Sunday, January 15, 2017

Virginia Mennonite Conference
601 Parkwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22802

Dear Leaders of Virginia Mennonite Conference:

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, the One who came to us as Immanuel—God with us.

We are writing in regard to the investigation into the responses of Lindale Mennonite Church and Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) following the complaints that were made against Luke Hartman by Lauren Shifflett and the report from D. Stafford and Associates (DSA). We are sorry for the frustration, uncertainty and stress some of you have experienced due to multiple delays of the release of the investigative report. We have made mistakes walking this difficult path over the last year, and our efforts have been far from perfect, but we have been and continue to be committed to transparency, justice and not re-victimizing or causing further harm. As leaders of the denomination, we offer VMC what we have learned through this process and will make every effort to move forward with justice and grace as our guides, promoting healing and strengthening accountability at every level of Mennonite Church USA.

On May 18, 2016, we received a letter from conference minister Clyde Kratz with a formal request for Mennonite Church USA to take the lead and initiate an outside investigation into Lindale’s and VMC’s responses to complaints brought by Lauren Shifflett against Luke Hartman. We agreed and contracted with DSA to conduct an investigation for the following:

*Development of a public report that responds to the following questions:*

*To what extent, if at all, was the staff or board of Virginia Mennonite Conference or Lindale Mennonite Church responsible for malfeasance in the way they handled the allegations that were made against Luke Hartman?*

*How, if at all, might these two entities improve the way they handle allegations of sexual abuse in the future?*

*What recommendations would DSA make for best practices in managing allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior, or misconduct of a sexual nature, that could also be a criminal offense, particularly when that conduct involves high profile individuals who do not carry ministerial credentials?”*

The contract also stated that “DSA will provide the Mennonite Church USA with a written report in the form of a PDF document, which will allow the Organization to publish the final, original report.” We received a 28-page report from DSA on November 25, 2016, and shared it as a courtesy with officials from Lindale Mennonite Church and VMC. We also shared it with Luke, Lauren and the Benner family, so that they had time to read the report before it became public.

It was soon determined that the report contained a few factual errors that did not affect the findings and, additionally, evoked legal questions about some quotations attributed to individuals. Further, the report described details of the relationship between Luke and Lauren that were already available to the public in other places, seemed extraneous to the requested scope of the report and could be unnecessarily painful for victims of sexual abuse to read. We gathered all the feedback and questions we received from Lindale and VMC leaders and Lauren and her advocate, and submitted it for DSA’s consideration.

When we shared this feedback with DSA, they made it clear that their original report was not a public document. This set our efforts back because we had made a commitment to publish an unedited, public report. Following their withdrawal of the report, DSA worked to produce a concise, four-page executive summary of the 28-page report. We considered this summary unsatisfactory, because while it included DSA’s analysis of whether actions taken were legal or not, it did not speak to the ethical and moral concerns raised in the full, original report. Further, it was also labeled “Private and Confidential,” without permission to share it as a public document.

Throughout this process, we consulted with FaithTrust Institute for support and advice on how to proceed with transparency and integrity. DSA had not given permission to make either the original, 28-page report or the executive summary public. In the end, DSA agreed to produce a public report as we had originally requested.

We received the final, public report from DSA on January 13, and believe that it clearly communicates DSA’s findings and recommendations, and reflects the legal, moral and ethical concerns of the original 28-page report. VMC leadership received the DSA report the evening of Friday, January 13, and it was posted publicly on Saturday, January 14 on our website: mennoniteusa.org.

The DSA public report has not been edited, altered or redacted by Mennonite Church USA, or by Lindale or VMC, the two entities being investigated by the report. All concerned entities, including Lindale, VMC, Lauren and her family, Luke, the Anabaptist-Mennonite Chapter of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and Mennonite Church USA EB staff have access to the 28-page version of the original report, the four-page executive summary and the final, public version of the investigative report.

The information gathered and recommendations made by DSA are one component of the information we are considering as we move forward. This report is one tool that we can use to help us make appropriate recommendations that strengthen our commitments to accountability, justice and healing at every level of Mennonite Church USA. After having considered all of the information available through the report and in subsequent conversation with Lindale elders and VMC leaders, we make the following acknowledgements, findings and recommendations.

**Acknowledgments:**

1. Mennonite Church USA believes Shifflett’s story as told in her blog on “Our Stories Untold,” and we are sorry that she found harm and not healing in our community.
2. At the time of the events that became the subject of this complaint, neither Lindale nor VMC had a misconduct policy for non-credentialed or lay leadership.
3. Mennonite Church USA has no authority or power to impose any type of punitive measures or requirements on Luke Hartman.
4. Lindale did not receive adequate pastoral support from VMC or Mennonite Church USA during this process. We regret that a better way was not found for Lindale’s voice to be heard in all of this.
5. The Lindale congregation has demonstrated tremendous resiliency and faith throughout this process and a desire to stand on the side of truth and justice even when it is uncomfortable.

Additionally, we want to express our appreciation to Clyde for the ways he has stayed in communication with us throughout this process to assure that VMC leaders are following denominational protocols and procedures.

**Findings:**

1. Shifflett’s story was found credible and in line with other victims’ experiences in similar situations as confirmed by her own story, other documents and interviews.
2. Lindale as a community was responsive to Shifflett’s story and her request for support and anonymity.
3. Lindale’s intentions were to provide support and care for the victim (Shifflett) and provide support and accountability to the offender (Hartman).
4. Lindale’s associate pastor Dawn Monger provided appropriate pastoral care, within the limits of her circumstances, to Shifflett.
5. Lindale’s financial support for counseling for Shifflett was not only appropriate, but is to be commended.
6. Due to the long-term close relationship between senior pastor Duane Yoder and Hartman, Pastor Yoder could not adequately both provide pastoral care to Hartman and serve the best interest of the congregation at the same time.
7. Pastor Yoder did not disclose all the facts known by him about this case when reporting to the leadership at EMU.
8. When asked by Pastor Monger, Pastor Yoder was not truthful regarding what he had reported to the leadership at EMU.
9. Shifflett made a request that private emails between herself and Hartman be deleted, and Lindale’s ministerial leadership agreed to her request. However, Pastor Yoder kept emails of a sexual nature forwarded from Hartman that Yoder implied had been deleted.
10. On multiple occasions, the decisions, actions and inactions of Pastor Yoder resulted in protection of Hartman rather than support for Shifflett.
11. Much of the language in internal church documents of Lindale include language that could be perceived as “victim-blaming.”
12. Pastor Yoder did not advise or disclose the facts known to him about this case with the leadership of VMC, even though it involved an active, high-level lay leader within the community.
13. VMC’s policy stipulating that all communication to conference leadership must pass through the congregation’s lead pastor is problematic, and in this case left Pastor Monger unduly restricted in her access to support and her ability to report legitimate concerns.

**Recommendations for Lindale Mennonite Church:**

1. Immediately begin a review of personnel policies and procedures, ministerial misconduct policies and procedures, and employee code of conduct to determine if senior ministerial

staff engaged in ministerial misconduct, employment violations and/or ministerial boundaries violations per the congregation’s policies, procedures and code of conduct agreements. If so, act within the next 90 days to implement the appropriate resolutions and remedies per the violations.

1. Contract with FaithTrust Institute for the following recommendations. The work needed is long-term, at least a year:
	1. To review all personnel policies and procedures and ensure various mechanisms for reporting complaints and concerns.
	2. To review issues of possible boundary violations for all ministerial staff and establish clear understandings between staff and board about accountability for boundary violations.
	3. To set up a process and review issues of boundary violations between Pastor Yoder and others.
	4. To develop procedures and actions to take after the review is conducted and a process is put in place.
	5. To work with Lindale staff and elders as they establish steps to lead the congregation in responding in just and compassionate ways for the sake of the victim, the congregation and the offender.
	6. Explore recommendations from the DSA report, FaithTrust Institute, abuse survivors and others for community healing.

We will depend on, and strongly encourage you, VMC leaders, to work with Lindale on these recommendations in consultation with FaithTrust Institute.

**Recommendations for Virginia Mennonite Conference:**

1. To walk along with and continue to provide support for Lindale leaders and the congregation as they process the findings, supporting documentation, determinations and recommendations of the Mennonite Church USA EB staff representatives.
2. Consult with FaithTrust Institute to assist with the following:
	1. To immediately begin a review process to determine if boundaries were violated according to *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership*[[1]](#footnote-1) by ministerial staff at Lindale. If so, follow protocol for review of credentials.
	2. To immediately develop and implement policy and procedure so that communication and reporting of concerns and complaints to conference leadership can be achieved by associate ministerial staff without passing through a congregation’s lead pastor.
	3. To review current VMC policies for alignment with Mennonite Church USA’s official policies and procedures documents, *A Shared Understanding of Ministerial Leadership* and *Ministerial Misconduct Policy and Procedure*.
	4. To review and update current VMC processes for receiving formal and informal complaints.
	5. Within the next 12 months, develop and implement a ministerial misconduct policy applicable to lay leadership within the conference.
	6. Within the next 24 months, offer and require an ethics and boundary training for lay leadership in the conference.

Additionally, we encourage VMC to clarify the roles of the church district versus the area conference in dealing with disciplinary issues.

We are committed to continue to stand with you and to support you as you work with your own structures and staff, as well as Lindale Mennonite Church, to begin the process of strengthening accountability and promoting healing across VMC. Terry Shue, director of Leadership Development for Mennonite Church USA, will work with you as you work to implement the recommendations made by both the denomination and other independent consultants above.

We give thanks for the faith of VMC, and offer our prayers as you begin the work ahead.

Yours in Christ,

Ervin Stutzman
Iris de Leόn-Hartshorn
Terry Shue

1. Especially pages 60-65, which cover ministerial ethics with specific emphases on the use of power, confidentiality, truth-telling, and the relationship of the area conference to the pastor and congregation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)