Combs pled to the felony charge, a person sometimes

[26] Email from church leader to Pastor on 12/12/15, "Just between you and me. There is nothing in the statement that will compromise his case. I'm not sure why [the defense attorney] wants them to be so secretive. First. Is there an obligation to tell the congregation anything? The information is a matter of open public record. Second. If the congregation needs to know does waiting do more damage? Does it make it look like the issue is being hidden from the church? I know you are in a tough spot knowing information and trying figure out what to share. You have my support with whatever you and others decide. I also understand this is an embarrassing issue for the Combs."

[27] The Pastor emailed the group on 12/12/15, "Thanks to all of you for your care and thoughtfulness. Here is what I propose *pending further conversation with [the offender's wife]* (bolded). I propose that we go ahead with the shorter statement in worship tomorrow, hopefully/prayerfully in a helpful way both to the congregation and to Michael and [his wife]. As I've read your thoughts/prayers and my own thoughts and prayers have been going round and round throughout the day, this has seemed to be the healthiest way. HOWEVER, I still need to talk with [the offender's wife] about this, and- as many of you have expressed- I want to be careful about being helpful to her and Michael about this as well. If anything changes, I will let you know. If we go ahead, I will also contact [Michael Combs' attorney] to let him know what has been shared and when. Thank you. Please continue to pray. [Pastor]."

[28] The Pastor emailed the group on 12/12/15, "I just talked to [the offender's wife], and her conversation with their lawyer has made her very anxious about saying anything. So, what we agreed is that we would NOT make a statement tomorrow and that I will meet with them next week to talk further about it. I ask your prayers for clarity and wisdom and help. Thank you all for your help. [Pastor]."

[29] Pastor emailed the group on 12/18/15, "Thanks to all of you for going through the process last week of thinking about what we might/should say to the congregation regarding Michael Combs' situation. Yesterday, I had the conversation with [offender's wife] and Michael that we had scheduled last Saturday. The long and the short of it all now is that I recommend to you that we not make a public statement until after a plea has been entered in February. A new element has come into the situation, and I guess it tipped the balance for me. I did tell them that I thought it would be healthier the whole way around if we were able to make a statement, and they understood that. On the advice of their lawyer, I do have a signed document from them that says that they would not approve of anything that we would say. I do not want to cause more pain in an already incredibly-painful situation. Thoughts? Questions? Again, thank you for walking along on this. [Pastor]"

[30] Various individuals responded, "I am ok with this and trust your judgement, [Pastor], because you have more information than the rest of us. Prayers for you throughout this difficult situation."; "[Pastor], I also trust your judgement on this and will continue to keep you in my prayers as you walk this close journey with Mike and [his wife]."; "[Pastor], It seems to me that many, if not most, people at the church are quietly aware of this situation. For me, it's OK to wait. I appreciate that there is legal counsel to wait, and in the meantime if anyone expresses concern, I'm sure that we can share that no child from the congregation is involved. Perhaps the time for a statement and organizational health will come after the plea is entered."; "Thank you, [Pastor]. I'm comfortable with this path and grateful for your careful walking alongside all of us."; "I trust and affirm your judgement in this."; "I think we all want to do what is most helpful for [the offender's wife] and Michael, so abiding with their legal counsel sees [sic] to be the thing to do. We can certainly reassure people when/if this topic comes up that it is unrelated to FMC. I find myself praying for them and those involved and wishing there was more I could do. At our December Nurture Commission meeting, [the offender's wife] asked for adults to help with the Wednesday night children's program rehearsals. Does anyone know if this is still the case?"

identified at FMC as "the elder"[31], whose wife is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, became increasingly concerned about the prolonged delay in making an announcement to the church. He called the Pastor and asked for public acknowledgement of the charge, but the Pastor encouraged him to seek approval from the offender and his wife. Then on April 3, 2016, the elder emailed various individuals including members of the Safe Sanctuaries Committee, Caregiving and Membership Commission, Nurture Commission, the Church Board Chair, and the Pastors asking them to publicly acknowledge Michael Combs' arrest. The Church Board Chair and others informed the elder they wanted to wait to do anything until the Pastor returned from her Israel trip on April 13. During this email exchange, one of the Church Board members acknowledged not knowing that Michael Combs had already pled "no contest" to the felony crime in court.

After the Pastor returned from Israel, the elder told the Pastor he was considering making his own announcement to the church if the Pastor did not. On Sunday, April 24, 2016, the Pastor gave the Annual Congregational Meeting Report. During this meeting, the Pastor made the public announcement to the congregation regarding Michael Combs' charges.[32] This announcement was followed by a letter from the Pastor dated April 26, 2016 which accompanied Michael Combs' letter regarding his criminal case to the congregation.[33] In the Pastor's letter, she acknowledged that in the interim time between Michael Combs' arrest in November 2015 up to that point in time, she "did not understand the complex of reactions to this situation that people who have themselves been victims of abuse might have. Sometimes this is called triggering, and it's a painful response of vulnerability when there are situations that recall the original abuse. I am sorry that I did not tend well to these people who are also victims- to some of you who may have been victims of abuse in your past." On June 13, 2016, Michael Combs was sentenced and taken into custody for a period of 93 months in the Department of Corrections. He is required to register as a sex offender for the remainder of his life. The Pastor attended (but did not speak at) the final sentencing hearing.

What followed in the months to come were a variety of communications and interactions between the elder, his wife (an abuse survivor), the offender's wife, various members of church leadership who served on the Church Board and other commissions and committees, members of the Life Sharing Sunday School class, and the Pastor. These difficult months have included processing these traumatic events, discussions about the church's delayed response, discovering more about the truth of Michael Combs' past, conversations about varying interpretations of the Safe Sanctuaries policy, and discussions about how the church could have responded more appropriately to survivors of abuse. Over time, the church has responded in positive ways, including inviting a survivor to speak about her abuse experiences from the pulpit during

[31] The person referred to as "the elder" throughout this Executive Summary is a parishioner at FMC who has become known for his advocacy for survivors of sexual abuse. Though FMC technically does not have elders in the church, this person has occasionally been referred to at FMC as "the elder" because there are two individuals at FMC with the same name. Accordingly, GRACE has chosen to adopt this term for the purposes of this Executive Summary.

[32] On 4/24/16, the Pastor gave a Congregational Meeting Report following the Sunday morning service in which a number of items were discussed. Regarding this specific matter, the Pastor stated, "Finally, there has been one other thing that we've been working with since last November. As you may have seen in the newspaper or heard from other people, Michael Combs was arrested in November for aggravated indecency with a child. He has been out under certain restrictions as the legal process has unfolded. That legal process is coming to a close, and next week (hopefully) each household of the church will receive a letter from Michael and [his wife] telling about the situation and what comes next. The victim is not from our congregation and we continue to stand by and adhere to our Safe Sanctuary policies as a way of showing love and care for our children. In these months, however, I did not understand the complex of reactions to this situation by people who have themselves been victims of abuse. Sometimes this is called triggering, and it's a painful response of vulnerability when there are situations that recall the original abuse. I am sorry that I did not tend to these people who are also victims. The Caregiving and Membership Commission wants to offer the possibility of support in any way that feels like support- if that is a group of people coming together, they/we are committed to providing a professional facilitator for that group. If there are other ways, please let me or any of the Pastors or Caregiving Commission members know. I hope that we do not have this kind of situation again. But if we do, I hope that I have learned from this one."

[33] The letter from the Combs was distributed to the FMC congregation. The beginning of the letter from Michael Combs began with an introductory paragraph from his wife stating, "Before you read the letter below from Michael, it's important to me for you to know that I still love Michael with all my heart and that will never change. Since Michael confessed his sin to me in November, I have had every emotion possible. Please afford me grace in the months and years to come learning to live my 'new normal' without Michael." The body of the letter from Michael Combs stated that he pled 'no contest' to a single charge of (statutory) Rape, a felony." He also alleged that "the State of Kansas does not consider me to be a 'Predator', since my victim was not a random child or a casually-known child sought out by me, but rather a much-loved relative, a minor member of my family with whom I had spent a lot of time. I sinned, by inappropriately touching her, destroying her trust in me, and doing untold amounts of damage to our family." In addition, Combs stated that he was voluntarily entering a treatment program for sex offenders and asked for prayers for the victim, his family, those who were "triggered" by hearing this news, his wife, and for himself.

a Sunday morning service; offering prayers of remembrance for the victim, the offender, and healing for the entire church; offering public statements of apology that acknowledged the Pastor's failure to notify the congregation of the offender's arrest immediately (as noted in the Safe Sanctuaries policy); reevaluating the Safe Sanctuaries policies; and facilitating additional training at FMC. However, many of these positive responses were significantly delayed and came after much effort had been expended to educate church leaders about abuse dynamics.

ASSESSMENT

Some preliminary remarks about the assessment that follows are in order.

First, it is clear from the initial series of emails that the Pastor preferred sharing the information of Michael Combs' arrest with the congregation soon after it had been reported in the newspaper. But after being warned by Michael Combs, his wife, and their attorney that the statement would "encourage gossip and raise more questions," thus jeopardizing his criminal case, the Pastor relented and agreed not to share knowledge of this information with the congregation until after Combs pled to the offense in court. The Pastor has sorrowfully acknowledged that she "knew better" but allowed other influences (primarily the advice of the Combs' attorney) to impact her decision. Several other witnesses also provided a number of different reflections upon what impacted the decision not to notify the congregation about the arrest many months earlier. These have included: the victim was not a member of the FMC congregation; they did not have a personal relationship with the victim and did not know her well; they were persuaded by the defense attorney who frightened Combs and his wife about the length of his possible prison sentence if the church publicly announced his charges; the sense that Combs' wife was a "secondary victim" and the need to care for her; seeing the "pain and anxiety on [Michael Combs' wife's] face every week"; the holidays were approaching; the church leadership was in "unchartered territory" and many had not faced this kind of issue before; the Church Board Chair had health issues and could not engage fully in Church Board matters at that time; the Pastor was in Israel during part of this timeframe; a shooting had recently occurred in which a number of students died and everyone's minds were occupied with that; no one knew what to do or where to turn for help; they did not know the legal system well and thought Combs' case would go through the system faster than it did; and a general desire to avoid conflict.[34] If given a chance to do things over, the Pastor and others in leadership have stated clearly to GRACE that they would handle things much differently.

Second, the majority of participants in this process indicated that they did not believe the Pastor or church leaders had attempted to "cover up" or deceive the congregation about this matter. Most also indicated a belief that the Pastor "did the best she could" under the circumstances and, overall, has acted in a caring and compassionate manner.

Third, church leaders (and other parishioners who became aware of the matter) who have reflected back on what occurred have largely recognized many of their mistakes, echoing the sentiment from a church leader who said, "we knew from our history of the Jim Dunn [former pastor's] sexual abuse that we survived it by being open, processing it, and seeking outside help and we survived it. I felt that some of us should have remembered that in all those emails that were sent back and forth to Nurture, Caregiving etc and we didn't! We should have advised [the Pastor] differently and we AS A CHURCH failed [the Pastor] and sexual abuse survivors by not remembering that which has led to where we are now."[35]

[34] As one parishioner noted, "Mennonites tend to proceed to caution, and they don't want to start tough discussions. Generally Menno churches tend to avoid conflict. I don't know if that had a direct impact but there is that feeling of not wanting to stir things up, and so that may have slowed the reaction."

[35] Email from church leader to the elder on 12/15/16. Another church leader similarly stated, "[The Pastor] sought counsel from a wide group of appropriate leaders in the church. I would say there is general consensus now that we made a significant mistake in not making a public announcement at our worship services immediately after Mike's arrest. We also have learned that it would have been best to look for outside help right from the start. Pastor [name] has been very open to counsel, to making changes, and to apologizing for things we did wrong. In fact, if anything, I would say she takes too much of the responsibility for the mistakes on herself, given that many persons were involved in the process." Another church leader also stated, "I tried to defer to [the Pastor], now I looking back, I didn't take proper responsibility and I didn't think about it enough myself."

Fourth, most church leaders now appear to be eager to take steps to learn from these events arising from the Combs matter and have committed to improved processes for handling sexual misconduct in the future.

Finally, it is readily apparent that deep wounds still exist in this congregation. Survivors, members of the Life Sharing Sunday School class, church leaders, and members of the congregation all expressed a number of tragic sentiments about these events and the relational injuries resulting from this trauma which ranged from betrayal to a profound sense of loss, including significant regret over the way in which these events have been handled since Combs' arrest.

After a thorough review of the surveys provided, conducting interviews, and reviewing all the material collected relative to this matter, GRACE has prepared a summary of FMC's most significant areas of vulnerability. These issues, if addressed with open and sincere attitudes, will strengthen FMC's ability to respond meaningfully and accurately to sexual misconduct in the future.

A. Putting Child Safety First[36]

In Mark 9:37, Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me." These are striking and powerful words from the lips of the Son of God himself. The plain reading of this passage simply means that our embrace of God is demonstrated and exhibited by how we love His little ones. We love Him through the loving of His children. Put another way, we reject God by and through pushing away His children. The culture of a church that is committed first and foremost to the heart of Christ our King is a church that will move mountains to love and protect the vulnerable.

The Pastor seems to have known instinctively that it was right to inform the congregation quickly about Michael Combs' arrest and subsequent criminal charges related to the sexual abuse of a child. However, she allowed other influences to guide her decision to wait five months before informing the church body of Combs' arrest. She also admitted that she "assumed wrongly, and didn't mean to keep it secret, but I assumed word would get out." The Pastor need not have asked permission of anyone to inform the congregation about a matter involving a member who had been arrested and charged with abusing a minor. Due to the fact that there are minors in this church, it was certainly in the best interest of the congregation to have knowledge of this information. In addition, on December 4, 2015, the local newspaper had reported Combs' arrest. The Pastor need not have asked permission of anyone to inform the congregation about a matter that had already been made public. Instead, concerns for the perpetrator, his wife, and his legal case were prioritized above the concern for child safety. The desire to protect a sexual offender from legal jeopardy should never be a primary concern of the church.[37] Church leaders must think shrewdly about these issues and recognize that an attorney working on behalf of a client owes a duty, above all else, to the client. The attorney owes no duty to the adverse party (in this case, the victim) or to the church. If Michael Combs' attorney knew early on about his client's prior history of sexually abusing teenagers at a previous church, the attorney working on his behalf would have had every incentive to suppress open conversation at FMC about Michael Combs, his past history of abuse, and any other potential crimes or wrongdoing.[38]

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[36] Matthew 19:13-15 "Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.'" This gospel passage is perhaps one of the most sobering illustrations of how we can spend a lot of time with Jesus and still overlook the intrinsic value of those who are greatly valued and loved by Him. It's not because the disciples didn't care about these children. It appears that they acted on a belief that the little ones interrupting Jesus were less important than the adults who were in the audience. The response of Jesus to their rebukes could not have communicated any clearer how much he values those who others overlook or disregard. Jesus demonstrates the same beautiful love over and over again in scripture. Our reluctance to acknowledge and embrace this truth not only hurts others, but it also exposes our failure to grasp the heart of the gospel message.

[37] A church leader stated "As soon as I got word that his lawyer said it would jeopardize case, we all caved. That was a big mistake."

[38] In fact, some church members knew that Michael Combs had been an Episcopal priest in Newton 30 years before. One even wrote privately to the Pastor on 12/9/15, "[Pastor], I'm replying just to you. Since I saw the arrest in the paper, I've wondered how it would be handled within the church. I was attending St. Matthew's over 30 years ago when Michael was asked to leave as its priest due to I still don't know (or need to know) what. It also recalls the Jim Dunn situation which I remember as a member of this congregation. This sort of thing is so difficult for a church, and I think it is important to address the situation directly which the statement you've sent us is doing. I like that Safe Sanctuaries is mentioned and appreciate how

An institution's failure to prioritize child safety creates several significant problems. First, it puts children (and other vulnerable individuals) at risk. Second, it harms survivors by reinforcing feelings of worthlessness, shame, blame, and helplessness because the church has chosen to place the needs of the perpetrator over the needs of survivors.[39] Third, it communicates to perpetrators that child safety is not the church's highest priority.

In discussions about how this event had been handled, a church member emailed another church member that when earthquake-like events like these happen in the life of a church, "we lose our moorings." She noted, "We hold on to anything we can in the absence of seeing something solid… But in the end, [Combs and his wife's] lawyer was the voice that was speaking clearly and decisively and we listened, in our confusion and in our earthquake, to the wrong thing that was the loudest." This thoughtful statement illustrates the central importance of an institution's culture which, at its core, grasps the heart of the gospel message. As psychologist Diane Langberg explains, "When we pursue Him above all else, the Body of Christ will be the safest place on earth for the most vulnerable of sheep."[40]

B. Being Proactive by Communicating, Truth-Seeking, Pursuing the Broken and Hurting, and Engaging External and Internal Resources[41]

Proactively Communicating with Immediacy and Transparency

The Pastor herself acknowledged early on in emails that "it would be healthier all the way around" if this information was disclosed to the congregation sooner rather than later. However this did not occur until over a month after Michael Combs pled to the charge. Some individuals (including some members of the Church Board) did not learn about Michael Combs' felony charges of Rape and Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a Child until it was announced in church on April 24, 2016. Others knew and questioned why the information was not being shared openly and transparently.[42] Communicating to the church body proactively, immediately, and transparently that an active member of the church had been arrested and charged with the rape of a child provides a number of important messages.

First, the communication would have provided any individual (and particularly parents) with an opportunity to immediately assess whether Michael Combs had any other victims.[43] A number of eye-opening studies have found that the likelihood of a sexual offender having more than one victim is very high.[44] Likewise, other studies confirm that child

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it's all worded. I wish there was more we could do for [the offender's wife]. This situation can end up being a real learning experience for our congregation, and I think the statement is a good start. I am praying for the pastoral staff as you deal with this."

[39] A survivor explained, "Because of this new disclosure of sexual abuse I again feel alone. It's easy to feel that others are siding with the perpetrator and that my pain is invisible."

[40] Diane Langberg, "Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations."

[41] Psalm 82:3-4 "Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." Proverbs 31:8-9 "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy." Isaiah 1:17 "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." Proverbs 17:5 "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD." Deuteronomy 27:19 "Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'" Matthew 18:14 "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." Zechariah 7:10 "Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart."

[42] For example, one witness shared, "I feel like our leadership, and I know they were trying to do the best they could, but it would have been very helpful if they would have responded as soon as it hit the newspapers. The gossip mill starts and you see [the offender's wife] and you think 'why aren't we hearing something?' Later, we read the letter from Michael, and I was like, OK we are hearing from the perpetrator. And we all loved Michael, but what we really needed to be hearing was that we need to be hearing that lament for the victim. FMC had a service of lament but it should have been months earlier."

[43] As one church leader noted, "And if we had been smart about it, there would have been a meeting for parents saying 'this is our policy, we are going to take another look at it. But if you have seen these kinds of signs and if you have questions, we will get them to the police.' That has not happened. We haven't had a parent meeting in the 10 years I've been in the church."

[44] In the late 1980's, Dr. Gene Abel conducted one of the first and most significant studies of sexual offenders. Many consider it "the classic study on undetected sexual offenses." (Anna Salter, *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children,* Anna Salter, 2003.) In this study, Dr. Abel and his team asked voluntary sex offender clients how many

abuse is disclosed at a very low rate, possibly around 5%.[45] The importance, therefore, of empowering parents to speak to their children about sexual abuse (or if a parent is uncomfortable in doing so, actively encouraging parents to connect to local resources who can speak to the child about abuse) cannot be more clearly underscored. Every passing day that abuse remains undisclosed is a day that a silently suffering child could be receiving the professional help they so desperately need.

Second, the announcement would have provided FMC with an outlet to actively encourage any and all individuals with information about Michael Combs' crimes to report it immediately to law enforcement. This was particularly important since Michael Combs was already going through the criminal justice system at that time and police were actively collecting evidence of his sexual abuse history.

Third, it would have demonstrated love and care for survivors within the church by reinforcing truth and transparency.[46] For survivors, silence about sexual abuse is associated with secrecy and shame. Institutional responses lacking transparency cause victims to feel devalued and serve as "triggers" because the response fails to prioritize the disclosures of sexual abuse.[47]

Fourth, the announcement would have communicated a strong message to any other sexual offenders that the church does not tolerate abuse, that it does not protect sexual offenders from justice, and that it cares for, protects, and defends the

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total offenses they had committed. (Notably, to encourage accurate and truthful disclosures, they guaranteed confidentiality in a number of ways: the interviewers did not have the subject's names; researchers obtained a federal certificate of confidentiality that prevented the results from being subpoenaed into any federal court in the country; and the master list was kept outside the country in any case.) In the study, researchers interviewed a total of 561 offenders about sexual offenses which included exhibitionism, voyeurism, adult rape, and child molestation. These 561 offenders admitted to more than 291,000 sexual offenses of all kinds and more than 195,000 victims. A smaller group of men who were composed only of 232 child molesters admitted attempting more than 55,000 incidents of molestation. Of these, they claimed they had been successful in 38,000 of these incidents. This group of 232 men reported having more than 17,000 total victims. Men who molested out-of-home female children averaged 20 victims. Men who molested out-of-home male children averaged 150 victims each. Most of these offenses had never been detected. Abel computed the chances of being caught for a sexual offense was at 3%. Gene Abel, et al., Self-Reported Sex Crimes on Nonincarcerated Paraphiliacs, 2(1) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 3-25 (1987). A number of other studies report similar results: an "iceberg of undocumented offenses beneath the tip of official records" (Weinrott and Saylor, 1991); Emerick and Dutton, 1993); (Janes, 1993); (Underwood, Patch, Cappelletty, and Wolfe, 1999).

[45] Considered the "classic study of adult women in the population," (Salter) Dr. Diane Russell found that 28% of women had been molested as children before they reached the age of 14 and 38% of women had been molested before they reached the age of 18. This study included physical contact offenses only (and excluded exhibitionism and nonviolent contact between peers). Of these, only 5% of the child sexual abuse had ever been reported to law enforcement. See Russell (1984; 2000); see also Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1990); Salter (1992); Wyatt and Powell (1988). According to various studies, approximately 9% to 16% of boys in the United States are molested before they reach the age of 18. See Badgley (1984); Salter (1992); Timnick (1985a; 1985b). The Finkelhor study found that 33% of women and 42% of men failed to report that they had been sexually assaulted until asked (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith, 1990). Lawson and Chaffin (1992) reported that 57% of children who were interviewed by hospital staff after finding STDs failed to disclose that they had been sexually assaulted.

[46] A parishioner who has served on the Church Board and was not immediately aware of the arrest and was informed much later explained, "I had anger that there was so much secrecy about it" as well as anger for being "left out" (i.e., not being informed of the arrest from the beginning). Another church leader acknowledged, "…we had a secret. We kept a secret…we see how that has caused other trust issues." A parishioner who is not an abuse survivor observed, "Concern for protecting [the offender's wife's] feelings has seemed to take priority over concern for victims of sexual abuse." Another parishioner noted a distinct "hush hush attitude."

[47] One survivor explained that because of the silence, "every day was traumatic" because she felt like she had to protect Michael Combs. For her, this silence was being "forced" on her by church leadership. Another survivor explained that she first learned of Combs' arrest in January and "I started feeling grumpy and angry and moody. And I was waiting to hear that something would be spoken about it in some setting in church. It wasn't named in our Sunday School class at all. Then I realized that Mike was on the Safe Sanctuaries trained group. What does that all mean? I was just stunned that we weren't hearing anything. What about these kids? What are we saying? His wife has been so involved with church and sometimes he would help with VBS. And I thought what in the world is going on? .... My anxiety was pretty high. I felt a lot of relief in late April when there was a congregational meeting and Pastor [name] gave a somewhat terse but clear statement at the meeting about Mike's arrest for Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a Child. I just felt so relieved that someone had said it plainly to the gathered people at the meeting…. Caregiving, Safe Sanctuaries, Church Board, Pastor, there was a muzzle over the mouth. I worried about the children…. I would like some acknowledgement that the whole system of the church was in cahoots with silence and protecting Mike. That it wasn't just Pastor [name]. It was the Church Board, and maybe other people heard more than I, but from my perspective I heard nothing!" Another church leader similarly explained that the silence made her feel that the church was concerned with "protecting" Combs. Another survivor stated, "[The Pastor] was part of suppressing information to the church about the case. This was in accordance to the wishes of Michael's legal counsel. This protected Michael from further prosecution and prevented justice to his many victims [which has resulted] in protracted pain and delay of initiation of a healing process for victims of abuse in our midst, potentially his victims." Another person who is not a survivor explained that the silence must have been difficult for survivors of sexual abuse, adding that if she had been a survivor, "I would have left the church."

vulnerable. Instead, a lack of immediate, transparent, and proactive communications risked saying to abusers that they may continue to operate undetected at FMC.

Proactively Seeking the Truth about Michael Combs' Crimes

When a church is faced with learning the unthinkable about a person who is well-liked and well-respected, finding out that the perpetrator was not what he or she appeared to be is painful. However, as Dr. Salter noted, "It is precisely our lack of knowledge and understanding that gives predators their edge."[48] The combination of not knowing the truth about a perpetrator's past (particularly if they plan to return to the congregation) and not understanding the dynamics of offenders is what makes predators so dangerous, particularly in religious settings. Proactively seeking the truth means, first, that church leadership should have pursued learning as much information as possible about the true nature of all of Michael Combs' criminal behavior through any and all available sources. Second, after the arrest was made, church leadership should have asked that Michael Combs and his wife disclose any and all information about his past sexual crimes so that the information could be reported to the appropriate law enforcement officials and meaningfully assessed in light of child safety at FMC. Third, knowing the reality of Combs' actions would have enabled the church leadership to hold him accountable for minimizing and misleading the church body about the true nature of his sexual crimes in the written letter he provided to the church on April 26, 2016.[49] Combs' statement to the congregation substantially understates and even deceives the church about the true nature of his sexual abuse history and the crime for which he was convicted.[50] As ugly as these truths may be, being fully aware of the reality of a perpetrator's history is one of the best and most important ways we can protect ourselves and our children. The deep longing for truth to be exposed and justice to be served should be the heart's desire of every congregation.

Proactively Pursuing the Broken and Hurting

Child abuse eats away at a victim's faith. The perpetrator of these crimes was formerly an Episcopal priest and an active member of FMC who engaged in a variety of visible church activities. Michael Combs and his wife brought this victim to FMC on several occasions. This type of relationship with an abuser would most certainly raise faith-related issues for any young victim. Apart from the elder, no one at FMC has reached out to the victim's family to express sorrow or support. Reaching out to the victim and her family would have demonstrated in a tangible way what is true about God's great love for her and for her family. FMC did have prayers on several occasions for the victim, her family, and for her healing. A number of individuals who attended the worship services and heard these prayers felt this time of remembering was impactful and meaningful. However, the Caregiving and Membership Commission and/or the Pastors should have proactively and immediately reached out to the victim, her family, to other survivors, and to any other parishioner who had an immediate need for pastoral care.[51] But for Combs' crimes, this young victim would still be attending FMC. As one parishioner noted, "She [the victim] was part of our church. She was here and is no more. And she still would be had this not happened. She attended VBS, etc. And now she is cut off. That is a huge loss and no one is thinking about that."

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[48] *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children,* Anna Salter, 2003.

[49] One parishioner told GRACE, "One time when I visiting [Michael Combs], he wanted to stress that it wasn't a violent or forceful act. We didn't know who the victim was then. It was a minor. [Michael Combs] said it was 'inappropriate on my part but I didn't hold the person down and they didn't seem like they were upset about it at the time.'" I just thought well if it was a minor it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if they didn't seem like they were upset, it doesn't matter. If Mike is the adult, it's his responsibility. The damage is done. He was in a state of denial."

[50] Several individuals who spoke with Combs after his arrest indicated that Combs had minimized his actions. As one explained, "he said he had a mental illness, as if it was his way of confessing a sexual problem."

[51] While some survivors indicated the leadership had been caring and supportive, some others have not felt a loving and supportive network for survivors at FMC. The failure to offer care for survivors left some feeling alone, isolated, hurt, and/or betrayed. As one survivor noted, "[After processing my abuse], I knew I was a loved daughter of God. But with this, after this happened, I thought, I think I'll be an only child of God. I don't want to be a part of church anymore… I want to connect with a church. But now, going to church, it's a place where you go and you sing songs and you meet with people. But there's not a lot of spiritual connection because I don't want to be disappointed. My view of pastors has really changed… I'm not totally leaving the church, but it will never be what it was to me. We grow and change and maybe my view was too idealistic, but maybe that's not all bad. But it has shaken my faith… We are not walking away, the church has walked away from us. All of it was steps in walking away."

Other sentiments about survivor care at FMC included the comment that, "it seemed like the survivors were more of an afterthought. It seemed like it was more important to support Combs and his wife, who is a victim in this." Another survivor described the church's care that has been offered to victims as "lip service."

In addition, a number of individuals at FMC, and in particular, the Life Sharing Sunday School class members have each processed in different ways and on varying timetables the grief, betrayal, and losses that accompanied this devastating revelation by one of their most dear and trusted long-time members. Church leadership must take care to identify the varying needs of all of the congregation early on as a part of the ongoing crisis intervention and healing process.

Proactively Engaging Internal and External Resources

FMC's best internal resources are its people. FMC has a number of commissions and committees which assist the leadership in reaching the various needs of the church body. In particular, the Caregiving and Membership Committee exists to aid in meeting various membership needs. First, mobilizing the Caregiving and Membership Commission[52] in the wake of this devastating revelation should have been a top priority[53] and would have been an effective use of internal resources.[54] Second, FMC adopted a "Safe Sanctuaries Policy" in 2006 that exists, in part, to assist the church in handling sexual misconduct issues when they arise. However several church leaders acknowledged that "no one seemed to pick up that we needed to look at it." Consequently, FMC did not follow its own internal policy by informing the congregation about sexual abuse when knowledge of it arose.[55] The Pastor has publicly acknowledged this failure on several occasions. Churches must always remember that, undoubtedly, child protection policies are important in processing issues that arise; however, it is the attitudes, the culture, and the priorities of an institution that will have the greatest impact on child safety. No policy can, by itself, prevent abuse. But creating, reviewing, and, of course, following child safety policies and protocols adopted by the church are a first step in responding appropriately to sexual misconduct. Third, the Pastor should have asked the Nurture Commission (in working with the Safe Sanctuaries Committee) immediately to prioritize the reevaluation and revision of the Safe Sanctuaries Policy. Though good progress has been made in recent months, it appears that it took more than a year after Michael Combs' arrest for the Nurture Commission to begin any significant evaluation of the policy, and then an additional two to three months for the work to begin on drafting proposed changes.[56]

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[52] The Chair of Caregiving and Membership stated, "Here I am the Chair of the Caregiving Commission. It didn't even occur to me that we should have done something. That is an incredible oversight. I was aware early on [of Combs' arrest]." She further noted, "I have been humbled and troubled by my poor response to this event, to the indifference I have felt within myself sometimes, to the confusion of ambiguity…. I should have been much more on the ball from the beginning and a better help to [the Pastor]." Another member of the Caregiving and Membership Commission stated, "Caregiving members were of various levels of knowledge regarding sexual abuse issues, so while some were helpful to individual survivors, others were not. We could/should have done a lot more in educating for commission members as to what to do and say for survivors."

[53] The minutes from the Caregiving and Membership Commission meeting on 5/24/16 reflect that an offer of an "Abuse Group with facilitator" had been made to the congregation, but noted, "No one has come forward asking for a group or help." It appears no other meaningful attempts to provide care for survivors was made until later. On 12/20/16, the Caregiving and Membership Commission met to consider how to address the "hurts and fears present in the congregation as a result of Michael Combs' crime, arrest and incarceration."

[54] Notably, 43% of survey respondent's indicated that they had "no opinion" on how the Caregiving and Membership Commission responded to this matter. The vast majority of individuals who provided a survey comment on this issue indicated that they could not formulate a response because they were unaware of how the Caregiving and Membership Commission had reacted to the crisis, and therefore had "no opinion" to offer. (E.g., "I am unaware of their responses"; "I do not remember hearing anything specific from these groups"; "I have no knowledge of what they have done in regards to this issue."'; "I don't know what they did/didn't do"; "Limited knowledge, but know this is a very caring group of leaders"; "Don't know"; "Not enough information to form an opinion"; "I don't recall their level of involvement but I am sure they were praying for the parties involved."; and "We did very little, aside from offering a facilitated group to survivors of sexual abuse. We are still learning what all we should have done and still will try to do to help make the congregation a safe place for all." Likewise, survey respondents provided similar answers regarding the Nurture Commission, with 40% of survey respondents indicating that they had "no opinion" of the Nurture Commission's overall response to and handling of this incident.

[55] Nurture Commission meeting minutes from 12/1/16 regarding this issue reflect, "Safe Sanctuary guidelines say that we notify the congregation prior to it coming out in the newspaper. We didn't do it."

[56] See Church Board and Nurture Commission Meeting minutes in 2015, 2016, and 2017. The Church Board meeting minutes on 12/8/16 regarding Nurture Commission reflect, "Besides our usual business, we spend [sic] considerable time talking about Safe Sanctuaries in regard to Michael Combs' arrest. We discussed the current policy and the parts we did not follow regarding notification of the congregation, and also talked about reviewing the policy and updating it as needed. There was discussion about finding ways to allow the congregation to process and grieve, and also discussion about reviewing 'Safe Touch' with the children, and doing more education with the congregation, possibly with guest speakers on a Sunday morning. We hope to be in coordination with Caregiving/Membership in these things." In addition, Nurture Commission minutes from 1/5/17

FMC leadership has utilized some internal resources effectively by inviting a survivor of sexual abuse to speak about her experience from the pulpit during Sunday morning. In addition, praying publicly for the healing of Michael Combs' victim, for other survivors, and for the church as a whole during several worship services has been a beautiful expression of love and care for survivors. One parishioner explained that the May 2016 service which invited an abuse survivor to speak during a service about lament had been very helpful. But she added that a service of lament ought not be "a one-time thing." She explained that she "would like a safe place for us to be able to do more lamenting and more questioning and more praying."[57] Other meaningful uses of internal resources would include preaching about sexual abuse and family violence[58] and using small group sessions to educate parishioners about sexual abuse and its wide-ranging impact.

It is important to add that the very fact that GRACE is here to provide this assessment demonstrates FMC's level of commitment to seeking outside help. However, FMC leadership would have benefitted from immediately reaching out for help to external third party resources and assistance much sooner.[59] Though a number of steps have been taken to engage external speakers and to attend various trainings in the last year, immediately pursuing these external resources could have helped in assessing what the additional congregational and pastoral needs were in the earliest stages of this crisis. External resources also could have provided assistance or, at a bare minimum, guidance in immediately investigating whether there are other victims of Michael Combs while he was still in the court system. Many external sources are also well equipped to provide assistance on these important issues.[60] In addition, the community of Newton has a number of external resources and community partners that are available to assist in times of crisis.[61] Engaging and utilizing internal and external resources expeditiously is critical to an effective response by institutions handling sexual misconduct.

C. Identifying Conflicts of Interest[62]

Pastoral Care for Victims and Offenders

The role of the Pastor is to tend to and care for its sheep, especially the most vulnerable ones. Children and wounded adults are some of the most vulnerable members within our flocks. Pastors, therefore, as the shepherd have the responsibility of protecting and tending to its flock. When a wolf enters its midst, the shepherd cannot properly care for

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regarding this issue indicate, "The Safe Sanctuary Policy is to be reviewed and revised. [Committee members' names] will work on revising the policy, the changes of which will need to be approved by the Board. [The Church Board Chair] would like an update to the Board from the Nurture Commission at the February Board meeting about the process for following up on the conversation from last month's meeting. The Caregiving and Membership Commission is tending to some parts of the suggestions that were made (evaluating last year's process and assisting the congregation in processing those events). The Nurture Commission will focus on 1) updating the Safe Sanctuary guidelines; 2) doing another "safe touch" teaching for the children; and 3) planning for a general education piece for the whole congregation, perhaps with a resource person from Dove's Nest." The Church Board minutes from 2/2/17 reflect that the Nurture Commission representative indicated that they are "reviewing the Safe Sanctuaries policies of the church and considering changes to these policies. Three of the commission members are working on the policies and they are waiting to see what the board decides before making their decisions." On 3/2/17 and 4/6/17, the Nurture Commission meetings reflect discussion of revisions to the Safe Sanctuaries policy. Various witnesses reported that the Nurture Commission's work on this issue is ongoing.

[57] Another parishioner who is a victim of family violence similarly expressed that the church's prayers and recognition of Michael Combs' specific victim was very important, but added that there are many victims who "suffer in silence" and believes that it is important to recognize these individuals as well.

[58] As one survivor explained, "I would like to see more openness talking about the prevalence of family violence and sexual abuse in Christian homes. I have been involved in it, and surely you'd think it's widely known. But most people think it happens elsewhere, but not here…. We should preach more about valuing children and seeing the value Christ gave them and seeing their vulnerability."

[59] A member of the Church Board who discussed the use of external resources stated, "[w]e really could have used clear and strong advice from the beginning. We were quiet when we should have been open and seeking more information."

[60] For example, www.churchprotect.org and www.gundersenhealth.org/ncptc/

[61] For example, the Heart to Heart Children's Advocacy Center and the Harvey County Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Task Force (Safe House). Other local resources can be found in the Harvey County Resource Directory, https://www.harveycounty.com/pdfs/Health/ResourceDirectory_2013.pdf.

[62] John 10:11-16: "[11] I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. [12] He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.[13] He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.[14] I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, [15] just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. [16] And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

both the sheep and the wolf. Neither is it wise for the shepherd to expect the sheep and the wolf to abide safely together in the same flock. The binary (good versus evil or right versus wrong) nature of sexual abuse creates a significant crisis within the church. One pastor simply cannot adequately care for the needs of both the sheep and the wolf.[63] The Pastor at FMC stated that she "tried to care for everybody." One parishioner reflected on what has happened and stated that in the absence of the actual victim attending FMC on a regular basis, the offender's wife became "the closest victim" which "blinded" church leaders to what has happened and to what the appropriate response should have been. Pastors must identify these conflicts and engage the help of others to effectively share the ministerial needs of all affected by abuse. Sharing this load benefits the well-being of the parties as well as the Pastor. Doing otherwise can be very re-traumatizing to survivors, who have already lived through the pain, betrayal, and losses associated with the abuse itself. If the shepherd is not adequately caring first and foremost for its sheep, the sheep with either suffer in silence or leave the flock to find sustenance and protection elsewhere.

Michael Combs' Wife and Her Roles and Responsibilities at FMC

Undoubtedly, prioritizing the safety of children over all other interests must be the central focus of any caregiver. Church leaders must identify and assess whether any person who is charged with the care of children or other vulnerable adults has a conflict in being able to objectively, faithfully, and unreservedly protect them from any and all harm. Where such a conflict exists, it is dangerous to permit such a person to be in the care of His most precious little ones. A number of conflicts are apparent as it relates to the roles and responsibilities held by Michael Combs' wife at FMC.

Michael Combs' wife served on the Nurture Commission[64] for a period of six years, with her term expiring at the end of 2015. When her husband was arrested in November of 2015, she had been serving as the chairperson of the Nurture Commission at FMC and a member of the Church Board, which she continued to do through the end of her term. In April 2016, after her previous term had ended, she was asked to return to the Nurture Commission as a full participant (but not an official member) of the commission.[65] In November 2016, she was elected to another term on the Nurture Commission. She continues to actively plan and carry out the annual activities of FMC's Vacation Bible School. As previously noted, Combs' wife was aware of her husband's sexual abuse of two teenage girls while he was a priest in Leavenworth before they were married. Furthermore, sometime around 2005, Michael Combs' current wife accompanied him to a Victim Offender Reconciliation Program meeting where one of the teenage victims confronted Michael Combs about his sexual abuse. She was fully aware that her husband had sexually abused two different teenage girls and yet she failed to warn a number of different individuals and entities.

First of all, Michael Combs' wife failed to warn the victim's parents of her husband's known history of sexual abuse, which may have totally prevented or at least greatly limited Michael Combs' access and contact with the victim. Second, Combs' wife appears to have said nothing to anyone at FMC about her husband's history of abuse before he was arrested. As a member and as Chair of the Nurture Commission, which oversees the Safe Sanctuaries Committee, her highest priority and concern must be for the care and protection of children. As such, she had the obligation to inform church leaders of this highly pertinent information before permitting a known sexual offender to be certified as a Safe Sanctuaries caregiver and giving him access, contact, and supervision of children at FMC activities. Third, Michael Combs' wife has been a special education teacher for 33 years. She knows of the unique vulnerabilities of the children in her care. Yet knowing that her husband had a history of sexual abuse, she nonetheless engaged his assistance as a paraprofessional one

[63] A church leader reflected, "When [the Pastor] tried to be a pastor to both sides of the issue, you can't do that. It was complicated by the fact that the victim was not part of the congregation. We knew Mike but didn't know the little girl."
[64] The Nurture Commission is charged with overseeing children and youth activities and programs such as the Safe Sanctuaries Committee, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Church Family Night, and more.
[65] Church Board minutes from 4/14/16 reflect that Michael Combs' wife had been on the Nurture Commission "…for 6 years and has only been off for 4 months. The Constitution requires a person be off a Commission or Committee for one year after serving for 6 years…. Board members decided to invite [Michael Combs' wife] to be a full participant on the Nurture Commission this year but not a member. She will be eligible for a full term at the end of this year."

day per week to help her at the Rec Center during swimming hours. Michael Combs also assisted his wife by attending field trips with the disabled children. This significant lapse in judgment permitted Michael Combs to have access, contact, and supervision of disabled children. One may fairly assume that Michael Combs' wife never informed the school district, her supervisor, or any of the disabled children's parents or guardians that her husband had a history of sexual abuse.

Michael Combs' wife has impacted the church's ability to communicate freely about these events. First, her presence on the Nurture Commission, and as a representative of the Church Board, has stifled the desire for much-needed discussions about sexual abuse and its impact on various parts of the church body because of fears of hurting the offender and his wife.[66] The need to reflect on what happened and to communicate freely and make decisions which are in the best interest of children is central to processing the lessons learned from this tragedy. Second, Combs' wife stated that it was at her "pleading" that the church did not make an announcement until after her husband had already pled to the crime. She explained that the church's much delayed notification is her fault, and not the Pastor's fault, because their attorney frightened them into believing that her husband could "get way more years or even life in prison" if the church was informed of his crime. However, her (and her husband's) ability to successfully persuade church leaders not to notify the congregation that Combs had been charged with Rape and Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a Child for over five months is disturbing and has unquestionably impacted the church's ability to communicate transparently about this tragedy.

In addition, Michael Combs' wife's visible positions of authority and responsibility at FMC are not likely to encourage any potential victims from coming forward. Furthermore, giving Combs' wife a seat on the Church Board, granting her any responsibilities on the Nurture Commission as a member or as Chair, or permitting her to be involved with the children's ministry in any way does not add to the belief that FMC actively supports, protects, and cares for the vulnerable.[67]

Michael Combs' wife has minimized her husband's crime by not helping him appreciate the depths of his destruction.[68] Her and her husband's focus and attention seem to be on Michael Combs and their own pain, rather than on the pain and long-term trauma his actions have caused for his victims. The Combs' unity of purpose in prioritizing the needs of the sexual abuser over child safety is very traumatic to survivors. Though his wife's grief and hurt are real and incalculable, she is no less exempt from the responsibility of protecting the vulnerable ones in her care.

D. Churchwide Education Regarding Victim and Offender Dynamics

A common problem within faith-based organizations is a failure to understand basic dynamics of sexual abuse relating to victims and offenders.[69] Added to this are additional layers of complexity: how sexual abuse impacts a victim's faith and his or her perception of God, issues concerning an offender's authentic repentance, questions about forgiveness, questions about the power and authority of the church, its obligations to respond, protect, and care, and so much more. All of these issues impact not only victims, but also family members of the parties, church leaders, and of course the church body as a

[66] As a Nurture Commission representative explained, the Commission was unable to speak about these events because the offender's wife was "always there." The representative noted that they should have excused the offender's wife from the Nurture Commission, adding that she was always "the elephant" in the room. In fact, one parishioner also noted that her overall worship experience has been negatively impacted by the presence of the offender's wife, noting, "sometimes it feels like, I can't fully lament what I really feel about Michael when [his wife] is there."

[67] One church leader explained that though it is "unfair to [the offender's wife] to lump her with Mike… she is up front [as a leader of Nurture Commission] because she leads VBS. We immediately think of Mike when we see her up front." She also stated that she believes it is inappropriate for her to be Chair of the Nurture Commission.

[68] As one parishioner explained, the offender's wife would be the first to say that she wants FMC to be "a safe place for kids." But during his interactions with Combs' wife, she was "minimizing" her husband's sexual abuse of children by making comments such as, "The charges sound way worse than what was done", "the charges don't fit the crime" and describing the sexual abuse of the victim as merely "touching."

[69] According to a 2015 study of the course catalogues of every accredited seminary in the United States, researchers found only 3% of seminaries had a focused course on child maltreatment. Janine Betz, Analysis of Child Abuse Training at Accredited Seminaries, unpublished research, Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center (2015).The Pastor at FMC indicated that she did not remember receiving any specific seminary training about this issue.

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Education is a critical part of understanding sexual abuse. As several parishioners have noted, the culture at FMC is one which desires to help the hurting. However, until this event unfolded, many parishioners explained that abuse was rarely, if ever, discussed. One Church Board member explained, these events caused him to "recognize my own lack of understanding of the situation and the best way to go about handling it." Other church leaders explained that they did not anticipate how survivors would be triggered by the leadership's handling of this crime.[70]

Some of the best experts in the area of sexual abuse are survivors because of the fact they have endured these painful dynamics. Listening to them is one of the most important components in abuse prevention. As many survivors explain, "if you haven't experienced it, it's hard to understand." This sentiment underscores the importance of asking survivors to lead and allowing their voices to be heard. So many of these "overcomers" understand all too well the dynamics of secrecy, shame, blame, loss, grief, reasons for delayed disclosures, grooming tactics, the misuse of power, deception, and so very much more. Survivors can be incredibly intuitive and are often the first to recognize the danger signs of abuse, and the church is therefore wise to listen to them.

Understanding offenders within the church is an even bigger problem. As already noted, Dr. Salter reminds us that "It is precisely our lack of knowledge and understanding that gives predators their edge."[71] Appreciating, therefore, the danger of sexual offenders is even more important for Christian organizations.[72] As Diane Langberg explains, "[w]e may think we know people, but God says we do not."[73] Deception and secrecy are the "lifeblood of sexual aggression."[74]

At FMC, some individuals have demonstrated a lack of understanding of these basic abuse dynamics. For example, one Church Board member wrote via email "it is my belief that if one of our children had been exposed to a predator, the child would have said something to [a church member] at the time and action would have been taken."[75] Another church member expressed doubt that abuse could ever happen at FMC because they have "windows and doors and a Sunday School Superintendent." The offender's wife and other church leaders expressed doubt that Combs would have sexually abused a child at church because he was allegedly "never alone" with children. This sort of naïve thinking is illustrative of common misconceptions about sexual offenders and how they can and do commit their offenses.

The harsh reality is that many church leaders and parishioners have a lack of interest in this issue.[76] But this kind of

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[70] As one Church Board member acknowledged to GRACE, "So, with [the Pastor], I was also ignorant of the effect that this kind of event has upon persons in the congregation who have suffered sexual exploitation at a previous time in their life."

[71] *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children,* Anna Salter, 2003.

[72] "One molester, who was himself a minister, said 'I consider church people easy to fool… they have a trust that comes from being Christians… They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people…. I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words." *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children,* Anna Salter, 2003.

[73] Diane Langberg, "Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations."

[74] Anna Salter, *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children,* 2003.

[75] Another example of this was expressed by a church member who told GRACE that the offender's wife had told her that the disabled children she worked with loved to "tattle." The offender's wife told this witness that if Michael Combs had sexually abused any of the children she worked with, the offender's wife was "sure they would have tattled."

[76] For example, a survey respondent who identified themselves as a church leader stated in the survey, "A professional therapist is needed for the abused individual. I don't want to hear about sexual abuse in church." Another survey respondent stated, "I am tired of hearing about it. The incident did not happen at church and we do safe sanctuaries. Also some Mennonite churches do not do safe sanctuaries. We feel like First Mennonite is not at fault." A prominent church leader, though claiming that child safety was a top priority, told GRACE, "I don't know all the details of what Mike did and I don't need to. I know enough through various people. Again, [the elder] went back and has copies of all the reports, past incidents, etc. He brought the reports to the Pastor and shared with it with his Sunday School class too. He was saying 'this is how horrible Mike is.' I did not look at all of them. I chose not to because my mindset was it would make me more disappointed in [the elder] that he had to bring all this stuff. It would not have made me feel any worse or better towards Mike." In addition, some FMC parishioners generally expressed the sentiment to GRACE that "individuals [within FMC] are loving and compassionate, but as a culture, we are indifferent and uninformed."

complacency and naiveté can significantly impact child safety and survivors.[77] As one survivor explained, she was reliving the experiences of her own abuse through Michael Combs' crimes and, given the church's "lack of interest in this issue" as well as its "desire to support the perpetrator of these crimes against children, how can I feel safe, loved, or valued at FMC?"

Training and education is an investment in FMC's people, and particularly in its children. Just as the church maintains its grounds, fixes a broken window, or repairs the organ, continuing safeguarding education must be an ongoing commitment for the health of any congregation that is committed to preventing abuse and supporting survivors. We expect our attorneys, teachers, engineers, and especially our physicians to be lifelong learners and we want them to be on the cutting edge of the latest research and to be familiar with the most effective treatments. In the same way, educating parishioners about the dynamics of abuse and the dangers of how offenders operate must be a top priority of the church.

Certainly not every person in a church will have the same level of understanding of these dynamics. As the elder expressed, these events regarding Michael Combs shifted his "feelings, pattern of thinking, and [his] priorities" and noted that the church leadership's delay in disclosing the facts surrounding the arrest and plea bargain to parishioners "seemed like a clear example of the ignorance and insanity that was so similar to my own earlier way of thinking." Clearly, learning is a process that requires us to offer our time, our hearts, and grace to one other when we initially do not understand. Finding appropriate, sensitive, and effective ways of educating individuals with varying degrees of education and experience with sexual abuse is an important consideration.

The elder's love for his wife, an abuse survivor, caused him to change the way he thought about these issues. And he shared his burdens of concern with the church, fully expecting that the church would do the same, out of its love and care for survivors. As time passed in the months after Combs' arrest, the elder felt the need to step in and fill the gaps he perceived in leadership by demanding open and transparent communication, by seeking the truth about Michael Combs' crimes, and by being the educator for others who did not understand these issues. The elder, a physician, does not readily speak the language of feelings. Instead he speaks the language of results, and of sound conclusions based on known and true facts. As a spouse who had a daily, front row seat to the pain and devastation his wife was reliving as a result of the revelations about a long-time and trusted friend, he urgently wanted help and healing for his wife and for his church. Over time, and particularly in the last year, many within the FMC leadership have engaged in constructive dialogue and exhibited an increasing understanding of the exigency of these issues. All of us should have this urgency when it comes to responding to abuse.

Let me provide you with some context for this crisis. We know that approximately one in four girls and one in six boys is sexually abused in this country prior to the age of 18.[78] Put another way, experts estimate that 25% of girls and 16-17% of boys have experienced sexual abuse before turning 18 years old. The population of the United States is approximately 309 million.[79] This means that roughly 65 million Americans currently are survivors of sexual abuse. Think about this: there are approximately 50,000 names on the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. So if we made a memorial to children in our society who have been sexually abused, it would need to be more than 1300 times the size of the Vietnam Memorial. So I invite you to consider how you would approach a situation in which you knew that one-fourth of the women and one-sixth of men in your congregation were facing a life altering crisis? Would things change in your preaching? Prayer? Outreach? Bible study? And so the elder's concern for his wife and for other survivors and his love

[77] An abuse survivor shared "And I think I remember too when I was told that Mike was going to be in jail, I remember someone said 'well at least it wasn't something in the church.' I thought, that's horrible, it's a child! Maybe they thought it would be harder to deal with if the child were in the church. But, that's not good."

[78] Vincent J. Felitti & Robert F. Anda, "The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare," in The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic, eds. Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermeten, & Clare Pain (Cambridge Medicine 2010), 78-79.

[79] Per the 2010 United States Census Bureau data, the U.S. population is 309,349,698.

and hope for the good that exists in this church has caused him to be a passionate advocate for abuse survivors. As one FMC parishioner wisely noted, "Growth is painful but all of this solidifies my opinion that there isn't room for apathy in these kinds of situations." The Lord can use (and is using) the totality of this experience to transform this congregation. And the Lord can use this so that FMC can be a model for other congregations.

The bottom line is that churches that are vocal about the realities of abuse by addressing it transparently through education, sermons, support, and care for survivors are communicating a clear message: your pain is not too much for us to bear. You who have survived it will not be forced to survive it alone. Transforming our churches and faith communities into places of refuge for those who have been violated, judged, and marginalized is what the gospel is all about. If God is our refuge, then our churches must be the places where these precious souls find safety and rest.

As Paul writes in Ephesians 3, this is GRACE's prayer for FMC, "**14** For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, **15** from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, **16** that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, **17** so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, **18** may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, **19** and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. **20** Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." May the love and peace of Christ our Lord surround each of you as you continue this important journey.

APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OUTLINE OF FINDINGS REGARDING MICHAEL COMBS, HIS SEXUAL CRIMES AND MISCONDUCT, AND OTHER VICTIMS

1945: Birth year
May 1967: Graduated with BA in Music Education from Northwest Missouri State
July 1967: Married first wife
1966-1971: Attended Christ Episcopal Church and taught at Bishop LeBlond, an all-girls school, in St. Joseph, MO
1970: Birth of son
May 1973 or 1974: Graduated with Masters degree in Guidance Counseling
1973 or 1974: Rector at Christ Episcopal Church told Michael Combs he was being inappropriate with a high school girl who had also been their babysitter
1975: Started attending St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Leavenworth, KS
May 1976: Combs told his first wife that he was being called to the priesthood
1977: Michael Combs and family moved to Austin, TX for Michael Combs to attend Seminary of the Southwest; attended First Presbyterian Church in Austin where he was employed as organist and choirmaster
1980: Ordained as an Episcopal priest
1980-1983: Employed at Grace Cathedral in Topeka; Michael Combs and first wife were youth leaders
1983-1986: Employed as Assistant Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Leavenworth, KS. Michael Combs confessed to Newton police that he sexually abused two teenage girls while he was a priest there. One was 15 and one was 18. Michael Combs also admitted to numerous affairs with married women while he was a married priest there. An active member of the church who was very close to the situation called Combs "a serial adulterer." Michael Combs also admitted that as a priest, he abused his role as counselor with counselees.
1986-1991: Michael Combs was Rector at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Newton, KS
1988-1989: Michael Combs' first wife and current wife were best friends and worked together; Michael Combs met his current wife through his first wife

January 4, 1990: Michael Combs left his first wife and filed for divorce
June 13, 1990: Divorce from first wife finalized
December 24, 1990: Michael Combs publicly announced his engagement to current wife to members of St. Matthew's church
1991: While at St. Matthew's in Newton, the church in Leavenworth learned about Michael Combs' multiple affairs. They also learned that he had sexually abused two teenage girls, ages 15 and 18. The criminal statute of limitations had expired but they still initiated ecclesiastical proceedings against him and his credentials as priest were revoked. Due to "privacy concerns" the Episcopal church did not provide his first wife with any of this information. However Michael Combs did share this information with his current wife before they married.[80]
June 1991: Married current wife
Around 1991-1993: After leaving the priesthood, Michael Combs applied for a job at Methodist Youthville and was hired. A person from the Leavenworth parish called the personnel director and suggested they call the bishop at Leavenworth to find out specifically why Michael Combs left the Episcopal church. After learning the real reason Michael Combs left, he was terminated.
Around 1997: Michael Combs and current wife became active at FMC.
Around 2005: Michael Combs was confronted by the prior 18 year old victim from Leavenworth at a Victim Offender Reconciliation Program meeting. Michael Combs' current wife attended the proceeding. Combs apologized to the victim and her husband when he was confronted.
2006: FMC's Safe Sanctuaries policy was initially adopted. Michael Combs completed the Safe Sanctuaries training at some point after this policy was adopted.
2005-2007: Male neighborhood child reported that Combs sexually abused him during this timeframe when he was approximately 12 to 14 years old. This report of sexual abuse was raised in the Plea Agreement which indicated that the charge was being dismissed in exchange for Combs' plea of no contest to Rape.
2011-2014: Per neighborhood boy, Michael Combs sexually abused the boy's younger sister during this timeframe when she was between the ages of 12 and 15.
From 2013 to 2015: Michael Combs repeatedly touched the victim (approximately age 8-10) all over her body, including the victim's breasts on numerous occasions with his hands. Michael Combs also admitted touching the victim's genitals (under her clothes) with his hand on approximately two occasions while they were under the covers together in his bed. Michael Combs claimed that he could not remember a lot but affirmed that the victim would not lie or make these things up, and that "her memory is a whole lot better than mine."[81] During this timeframe, Michael Combs also assisted his wife in her work with disabled children (such as swimming at the Rec Center and outings to the zoo).[82]
Summer 2015: Michael Combs preached a sermon at FMC while the Pastor was away.
November 19, 2015: Michael Combs confessed a number of sexual crimes to the Newton police and was arrested and booked into jail for felony charges. Police then informed Pastor of his arrest. Pastor told Youth and Young Adults Pastor and the Worship and Visitation Pastor.
November 23, 2015: The felony Complaint outlining 4 felony counts of sexual crimes was filed in the District Court of Harvey County, Ninth Judicial District: 2 counts of Rape and 2 counts of Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a Child under the age of 14.
December 4, 2015: Local newspaper reports Michael Combs' arrest
February 2016: Court date was postponed.
March 22, 2016: Pled "no contest" in open court to one count of Rape (sexual intercourse with a person under the age of

[80] In his interview with Newton police, Michael Combs stated that before he married his current wife, he told her about his sexual abuse of the two teenage girls from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Leavenworth.
[81] Michael Combs confessed to these crimes in a videotaped interview with the Newton police.
[82] No person has disclosed that Michael Combs abused them while at the Rec Center. However in speaking of the disabled children in her care, Michael Combs' wife admitted, "Those boys can't remember anything. They can't even remember what happened yesterday."

14).[83]

June 13, 2016: Michael Combs sentenced and taken into custody for a period of 93 months (7.75 years) in the Department of Corrections; other conditions include Lifetime Post-Release Supervision and Lifetime Sex Offender Registration

APPENDIX B: SUMMARY OUTLINE OF EVENTS RELATED TO FMC'S HANDLING OF MICHAEL COMBS' CRIMES

November 19, 2015: After Michael Combs confessed to a number of sexual crimes, he was arrested and booked into jail for felony charges. Police informed Pastor of his arrest. Pastor then told Youth and Young Adults Pastor and the Worship and Visitation Pastor.

November 23, 2015: The felony Complaint outlining 4 felony counts of sexual crimes was filed in the District Court of Harvey County, Ninth Judicial District: 2 counts of Rape and 2 counts of Aggravated Indecent Liberties with a Child under the age of 14.

December 4, 2015: Local newspaper reports Michael Combs' arrest

December 9, 2015: The Pastor emailed members of the Nurture Commission, Safe Sanctuaries Committee, Caregiving and Membership Commission Chair, and Church Board Chair regarding the arrest and asked for feedback about the wording of the announcement she planned to make to the church body on Sunday, December 13th.

December 10, 2015: Michael Combs' wife was the Chair of the Nurture Commission and a member of the Church Board. The minutes reflect her attendance on this date for this monthly meeting of the Church Board.[84]

December 12, 2015: Pastor informed email group above that she spoke to Michael Combs' defense attorney and he opposed her making any public announcement until after the case was finalized. Pastor emailed group asking for feedback about whether waiting a week to make the announcement would be wise. During this time, there were a number of back and forth emails between the individuals above. Some advised the Pastor to wait a week to make the announcement and some advised it was better to go ahead and make the announcement. The primary concerns were about what Michael Combs and his wife wanted, reassuring the congregation that the church is safe and that child safety is a priority, and concerns about telling parishioners to avoid gossip. Pastor stated that she would meet with Combs and his wife and then make a decision.

December 17, 2015: Pastor meets with Michael Combs and his wife about making an announcement regarding his arrest to the congregation.

December 18, 2015: Pastor recommends to the email group after meeting with Michael Combs and wife that no public statement be made to congregation until after a plea has been made.[85] The group affirmed that it was her decision to make and they trusted her in doing whatever was the appropriate thing.

February 2016: Michael Combs' court date was postponed.

March 21, 2016: Michael Combs' Sunday School class held a prayer meeting at FMC for Michael Combs. They also prayed for the victim of his crime.

March 22, 2016: Michael Combs pled "no contest" in open court to one count of Rape (sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 14).

April 3, 2016: Email from elder to Safe Sanctuaries Committee, Caregiving Commission, Nurture Commission, Church

[83] As previously noted, the Plea Agreement states that in exchange for Combs' plea of "no contest" to Count 1, Rape, the State of Kansas would dismiss "Counts 2, 3, and 4, and not to file charges related to an investigation/reports involving [name] as a possible victim of the Defendant."

[84] The Nurture Commission is charged with overseeing children and youth activities and programs such as the Safe Sanctuaries Committee, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Church Family Night, and more. Michael Combs' wife's term on the Nurture Commission expired at the end of 2015 after six years of service, however she was invited to return to the Nurture Commission in April 2016.

[85] Pastor emails the group on 12/18/16, "I recommend to you that we not make a public statement until after a plea has been entered in February. A new element has come into the situation, and I guess it tipped the balance for me. I did tell [Michael Combs, his wife and the lawyer] that I thought it would be healthier the whole way around if we were able to make a statement, and they understood that. On the advice of their lawyer, I do have a signed document from them that says that they would not approve of anything that we would say. I do not want to cause more pain in an already incredibly-painful situation."

Board Chair, and Pastors. Elder asked group to publicly acknowledge Combs' arrest. Church Board Chair and others tell elder they will wait to do anything until the Pastor returned from her Israel trip on April 13. During this email exchange, one of the Church Board members acknowledged not knowing that Michael Combs had already pled "no contest" to the felony crime in court.

April 14, 2016: Michael Combs' wife was permitted to return to the Nurture Commission as a "full participant" on the Commission.[86]

April 20, 2016: The elder told the Pastor he was considering making his own announcement to the church.

April 24, 2016: Annual Congregational Meeting Report. During this meeting, the Pastor made the public announcement regarding Michael Combs' charges.[87]

April 26, 2016: Pastor sent letter to congregation concerning Michael Combs' arrest. This letter was also accompanied by Michael Combs' letter regarding his case to the congregation.

April 30, 2016: A series of articles about Michael Combs' case was published in "The Kansan" newspaper.

May 1, 2016: Pastor gave sermon on lament. A survivor was invited to speak publically from the pulpit about impact of child abuse during the worship service as a part of the sermon time.

May 24, 2016: Minutes from Caregiving Commission reflect that an offer of an "Abuse Group with facilitator" had been made but noted, "No one has come forward asking for a group or help."

June 5, 2016: "Prayer of Remembering and Healing for the victim and her family" was held during the Sunday morning worship service. Flowers and candle were placed on the organ.

June 10-11, 2016: Vacation Bible School at FMC was led by Michael Combs' wife.

June 13, 2016: Michael Combs sentenced and taken into custody for a period of 93 months in the Department of Corrections; other conditions include Lifetime Post-Release Supervision and Lifetime Sex Offender Registration. Pastor attended the final sentencing hearing.

June 14, 2016: Article posted in "The Kansan" about Michael Combs' sentencing.

July 3, 2016: "Prayer of Remembering" was held for Michael Combs and reading of Affirmation of Faith during the Sunday morning worship service. Flowers and candle were placed on the organ.

July 10, 2016: Abuse survivor shared in Life Sharing Sunday School Class about sexual abuse.

September 4, 2016: "Prayer for Healing for Victims of All Kinds of Abuse" (from US Conference of Catholic Bishops) during the Sunday morning worship service. Flowers and candle were placed on the organ.

October 2, 2016: "Prayer of Remembering for Our Church and Our Healing Journey" during the Sunday morning worship service. Reading of a prayer poem entitled "All Desires Known." Flowers and candle were placed on the organ.

November 9, 2016: Meeting with Pastor and elder along with two witnesses regarding events of past year and how this situation was handled.

November 13, 2016: Annual Congregational Meeting; Pastor apologized to congregation regarding her handling of this situation.[88]

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[86] Church Board minutes from 4/14/16.

[87] On 4/24/16, the Pastor gave a Congregational Meeting Report following the Sunday morning service in which a number of items were discussed. Regarding this specific matter, the Pastor stated, "Finally, there has been one other thing that we've been working with since last November. As you may have seen in the newspaper or heard from other people, Michael Combs was arrested in November for aggravated indecency with a child. He has been out under certain restrictions as the legal process has unfolded. That legal process is coming to a close, and next week (hopefully) each household of the church will receive a letter from Michael and [his wife] telling about the situation and what comes next. The victim is not from our congregation and we continue to stand by and adhere to our Safe Sanctuary policies as a way of showing love and care for our children. In these months, however, I did not understand the complex of reactions to this situation by people who have themselves been victims of abuse. Sometimes this is called triggering, and it's a painful response of vulnerability when there are situations that recall the original abuse. I am sorry that I did not tend to these people who are also victims. The Caregiving and Membership Commission wants to offer the possibility of support in any way that feels like support- if that is a group of people coming together, they/we are committed to providing a professional facilitator for that group. If there are other ways, please let me or any of the Pastors or Caregiving Commission members know. I hope that we do not have this kind of situation again. But if we do, I hope that I have learned from this one."

[88] During the Annual Congregational Meeting on 11/13/16, the Pastor stated, "There have also been some rocky places and thorns along the way this year. Just about exactly a year ago, Michael Combs was arrested for sexual abuse of a child. Just about exactly a year ago. He's now in prison. I delayed in notifying the congregation publicly about his arrest until after his hearing in March, and in doing so, I have learned that I failed to follow our Safe Sanctuary Guidelines, and so today I apologize to you for this failure. Michael's transgression has also triggered the pain that some have

November 2016: Michael Combs' wife was elected to another term on the Nurture Commission. She continues to plan and carry out activities within the children's ministry including Vacation Bible School.
December 1, 2016: Nurture Commission meeting addressing Safe Sanctuaries policy violation concerns raised by elder. Minutes from this meeting indicate "Safe Sanctuary guidelines say that we notify the congregation prior to it coming out in the newspaper. We didn't do it."
December 2, 2016: Letter from Pastor to Church Board acknowledging errors in handling this matter.[89]
December 8, 2016: Church Board meeting and report from Nurture Commission regarding this matter.[90]
December 20, 2016: Caregiving and Membership Commission meeting to consider how to address the "hurts and fears present in the congregation as a result of Michael Combs' crime, arrest and incarceration."
January 5, 2017: Nurture Commission meeting discussing the update of the Safe Sanctuaries policy.[91]
January 6, 2017: Letter to Church Board from the Pastor[92]
January 12, 2017: Letter from Church Board Chair to Church Board regarding leading the healing process in the congregation
February 2, 2017: Church Board meeting; Nurture Commission representative indicated that they are "reviewing the Safe Sanctuaries policies of the church and considering changes to these policies."[93]
March 2, 2017: Nurture Commission meeting and discussion of revisions to the Safe Sanctuaries policy
April 6, 2017: Nurture Commission meeting and discussion of revisions to the Safe Sanctuaries policy
April 7-June 30, 2017: GRACE survey available
May 8-10, 2017: GRACE in Newton for in-person interviews
June 2-4, 2017: Vacation Bible School at FMC, led by Michael Combs' wife
July 24, 2017: GRACE presentation to Church Board regarding this Assessment
July 25, 2017: GRACE presentation to congregation regarding this Assessment

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who have experienced abuse in their own lives and that pain continues. There have also been relational effects within our congregation and this has been a difficult time for many folks."

[89] The Pastor's letter to the Church Board on 12/2/16 regarding this issue stated, "In this month, I had another conversation with [elder] in regard to my handling of the situation with Michael Combs. As I told you last month orally, he pointed out to me (correctly) that I did not follow Safe Sanctuary guidelines by not publicly notifying the congregation right away of his arrest and of the charges against him. He has some focused requests for how to follow up. Since that initial conversation there have been a number of other ones. The Caregiving and Membership Commission is, as you've heard, suggesting that we bring in outside help us to process this situation. The Nurture Commission, in their December meeting, had good discussion about both process and revision of the Safe Sanctuary guidelines. I have been in contact with Dr. Melissa Hofstetter, who was the resource person for Western District Conference's Pastor resourcing on sexual abuse in the congregation. Ryan Koehn, as incoming Church Board Chair, has also had some conversations. I have certainly learned much this year in all kinds of ways (including error) about process, about myself, and about the congregation. I have some hope for what is possible going forward."

[90] The Church Board meeting minutes on 12/8/16 regarding Nurture Commission reflect, "Besides our usual business, we spend [sic] considerable time talking about Safe Sanctuaries in regard to Michael Combs' arrest. We discussed the current policy and the parts we did not follow regarding notification of the congregation, and also talked about reviewing the policy and updating it as needed. There was discussion about finding ways to allow the congregation to process and grieve, and also discussion about reviewing 'Safe Touch' with the children, and doing more education with the congregation, possibly with guest speakers on a Sunday morning. We hope to be in coordination with Caregiving/Membership in these things."

[91] The minutes from this meeting regarding this issue reflect, "The Safe Sanctuary Policy is to be reviewed and revised. [Committee members' names] will work on revising the policy, the changes of which will need to be approved by the Board. [The Church Board Chair] would like an update to the Board from the Nurture Commission at the February Board meeting about the process for following up on the conversation from last month's meeting. The Caregiving and Membership Commission is tending to some parts of the suggestions that were made (evaluating last year's process and assisting the congregation in processing those events). The Nurture Commission will focus on 1) updating the Safe Sanctuary guidelines; 2) doing another "safe touch" teaching for the children; and 3) planning for a general education piece for the whole congregation, perhaps with a resource person from Dove's Nest."

[92] The letter from the Pastor to the Church Board regarding this matter on 1/ 6/17 states, "As I write this report, I do so with deep gratitude for the people who have assumed responsibility for helping with the concerns that are present in regard to the congregational processing of Michael Combs' arrest for sexual abuse of a child. I am grateful to have the help that I should have asked for much earlier. December was a difficult month in that the conflict between [elder] and me intensified. During one particular week, I found it difficult to function well (or maybe at all). Throughout the month, however, [various individuals from various commissions] were all at work in listening and discerning possible ways forward. You will hear more about these intentions during this board meeting. These people/groups of the congregation are providing the help that, again, I should have asked for earlier. As well, I received unexpected words of encouragement from person who had no idea that that was what they were offering to me. So- again- I am grateful."

[93] The Church Board minutes reflect that the Nurture Commission representative indicated that they are "reviewing the Safe Sanctuaries policies of the church and considering changes to these policies. Three of the commission members are working on the policies and they are waiting to see what the board decides before making their decisions."