RECOMMENDATIONS

PREPARED BY GRACE FOR FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH IN NEWTON, KANSAS

The Church Board, the Nurture Commission, the Caregiving and Membership Commission, and the Safe Sanctuaries Committee

- Utilize a survivor-centered organization that will help FMC address the issues articulated in this assessment and facilitate the process going forward
- Conduct annual training on sexual abuse and offender dynamics
- Complete a screening check[1] of every individual who has access or contact with individuals 17 years of age or younger
- Create a Child Safeguarding Committee that will:

be a support ministry for survivors of sexual abuse; facilitate ongoing training for children and for adults; review the Safe Sanctuaries/Child Safety policies every 6 to 12 months and revise as needed; handle policy violations; evaluate church facilities for potential blind spots or other child safety concerns; provide hall monitors for various areas within the church on Sundays; engage community partners who work in the field of abuse; and address any other needs as they arise. The committee must include at least one survivor of sexual abuse at all times.

- Conduct an audit of all of FMC's policies relevant to child safety and make appropriate revisions[2]
- Write a letter to Michael Combs requiring that he identify all known victims, plead guilty to any additional crimes, pay for counseling for all victims, and demonstrate unabated and sincere repentance for all of his crimes and sexual misconduct.
- Write a letter asking the school system where Michael Combs' wife works to notify all of the parents/guardians of the disabled children who had contact with Michael Combs while he was working with them in the Rec Center.
- Offer counseling services (or reimbursement) to Michael Combs' victims
- Outline a plan demonstrating authentic repentance (i.e., actions and words) addressed to primary victims and other survivors who may have been hurt by the church's response
- Facilitate a transparent discussion with the entire church body regarding whether Michael Combs will be permitted to return to FMC if and when he is released from prison. Without a proven demonstration of authentic repentance, Michael Combs' membership should be permanently revoked. Should he be permitted to return to FMC, he must never be allowed on the property when minors are present. In addition, he must never be allowed at, or granted participation in, any off-campus FMC activities in which minors are present.
- Discuss ways that the church can have transparent and healthy conversations that address all forms of abuse including sexual abuse, family violence, non-physical/verbal abuse, and its effects on children
- Review the resources within the church library to be sure that resources exist for families impacted by abuse. This should include books[3] and links to *appropriate* counseling in which a licensed clinician is able to provide evidence-based therapy and, within that setting, to also address the spiritual impact of child maltreatment.
- Add Michael Combs' name to the SNAP (Survivors Network of the Abused by Priests- Anabaptist Mennonite chapter) MAP (Mennonite Abuse Prevention) list

The Pastor

· Outline a plan going forward to address the needs articulated in this assessment
· Write a letter to all current and former FMC members and attendees[4] that addresses Combs' conviction for sexual abuse of a child and encourages them to report any information regarding suspected child abuse to the authorities
· Complete a seminary training course on sexual abuse principles related to victims and offenders
· Pursue opportunities to serve and listen to survivors
· Speak publicly about the "lessons learned" from this experience
· Consult with a counselor who can help the Pastor process these issues

Michael Combs, the Offender[5]

· Identify all sexual abuse victims[6]
· Plead guilty to any additional crimes
· Pay for the counseling of all victims
· Demonstrate unabated and sincere repentance for all sexual crimes and misconduct

Michael Combs' Wife

· Resign from service on the Nurture Commission; withdraw from responsibilities on the Safe Sanctuaries Committee (if any) and the Church Board (if any)
· Resign from leading or engaging in any children's activities
· Withdraw name from the Safe Sanctuaries list
· Join a support/accountability network for spouses of sexual offenders

The Church Body

· Commit to praying for your Pastors, the Church Board, and the Commissions and Committees who do this difficult work
· Commit to praying for your church, the victims of Michael Combs, Michael Combs' family, the offender, the offender's spouse, and for all survivors of abuse at FMC
· Talk to your children about abuse and/or connect them to local resources who can discuss it with them
· Be a friend to survivors and secondary survivors
· Speak out against all forms of abuse including sexual abuse, family violence, and non-physical/verbal abuse
· Commit to understanding and abiding by all child protection policies
· Commit to receiving annual training on the dynamics of abuse and sexual offenders

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[1] Screening checks include a criminal background check, a references check, an interview, and checking publically available sources as needed, including social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.

[2] "When writing a church policy on child maltreatment, for example, the preamble must remind readers that these policies are not being done to avoid litigation or reduce our insurance rate—but because children are Christ's representatives (Mark 9:36-37) and we intend to treat them with the respect due messengers of God." *On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse On the Life and Words of Jesus*, Victor Vieth, 2017.

[3] E.g., Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro: New Growth Press 2015).

[4] This should include any person who attended FMC since the time Michael Combs began attending FMC.

[5] As child protection expert Victor Vieth explains, “There is, of course, hope for both child abusers and those who enable child abusers. Although God’s law is a ‘thunderbolt’ that ‘destroys both the open sinner and the false saint’ (BC 312:2), it is not the end of the story. The purpose of the law is to convict us of our sins so that we may turn to Christ for forgiveness.” *On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse On the Life and Words of Jesus*, Victor Vieth, 2017. Psychologist Diane Langberg similarly puts it this way: “Grace is not a lack of restrictions (P. Monroe). In fact, sometimes the thing that is most grace-filled *is* restriction. When our God says, do not murder, do not commit adultery- is He not being full of grace to try and prevent us from engaging in those things that will eat us alive? We do so with our own children when we say, do not play in the street. The restriction is full of love and grace. Abusers need that grace extended to them. They have spent years playing in the street of deception, evil, and abuse damaging both their victims and themselves. To say to the abuser, no, you cannot stay in the pulpit; no, you cannot simply transfer to a different ministry is not an assault on their dignity; it is not an accusation; it is not even a failure to trust (though not trusting them is wise)- it is a keen awareness that their sensibility to sin has been so deadened that they cannot see clearly and are in great danger of further destroying their own soul, not to mention other vulnerable sheep. Of course, we need to protect the vulnerable- our God calls us to that over and over again, but we are also protecting the abuser from his own habituated sin and deadness.” Diane Langberg, “Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations.”

[6] This includes adult and child abuse victims. At the time of Combs’ admitted sexual interactions with counselees in the 1990’s, no criminal statute prohibited a priest from having sexual contact with a parishioner. Nonetheless, “[clergy sexual abuse] is an abuse of power and a desecration of the name of Christ. It is not an affair, nor is the victim equally culpable. The safety of God’s sheep results from *His* character not theirs. And so it should be for the broken, confused, wounded sheep in our communities. They should be safe because of the shepherd’s character and where they are not, a shepherd’s character is exposed as being abusive of power, deceptive and clearly unlike the character of the one he calls Master.” (Diane Langberg, “Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations.”) It is important that, even if Michael Combs’ actions were not considered criminal at that time, that he demonstrate authentic repentance for all of his sexual misconduct occurring in the 1990’s and at any other time.