

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We're blessed. First Christian Church of Florissant is an amazing multi-generational, multi-ethnic family. We joyfully celebrate a 57 year legacy of ministry built on honoring Jesus Christ through compassionately living in the world...

This is true. For fifty years, there were few better examples of Great Commission churches in the United States. So moving was this history that I wrote my masters thesis on the rich history. It is one worthy of great honor. I still have one of Charles Wingfield's ties in my office, a reminder of this legacy.

We have served thousands of families and been recognized nationally for the strength of our diversity. Like every family, our church family has moments when our strength is tested.

This is one of those moments. In January 2014 two former First Christian Church families were told for the first time by their now grown sons that they had been sexually abused in 2007 by Brandon Millburn...

Two questions: 1. How do the elders know those families were told in January? They have talked to one of the families sparingly and the other not at all. I know this because I have spoken with both the families. 2. The victims were not abused in 2007 alone, but from 2007-2009. To continue to cite this date inaccurately seems to victims to be a minimization of what occurred to them in order to save face.

...then a full time student at St. Louis Christian College and a part-time church employee. These families did the right thing, the difficult thing. They stood strong in their test...

They are strong, but I would not say they stood strong. They were crumpled to the floor in agony. They wept. They were broken. They hurt. And again, I'm not sure how the elders would know that they stood strong "in their test," because there was little to no communication between the families and the church.

...reported this horrible crime to the authorities and sought counseling. A year-long open investigation invited any other victims to come forward and led to a guilty plea and a sentence to 25 years in prison...

The investigation by law enforcement did not last a year. And there was no investigation by church leaders (unless a handful of announcements counts as an investigation). At first, there was a not-guilty plea and the defendant minimized his actions. At the last second, when facing trial, Brandon changed his plea to avoid a trial.

While this abuse did not occur in church facilities or at our programs, we hurt when others do...

There is no doubt in my mind church leaders hurt to learn of Brandon's betrayal of trust and predatory behavior. I believe that is true. However, this is not the abuse that Steve was confronted about or what the recent controversy is surrounding. For the better part of the last four months, private conversations with Steve and elders attempted to make this clear.

To clarify once again, he recent confrontation was regarding abuses IN ADDITION TO the abuse charges levied against Brandon, and warnings of that abuse that were shared with Steve in 2011 and 2012.

The actions of one had a ripple effect of hurt to many through his violation of trust. Because we are a place of healing, First Christian provides two professional counseling resources available for victims of Milburn's abuse.

There's a lot to be said here. First, many were indeed hurt by Brandon's violation of trust. But, again, that's now what the recent confrontation has been about. It has been about hurt caused by the elders' (including Steve) and the violation of the trust placed in them, beginning with (but not limited to) their inactivity when approached about additional abuse concerns shared with Steve in 2011 and again in 2012. This abuse was not related to the charges against Brandon, but was inflicted upon additional victims. There is no mention of this in this open letter, and that is deceitful. No one was ever claiming that Steve (or anyone, for that matter) knew about abuse in 2007-2009. However, most readers of this Open Letter surely read recent news stories of first-hand accounts from additional victims saying that they were abused by Brandon in 2011/2012. THESE are the abuses that Steve was alerted of and did not report.

Additionally, while First Christian did offer counseling, the elders started this document by granting that the known victims and their families were no longer involved at First Christian. So the counseling they reportedly "offered" was not known by those families, because those families were not in services to hear the announcement--the only place those services were spoken of.

Disturbing methods. Since the February 2015 sentencing...

Brandon Milburn's sentencing was in late March, not February.

First Christian Church has been harassed and slandered by false claims that church leaders knew of the sexual abuse and criminally failed to report it. This is simply not true...

Actually, it is true. In 2011 and again in 2012, two different individuals told Steve Wingfield of concerns regarding behaviors indicative of abuse. I am the only one to allege this was a crime, which I shared with Steve and the elders privately on one occasion. This was after hearing about the concerns first hand and doing my own investigation to ensure that they were true before confronting them. I came to the elders and Steve through a private letter that alerted them to that which I had been made aware. Even though I was the only one to allege that it is a crime, it is worth noting that failure to report suspected child abuse (not proven child abuse, but suspected) is a crime.

It is also only fair to admit that it was later included in the case study and received a much wider audience.

"Harassment" and "slander" are two legal terms used to describe a criminal offense that the cited behavior does not rise to the level of. The restraining order that asserted that these behaviors were present was ruled against in the court of law, so to still describe the behavior "against" the church as harassment and slander is legally untrue and as an adjective in a piece of communication like this is a poor choice as it does not represent the truth.

These unsubstantiated claims...

The claims were not unsubstantiated. They were verified by several people before I ever contacted church leadership.

...were repeatedly promoted in the unfiltered platform of social media...

Sort of like the elders open letter that I'm now commenting on.

...on fake Facebook accounts, in phone calls and emails sourced through the unauthorized use of church databases, in issuing demands for the resignation of leaders and seeking supporters who might disrupt worship services...

to this day, the elders have offered no evidence of harassing phone calls or e-mails, nor that there were those who had the goal of disrupting worship services.

...Critics do share a valuable role suggesting need for improvements. However, some opportunistically choose destructive methods...testing great cities, testing law enforcement, testing best of class organizations, schools, and even effective churches...

To assert that someone was being opportunistic infers that they are seeking selfish gain. Though church leaders have hinted at hidden agendas on the part of whistleblowers, they have never indicated what these agendas might be. As for the various institutions that have been tested, only First Christian has faced critique and ridicule. And outside of the crimes of Brandon Milburn (and the mishandling of concerns on the part of church leadership in the wake of his arrest), it is easy to argue that FCCF has not been "effective" in various ministry pursuits in recent years. In other words, the people watching all this and yelling "fire" are not the ones that lit the match. There are bigger problems at FCCF than Brandon Milburn.

A line must be drawn. These methods do not belong in our church family.

Patient leadership. As elders, we have worked in unity over the last months to protect and clear First Christians name legally and through law enforcement...

Understand this phrase "a line must be drawn." They are drawing it. If you do not agree with church leaders, you do not belong in "our church family."

It has long been assumed by many that protecting First Christian's name was the leadership's goal based on how these issues have been handled. While some churches would've preferred to seek the truth, minister to victims, and take substantive steps to correct mistakes and not just save face, their goal -- now stated clearly for all to see and understand -- was to clear their name and protect their reputation.

Based on the clear evidence, we've sought retractions, not financial penalties...

It's not "clear evidence" when none has been provided that slander and harassment occurred, and several lawyers have read the lawsuit filed against five defendants in Saint Louis County court -- four lawyers representing the defense and at least one additional lawyer giving advice. Each of them have been clear -- financial penalties of at least \$25,000 were being sought in the lawsuit against the defendants. To assert that retractions and not financial penalties were what was being sought is simply not true.

But you don't have to be a lawyer to conclude that financial penalties were being sought. In count 5 in the lawsuit, "Negligent Infliction of Emotional Distress" against all five defendants, the Plaintiff (that's Steve & First Christian) "demands judgement against Defendant as follows:

- a) for compensatory damages in excess of \$25,000**
- b) for punitive damages**

c) for their cost of suit, including reasonable attorney's fees

Then, on page 12 of the same lawsuit, Steve Wingfield signed his name in front of a notary public on the 16th day of April, "swearing that he read the foregoing petition" and understood was contained therein.

After pursuing options that enabled us to name accusers and present affidavits and evidence that could be substantiated in court...

The elders do not note here that it could NOT be substantiated in court...the restraining order that named the accusers and attached the affidavits and provided the evidence was denied by a court in Saint Louis County.

...the eldership decided to voluntarily drop civil actions and enlist assistance from two respected Christian mediators...

This is not true. My wife and I were in the meeting where the elders were ASKED to drop the lawsuit. They did not do so voluntarily. The "mediators" were arranged by a concerned third party...they did not come at the invitation of the elders. How is that the elders can now claim to have voluntarily dropped the lawsuit in order to instead enlist assistance from outside mediators when the mediators were brought in first (the meeting set up by a third party, not at the elder's invitation) and ended up being the ones who asked them to drop the suit?

...Our intent - to give our critics yet additional opportunities to reconcile. Regretfully, those seeking to blame us and incite outrage prefer to continue spreading wholly false accusations...

Following the dropping of the lawsuit, only my wife and I were reached out to for further dialogue. This dialogue happened on one occasion and did not include any talk of reconciliation, only a rehashing of past events and arguments as to why they had to be that way. In fact, after forty minutes of this banter, the "mediator" decided he'd heard enough and excused himself to go home. The phone call ended abruptly.

Additionally, as it has already been pointed out, the accusations were not "wholly false." In fact, in the same meeting where it was requested that the lawsuit be dropped, Steve Wingfield admitted that Dawn Varvil had shared with him in the 2012 meeting that Brandon had bought an iPhone for a young man, been seen spooning with him, and had a key to his apartment.

...**Standing strong.** Upon the counsel of our mediator, we are persuaded that the best course of action for the First Christian family NOW is to refocus our energies exclusively on moving forward with our ministry and mission.

This is true. The "mediators" did not actually mediate -- trying to bring two sides together. Rather, they advised church leaders to make a statement and move on. This statement is the statement following that counsel, and they sincerely have no intention of talking about this any more.

...With your support and encouragement, First Christian Church will only intensify our commitment to stand strong, becoming an even more compassionate community resource. We're thankful that this amazing family continues to grow in faith, welcoming first-time guests and each week celebrating new committed followers of Christ. We began June with more than 500 kids and volunteers in Vacation Bible School. Our *Celebrate Recovery* is an ongoing

ministry of support. While we will always have a tear in our eye for those wronged by heinous actions...

Since Brandon's arrest, no elder reportedly been seen with a tear in their eye for any victim. Only after a huge public outcry, several newspaper articles, and a drastic reduction in weekly attendance and giving did the church even arrange for counseling for victims -- and those details are yet to have been shared with a wider audience they are supposedly meant to serve.

...our focus is and will be resolutely on the greater things that bring us together... one faith, in one Lord, and one message of God's love and grace that can bring healing in any life.

Better not bitter. First Christian Church of Florissant is listening, learning and loving, determined to be better, not bitter...

In the often-scoffed at case study entitled "Is it Enough?" the authors provide more than a dozen suggestions at how First Christian could do better at recognizing, reporting, and handling sexual abuse within its family. As of the writing of this response, zero have been implemented.

...Our core values determine that we will go forward, empowered by God's grace to be a place where Christ comes first, where the lost are found, where the Word is heard, where care is shared, and where our world is changed. In this time of testing, First Christian is standing strong...

Given the turnover in staff, decline in attendance, public outrage, divided congregation, and reported spiritual and physical unhealth of the senior pastor in the face of conflict, it is difficult to believe this assertion.

We invite you to stand with us.

Every piece of evidence I've suggested in this response is verifiable by someone other than me. I don't ask you to stand with me, however. I ask you to look into it, find the truth, and stand with it.