

A statement by missionaries and interns formerly associated with Vision Baptist Missions regarding the allegations made against Austin Gardner.

6 August 2021

This statement is intended to be read by pastors and leaders of churches in the MCC and those churches that support VBM missionaries. It is not our desire to release this information at this time for the general public as the name of Christ and his message are at stake.

On 3 August 2021, a video featuring Becky Earnhart was released to the public that details the alleged abuse that she suffered at the hands of Austin Gardner. In response to this, we, a group of missionaries, former missionaries, students, and lay people who were closely associated with and/or mentored by Austin Gardner, issue this statement concerning the allegations made.

While none of us have observed or experienced sexual abuse from Austin Gardner, we have observed and called out a repeated pattern of abuse spanning decades that involves pastors, missionaries, students, and church members. The nature of and the length to which abuse took place is different for each of us, but the commonalities are shared among all. These abuses include but are not limited to: spiritual abuse, mental abuse, bullying, manipulation, pastoral neglect, fits of anger, slander, abuse of power, breach of confidentiality, and the mishandling of sexual trauma.

It is not our desire to destroy a man or a ministry. We do not support any of the vindictive attacks that are currently taking place on social media against the Gardner family or Austin Gardner himself. What we have done, however, is to biblically address these issues over the course of several years with Austin Gardner directly as well as with those responsible to hold him accountable. None of our internal efforts have been at all helpful. There has been a loyalty to one man placed above a loyalty to truth, Christ, and his gospel.

We believe that Jesus and the gospel are the ultimate source of forgiveness, healing, and hope for all people. We believe that restoration for both victims and the accused is not only possible, but is in fact our primary goal. However, this healing and restorative process is stunted by the refusal of Austin Gardner, and those who continue to enable and/or hide his behavior, to convincingly repent of the sin that has left deep wounds in the lives of many.

Our desire is for biblically required action to be taken. This will require an independent and honest investigation of Austin Gardner and those in leadership at Vision Baptist Church and Vision Baptist Missions who knew about both Mrs. Earnhart's accusations since 2004 as well as the ongoing abuse we have shared about only briefly in this letter. For clarification, some of the signers of this document knew about the accusation made by Becky in 2004. We were only told about a very small part concerning over-spanking and our source was only Austin Gardner.

We believe that our sovereign God is both merciful and just, and that ultimately He will bring all things to His will, in His timing, and for His glory.

Signed,

Aaron Bashore

Jillian Bashore

Gretchen Masters

Tyler Masters

Heather Nicol (Marks)

Chad Phillips

Bethlehem de los Reyes

Edward de los Reyes

Matt Smith

Melissa Snyder

Deborah Tabardau (Velasquez)

Jesse Turpin

David Velasquez

Faviana Velasquez

Chris Waye

Sherry Waye

Joshua Wormley

Clarification:

After receiving several responses to our initial statement, we believe that it would be helpful to clarify the following segment:

“Our desire is for biblically required action to be taken. This will require an independent and honest investigation of Austin Gardner and those in leadership at Vision Baptist Church and Vision Baptist Missions who knew about both Mrs. Earnhart's accusations since 2004 as well as the ongoing abuse we have shared about only briefly in this letter.”

It is important to make it clear that the signers of the previous document were not and are not accusing the current leadership of Vision Baptist Church of negligence or a cover up in the 2004 accusations of sexual abuse made by Becky Earnhart. We do not believe

that Pastor Trent Cornwell is in any way responsible for the actions of those involved during that time. We are confident that any investigation would confirm that. We apologize for any misunderstanding due to the wording of the letter.

With that clarification in mind, our desire is that the leadership would take seriously other forms of abuse that have been brought to their attention. We are calling not only for an investigation of the 2004 allegations, but also for those of individuals who suffered spiritual and emotional abuse while subjected to the toxic culture created by the ministry of Austin Gardner. Our prayer is that the truth would be exposed and that healing and restoration would ensue.