Mennonite missionary charged with child abuse

TheMennonite

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James Daniel Arbaugh, a Mennonite missionary, has been arrested and charged with molesting children while serving in Haiti. On Nov. 21, *The Daily News-Record* of Harrisonburg, Virginia, reported that Arbaugh was arrested on Nov. 15 by a U.S. Homeland Security special agent. Court records show that Arbaugh, 40, was charged with felony coercion or enticement of a minor. Arbaugh attended Mountain View Mennonite Church in Lyndhurst, Virginia, a former Mennonite Church USA congregation, and was a board member for Walking Together for Christ Haiti.

The criminal complaint, filed with the U.S. District Court in Harrisonburg, states that "Arbaugh reported grooming and/or having sexual contact with approximately 21 males under the age of 18." Arbaugh disclosed the abuse to a counselor during a Sept. 11 session. In Virginia, health-care providers are mandated to report child abuse to social services. According to the *Daily News-Record*, social services contacted the Harrisonburg Police Department, who then contacted federal agents.

Arbaugh traveled to Haiti from 2009 to 2015. According to a websitewhere he documented his mission work, Arbaugh was a self-supporting "tentmaker" partnering with Walking Together for Christ in Haiti and involved in "media ministry." The last post on the site is from July 2.

According to the complaint, on Sept. 15, Arbaugh allowed police to look at his laptop and showed police a picture of a 5-year-old boy, the son of a pastor at a church in Haiti, on the computer. The complaint states that Arbaugh confessed to molesting the boy.

The complaint states, "Arbaugh indicated he used his missionary work in Haiti to build friendships with the minors. Arbaugh acknowledged that he groomed the minors in Haiti by engaging in minor sexual activities with them so that one day they would be open to more."

In 2015, Walking Together for Christ Haiti became an independent nonprofit organization. Members of its board of directors came from four Mennonite congregations in Virginia: Lindale Mennonite Church, Linville, Virginia; Mountain View Mennonite Church (which withdrew from Virginia Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Church USA in February 2017); Waynesboro

Mennonite Church and Zion Hill Mennonite Church, Singers Glen, Virginia. Prior to 2015, individuals connected to Walking Together for Christ had informal connections with Virginia Mennonite Missions to support short-term mission work in Haiti. Galen Lehman, a member of the board, previously served as the Caribbean regional director at VM Missions. When he transitioned out of this role, his position was not replaced, and the new organization was founded to continue mission work in Haiti.

According to Lynn Suter, VMMissions Director of Operations and International Ministries, VMMissions has not partnered with Walking Together since its incorporation in 2015. Prior to that time, Suter says, VMMissions was engaged in intermittent work in Haiti and sent six short-term missions teams from 2003-2010. VMMissions is reviewing its records to determine the extent of its connections to Arbaugh. VMMissions has not found record of James Arbaugh having been employed as a missionary by VMMissions. VMMissions is calling on individuals with information about Arbaugh's connections to the organization to contact Suter (lynn.suter@vmmissions.org). According to Suter, VMMissions and the Walking Together board will work to contact individuals in Haiti that Arbaugh may have been connected to.

Suter says that VMMissions first learned in September that Arbaugh had returned to the United States to receive professional counseling for unnamed "sexual sins." VMMissions was told that Arbaugh was aware that if he divulged anything about his behavior that was illegal, the counselor would be legally required to report it to the authorities. VMMissions did not learn more about Arbaugh's behavior until the *Daily News-Record* article was published on Nov. 21. VMMissions does not have information regarding the time frame when Arbaugh's misconduct occurred.

"VMMissions strongly condemns the abuse Mr. Arbaugh has confessed and is alleged to have committed. We are heartsick for the victims and for the grievous misrepresentation of Christ and his church by someone who should have been trustworthy," wrote Suter in a Nov. 30 email.

Suter says that VMMissions has procedures both to assess the fitness and conduct of individuals who apply for service with VMMissions, including criminal background checks.

"The revelation of Mr. Arbaugh's conduct compels us to more closely examine the character and conduct of persons who are not appointed or employed with us but with whom we associate on the field and their own systems of accountability," she wrote.

The Mennonite reached out to four members of the Walking Together board for comment, but at press time, none had returned requests for comment. Lowell Haarer, board member and pastor at Zion Hill, wrote in a Nov. 28 email that the board was working on a statement, but he did not respond to queries about when and where the statement would be published. As of Nov. 28, the organization's website, walkingtogetherhaiti.org, was taken down.

Tyler Eshleman, of Taos, New Mexico, served one year as a member of the advisory council to the board and attended two Walking Together meetings in 2014. Eshleman first heard the news of Arbaugh's arrest when word started circulating on Facebook and says that he "was absolutely devastated, disgusted, angry and heartbroken."

"It is so painful that someone would abuse power in such a way," said Eshleman in a Nov. 29 phone interview. "That's what this is about. It's Doctrine of Discovery stuff, and it's a systematic, large-scale issue for white male Protestants. This is what we've been doing to Haiti as a church and as a country for centuries. We've been wielding unhealthy power."

Eshleman hopes this news will lead the Walking Together board and Mennonites in general to renew commitments to name and speak out about sexual violence in church contexts.

“There are all sorts of ways I think this organization can respond, but it’s so much bigger than that,” he said. “This happened in one instance with a particularly conservative evangelical organization, but abuse is happening all over the place. How do we as Mennonites engage this work? We have a responsibility to work alongside Haitians to fix the harm and damage.”

Arbaugh is being held without bond at the Central Virginia Regional Jail.

Panel on Sexual Abuse Prevention developing guidelines for abuse by noncredentialed leaders

Over the last year, the Panel on Sexual Abuse Prevention, a group jointly appointed by Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Education Agency, has been working to develop a policy for congregations and Mennonite organizations and educational institutions to use when allegations of abuse involve a noncredentialed leader or member, like Arbaugh.

The group has developed a flow chart that identifies steps for an organization or church to take, including publicizing the information, inviting anyone with information or further allegations to come forward and immediately suspending the leader from further engagement with the organization during an investigation. The group calls Mennonite Church USA to form investigative teams to respond when misconduct is reported. The group hopes that each area conference would have a team and that these teams would then be able to help with investigations for sister conferences, so that no conference or congregation is conducting an internal investigation of itself.

“Part of the problem we’ve talked about since we started our term is that it has proven difficult to hold even credentialed leaders accountable because we don’t have a hierarchical structure that can enforce procedures in each conference,” said Jennifer Castro, coordinator of the MC USA Women in Leadership Project and a member of the Panel, in a Nov. 28 interview. “We’ve worked hard to move toward standardizing the process, with the hope that conferences will buy in and say this is worth it because we care about stopping this behavior.”

The panel has submitted its process to the FaithTrust Institute for feedback and will also present it for approval to area conference leaders during the spring 2018 meeting of the Constituency Leaders Council. If approved, the document will be recommended for use across the denomination.