5 August 2018

Dear Bethel College Mennonite Church pastors, board members, deacons, and Faith Formation Commission members:

I write with gratitude and love for the church, and also with deep concern. I was surprised and troubled by the announcement on Palm Sunday regarding Dan and Loretta Baumgartner and what led to the decision to ask them not to attend BCMC. I have already spoken twice with Pastor Dawn Yoder Harms. Silence from church leaders since that announcement prompts me to share my concerns more broadly.

Here are some key events in which I was involved, as well as the issues I see arising from them:

1. In 2013, I shared with Pastor Heidi Regier Kreider what I knew then about accusations of abuse by Dan Baumgartner decades earlier, and indications he was still at high risk for reoffending. I brought this concern as one pastor to another with the permission of his accusers, but would have done so without their approval because of my deep commitment to the safety of children and youth in our community, especially in our churches. I was aware that some steps were being taken at BCMC to address the possible risk.
2. In June 2016, I began attending BCMC after leaving my pastoral position at [redacted] Church. I wondered what had come of my call to Heidi three years earlier, since Dan seemed to participate fully in the life of the congregation. At some point after Dawn began as lead pastor, I was told that she had been informed of the accusations and began looking into them. I knew she was also in conversation with Heidi, now at Western District Conference, about the matter.
3. In March 2018 there was an announcement from the pulpit (after children and youth were asked to leave) about having offered Dan a "limited engagement agreement," his refusal to sign it, and BCMC's decision that Dan would no longer be allowed to attend. It appeared that only three people were part of the decision-making process: Pastor Dawn, board moderator Sondra Koontz, and moderator-elect John Waltner. I felt some relief, but was also troubled by both the announcement (there was no warning given, and nothing was in writing) and the instruction to share any concerns, questions or reports of recent abuse with John or Sondra (rather than reporting to an outside authority or to police).
4. That same morning, Sondra, John and Marlene Ewert came to the Sunday school class I attend (Agape), with another class invited to join us. The Agape class was essentially required rather than invited to attend this follow-up discussion, because it was taking place in our regular meeting space. All three presenters seemed to indicate that the information Dawn had received and shared from undisclosed sources was the first church leaders had known of the accusations against Dan, and that the accusations were serious and credible enough to warrant quick action. I asked the presenters whether they were aware of any previous concerns raised at BCMC about Dan's safety with children and youth. The three seemed puzzled by my question, so I informed them (and the others present) that I had in fact called Heidi several years earlier to relay information about the accusations then being made against Dan. Sondra assured us that we now had a policy for addressing perpetrators of abuse in the congregation.
5. I met with Dawn soon after that Sunday to express my discomfort with the way the announcement had been made, without warning and with so few decision-makers involved, and to strongly encourage her to put something in writing to give to the congregation so information was less likely to be misconstrued and misunderstood. I also urged her to share openly with

congregational leaders the history of this matter, rather than keeping them in the dark about decisions made regarding Dan five years ago. I told her I thought the decision she came to may well have been the right one at this time, but that the process lacked both transparency and congregational support. She asked whether I might be a consultant to the church moving forward, and I agreed to consider it.

The lack of follow-up and transparency is costing the church, in the form of absenteeism, hostility and despair for many people: those who support the Baumgartners and can't understand why "due process" wasn't offered; those who advocate for victims and see this latest announcement as yet another arbitrary decision taken without guidance from survivors and other "experts" in the field; and those who are simply left wondering what happened and what might possibly happen next. We were asked to trust that things were handled correctly, but we were kept in the dark about not only the details of the accusation (which appropriately protects victims) but also the entire process. We were left to guess whether we think that process is fair and good--or not.

In conclusion, I have these recommendations:

- that BCMC create a group and/or process before the end of 2018 to evaluate past decisions related to allegations or accusations of abuse, and to submit proposals about future processes to handle accusations of abuse to the Faith Formation Commission and Church Board for initial consideration.
- that someone outside Western District Conference be invited (and likely paid) to guide this group. Such a guide might suggest other ways to proceed that can help our church clarify what has happened, and how we can move forward with love and accountability.
- that our pastors work with the church board to write a letter to the congregation, soon, that reiterates the offer to provide support and receive counsel, and clarifies what is and is not currently church policy regarding the safety of children and youth.
- that our pastors share with the congregation a list of community resources, for example, for reporting abuse, the North Newton or Newton police department or Heart to Heart Child Advocacy Center; or for seeking professional support, Prairie View and other counseling services available in our community.

I pray that my letter is helpful as you guide the church that is Christ's body. This situation has already cost me many hours and tears and, while I am not eager to spend more hours or tears on it, I am committed to supporting the church and holding us to the standards of love we have already set for ourselves in our policies, our statements and our relationships. Please feel free to contact me with your questions. I would most appreciate them coming from one person on behalf of those I've addressed. Thank you.

Sincerely,

[redacted]