

Is It Enough?

Sexual Abuse Within the Church: A Case Study at First Christian Church of Florissant

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6th Edition March 28, 2015

Introduction

He was a Bible College graduate, a skilled musician, a talented worship leader, a gifted creative arts director, a youth sponsor, a church intern, a church member—and a pedophile.

On January 26, 2015, in a courtroom in St. Louis County, Brandon Milburn pleaded guilty to seven counts of sodomy with two minors under the age of 12—two innocent, impressionable, and trusting boys from a North County church. He awaits his sentencing on March 30, 2015, a sentence that could bring 10 years to life.

But that is not the end of the story, nor is it the beginning of the story—it is the middle of the story.

The Churches 1

First Christian Church of Florissant

The beginning of the story goes back to a time when Brandon first arrived in St. Louis. He enrolled at Saint Louis Christian College¹ in August of 2005 and began attending and volunteering with the children’s ministry at FCCF. The church hired Brandon part-time as a children’s intern with two other interns the next year (2006), working with 5th graders. He would continue as a paid intern through December of 2007.

During the 2006-2007 school year, a former staff member reported that

“I had conversations with Brandon about being alone with both (Family Name) boys and the youngest (Family Name) as all 3 boys stated how uncomfortable they had gotten. Not to my surprise, he pushed what I was saying away. I told the (Family Name) about my conversation and how uncomfortable their son was and they asked Brandon to move back to SLCC. From there, I honestly avoided him...because he honestly, avoided me.”²

In June of 2007, Brandon committed the six accounts of sodomy against two young boys under the age of 12. It would be four months later, in October of 2007, that Brandon committed the seventh count of sodomy.

No one knew except the two innocent victims—and Brandon.

We now know—so as the steps of Brandon’s story are retraced, we hope it may help to interpret the “circumstantial” evidence to better understand and learn from this tragic event.

Southeast Christian Church

Brandon left town after graduating from SLCC in December of 2007 and returned to his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. He was employed at Southeast Christian Church³ as an *Atmosphere and Media Tech* from October of 2008 to April of 2009.⁴

¹ Saint Louis Christian College <https://stlchristian.edu/>

² Facebook Message March 17, 2015.

³ Southeast Christian Church <https://www.southeastchristian.org/>

⁴ Linked In https://www.linkedin.com/start/join?trk=login_reg_redirect&session_redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.linkedin.com%2Fprofile%2Fview%3FauthType%3DNAME_SEARCH%26locale%3Den_US%26srchtotal%3D3%26trkInfo%3DVSRPsearchId%3A4063682681

First Christian Church of Florissant

Brandon returned to St. Louis to re-enroll at SLCC in August of 2009 to pursue a BS degree in preaching. He returned to First Christian Church of Florissant to volunteer and work with the youth—and to return to the two minors he had abused in 2007.

It was during his first semester back at SLCC that Brandon would bring minors from the church over to his dorm. One⁵ of the Resident Assistants said,

“I had noticed that Brandon had been bringing junior high and high school students back to the dorm to hangout in the lounge or in his room. Honestly, I didn't get a weird feeling about it at all. I figured he was spending time with them in a positive way. However, I did encounter him having the door shut with a junior or senior high boy in the room. I always had an open door policy on my floor (meaning that I left my door open if I was there).”

“I decided after that evening I needed to approach Brandon about what I had witnessed. I didn't expect anything at all; I simply felt that no underage student should be allowed to be behind a closed door for any reason in a dorm.”

“I shared what I expected from Brandon and he said "Oh yeah, that's probably a good call" and from that day on we never had a problem (that I was aware of). However, in 2010 Brandon would hardly spend any time in the dorms or on campus.”

One of Brandon's roommates witnessed the same behavior:

“I can only remember a handful of times that he ever brought a youth to the dorm rooms. They never stayed for more than a minute or two. I was always there before they were. I don't remember ever walking in and finding him with a student. I can't ever remember actually seeing anything suspicious while I was rooming with him.”⁶

Another RA summarized a very common observation made by his fellow dorm mates,

“ He lived with some families from the church off and on while I was at SLCC. This was the only suspicious thing for me and that's probably too strong a word for what I thought at that time. It was just a little strange that he spent much of his time off campus with students and families from his church and so little time with his peers on campus.”⁷

Discovery Church

The following summer, 2010, Brandon served as an intern at Discovery Church⁸ in Simi Valley,

⁵ Facebook Message on February 20, 2015.

⁶ Facebook Message on February 20, 2015.

⁷ Facebook Message on February 21, 2015.

⁸ Discovery Church <http://discoverychurch.com/>

California.

While at that church, Brandon met a young woman. She enrolled at SLCC for the spring semester of 2011. She told me one day after class that although she had received offers from other colleges, she turned them down to attend SLCC for one main purpose—to be with Brandon. He, however, was not interested—a sentiment he repeated every time I asked him about her. He would often say that he just wanted to focus on his relationship with the Lord and ministering to the kids at church instead. I believed him.

First Christian Church of Florissant

Brandon returned to SLCC in August of 2010. His roommate during his last year⁹ at the college summarized how most students perceived him, “He (Brandon) was known as the invisible man.”¹⁰ Concerning Brandon’s relationship with young boys, he said that he “admired how he (Brandon) brought students under his wings” and how “he brings them along when he was working or when he was on stage.”¹¹

Brandon graduated in August of 2011 with a BS degree in preaching.

In August of 2011, Brandon was hired by FCCF as the *Creative Elements Director*, a position he held until January of 2012¹² although he was still listed on the FCCF website as the CED as of February 16, 2012.¹³

It was during a two-day mission trip to tornado ravished Joplin in August of 2011 that I first noticed “something unusual” about Brandon. He was part of a group of members from FCCF who had traveled to Joplin to help with the cleanup. Brandon had been asked by the church to provide video coverage of the trip, something for which he was profoundly talented. Yet, during filming one day, I observed that a young boy, about 14 years old, was constantly following Brandon. They had traveled to Joplin separately from our group in the church van; they had traveled together back to St. Louis in a separate car. The minor was quiet and reserved, often looking away from me if I tried to speak to him. I forgot about it until six months later.

Since this trip, one of the church members on that trip recently told me of an inappropriate incident between Brandon and the minor. The men from the church were spending the first night in Joplin at a large facility, including Brandon and the minor. Located in the corner, was a long counter, similar to a bar counter. This church member said that Brandon and the minor were sleeping next to each other behind this counter while the other men were sleeping out in the open. He confronted Brandon and told him it was inappropriate. Brandon replied that the minor was afraid of sleeping in

⁹ August of 2010 to May of 2011.

¹⁰ Phone interview on March 4, 2015.

¹¹ Phone interview on March 4, 2015.

¹² Linked In

https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=138428543&authType=NAME_SEARCH&authToken=VM_d&locale=en_US&srchid=4063682681425149403848&srchindex=1&srchtotals=3&trk=vsrp_people_res_name&trkInfo=VSRPsearchId%3A4063682681425149403848%2CVSRPtargetId%3A138428543%2CVSRPempt%3Aprimary

¹³ First Christian Church of Florissant <https://web.archive.org/web/20120216192449/http://www.fccf.org/welcome/ministry-staff/>

front of adults. When the group returned to St. Louis, this church member informed the senior minister at FCCF about the incident.¹⁴

Gateway Christian Church

At the end of January of 2012, Brandon left FCCF and was hired on a contract basis to do graphic art design, to participate with the worship team on Sundays, and to run sound at Gateway Christian Church¹⁵ in St. Louis, a job that was similar to what he had done at FCCF. He was hired by the worship minister¹⁶ on a contract basis, not as an employee of the church.¹⁷ This was my second “something unusual” moment. Brandon was exceptionally talented as a speaker, musician, artist, and techie. Churches would always be highly interested in someone with Brandon’s skills—so why would Brandon leave a church with over 1000 members to work at a much smaller church down the street?

While Brandon worked at Gateway on Sunday mornings, he continued to volunteer with the youth group at FCCF on Wednesday evenings. This continued from February to May of 2012. This was my third “something unusual” moment. Why did Brandon leave his employment at FCCF but continue to volunteer on Wednesday evenings with the youth at the church where he was no longer employed?

Each of these “something unusual” moments seemed insignificant by themselves, but they soon were about to be connected—the beginning of the end for Brandon.

Mission Church

After Brandon completed his contractual agreement at Gateway Christian Church sometime in May of 2012, he headed west to another church, this time in Ventura, California. When he first arrived, he posted a video, created by himself, of a young male skateboarding with Brandon at Moor Skate Park in California.¹⁸ It appears that Brandon began attending and/or working at Mission Church,¹⁹ possibly as early as July 8, 2012.²⁰

One of Brandon’s roommates remembered that Brandon had left Mission church sometime before April of 2013 and that he had spent some time at a ranch—some type of treatment center—outside of California, but Brandon did not tell the roommate for what type of treatment.²¹ The roommate was told this information during the weekend of April 5-6, 2013, while Brandon and the roommate were back in St. Louis. If Brandon had left the Mission church before April of 2013, it is unclear as

¹⁴ Phone conversation on March 24, 2015.

¹⁵ Gateway Christian Church <http://gccstl.org/>

¹⁶ He is no longer the worship minister at Gateway CC. He is currently the worship leader at FCCF, and the son-in-law of the senior minister.

¹⁷ Phone interview with the senior minister at Gateway CC on March 3, 2015.

¹⁸ 2 Go Cameras Moor Skate Park <https://vimeo.com/43318414>

¹⁹ Mission Church <http://missionventura.com/gallery/home/>

²⁰ Twitter July 8 2012 <https://twitter.com/brandoburn/status/222017111818633217>

²¹ Phone interview with the former roommate on March 4, 2015.

to where he was employed.

Real Life Church

Brandon again was on the move in August of 2013. He was hired by the Real Life Church²² in Valencia, California. This would be Brandon's last place of residency until his arrest in St. Louis on February 7, 2014. Two days before Brandon was arrested, he tweeted this comment: "Who I am hates who I've been,"²³ a reference to a song by the group, *Relient K*. The full lyrics are as follows:

*Who I Am Hates Who I've Been*²⁴

I watched the proverbial sunrise
Coming up over the Pacific and
You might think I'm losing my mind,
But I will shy away from the specifics...
'cause I don't want you to know where I am
'cause then you'll see my heart
In the saddest state it's ever been.

This is no place to try and live my life.
Stop right there. That's exactly where I lost it.
See that line. Well I never should have crossed it.
Stop right there. Well I never should have said
That it's the very moment that
I wish that I could take back.

I'm sorry for the person I became.
I'm sorry that it took so long for me to change.
I'm ready to be sure I never become that way again
'cause who I am hates who I've been.
Who I am hates who I've been.

I talk to absolutely no one.
Couldn't keep to myself enough.
And the things bottled inside have finally begun
To create so much pressure that I'll soon blow up.

I heard the reverberating footsteps
Synching up to the beating of my heart,
And I was positive that unless I got myself together,
I would watch me fall apart.

²² Real Life Church <http://www.reallifechurch.org/>.

²³ It was from a song by Reliant K. Twitter February 5, 2012 <https://twitter.com/brandoburn/status/431219890561617920>

²⁴ Song Lyrics <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/relientk/whoiamhateswhoivebeen.html>

And I can't let that happen again
'cause then you'll see my heart
In the saddest state it's ever been.

This is no place to try and live my life.

The Allegations 2

The Revelation

Shortly after Brandon left FCCF in January of 2012, the senior pastor²⁵ at FCCF had received a call from the minister at Gateway Christian Church about a rumored concern involving Brandon, a mother and a student connected to FCCF. The mother was concerned about the amount of time Brandon was spending with her teenage son. The minister at Gateway had heard about the rumored concern from a student attending SLCC. He had heard about the concern from a youth sponsor at FCCF, Dawn Varvil.

The senior pastor at FCCF and the executive minister²⁶ invited Dawn Varvil to come to the senior minister's office to respond to these rumors. Dawn met with the two pastors from FCCF for over two hours. Immediately afterwards, Dawn stopped by my house, very distraught and obviously shaken. Over the next several hours, Dawn shared with me and then with my wife, Tamara, a long list of disturbing alleged sexual allegations between Brandon and a group of boys, all minors, from the youth group at FCCF. These alleged allegations took place between 2009 and 2012.

Up to this point, I did not have any strong suspicions or any credible evidence of any inappropriate sexual or emotional relationships with minors by Brandon, nor had I ever been told of any complaints or allegations from any students from the college; any youth, parent, or staff from the church; or any individual outside of the church—no one—until February of 2012.

Here is a list of key alleged allegations Dawn reported to the senior minister and the executive minister in February of 2012 and then shared with me and my wife in our home:

1. Brandon had a male minor staying with him—off and on—in an apartment located across the street from McCluer North High School. Brandon was employed at the church and later was a youth volunteer at the church during these episodes. Brandon gave the minor a key to his apartment and gave him gifts, including an ipad and an iphone. The iphone was included on Brandon's cell phone contract and was purchased specifically for the minor.
2. Before Brandon moved to the apartment, he had lived with the parent from FCCF. On more than one occasion, the parent witnessed Brandon in the same sofa bed as the minor, sleeping in a “spooning” position.

²⁵ He is still the current senior minister.

²⁶ He is no longer employed at FCCF.

3. After the parent shared this information with a counselor, the counselor hot lined Brandon to the proper authorities. Although the counselor was told there was not enough evidence to warrant a further investigation, the counselor was obligated as a mandatory reporter.
4. The parent contacted the mother of the minor and informed her of the following facts: a) Brandon had given both an ipad and an iphone to the minor, b) Brandon had included the minor on his cell phone plan, c) Brandon had given a key to his apartment to the minor, d) Brandon frequently allowed the minor to spend the night at the apartment alone with Brandon.
5. The parent, after conferring with another pastor, hot lined Brandon for a second time. Again, although there was not enough evidence to investigate, the parent was told it was important to demonstrate a pattern of inappropriate behavior.
6. Brandon contacted this parent and asked to meet alone with the parent. Brandon and the parent met at a park in Florissant. Upon arrival Brandon expressed to the parent his relief that the parent had come without the police. Brandon then talked about his “emotional” relationship with the minor, pleading with the parent to convince the minor to return to him because the minor’s mother had cut off her son’s relationship with Brandon.
7. Five males from the church, all minors, told the parent’s minor daughter, that Brandon had exposed himself to the boys and had convinced them to expose themselves to Brandon.

The above key alleged allegations were part of the first edition of this case study I had sent to the elders (including Steve Wingfield) on March 3, 2015. I am now²⁷ including more specific notes of the meeting. Dawn says this is a summary of a meeting with Steve Wingfield and Scott Strandell in Steve Wingfield’s office in February, 2012 with her. This information is what Dawn shared with me when she visited me in my home after her meeting with Steve and Scott.

Information I shared with Steve and Scott

1. I had contacted the mother of a male minor by phone earlier in the week to make her aware of some concerning facts regarding her minor son and his relationship with Brandon Milburn.
 - a. Her son had been given a key to Brandon’s apartment, which was only a few blocks from his home and directly across the street from the minor’s school.
 - b. I had been told by another student that the minor had been telling his mother that he was staying overnight in my home when, in fact, he had been staying the night in Brandon’s apartment.
 - c. I had not seen or heard from the minor in quite some time, and that if he had been

²⁷ March 28, 2015.

telling her that he was spending time at my house, he was lying.

- d. Brandon had included her minor son on his cell phone plan and purchased an Iphone for him as a gift.
 - e. Brandon had gifted her minor son an Ipad.
2. Virgil Brazle had contacted me by phone the same day that I had spoken to the minor's mother, and he berated me for contacting her. He then told me that he would not allow me to be a youth sponsor at FCCF because I was "harassing" one of the other youth sponsors (referring to Brandon Milburn). Virgil then argued the validity of my concerns and whether or not it was appropriate to contact the mother with those concerns.
 3. Prior to Brandon getting his own apartment, he had been living with my family. During that time, Brandon and I had many conversations about appropriate boundaries with the teen boys, particularly sleeping in bed with them.
 4. I had personally witnessed Brandon sleeping in a spooning position with his arms wrapped around the above-mentioned minor.
 5. That my daughter Chelsea had shared with me that a group of her male friends had told her that Brandon had exposed his genitals to them and that they had exposed their genitals to him at his request.
 6. That I had confronted Brandon about the alleged exposure, and that he had minimized it and explained away as being just playful stuff that guys do.
 7. I had discussed the above concerns about Brandon with my counselor.
 8. My counselor had called and reported Brandon to Department of Family Services for the above-mentioned concerns.
 9. I had discussed the above concerns with my mentor Lisa Womble.
 10. I had called the Department of Family Services and reported the above-mentioned concerns at the suggestion of my mentor.
 11. I had discussed with Brandon the necessity of him speaking with a counselor regarding his relationship with the above referenced minor.
 12. I had provided Brandon with the name and phone number of a qualified counselor.
 13. Brandon had told me that he had set an appointment with him but that I was unsure if he had kept the appointment.

14. How difficult it had been for me to carry out all of the above because of the close personal relationship Brandon had shared with my family. That I cared deeply for not only the minor child and his health and well-being but also for the health and well-being of Brandon as a brother in Christ.

Feedback I received from Steve

1. He told me that he had received a phone call from the pastor at Gateway Christian Church saying that someone had come to him with concerns about Brandon Milburn being sexually inappropriate with minors because I had told a student at SLCC that he had been inappropriate with one of my sons. (To which I replied surprise because I had NOT relayed to the student that he was not being inappropriate with one of my sons).
2. He asked if any of my natural children had been abused (To which I replied “no”).
3. He told me that if he believed that any child had been mistreated that he would be willing to hotline.
4. He said something to the effect that his son Joshua was also an artist and that sometimes people misunderstand artistic, talented people and mislabeled them as gay. He in effect told me that Brandon Milburn was no more gay than his own son.
5. He stated that if he believed Brandon was capable of things we had discussed that he never would have recommended Brandon to his son-in-law who Brandon had been working with at Gateway Christian Church.
6. He stated that even in light of the information I had given him, he would have no misgivings in recommending Brandon to other churches and would readily write a letter of recommendation for him (paraphrased).
7. He questioned my ability to objectively assess the situation with Brandon, questioned my emotional state and suggested that I take care of my family and distance myself from the situation with Brandon.
8. He stated that he would “Stake his career” on Brandon’s innocence.

Feedback I received from Scott

1. Scott told me that he wanted to make it clear to me that Brandon’s contract with FCCF had not been renewed in January because he had not carried out all of his job duties properly and stressed to me that it was “for no other reason”.
2. Scott stated that Brandon had been very close to his own family and that he cared for him as a son. He continued on that he had had conversations in the past with Brandon regarding appropriate boundaries with students and that he would continue to.

This was the first time I had heard from a reliable source about any alleged allegations of sexual contact by Brandon with minors from the church. If they were true, I was grieved—grieved for the pain placed upon these innocent and trusting minors, grieved for the impact this would have on the church, and grieved that such a talented and gifted young man could be involved in such despicable acts.

Yet I was not completely surprised—I was beginning to connect the dots.

The Rejection

I was equally grieved and shocked at what I heard next. Concerning these alleged allegations, Dawn said²⁸ that the senior minister commented that he would stake his career on Brandon's innocence. He said that he would not have written a letter of recommendation to Gateway if he had believed he was guilty of improper sexual activity. The senior minister was a supporter of Brandon.

Since then, I have learned that the minister at Gateway reported that the senior minister at FCCF did not inform him about any of these alleged allegations during the entire time of Brandon's employment at Gateway.²⁹

Also, a former college roommate and a former worship leader and intern at FCCF, who had worked with Brandon³⁰, reinforced this sentiment. He³¹ states the senior minister was “in his own words, a ‘kindred spirit-hood’ with Brandon.” The former intern also says that the senior minister

“was vocal in his admiration for Brandon's creativity, his commitment to ministering to students, and for Brandon as a friend, on a personal level. (He) thought Brandon was cool, charismatic and extremely talented. This was clear by how (the senior minister) talked about Brandon, but was probably more apparent by (the senior minister's) actions.”

“Brandon would move back and forth between Florissant and Louisville, Kentucky or California, and upon his return each time, the senior minister would offer him a higher position with more responsibility than the job he had previously. No other intern or staff member received the same treatment.”

“Further, the senior minister openly considered Brandon “like-minded” with himself and it seemed to me that he would give Brandon the benefit of the doubt in any situation. In short, the senior minister admired, favored, and just plain liked Brandon as a person and as a minister.”

Near the end of the meeting, Dawn stated the senior minister began to question her own mental

²⁸ The description of the meeting is from the perspective of only the parent. The senior minister and the executive minister have been asked repeatedly to present their perspectives of this meeting, but they have, as of the present, ignored any requests.

²⁹ Phone interview with the senior minister at Gateway on March 3, 2015.

³⁰ He worked with Brandon from August of 2009 to May of 2011.

³¹ From a phone conversation on March 4, 2015 and an Email from March 5, 2015.

capacity to the point that when she arrived at my house, she began to question the severity of the allegations. My wife and I, however, immediately reassured Dawn that these alleged allegations were very serious and that she had acted legally and morally by reporting them to the two pastors.

These alleged allegations—shared by a key church member whose children knew the very boys with whom Brandon hung out—should have been enough to warrant a church-wide investigation.

These alleged allegations—reported by a youth sponsor who spent extensive time ministering to the very boys with whom Brandon was accused of abusing—should have been enough to call for an examination of the charges.

These alleged allegations—conveyed by a parent who had the courage and strength to bring them to light—should have been enough to launch a probe into the alleged allegations.

It should have been enough—but it was not enough!

The Consultation

My wife and I laid out three imperatives concerning these alleged allegations. Dawn had already carried out two of them; I was about to carry out the third one.

1. Brandon had to be hot lined to the proper authorities—the parent and her counselor had each fulfilled this one.
2. The alleged allegations had to be reported to the church leadership—the parent had just warned the senior and executive ministers.
3. Brandon had to be confronted about the alleged allegations—I would follow through with this one about a week later.

When I asked Brandon, in my office at the college, about each of the alleged allegations, he blew off the one alleged allegation of exposing himself to the five minors by saying, “it was just something boys do when they are joking around.” Brandon denied any inappropriate behavior with the minor staying at his apartment. In fact, he denied any type of inappropriate sexual behavior with any individuals at the church. He looked away from me often, staring down at the floor. He was not shocked or intimidated by his questions—it was as if he had already been prepared for them. As he walked out of my office, Brandon would cut off our 6-½ year friendship, not wanting to have any contact with me during the remaining time he volunteered at FCCF, including teaching at Hydrate on Wednesday evenings.

But I now knew, for the first time, that Brandon was most likely involved in some type of inappropriate sexual activity with young boys. Although there wasn't enough objective evidence to warrant an arrest, there was enough circumstantial evidence to begin to connect the dots to be highly suspicious of Brandon. It was then that I began my own investigation by putting together a narrative of Brandon's story, documenting his history at the college and at the church—thus the

genesis of this story.³²

The Request

About a month after these alleged allegations were shared with the two pastors, Dawn sent me a text from Brandon.³³ By this time, the minor's mother had requested her son to cut off his relationship with Brandon. So Brandon sent Dawn this text, begging Dawn to convince the mother to let her son, under the age of 16, to return to Brandon. The names of the people in the text have been replaced with their titles, and no revisions of the original text have been made.

“So, I've been going back and forth on whether or not i should send this text. But i just have to. Its' similar to that "momma bear" feeling you always told me about. and i get it. totally now.

I see (The Minor) as my son and God had definitely been guiding that so similar to Paul and Timothy and Jesus and John. We were closer and closer. And now I have this feeling that I would do anything to get my son back. This text is not to accuse you of anything but to just tell you what has happened. (The Minor) has no phone anymore (not a big deal) but (The Minor) can never see me ever again, he isnt allowed any communication with me. and worst of all he can't attend church anymore.

His parents told me how they were surprised I was fired from fccf for accusations against me regarding teen boys. But the reality is, they have no idea that their son went from Saul to Paul. that he's been clean of drugs and alcohol for a year and a half, that he's remained sexual pure. And not to have an ego boost there, but it was because of how I guided (The Minor). They see me as a bad person and a threat to their son, when in reality I was the very vessel that God used to help same him. (The Minor) messed up by keeping alot of our activities from them. I didnt kknow that. What I do know is that (The Minor) stopped lying about going to your house a while back. And he didnt lie about going to (Name) or (Name)...he just never updated them after he was with those guys.

My request is simple please please please please call his mom back today and let her know how good i was/am for (The Minor). please let her know his past before I came into his life. And please let her know that the only reason he hid the relationship from her was because he was used to hiding things from her before and that I urged him to tell her things. And he started to.

I am willing to jump through any hoop, pay any amount, go anywhere, do anything, I will do whatever you want, becasue what God had been doing in that boys life the past 4 weeks was incredible. He was planning to ask his mom about going on a missions trip (without me) and

³² Looking back on the story, I would have informed the senior and executive ministers that the parent had informed me about the allegations, and I would have informed the minister at Gateway about them also. I did not hotline Brandon after I talked to him because he had already been hotlined twice for the same allegations. The lesson learned about sexual abuse allegations—report.

³³ Text message from Brandon to the parent on March 18, 2012.

had started preaching to his friends on facebook. He even talked about attending bible college. We read the bible together ever night. he started showing signs of mentoring towards younger boys on simple levels. He is a good kid who made a simple mistake. And now he's facing persecution. I was filled with bitterness and rage and anger, and i let it all pass. But what remains is a heart for a son. To continue to raise him up in the LORD. please call her today. please”

Dawn did not, at any time, ask the mother to let her son return to Brandon. But it was still during this time that Brandon was volunteering at FCCF on Wednesday evenings.

A current youth sponsor at FCCF who served as a leader during FCCF’s late night Sunday evening service from February to May of 2012 came forward recently and reported to me:

During this time, I would regularly see Brandon Milburn at these services, often coming in during the middle of the service, and always accompanied by teens. I knew Brandon was no longer on staff at the time, but did not question his presence, seeing it at the time as him just being a good mentor to students he had been guiding during his time at Florissant. What would often make me tilt my head and question was that every time Brandon was there, he would always have his arm around a student. It was nothing that gave me any suspicion of inappropriate behavior, just something that I felt was rather odd.³⁴

This youth sponsor added that during most of these Sunday evening services from February to May of 2012, the senior minister preached at these services, and that he would have witnessed Brandon attending the services accompanied by minors.

This occurred after the senior minister had been made aware of the alleged allegations from February of 2012 by Dawn Varvill!

³⁴ Facebook message from the youth sponsor on March 26, 2015.

The Arrest 3

A few days before Brandon's arrest, a detective appeared at the Dawn's home because Brandon had listed Dawn's address as his St. Louis residence. Dawn was informed that Brandon was going to be arrested when he arrived in St. Louis. A day after his arrest, Dawn called me—Brandon was in police custody.

That evening, February 8, 2014, I phoned Titus to share the news of Brandon's arrest.

The day before the news³⁵ broke on all of the media outlets in St. Louis, I visited³⁶ Brandon at the Saint Louis County jail. He appeared dazed and confused, quite surprised to see me. On my second visit a week later, Brandon told me to not tell anyone he was in jail; it was too late—his mug shot had been plastered all over the media. His secret was out.

When the story did break in St. Louis, FCCF released this statement to the press on February 11, 2014 by the Executive Minister³⁷:

"Having just heard of these charges from something that happened in 2007, our first concern is with how we can best help any victim heal, "The charges point to a time when as a college student he served in a part time role as an intern. For the last several years he has been living in another state. We have a justice system who can do the investigation and we will assist them any way we can as our church family works through this."³⁸

When the executive minister³⁹ was asked later about why the press release did not fit with the timeline of Brandon's time at FCCF, he said, "I can say with 100% certainty I communicated the exact information I received."⁴⁰

The senior minister then addressed the charges against Brandon during one Sunday morning service. He then communicated the church's concern with a number of small groups during one Wednesday night event at the church building. His address is presented below in its entirety:

³⁵ Fox 2 News Saint Louis <http://fox2now.com/2014/02/11/youth-minister-arrested-for-sexually-assaulting-children/>

³⁶ February 10, 2014. The news broke on TV on February 11, 2014.

³⁷ He was not the same executive minister from 2012 that met with the senior minister and Dawn about the alleged allegations. This executive minister was hired after Feb of 2012. It is not known if he was told about the alleged allegations by the senior minister.

³⁸ St. Louis Post-Dispatch http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/california-youth-minister-faces-sodomy-charges-in-st-louis-county/article_3d3299f1-cd97-56d4-baf9-d63e5572efe6.html

³⁹ He is not the executive minister who heard the allegations in 2012. He was hired after that event.

⁴⁰ Executive Minister: Email from March 15, 2015.

This past week has been difficult as news reported on the arrest regarding a very serious crime. For the next five minutes I need to lead us in a family talk as a dad myself with two teenagers and as your pastor. Sometimes in the very best families, bad things happen. If you don't know already, it was revealed this past week that someone was arrested. He was arrested a week ago Friday, for hurting a couple of kids. The person charged is Brandon Milburn. He moved away two years ago but during a time between 2007 and 2009 he allegedly sexually abused two eleven year old boys. This while he was a college student and working here part-time as an intern. And it made our local news on Tuesday. I think I know how many of you feel. That makes me both angry and sad all at the same time. Because we want this to be a safe place for you for your children just like I would for my daughters.

How many of you are parents in this room? As parents, I want you to know Wednesday night I had a difficult task of speaking to a group of about 130, 150 teenagers on Wednesday night. And I need you to know what I told them. I told them two things—a hard truth and what we can do about it. The hard truth is sometimes people we trust may try to touch us or get us to do something that is wrong. That's a hard truth. And the thing we do about it is if anyone ever makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, young people, we want you to tell your parents, your school counselor, tell a pastor, even if it's embarrassing to talk about it. Parent, a school counselor, a pastor will listen and help.

And then I had to work my way around to six or seven different small groups that meet here in the church, and I had to say to parents that were here, you need to know what I told your teenagers, but it's not my job, it's not the church's job, to give explicit definitions of sex crimes to young children in mix settings like at a local church or in a public setting. That's a parent's responsibility.

So we encourage all parents to talk to their children and look them in the eye and say if ever anything happens that makes you feel embarrassed, or if it makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe you can tell me. I want you to tell me. You can tell your school counselor, you can tell your pastor, and I will listen and I will always love you.

You know no matter what happened in the past not every case makes the news or gets reported. And I looked up the statistics from an accurate source. the National Center for the Victims of Crime based out of Washington DC, and one out of five girls and one out of ten boys are sexually abused in our country. So if you have been hurt by something like this, you need to know you are not alone and the good news is that you can get past this, and you can heal in this place. We know a healer and he can heal anybody of anything, amen?

Listen we are not a perfect church, I am very imperfect as a pastor, our leaders are imperfect, and you at times, you're not all that either. But our desire is to be people of truth and holiness and to help people to heal through the life changing power of the good news that we have to share. You know one of Satan's oldest ploys is to create distractions for the

church from its core mission to connect people to Jesus, and I am glad as a church family we're not going to let something bad that happened years ago keep us from doing good right now and as a church family we are going to stay positive. We are going to keep preaching Jesus. We are going to help people heal cause that's what we do here. That's what's this family is all about. Amen.⁴¹

Surely these two pro-active actions were enough to finally jump-start the investigation into the alleged allegations from 2012. I had assumed that during the eleven months leading up to the trial, the elders of FCCF had investigated the alleged allegations, first by interviewing this parent and second, by interviewing others, including myself.

I was, however, shocked and dumbfounded to discover that no staff or elder had ever followed-up with the parent concerning these alleged allegations!

In fact, a former staff member reported that at the time of the arrest he was surprised. He said,

“I can verify that what was communicated to the staff when the arrest happened was that leadership was completely shocked by the news. and they had never been made aware before of any inappropriate behavior.”⁴²

Another former staff member echoed this same surprise about any allegations,

“What you wrote explained to me what some were posting on Facebook right after his arrest about something being known before. As far as I knew this was the first that anybody knew about accusations.”⁴³

Shouldn't the arrest have been enough to convince the leadership of FCCF to investigate the 2012 alleged allegations? Shouldn't the six counts of sodomy that had occurred nearly 7 years previously have been enough to move the leadership to reexamine the parent's warnings? Shouldn't the \$100,000 cash-only bond have been enough to show the seriousness of the charges to wake-up the leadership to reconsider the alleged allegations from 2012?

It should have been enough—but it was not enough!

After the charges were released to the public, I assumed the two victims were boys from the 2012 alleged allegations. It was eight months later, however, when I learned the shocking news—these two victims were not connected to the alleged allegations of 2012.

⁴¹ Steve Wingfield's address to FCCF concerning the arrest of Brandon Milburn on February 16, 2014 at the FCCF worship service. <https://vimeo.com/87521576> Time 25:49-31:15.

⁴² Facebook Message March 17, 2015.

⁴³ Facebook Message March 16, 2015.

A Time to Act

It was enough for me to act.

My wife and I met with the family of one of the victims who had come forward. I talked with a family member of the other victim. I contacted the Saint Louis County prosecuting attorney, sharing with him the 2012 alleged allegations first reported to the leadership at FCCF and sharing the church's failure to follow-up on them with this parent. As the trial date of January 26, 2015 approached, the prosecuting attorney subpoenaed Titus and me as potential witnesses. I revised and wrote several more drafts of this story in preparation for a trial. Fortunately for the highly vulnerable victims, they did not have to testify publicly.

Without any fanfare or media blitz, Brandon Milburn pleaded guilty to not six, but seven counts of sodomy with two minors under the age of 12 on a Monday morning at the Saint Louis County courthouse on January 26, 2015. He still awaits sentencing as of March 30, facing a prison term from 10 years to life.

So ends the story of Brandon Milburn, for the victims and their families, the college, and the church—or does it?

The Plan 4

Called to Lead

This is simply the middle of the story, a story that is not completed, a story that is not finished, a story that continues to be written.

Since the guilty plea, I have become aware of two more alleged allegations⁴⁴ of sexual abuse with minors by Brandon—raising the number of alleged victims by Brandon to eight, not including the two victims from 2007.

The consequences and fall-out from Brandon Milburn’s actions at FCCF and potentially other churches will not simply go away when Brandon goes away to prison in a few weeks. FCCF is not ready to “move on” and “put this behind them” as much as they might want to. FCCF must slow down, FCCF must investigate the fall-out, FCCF must learn from this tragedy, and FCCF must prepare to bring healing, comfort, and justice to any and all of the people affected, directly or indirectly, by the actions of one young man—Brandon.

The elders must lead this call; they are called to be the leaders.

Over thirty years ago, I was ordained to the ministry. I have had the honor and privilege to serve the church in multiple positions as a youth minister, co-pastor, missionary, senior minister, elder; in different locations overseas and in the states; and in a variety of environments with well-established churches and new church plants.

I understand that the biblical role of a pastor / elder, carries with it a high privilege:

“If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”⁴⁵

The role of a pastor/elder also brings with it a tremendous responsibility to--

“shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”⁴⁶

The elders must shepherd the flock, a flock of confused and hurting young boys affected by these

⁴⁴ Interview in February of 2015 with a former FCCF youth sponsor and parent.

⁴⁵ 1 Timothy 3:1 ESV

⁴⁶ 1 Peter 5:1-4 ESV

events, a flock of angry and frustrated parents trying to make sense of this, a flock of volunteers and workers attempting to figure out how they missed all of the signs, and a flock of leaders feeling overwhelmed with how to manage these events.

Initiate An Investigation

To begin this process of implementing a plan, Titus sent an initial letter to the elders at FCCF on February 27, 2015, laying out the need for the elders to initiate an investigation. The letter has been printed below in its entirety:

Dear Elders of First Christian,

As you are all aware, Brandon Milburn was arrested one year ago on charges of sodomy. These charges eventually resulted in a guilty plea. His punishment will be severe, and rightly so. Throughout this process, I have cooperated with the prosecuting attorney in the case. I was set to serve as a witness had the case gone to trial. Fortunately for the victims it did not come to that. As sentencing draws near, I wanted to take a chance to reach out to each of you.

In the past year, I have become aware of many details regarding this case. I've done my best to handle that information with care, including consulting legal advice and maintaining communication with the Prosecuting Attorney's office.

Among the disturbing information I've been made aware of is the fact that Steve Wingfield and Scott Strandell spoke in early 2012 with someone expressing great concern regarding an inappropriate relationship between Brandon and a male student. My understanding is that specific examples were cited to communicate the severity of these concerns, yet the church did not act on this information.

More troubling, it seems the church has attempted to distance themselves as much from this situation as possible, including:

- Steve assuring people that prior to Brandon's arrest he had no knowledge of abuse allegations, which is false, as concerns were shared with him in 2012.
- Failing to reach out to the victims or their families despite expressing this as a "first Priority" to the congregation and public.
- Failing to attempt to reach out to possible additional victims.
- Failing to alert churches where Brandon subsequently served, both in MO and CA.

In the last twelve months, I have done a disproportionate amount of pastoral work with people on all sides of this issue. Doing this from 900 miles away is a challenge and should

not be necessary, but I am willing to do what I can to facilitate healing. However, it seems there has been a leadership vacuum from the church. Frankly, I believe the church has failed to handle this situation correctly, both in 2012 after concerns were voiced to Steve and Scott as well as since Brandon's arrest. Not proactively pastoring victims, potential victims and many other individuals who are hurting over this situation are all examples of this failure. Distancing yourself may be the safe thing to do, but it is morally wrong and a failure of Steve's and the rest of the elder's leadership. It was also against the law.

I have been in contact with additional victims and helped to coordinate their interaction with legal authorities and counseling resources. I have fielded countless phone calls from concerned parents. I have ministered directly to the victim's families. I have given advice to people wondering how they might communicate with and minister to Brandon. I have been in ongoing communication with the prosecuting attorney. I've talked to churches where Brandon served after he left Florissant. That First Christian has not led in this effort is outrageous.

I have given the church a year to coordinate conversations and publicly lead the faith community in appropriate ways. There is so much that has happened that remains a secret, and that is not acceptable. There are people who are suffering and—because of the church's perceived silence—look at the church as a co-conspirator instead of an agency of healing. This is also unacceptable.

I am watching hopefully to see the church right some of its wrongs; however, I'm not waiting any longer to assist in making these things right. I will cooperate with any attempt to shine light on the failures of the past. I am beyond frustrated at the way this has been managed and heartbroken that the church I once called home and love deeply has mishandled this situation so severely. By failing to report allegations in 2012, failing to follow up with known victims, seek out other victims, and being disingenuous with the facts (with multiple people and news outlets), First Christian has invited suspicion. That suspicion may be unwarranted, but it does exist.

Giving people the opportunity to know the truth, talk about what happened, and move on healthily is my goal. It is particularly true that I want this for the victims who were ignored in 2012 when the church became aware of alleged abuse against them. I am coming to you as directly as I can with all of this out of respect of the office of the elders as well as out of respect for each of you as individuals. I count you as brothers in the faith.

I worked with Brandon as closely as anyone. I never suspected a thing. I have great regrets over that fact. However, my greatest regret is that no one ever came to me with the suspicious behaviors they observed or concerns about alleged abuse. Had they, I most certainly would've acted. Why didn't you guys do more? Ongoing abuse as Brandon volunteered in 2012 or victims in California—if there are any—most certainly could've been avoided by more decisive action.

Ultimately what I am asking for is some public recognition of these failures as well as

accountability for and corrections to the insufficient response. For Steve and Scott and any alerted staff members for not adequately handling concerns raised about Brandon in 2012 as well as the rest of the elders for failing to insist on greater pastoral care for the many people who have been so deeply affected by all this. Please take steps to make this right. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely, Titus Benton

Following Titus's letter to all of the elders, I sent the first edition of this document on March 3, including the following three-fold Strategy for the Elders, to begin the conversation, to begin the healing, to continue the story.

A Three-Fold Strategy

1. The story is unfinished—the elders must minister to all the victims, to their families, and to any church members affected by this event. The elders should:

- Apologize, support, and applaud the two victims, who with great courage and strength of character, came forward without the support of the church, to stop Brandon from hurting any more young boys.
- Surround the families of the victims with love and support, apologizing for ignoring their pain and praying for their recovery.
- Reach out and care for any of the volunteers, youth sponsors, and parents who were affected by Brandon's actions.
- Apologize to Dawn Varvil for ignoring her allegations from three years ago and for minimizing her motives.
- Work tirelessly to identify, assess, support, and care for the needs of any other victims—those included in the alleged allegations of 2012 and any new allegations—for as long as it takes to bring healing and restoration to them in the name of Christ.
- Pray for confession and repentance for Brandon and for restoration and reconciliation with the church as he enters into the prison system, remembering Jesus' words to visit those in prison.

2. The story is unfinished—the elders must reexamine the church's official statement released to the press on February 11, 2014. The elders should:

- Recognize that the official statement released to the press was incorrect. Brandon had not been living in California the past "several years" but had actually been working at Gateway Christian Church and volunteering in the Wednesday evening youth program between

February and May of 2012.

- Investigate why the official statement was inaccurate and released to the press.
3. **The story is unfinished—the elders must initiate an extensive investigation into any mismanagement or failures by the senior pastor/ elders/ or staff in handling this situation and thoroughly reassess all of the church’s policies and procedures concerning sexual abuse allegations. The elders should:**
- Investigate any past or current alleged allegations immediately. Although Brandon was brought to justice, the legal authorities will not investigate any other alleged charges nor interview any potential victims unless they come forward first. Until they do, the church cannot hide behind the law and not conduct its own internal investigation of past or current alleged allegations.
 - Consider the example of the Real Life Church in Santa Clara, California, who although they had received no complaints about Milburn, they still opened an internal investigation on February 13, 2014, only days after his arrest.⁴⁷ The church posted that “the church is reaching out to members through email, Facebook and meetings to try to communicate what the church knows, Gray said, although officials at Real Life Church are still conducting their own investigation into the situation.”⁴⁸

They also stated, “Milburn, who worked with the church for about five and a half months, came highly recommended by references, including a pastor in St. Louis, Gray said. Church officials have been “horrified” by the accusations, he said.”⁴⁹ Remember that Brandon had been associated with FCCF, not for 5½ months but for nearly 5½ years, and that FCCF had received complaints—by a youth sponsor / parent—of alleged allegations of sexual behavior against not one but numerous minors from the church.

- Ask a series of questions of all church staff, elders, deacons, volunteers, teachers, and members who may have had a role, directly or indirectly, in Brandon’s nearly 5½ years at FCCF, and when necessary, take corrective action.
 1. Was Brandon hot lined to the authorities by the senior and executive ministers as mandatory reporters? If not, why not?
 2. Was Gateway Christian Church made known of these alleged allegations after Brandon left his employment at FCCF?⁵⁰ If not, why not?

⁴⁷ SIGNALscv.com <http://www.signalscv.com/archives/114294/>

⁴⁸ KHTS AM 1220 <http://www.hometownstation.com/santa-clarita-news/crime/real-life-church-pastor-addresses-concern-over-former-employee-40396>

⁴⁹ KHTS AM 1220 <http://www.hometownstation.com/santa-clarita-news/crime/real-life-church-pastor-addresses-concern-over-former-employee-40396>

⁵⁰ Since the initial edition of this story on March 3, 2015, it has been revealed that Gateway Christian Church was not made aware of these alleged allegations.

3. Were staff and/or elders at FCCF made aware of the allegations in 2012? If so, to whom and when? If not, why?
 4. Was either of the two churches in California given letters of recommendation from the senior minister? If so, what were the recommendations?
 5. Were the three churches in California made aware of these allegations? If not, why not?
 6. Did the staff and/or elders do a follow-up investigation with the parent who brought the allegations to the senior and executive ministers? If so, when and how? If not, why not?
 7. Why did Brandon continue to be a youth volunteer on Wednesday nights during the spring of 2012 after the revelation of the allegations were made known?
 8. Have any staff and/or elders met with the two victims and their families to provide pastoral and spiritual support? If not, why not?
 9. Have the staff and/or elders met with Brandon while he is in the Saint Louis County jail? If so, who and why? If not, why not?
 10. Have any staff/elders/deacons/teachers been contacted by anyone, inside or outside the church, with any information, concerns or suspensions related to Brandon's behavior with minors? If so, who and when? What was done with the information?
 11. Have any staff/elders/deacons/teachers initiated any communications with anyone, inside and outside the church, concerning any information, concerns, or suspicions related to Brandon's inappropriate behavior with minors? If so, who, when, and why?
- Examine, assess, and revise problems with the church's policies and procedures concerning any type of abusive, ungodly, or illegal behavior—physical, sexual, or emotional—displayed by any staff or member of FCCF.
 - Reassure the congregation that the leadership is committed to protecting the church, particularly the most vulnerable members—its youth—from predators and promise to take any and all future complaints or allegations of sexual abuse seriously.
 - Pray for wisdom and discernment, practice confession and repentance, and seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Response 5

The Certified Letter

On March 19, 2015, Titus and I received a reply from the elders, a certified letter—with no names—in response to this document. It is reprinted below in its entirety:

March 17, 2015

Douglas Lay
2409 Lavin Court
Florissant, MO 63033

Dear Mr. Lay

It is clear that you care deeply about this tragic situation. The actions of one have hurt many, including you. As well, our whole church family has been a victim of this sin and violation of trust.

While we have and will continue to cooperate fully with the legal process, it is not appropriate for us to discuss this with you.⁵¹ We have a culture of zero tolerance of child abuse and remain committed to making safety of children our highest priority.

We are thankful that two victims came forward so that the authorities could conduct an open investigation and seek a judgment. As part of our complete cooperation with the instructions of the prosecuting attorney, as a church we have not taken the role of investigator.⁵² In each public announcement we encouraged other victims, if any, to communicate directly with those handling the case. We believe honoring victims includes allowing them to initiate communication and process healing through the counselors of their choosing.⁵³ As we have reviewed your correspondence, we feel that it contains a number of inaccuracies and does not fairly or accurately describe communications with our church or

⁵¹ It is unclear as to why the elders believe it is not appropriate to discuss this with me. I have reached out to them on five occasions, asking them to, as in the words of one of the current staff members, “fill in the gaps”. So, I will continue to send the elders requests for their perspective.

⁵² This is unclear. Why not? The prosecuting attorney does not prohibit a church from doing its own investigation; in fact, he would welcome it. The Real Church in CA conducted its own investigation after the arrest of Brandon in 2014.

⁵³ This clearly displays ignorance about how to minister to alleged victims. They almost never will come forward on their own without the proactive initiative, in this case, of the church. This is simply a smoke screen to avoid any legal liability.

our approach.⁵⁴ It is our desire though not to add to speculation or discord in forums such a social media as this has great potential for adding hurt to victims.⁵⁵

We have confidence in the expertise of the law enforcement personnel. We will continue to defer to their investigation and prosecution of Brandon Milburn.⁵⁶ The sentencing will likely involve sever penalties. As we did last year, we expect to provide additional training of our servant leaders to be alert to abuse and to help assure persons who may be victims that they should not feel personal shame for the actions of another.

It is our prayerful hope that through this process the victims, their families, and others affected by this tragedy will attain justice and healing. As for this ministry, our determination is to move forward sharing the good news of the powerful and healing name of Jesus Christ.
In Christ's Service

Elders, First Christian

Titus contacted the Prosecuting Attorney's office handling Brandon Milburn's case shortly after receiving this letter. His office said that no one from the church had contacted him about his instructions to the church and that he would be open to any assistance the church could provide.⁵⁷ I sent the 4th edition of "Is It Enough" to the Prosecuting Attorney's office immediately after discovering this information.⁵⁸ His office contacted me the following day (March 20) to follow-up on the eight alleged victims mentioned in the story—welcoming my own investigation!⁵⁹

The elders did not address the thesis of this story—knowledge of the 2012 alleged allegations by the senior and executive ministers—and now the elders together have chosen to remain silent as well.

The Message Letter

I then contacted the former FCCF executive minister after receiving this letter from the elders, asking for his help. I said,

“As you know, Brandon Milburn, who pleaded guilty of sodomy, is about to be sentenced

⁵⁴ I have asked the elders on five occasions to correct, altar, add, or deny any of the information in this document, yet they choose to remain silent. It is totally disingenuous to declare a number of inaccuracies exist and then in the same breath declare their refusal to address them. They may send any corrections to isitenough15@gmail.com.

⁵⁵ I did not request the elders to address the content of this document in social media; I requested they address them in only private correspondences, by email or in person, with me. The issue at hand is how the elders have dealt with the alleged victims.

⁵⁶ Their letter addressed the current two victims only for which Brandon has already pleaded guilty. This document addresses the elders' failure to address the alleged allegations of six other alleged victims. There is no legal investigation to defer to by the PA against Brandon for these six alleged allegations because the PA's office doesn't investigate alleged victims unless they come forward. But that in no way prevents or hinders the church from assisting in conducting its own investigation. The church's refusal to investigate these alleged allegations is the very reason for writing this very document!

⁵⁷ Facebook Message from Titus on March 19, 2015.

⁵⁸ March 19, 2015. Email sent to Michael Hayes, Prosecuting Attorney for St. Louis County.

⁵⁹ Voice mail from Michal Hayes, the PA of St. Louis County on March 20, 2015.

on March 30, 2015. I have been conducting an investigation into Brandon's behavior at the college, which also runs over to the church. I had been his academic adviser for 4.5 years, a mentor, and a member of the same church he attended, So I have put together a narrative, a time-line of his time from 2005 to 2015. Part of that time-line includes you. I am writing to you, first, to give you a heads-up on the narrative. I will be glad to send you the narrative, if you wish, through an email address, if you would like to send it to me. I do not know or am interested in the situation around your employment or the reasons for leaving the church. But since you are in the narrative, and out of respect for you, I wanted to let you know in advance about the events that led up to his guilty plea. Also, I wanted to give you a heads-up if there are any other investigations. I have been keeping a record since Feb of 2012 when I first became aware of credible allegations against Brandon. I have interviewed numerous former staff workers with Brandon, former students at the college, youth sponsors, and even the families of the victims. I have a vested interest in this situation. So, you can let me know. My cell is _____ or my email at _____ Thank you.”⁶⁰

The executive minister replied later that day: “Hello Doug, Thanks for reaching out to me. This is the first I've heard of this, so yes, I would ask that I be sent a copy of this document. My email address is: _____. Thank you.”⁶¹

I sent him the narrative, “Is It Enough?” on March 5, 2015. I sent him an update of the story on March 18th, asking him to make any changes or comments he believed would correct the story. I did not hear from him. Then after receiving the elders’ letter from FCCF, I sent him this message⁶²:

I need your help. I will be straight up with you. Here is the letter from the elders to me about the story, "Is It Enough?" I am going to ask you, for the sake of the other victims, come forward and testify to the conversation the parent had with you and Steve in February of 2012? Please consider it. I need your help. You were there. Don't let this remain silent. Thank you.

He responded that same day: Doug, I have been advised to not communicate about these accusations.⁶³

So, as of March 19, 2015, the situation stood as follows: Concerning the meeting in February of 2012 between Dawn Varvil, the senior minister and the former executive minister about the alleged sexual allegations towards six minors from FCCF, the senior minister is refusing to speak about the meeting, the former executive minister is refusing to speak about the meeting, and none of the current FCCF staff or five elders have ever contacted Dawn Varvil to verify her account of the meeting.

⁶⁰ March 5th, 9:43am

⁶¹ March 5th, 12:06pm

⁶² March 19, 2015 at 7:27 pm.

⁶³ Facebook Message March 19, 2015

The Open Letter

On Friday evening, March 20, 2015, Kari Benton, the wife of Titus, posted on Facebook an open letter to the senior minister, Steve Wingfield. It is reprinted below in its entirety⁶⁴:

Dear Steve,

Anyone who knows me well is aware that I hate conflict. I don't like to discuss difficult topics, and especially not publicly. Anyone reading this needs to know that I have written these thoughts down because I felt like I HAD to; because I felt truly convicted to do so. I also need you to know that my motivation in writing is not vindictive or mean-spirited. I have a twenty-year history with the Wingfield family and deeply care for each one of them. Charles sat in my living room when I was just a kid and explained the plan of salvation to my mom and I. Beth was my high school BASICS director. You conducted my uncle's funeral and visited me in the hospital after my son was born.

I am writing publicly to you, Steve, because I have some things that I must say to you and I feel that if I were to do so privately you would ignore or dismiss me, as you have done to others in the recent past. What I want to communicate most clearly is this:

You, Steve, are not fit to be lead pastor of the First Christian Church of Florissant and you need to turn in your resignation as soon as possible.

This has been my position for many years but I did not feel the need to speak about it publicly because it mostly affected Titus and me and other staff members. However, recent events have made me decide that I MUST speak up. I know that I am no longer a member at First Christian so you may be tempted to dismiss my words, therefore I'd like to make it clear: **Titus resigned from First Christian only because he could no longer work under your poor leadership.** If it were not for you, it is very likely we would still be serving at that church today. I care deeply about FCCF and feel an obligation to speak up for those who are unable to speak up for themselves.

Since Brandon Milburn was arrested in February 2014 I have waited for you, Steve, to take strong leadership in helping this faith community to heal from this traumatic reality. Granted, I do not have the knowledge of all that you have said or done in the last year regarding this situation, but I do know that it has not been enough.

Most disturbing is the fact that in 2012 you were made aware by a concerned adult that Brandon was having an inappropriate relationship with a teenage boy and this adult was very confident that Brandon was abusing this boy. Your response to this adult was basically - That's not true, you're crazy for even suggesting that (I'm paraphrasing here). **You failed in that moment.** Not only should you have believed this concerned adult, but you also should have gotten on the phone and reported these allegations to the authorities. You did neither.

⁶⁴ Facebook post by Kari Benton on March 20, 2015

After Brandon was arrested you failed again. The first phone call you should have made after learning of his arrest was to that concerned adult that had previously come to you with concerns of abuse. But you did not do that- and to this day you still have not reached out to that concerned adult or to that teenage boy. **You have failed both of them.**

What makes this even worse is that this is not the first time you have mishandled situations such as these. Many years ago another young man was found to have inappropriately touched a younger boy. These two situations are not identical but your responses are eerily similar. In the name of "protecting" this young man you managed to keep this situation from the public. However honorable you might have thought that was, the fact is a victim was silenced at your request. To me, this shows a clear pattern that when something of this nature comes to your attention your initial reaction is to keep it quiet and to do as little possible in order to preserve yours and/or the church's reputation. In considering these two situations, I conclude your actions have proven you to be untrustworthy when it comes to serious circumstances such as abuse. As a result, if another similar situation were to come to your attention in the future, I have absolutely ZERO confidence that you would handle it appropriately.

It is unacceptable for a lead pastor to be untrustworthy when it comes to handling serious situations such as abuse.

There are many other ways that you failed to be a suitable leader not only regarding Brandon's situation, but also at many other times throughout the years. You have lied to people about my husband and the reasons he resigned. You have used the pulpit and your sermons to passive aggressively chastise your staff for disagreeing with you. You have stubbornly resisted to listen to members of your congregation that had concerns regarding the turnover of staff members. For all these things I chose not to speak up, **but this time is different.** This time I am speaking up not for my husband's reputation, but for the victims and the young people who have been hurt and to whom you have failed to effectively minister, which is your job. I know that I have little to gain and much to lose by speaking up like this, but your lack of leadership in this is a much bigger deal than I think you realize. This is not something that can easily be forgotten in a few weeks or months. This is the culmination of a history of consistent leadership failures. For these reasons, the right thing for you to do is to resign. Will it be difficult? Yes. Will it be painful? Yes. Will the church struggle as a result? Yes. But you are simply not fit for this position- you never were and you still are not. If you truly love the church as much as you claim you will do what is right and step down.

Kari Benton

Five days⁶⁵ following the open letter, the senior minister of FCCF reported to a group of about 30 youth volunteers that he did not know of any allegations against Brandon before his arrest on

⁶⁵ March 25, 2015. The meeting was at the FCCF facility after a Wednesday evening service. Three individuals lead the meeting: The youth intern, the executive minister, and the senior minister.

February of 2014. When asked by a volunteer if a parent had reported to the senior minister any alleged allegations from 2012 (reported to him by Dawn Varvil), the senior minister said there were only “rumors” about the alleged allegations and that the church was not going to investigate the rumors, but rather the church, with the support of the five elders, was going to move ahead. They were not going to talk about Brandon anymore.⁶⁶

The Court Letter

In a few days, Brandon Milburn will appear in the St. Louis County courthouse in Clayton, Missouri, to receive his sentence for seven counts of sodomy against two minors from First Christian Church of Florissant. The judge, who will decide Brandon’s sentence, has asked anyone associated with this case to send him a letter as he decides the length of Brandon’s incarceration. It is with a heavy heart that I am mailing, *Is It Enough?* to the judge today.

When the sentencing comes down on March 30, 2015, the judicial system will have completed its role. This case will be over. The legal system will move on. But this story will not be over—it will continue.

The Deacon Letter

On March 25, I sent out the case study, *Is It Enough?* (5th edition) to nineteen of the deacons at FCCF. One of the deacons responded three days later by sending this letter by email to the elders on Saturday, March 28th. She sent a copy of the letter to me.⁶⁷

To the Elders:

I'm writing to express deep concern for recent serious and public accusations made against the FCCF leadership. I read the open letter Kari Benton posted on Facebook, and I read the case study on FCCF entitled, "Is it Enough?" by Titus Benton and Professor Doug Lay. I consider all three of these people to be sincere believers who care about honesty and integrity, so their claims disturb me.

There is a piece of the story missing, which is a full disclosure by the church leadership of the events described in these documents. I am a small cog in a huge financial wheel who helps pay salaries for church staff. As I prayerfully come to a decision on what to do with my support in the future, I carefully consider as much information as possible.

As a deacon and a church member, I respectfully request an opportunity to hear your missing account of this issue in an open, honest format before your membership body. I have already been asked about what's going on by some of the members to whom I minister in Celebrate Recovery. I would like them to receive answers to their questions in public on

⁶⁶ Personal interview with two college-age youth sponsors and volunteers on March 26, 2015.

⁶⁷ Facebook Message received on Saturday, March 28, 2015.

these damaging accusations that have been made publicly. Nothing but abject honesty and full disclosure will do.

I can support acknowledgement of the deficiency and solid evidence of positive actions to address the issue through amends to the body and training of staff and volunteers on the proper way to handle threats to those in the body.

If mismanagement and poor leadership comes out in the truth of these events, I can support dismissal or remedial actions taken against the individual(s) involved.

I have no desire to create a rift, nor do I have an agenda. I just want answers to my questions in a public setting where others can hear my questions and also hear your answers.

As a codependent personality who struggles with the effects of abusive relationships, I get the tendency to cope with negative news with silence, hoping the issue will go away. My personal experience shows me that trying to avoid pain by not removing the splinter only leads to festering and infection.

That is where FCCF is today.

It is leadership's role to clean out the infection through open, honest communication with the body of church members that will allow healing to begin. I look forward to participating in a full disclosure meeting of the body, at which your side of the story is told and your positive action plan for the future is revealed.

In His mighty hand, _____.

The Purpose 6

As I have interviewed people associated with this case study, they have asked me, “Why are you writing this story?”

I am not writing this story as one of the elders at the church; I am not writing this story as a law enforcement officer; I am not writing this story as a lawyer; I am not even writing this story as a reporter!

The Victims

I am writing this story for the two victims and any future victims.

These two victims needed protection, but they may feel the church failed them. They need a voice now, but they may feel they are being ignored. They will need patient and loving support and care—but they may believe the church will not provide it.

Their families, likewise, will need patient and loving support and care as they work through this with their children.

Other victims exist. Titus and I have communicated with another alleged victim, and we have been told of allegations of other possible alleged victims from FCCF—in addition to these two. The other alleged victims are terrified to come forward—they dislike themselves; they distrust the church; they disbelieve in God.

I empathize with the victims. At 10, I was a victim of abuse, multiple times, by a middle-aged married man, a neighbor across the street. At 18, I was a victim of a sexual assault by a college student, a well-known senior from my dorm. I did not report either incident. I regret not doing so. I kept silent for over 20 years—I will not keep silent now.

One former youth minister hoped that this document would “open communication and allow other victims a chance to heal, and the current victims a chance to feel loved by the church they trusted.”⁶⁸

I pray this story would help these two victims and their families; I pray this story would help any other victims to come forward—sooner than later—and experience the true restoration and forgiveness found only in Christ.

⁶⁸ Facebook Message March 17, 2015.

The Church

I am writing this story for the youth ministers, sponsors, parents, kids, staff, teachers, church members.

They are all victims, collateral victims, for they were betrayed, deceived, and fooled by Brandon's actions.

Many live with a deep-seated anger over the broken trust but may also live with a deep sadness to see such a talented and gifted young minister—with a productive future—spend that future in prison.

The church needs to process this story; lessons are waiting to be learned. Titus recently blogged about three things the church must learn: The church must get better at recognizing, preventing, and dealing with sexual abuse.⁶⁹ Powerful advice. I would add a fourth. The church must get better at pastoring the casualties of sexual abuse—the primary victims and the many collateral victims.

I pray this story would bring to light the darkness of sexual abuse, so we, the church, can bring to the victims, the families, and the church the light of the gospel of restoration.

The Elders

I am writing this story for the senior minister and the elders of FCCF, the overseers of the church.

As a former elder and pastor, I understand the role they play in the church. If I were an elder or staff member at FCCF, I would want to know about any and all allegations of sexual abuse. A youth sponsor did come forward three years ago.

The elders are the protectors of the church's most vulnerable treasure—our kids. The elders need to take responsibility for their handling of the situation—investigate all of the alleged allegations, examine the procedures and policies of the church, and take swift and corrective measures with any personnel found to be culpable. The elders cannot continue to be silent.

The college where I was assaulted was silent. Although they had received numerous allegations and complaints about the student who had sexually assaulted me, the college allowed—by their silence—this student to enter into full-time campus ministry and remain there for nearly 20 years. He worked among the very young people from whom he would solicit sex.

The FCCF leadership was informed about serious alleged allegations against Brandon two years before his arrest, yet he was allowed—by their silence—to continue to minister to the very same type of kids from whom he had abused five years earlier.

⁶⁹ "What I've Learned Since My Friend Got Arrested" <http://tituslive.com/2015/02/12/what-ive-learned-since-my-friend-got-arrested/>

The elders were mailed a copy of the first edition of this story on March 3, 2015—the five elders, the executive minister⁷⁰ and the senior minister.⁷¹ They were mailed a second document with additional information on March 6, 2015. They were mailed a document (Why I am Writing...) on March 9, 2015. On March 15, 2015, the elders were mailed a fourth document, a compilation of these three documents, and on March 23, 2015, the elders were sent this fifth edition—including the response of the elders. As the spiritual shepherds of FCCF, they were the first ones to read this story; they will not be, however, the last ones.

I pray this story would move the elders to “shepherd the flock...not domineering over those in their charge, but as examples to the flock”.⁷²

The Predators

I am writing this story for predators to warn them that the church is on high alert to the signs of a sexual predator.

The constant thread throughout this story has been that people saw “nothing obvious”. Brandon hid in plain sight. He fooled others; he fooled us; he fooled me.

Predators, like Brandon, are masters of deception—by building coalitions with those in authority to help them hide their behavior. If suspicions are suspected, they rally around their supporters to fight for them, as was the case at FCCF with the senior minister and the executive minister. If confronted with allegations of abuse, they deny them with a calm and reassuring demeanor, as was the case when I confronted Brandon about the alleged allegations of 2012. If they are confronted with suspicions, they quickly apologize, as was the case when Brandon was caught with a middle-school kid in his dorm room. They divert the attention off of themselves.

I pray this story would help to instruct not only churches and colleges but also the population at large by identifying the “signs” of abuse before the abuse happens—to help stop the predators before they start.

Brandon Milburn

I am writing this story for Brandon Milburn, guilty of seven counts of sodomy of two minors under the age of 12.

I first met Brandon when he came in and sat in my office at the college; he was an incoming freshman, and I was his academic advisor. And now, nearly 10 years later, he sits in a jail cell in St. Louis County; he is now a convicted sex offender, and I am his former advisor, professor, and mentor, wrestling with the events of the past ten years. Predators need justice; his justice will come

⁷⁰ He was hired, in February of 2015, as the executive minister and ordained on March 15, 2015 as the executive minister; he was previously the chairman of the elders.

⁷¹ He is also an elder.

⁷² I Peter 5:3.

in a few weeks as he awaits a sentence between 10 years to life.

But predators also need the gospel. During several visits with Brandon in jail this past year, I have wondered how he will adapt to life in prison. How will justice and mercy be carried out in his life? Will he repent? Will he seek forgiveness from the victims? Will he seek reconciliation with the church? Will he allow the Lord to turn this tragedy into something good?

I pray this story would help Brandon, and other predators behind bars, to receive and experience the gospel of Christ—the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Is It Enough? 7

Is it enough to deny the existence of other alleged victims? Is it enough to ignore the pain of the collateral victims? Is it enough to keep silent about the church's responsibility towards dealing with sexual abuse? Is it enough to remain ignorant to the signs of sexual predators? Is it enough to miss the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of this tragedy—thus turning evil into good?

It is not enough for me to close the book on this story—I will continue to turn on the light and turn the pages of this story. Should it not be enough for you too? ⁷³

⁷³ It is with the upmost care and prayer that we have researched the dates and places mentioned in this case study, to interview individuals related to its content, and to write with clarity and truthfulness, as we understand the events. We have not knowingly or willfully falsified or altered the facts to deceive or defame any individuals in the letter. We still continue to investigate, rework, revise, and update the information in this story. If anyone knows of any inaccuracies with the dates, places, or events, or knows of any necessary information that is absent or omitted, you may contact Douglas Lay at isitenough15@gmail.com. We will investigate all responses, and if any corrections, alterations, or admissions are found to be accurate, we will include the information in the next revised edition. As of this writing, the senior minister and all additional full-time staff members at FCCF, along with all of the five elders have yet to comment, edit, alter, add, or deny any information. Attempts continue to be made to acquire their perspectives contained in this case study. It is the objective of this case study to collect, analyze, and assimilate any and all facts and information pertaining to this story.

Sentencing 8

Justice took nearly 8 years. The sexual abuse began on June 1, 2007 and the sentencing ended on March 30, 2015 at around 12:45 p.m.—25 years for seven counts of sodomy.

Authors

Douglas Lay

I am a professor of English and TESOL at Saint Louis Christian College since 1999, a former pastor in Fenton, Mo, and a former missionary in Puerto Rico for nearly 14 years, having taught English for five years at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez.

I was one of Brandon's professors at SLCC and his only academic advisor from August of 2005 until May of 2011. I was also his mentor, spending time with him outside of the classroom eating lunch together, sharing life.

I am a member of First Christian Church of Florissant since 1999. I have taught high school Sunday school classes, volunteered at VBS, co-taught a college age Sunday school class with Titus, co-taught the college age Sunday school class with Joe Mueller, occasionally speak on Wednesday evenings, and currently co-teach an adult Sunday school class with my wife, a class previous taught by a former staff member, Steve Ross. I participated in a mission's trip to Joplin after the tornado, and, for a short time, was a member of the choir.

I am also a survivor of sexual abuse and sexual assault.

Titus Benton

I served at First Christian Church of Florissant first in part-time roles while a student at Saint Louis Christian College ('01-'03), as full-time intern in '03-'04, and in a full time pastoral role from Fall 2005 to June 2011. While there, I served alongside Brandon Milburn in our student ministry. Brandon was someone I gave a ton of responsibility to. We worked closely together in a variety of ways.

I never suspected any misconduct on his part, and no one ever approached me with allegations against him during my time on staff. Since learning that his crimes are not limited to the charges brought against him, I have done my best to create an atmosphere where additional victims would feel safe coming forward, including cooperating with the formation and sharing of this document.

