Transcription of ministers' statements to Sandy Ridge Mennonite Church, Dec. 6, 2020

(Lyle Bontrager)

We would like to make a final address to you as a congregation concerning the situation with Brother Collier and Sister [redacted]. We just would like to, as a ministerial team, come to you this morning and share with you some of the things that have been on our hearts and on our conscience, perhaps, in the process of working through this thing. I think it's safe to say that it's impacted our church tremendously. Some of you, it's impacted more personally, and we acknowledge that.

But in this process of working through it, we as a team have come to understand that some of the things that we have done through this process, choices we've made, decisions we've made, words we've said, have caused hurt and disappointment in you. Some of those specific things that we're aware of, that in conversations with you, were things like a perception of a lack of proper and decisive action in the situation, maybe being too careful, which made it seem like we were trying to hide things or sweep them under the carpet, maybe playing favorites. Another thing was failing to be sensitive to some of you, maybe to all of you, especially the ones that were hurting deeply and directly affected by this. And maybe just a general lack of compassion and care. A lack of forgiveness, a lack of grace, specifically towards Collier, but also maybe in general. A lack of Christian love and gentleness, a tendency to be harsh. And then finally, a lack of communication, clearly communicating with you as a congregation through this process. And I'm sure there's more that we could probably add to this. Those were the ones that were clear to us as we reflected back in different conversations that we've had with you.

And we would just say as a team to you, as a church, to you specifically, if you felt those things, that we are sorry. We ask for your forgiveness, and if you could forgive us for those things, if you could walk with us in those things, we want to learn, we want to be teachable and to continue to know what it means to become more and more Godly in those areas. We would be grateful if you could find it in your hearts to extend grace and forgiveness towards us.

Some final comments about this. Back in the late summer, I forget exactly the timing, the lead pastor of Living Hope, where Brother Collier and Sister [redacted] are attending, contacted us as a team and was wanting to hear from us our perspective and where we were at with it. And as a result of that, we responded back to them with a letter, and that letter was a letter of release and blessing for Collier and [redacted]. We released their membership here, and talking about it this morning, we realized we didn't necessarily bring that to the congregation. And as we discussed it, I think the reason that we did not feel like that was important was it wasn't necessarily a church letter. They wanted communication from the leadership team on how we were feeling about them coming to church. And so we simply wrote them a letter of release and blessing, committing them to their care and wishing them the Lord's blessing as they continue to seek membership there. They may already be members, I'm not sure, but they were seeking

membership there. So we released them and gave our blessing and wish the Lord's blessing on them.

So with that thing, we are inviting you as a congregation to join us as the leaders here at Sandy Ridge, to put every effort into laying down our feelings and our opinions, our grievances and our hurts, that have come out of this thing and to move forward in a positive vision for the future of Sandy Ridge and what Christ can do in us and through us again in the community and for his kingdom's sake.

We would ask that you would refrain from bringing up the situation in conversations in a negative way. We're not saying that you can't have conversation at all. In fact, we would invite you to come to us, if there are things that you still feel towards us or have towards us as ministers, we are certainly open to that. We're not shutting the door to any conversation, but we're asking you as a congregation to join us in laying this aside. It's in the past, and we move forward from here and look to the future. As we endeavor to practice Christian love towards Collier and [redacted] and also towards each other. We become more and more Christ-like. So we invite you to do that.

I would just like to say that I would like to read Philippians chapter three, verses 13 and 14. And then I'll jump over to chapter four and read verses seven and eight just as a closure to this. And then after I'm done reading this, I'm going to invite the other ministers to stand and just give their comments. But if you would listen to this, and I know this is Paul, perhaps in a sort of a different context, and yet the words speak directly to what we're talking about this morning. So Philippians three, verses 13 through 14. He says, “I pressed toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” I'm sorry, 13: “Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” And we could go on from there, but those two verses were running through my mind this week as I was thinking about preparing to share this with you this morning.

If we can together forget about what's in the past, perhaps we can't altogether forget, but we can move on. And if our focus is Christ, then I think that's where the power lies. If our focus is Christ, together collectively with each other's goodwill and good intent in mind, and Christ is our focus, we can move forward. That's our vision, I believe we can do that. Chapter four, verses seven and eight: “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

I'm going to allow John to be the first. And then we'll go to Vancen and Ken and then Kendall.

(John Miller)

It's what Lyle said. I guess the last time that Collier and [redacted] and my wife and I were together and talked about this issue, we spoke to each other words of peace. We want to be at peace. And I said that. And he said that we want to be at peace from here on out. And so we want to be able to put the negative things behind us. Move forward. I desire that for the congregation. I acknowledge my failure in the statement Lyle made and say, look, could we, should we, those things have been just ever present with us, how we should have done things. Where we have failed you, where we have hurt you, not met expectations, we truly want that to be cleared.

And I open myself up, too. I think, Lyle, what we want is not to have this as a congregational issue, but certainly are open to hearing from you individually. If there are things that you hold against me personally, I really would like to have you come and try to work through that. That's my desire. I want to bless Tony, Eric and their families as well. This was a painful thing for them. I know it was, and how I contributed to that, I'm really sorry for that.

(Vancen Miller)

Thank you, Lyle, for how you shared. I think you expressed very well what was on my heart this morning, too. The message we heard this morning was talking about loyalty to your leaders, and I feel the weight of needing to earn that. I don't take that for granted from any of you, I appreciate each of you here. I feel the responsibility is if you want to trust your leaders, then we need to live in a way that's trustworthy.

And so I too, would like to just acknowledge the fact, and even beyond the issue with Collier, I know there's other hurts here in this church. Numerous things happened. I know we cause offense by the way, sometimes we say things, and maybe there's times we don't say things, don't reach out, those kinds of things. I just want to acknowledge my part in that as well. And if you feel hurt, and I've contributed to it, I would want you to be able to speak to me. I commit myself to be approachable, in no way want to shut anyone off and say we can't talk about this anymore. But I am committed to a way forward, a vision for the church, that we can have each other's back and feel like we trust each other. And I want to contribute to a culture of trust here at church. So just to open myself up, and I would ask for your forgiveness for contributing to some of the pain that we've caused here. God bless all of you.

(Ken Miller)

I agree with what has been said. I know there's a saying that says for a piece of china that is stronger for the mending after it's broken, and we are broken creatures, all of us. So we need God to mend us at times. And so I feel like anything that I would have contributed towards that brokenness, I would desire your forgiveness. And I would welcome anyone to speak to us as leaders or myself personally, on ways that we can encourage the church to grow. The thoughts that were going through my mind as I was thinking about sharing this morning was, God in Jeremiah 29, when God was speaking to the children of Israel, they were in captivity with Babylon, and we often take this individually to ourselves. He says, I know my thoughts towards

you, thoughts of peace and goodness, that he has an expected end for us. But he was talking to a congregation there as well. I think for us at Sandy Ridge here, God has a vision much greater than we can imagine for us as a congregation, to move forward into the years to come, outreaches and ministry, and growth within ourselves, to become more and more like Him. And I think that's my desire for the church as well.

(Kendell Burkholder)

I am in agreement with what Lyle shared this morning. I realize that I caused hurts to some of you through this also, and I just personally want to apologize for that. Whether it be things I said, or maybe didn't say, or didn't reach out to you in some way. I just want to commit myself to moving forward as a leader in this. If there is something that I have offended you in, I'm open to, I want to talk to you. I would like for you to speak to me. I would like to make that right. I'm just committing myself, I guess, to moving past this situation. And I'm not willing to speak in a negative manner in any way in this situation. And I don't want to allow Satan any foothold to continue to, I don't know how to say it, but to continue stirring this pot. I'm going to take my ladle out. May we as a church, move forward, and may we have a vision to serve the Lord.

(Lyle Bontrager)

I don't think I was clear, but I too want to just say, personally to you, that I am aware that I have probably said things and conducted myself in a way that was offensive to you during this time. I am open to having conversations about those things, but I'm also here to say that I am sorry for those things. And if you can forgive me, I would be grateful. Again, our vision, I hope you heard what we're saying, is goodness. We look ahead, and sometimes we can't move ahead until we face some of these things that sort of stand in the way. And we want the church to prosper. We don't want to be a hindrance to the church. And that's why we come to you this morning with what we did.