

# THE JUSTICE REPORT

## Allegations of Misconduct at Aquila Villa

A report on allegations of misconduct at a ministry for young women in Ronks, Pennsylvania

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## Aquila Villa

In the heart of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, there is a home for young women known to the community as Aquila Villa. Newly named Stories Made New, Aquila Villa was started by Melvin (Mel) and Barbara (Barb) Esh. While Aquila Villa is optimistically known as a peaceful home for struggling young women, there have been numerous accounts of misconduct, leaving many in the community to wonder what is really happening inside the picturesque farmhouse.

This report seeks to provide a clear and objective understanding of what has taken place at Aquila Villa under the guidance of Melvin and Barbie Esh. It includes the testimony of many former residents and former matrons at Aquila Villa. As most in the community know the ministry as Aquila Villa, this report will refer to it as such, with the understanding that it also applies to Stories Made New.



## Introduction

Aquila Villa is a residential home for young women from the Anabaptist community who need counseling and mentorship. According to [storiesmadenew.org](http://storiesmadenew.org), the ministry's vision is "To bring single women who are struggling into fulfillment and purpose in Jesus Christ." The newsletters found on the website include pictures of the residents and matrons participating in farm life, games, baking, household duties, and study.

Aquila Villa was started by Mel and Barbie Esh in the summer of 2017. They have since served as its administrators until they entered a sabbatical in 2023. The couple resides in Ronks, PA, on the same grounds as the ministry. While they have no children, they have mentored many young people. Mel was an Elder at Charity Christian Fellowship of Leola, Pennsylvania, after being ordained in April 2005 until 2023, when he reportedly stepped down amid turmoil related to allegations of misconduct at Aquila Villa. There is a second ministry home recently opened under the same leadership, known as Happy Haven, which is located on an adjacent property. Mel and Barbie own and live on the property where Aquila Villa and Happy Haven are located. According to one source, they received a combined salary of \$4,800 per month, as well as \$5,000 in monthly rent for Aquila Villa and \$3,000 in rental fees for Happy Haven. However, this has been reduced while they are on sabbatical.

Aquila Villa operates under a board of five directors, with Leroy Smucker of the Old Order Amish as Chairman. Other directors include Nathaniel Gingrich and Cleason Sensenig, both of Mid-Atlantic Fellowship; Ken Shirk of Charity Christian Fellowship; and Mark King of Pequea Amish Mennonite Church.

Aquila Villa was initially registered with the IRS under Charity Christian Fellowship's 501(c)(3) status. However, not all the directors on the board are affiliated with Charity Christian Fellowship (CCF). The ministry was operated by Mel and Barbie Esh and not strictly overseen by CCF. In an early newsletter (Spring 2018), this statement could be found, "Aquila Villa is an auxiliary of Charity Christian Fellowship, has an Advisory Board, and is operating under a Board of Directors." However, later newsletters omitted anything about CCF. It is unclear how much involvement CCF had in the running of the ministry, however, numerous matrons and residents were attendees of CCF. Since Aquila Villa is no longer associated with CCF, they now hold their own nonprofit status, and the ministry has been renamed Stories Made New.

In the last few years, many in the community have expressed growing concern about the effectiveness and safety of Aquila Villa. Many residents report leaving the ministry feeling more confused about life and with more emotional wounds to heal than when they first arrived. This report describes the first-hand accounts of life at Aquila Villa with a specific focus on the relationships that the matrons and residents had with Mel and Barbie Esh.

# Allegations of Misconduct

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There have been countless allegations of misconduct at Aquila Villa. This report includes the accounts and opinions of former matrons, former residents, and some accounts from others in the community. These women shared their stories anonymously to avoid any potential repercussions or embarrassment. Among the most severe allegations brought against Mel and Barbie Esh are improper counseling methods, inappropriate relationships between Mel and several women, as well as control, manipulation, favoritism, unhealthy relationships, and dishonesty.

## Unhealthy Relationships and Favoritism

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Several former residents and matrons described a pattern of unhealthy relationships at Aquila Villa. These women recounted stories of some of the women being treated “like daughters” by Mel and Barbie while others were treated with indifference. This favoritism created many offenses and much confusion, particularly between the women who were on staff with Aquila Villa.

One former matron described the favoritism she experienced. “All of the other staff girls that I was there with [...], they took in as daughters, but they didn't do that for me, which was very confusing and very painful, because I didn't have a great relationship with my parents. And so, I didn't understand why they would take in these other three girls and do all these fun and special things with them. But they didn't do that for me. And so even though, yes, they were very free in their affirmations, there was still such a spirit of favoritism and comparison in the home that made it very confusing.” When asked what kind of special things Mel and Barbie did with the other women, she recalled that sometimes Mel would go out for coffee alone with them and that Mel and Barbie would take at least one of the other staff members on vacation with them. She went on to say that now, she is grateful she wasn't one of the “girls they considered daughters”, however in the moment, it felt quite painful and confusing to experience.

**“I didn't understand why they would take in these other three girls and do all these fun and special things with them. But they didn't do that for me. And so even though, yes, they were very free in their affirmations, there was still such a spirit of favoritism and comparison in the home that made it very confusing.”**

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This was a common theme among the women who lived at Aquila Villa. Many of them spoke of how confused they felt about Mel and Barbie's favoritism. Most of them felt they might be more accepted if they performed better. The couple allegedly repeatedly promised to be “like parents” to a young woman, creating expectations that they would show the same affection as they were showing to others. Despite their promises, they would spend most of their free time with just one of the women for several months while pushing off meetings, assistance, and counseling to the others who were awaiting their guidance.

One former matron recalled that Mel denied her request for a ride to the airport while also requiring her to give another staff member a ride to the airport. On the way home from a turbulent week with family, the matron requested a day off from her duties. Mel reportedly denied her request and informed her that the other staff member needed some time off after some time with her family, so he and Barbie would be taking the other staff member on vacation because they viewed her as a daughter. This same matron was repeatedly assured that she, too, would be treated as a daughter, only to encounter confusing rejection instead. This kind of story was repeated often, with one or two women seemingly receiving much favor while the others felt cast aside and unheard.

There was even perceived favoritism in how some of the women were treated when they were ill. They felt that the perceived “favorite” at the time would receive rest and attention when she was feeling sick, while the other women were expected to work through whatever illness they were experiencing. One woman reported that she had Lyme Disease and was not given the care and rest she desperately needed at the time. Another reported that while in extreme pain from a cyst, she was required to continue with the activities of the day. However, it was observed that one of the women received significant attention and time to recuperate when she was ill.

One matron reported that she wanted to go swimming with another staff member, but Mel wanted to teach that woman to swim, so Mel and Barbie were going to take her swimming instead. Mel then allegedly sent a message to the first woman saying that Barbie had reminded him that they had taken the woman swimming a week prior. He allegedly apologized for being selfish over her. This left the matron wondering why Mel was selfish over another woman.

A former resident reports, “I think he [Mel] definitely had favorites. I was completely pushed to the back burner and not a priority, because my family was poor, and had no money to offer him after he took my life savings for two months’ worth of rent.”

It is important to note that although this favoritism caused so much pain and rejection at the time, each of the women who raised these complaints expressed that they now understand that whoever they perceived to be a “favorite,” in fact, had a very painful, controlled, and dysfunctional relationship with Mel and Barbie. All the women who raised concerns over favoritism have expressed relief that they did not get closer to Mel, especially as it was an increasingly violating experience the more acceptance they received from him. Another important note is that while young women can struggle with jealousy at times, Mel and Barbie reportedly openly classified some women as “daughters” and spoke highly of those relationships to all the women in the home while simultaneously disregarding and neglecting other relationships despite many promises to change sometime in the future.



## Inappropriate Relationships Involving Mel

In addition to unhealthy favoritism that involved both Mel and Barbie, several individuals separately described interactions with Mel that made them uncomfortable. Multiple women reported that Mel gave them extended hugs that made them uncomfortable. One matron recalled that Mel took her out for coffee on multiple occasions and held and caressed her hands for a long time during those outings. He also reportedly requested for one of the ladies to massage his feet. Other alleged behaviors from Mel that made the matrons and residents uncomfortable was his habit of looking deep into their eyes, commenting on their bodily appearance, and sending emotionally intimate text messages.

Serious allegations were raised about Mel's behavior during his one-on-one interactions with the women at Aquila Villa. Multiple women reported that he would often have counseling sessions with them alone in a room with the door closed, making them feel quite uncomfortable. He would often sit close beside them on the couch and sometimes attempt to hold their hands. One matron said that when Mel took her out for coffee, he brought her a blanket and covered both of them from the waist down, leaving her feeling confused. One person reported that Mel gave long hugs, sometimes lasting more than ten minutes.

Some women reported that Mel often inappropriately touched himself with his hands in the pockets of his pants during one-on-one counseling sessions. Regarding this allegation, a male source reports that he frequently saw Mel doing that. He comments that he is confident that it was not for pleasure and that he just had a bad habit of scratching himself. When he spoke to Mel about it, Mel committed to working on this habit. However, this behavior caused the young women in private meetings with him to feel fearful and confused.

Mel was reported to engage in emotional intimacy that bordered on emotional affairs with some of the women who lived at Aquila Villa while claiming that he was merely acting as a father toward them. He allegedly frequently commented about the women's physical appearance, often mentioning that they were beautiful. One woman recalled him calling her a "beautiful handmaiden of the Lord" on multiple occasions. Most of the women mentioned that Mel would engage in deep intimate eye contact with them. One of the matrons recalls a food fight in the kitchen between Mel and another woman that

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**"I never had a relationship with my dad. And so, I always wanted a relationship with a dad or a father figure or whatever. But I personally didn't know what that was supposed to look like either. And so the things he was doing and stuff, it was kind of like 'Oh! This is supposed to be like my dad.' And now, [I understand], not even a dad is supposed to do that to his daughter... Just like sit at a coffee shop and hold the girls hand... He would like rub your hands all over."**

**"He wanted to be emotionally attached to me too and make me attached to him like a father. He even would say things of that nature on a constant basis. . . But it was awful. He didn't even know how to treat a daughter, and he never even had a daughter himself. He loved to control. Him claiming I was like his daughter and treating me so awful broke me to pieces."**

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To read more direct quotes from sources, see page 6.

ended in him pushing her up against the door and putting icing on her face. He was also reported to have spent a long time alone with one of the women in her living quarters on at least one evening. A couple of women talked about how they had left and were drawn back by Mel's intense emotional pursuit even though they felt afraid and uncomfortable about returning. For some of the women, he allegedly sent them messages almost every night, sometimes including red hearts, red roses, and the "heart eyes" emoticon. One woman reported receiving nighttime messages often that said, "Love you so much."

According to members of Charity Christian Fellowship, Mel sat beside a couple of women in church every Sunday, even insisting that one woman sit beside him every time they attended church.

When confronted by people about his favoritism and emotional exploitation, Mel frequently denied any such impropriety. However, he reportedly acknowledged parts of their concerns as valid on a few occasions. He allegedly told one former matron that he does not believe he has inappropriate soul ties with all of them and that he only had soul ties with one of the women. Another matron recalls Mel admitting to favoring and being selfish over another staff member.

## **“ Direct Quotes from Former Matrons and Residents ”**

**“He would give me extended side hugs, and very long handshakes and eye contact, which made me feel uncomfortable.”**

**“He would use buttery words and praise me and tell me like I was like a daughter to him, and he was very pleased with how submissive I was, even though he was making it hard for me and he knew he was making it hard for me. He literally said those things with his own words.”**

**“Mel told me the only way he would be a mentor and authority in my courtship is if I lived in his home with him so he could be connected better with me and have a better grasp over my life. So, I was basically forced to live there, even though I begged my counselor at Door of Hope to not put me back with Mel Esh.”**

**“It broke my heart. It was like he was hugging me and stabbing me in the side at the same time.”**

**“Mel very often would have his hands in his pockets or would be scratching at himself or moving something around. I just figured he was probably nervous.”**

**“He had favorites, and he was very emotionally attached to [redacted] and [redacted] spending a lot of time with them sometimes even at bedtime. He would go around the house checking all the thermostats and sometimes he would talk to [redacted] for a long time. She was a staff girl, and her quarters were right on the other side of my [bedroom]. So, I could tell he was up there for a long time.”**

**“Mel had a way of sweet-talking me into being okay every time I was beginning to build up pressure. And then he would ever so slyly turn on me and turn the whole picture around.”**

## Direct Quotes from Former Matrons and Residents Cont'd

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“Well, he’d take my hand for a terribly long time while looking really deep into my eyes, like I felt forever. That felt icky.”

“I was at a place where I didn’t know what it meant for a man to respectfully give me a hug without just trying to soothe over things. And I also didn’t know what it meant or what it looked like when a man would do something to satisfy his own desires. But looking back now, the motive behind it was weird, and it wasn’t because he loved me.”

“Mel was very lavish with his affirmations and with the way that he would affirm me, he would say things like ‘we love you’. And I knew that he was referring to himself.. He would say I’m such a beautiful handmaiden of the Lord and he just knew how to, I guess, affirm in ways that really like drew my emotions and make me feel good.”

“He [Emanuel Esh] would talk about a lot of the ways that Mel would treat us girls was like he was courting us, in a sense, like he was treating us like his girlfriends and the ways that he would do that was like just, you know, telling us he loves us, like telling us we’re beautiful handmaidens of the Lord, telling us how amazing we were doing, you know, even dreaming about my wedding sometimes.”

“When I left, I told someone, ‘I feel like I’m breaking up a dating relationship.’ Literally. I said it’s like the same feeling that people describe when they break up a dating relationship.”

“There were definitely times that he would give long handshakes and look deep in my eyes, you know, and tell me he loves me basically. I mean, he would say, ‘We love you.’ But I knew he meant ‘I love you’... And so the long handshakes and looking deeply in my eyes with almost puppy dog eyes, that’s the farthest he went for me. He never gave me a hug. “

“Another thing that was a huge struggle for me, is that often, in conversations or when Mel was in deep thought, he would touch himself in a way that would not look very appropriate. I could often not look at him when we were talking, especially in his office because of this. I didn’t understand it all back then, but I felt weird, very weird about it.”

“He would occasionally insist that I shake his hand. Sometimes I would but other times I wouldn’t as I didn’t think it was healthy. I put boundaries in place so I wouldn’t allow too much physical contact.”

“He teased me a lot.”

“It was by far not the worst experience I’ve ever had, and sometimes, it’s hard to validate it simply because it wasn’t as bad as I’ve already experienced in the past.”

“He didn’t want me to take care of me. He wanted me to use me to make his world go round, and when I didn’t do so hot at doing that, I was despised.”

## Control, Manipulation, Secrecy, and Deception

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In addition to inappropriate relationships, Mel and Barbie were reported to have engaged in control and manipulation tactics that caused deep confusion and disillusionment among the matrons and residents of Aquila Villa. Multiple women reported that there was a culture of secrecy and extreme control over relationships and conversations. They also reported manipulative behaviors from both Mel and Barbie.

The residents and staff at Aquila Villa were required to adhere to a strict set of rules. Some of these rules were listed on the intake paperwork given to each resident. The rules listed include basic housekeeping rules such as “Please keep shoes downstairs” and “Do not move furniture.” However, some former residents had complaints about other rules, such as being limited to 15-minute showers. Another rule that was difficult for some was the following: “Weekly phone calls: Your choice, two 15 minute calls to 2 different people or one half hour call to 1 person.”

Although it was not mentioned in the official paperwork, some of the residents reported that Mel or someone else would always be with them to supervise phone calls. This made them feel isolated and unable to have any honest contact with the world outside of Aquila Villa. Some other rules that residents reported having were not being allowed to go on a walk or upstairs alone, not being allowed to move their suitcases alone, and not being allowed to open the exterior door or go onto the porch without permission.

In addition to the rules recorded on the “Please DO and DON’T List,” as it was called, many residents and staff reported that there were rigid rules surrounding relationships and conversations both within and without Aquila Villa. Although reports varied on the specific details of the communication rules, there were consistent allegations that the residents were prohibited from discussing their personal lives with each other or anyone outside of Aquila Villa. They were each required to have support people listed on their application. However, many of them believed they were not allowed to discuss anything related to their experiences within Aquila Villa or what they were going through during their stay, even with their support people. There were also reports that some residents were restricted from talking with the matrons for more than five minutes and to only talk about trivial matters. One resident reports that she was instructed not to discuss anything that happened at Aquila Villa with anyone except for her pastor, even after she left the facility. This control around communications effectively meant that Mel and Barbie were the only people with whom some residents were permitted to communicate freely. This created a significant dependency on Mel and Barbie and isolated the residents from anyone they could confide in when they felt unsafe at Aquila Villa.

The matrons also reported strict control surrounding their communications among themselves and with others. One matron reported being explicitly instructed never to share any details about her experiences as a matron at Aquila Villa with anyone. Without Mel and Barbie’s support or the support of anyone outside of Aquila Villa, she often felt overwhelmed with questions about how to handle the intense difficulties of caring for the residents and felt isolated and unable to seek help. She says, “The girls were not allowed to talk to each other, and even us matrons were not allowed to talk to each other about things that went on or how we were doing.”

Several sources described a culture of control and manipulation, where anger and manipulation were often directed at the matrons, and discipline was enforced on residents who did not comply with the rules. One matron described it in her own words, “So, usually we’d get to a really intense spot in our relationship (her and Mel), and he’d just take me out for coffee, and this is where the whole narcissistic spirit comes in. He’d be like ‘Oh, let me take you out for coffee,’ and then we would sit there. And then he would hold my hand. And he would look at me and [say], ‘You know if you don’t do so and so, and if you would have to leave our home, that would be so sad. It would be so hard on us.’” She said, “I can’t explain it, but he had a way of sweet-talking me into things and bringing me to the point of feeling completely guilty and bad about myself... And then he would ever so slyly turn on me and turn the whole picture around.” One matron also reported that Barbie would get very angry and sometimes slam the door in her face. She also reported that if she did not do as she was told, she would often be forced to confess and apologize to the residents. She recalls being forced to apologize to them after she tried to advocate for proper treatment and multiple times for crying in front of them or expressing her opinions.

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**“I saw how he [Mel] would get upset and angry and also very, very harsh with how he treated others when they didn’t just submit and follow whatever he was requiring of them. And so, I became this people pleaser who always just did everything that Mel and Barbie wanted me to do.”**

Another matron described the type of discipline she was required to enforce on the residents. “If they would not heed to the correction that I would give them, then I was supposed to send them to the prayer room for at least half an hour and just have them pray and process things with God and see if they came to a place of repentance in that half hour. So, they were basically alone... that’s where they were supposed to be for the next half hour. And if they didn’t come to a place of repentance with that, then I needed to give them either a portion of Scripture or a song to write out. I needed to find something that would kind of go with the situation that I was dealing with, and then if that didn’t work out, they were supposed to either stay in their room or the prayer room until we could have a meeting with them with Mel involved in the office. Then Mel would get involved with the situation, and if that didn’t go well, then we would give them a warning of dismissal.”

A former resident describes a different experience in the prayer room. “They would put me in the prayer room—a very tight room, muggy, hot, no airflow—for hours on end as a discipline. If it was discipline or any kind of punishment, he [Mel] would be alone with the girl. He would come back every half hour and ask a lot of questions.” She also explained that often her discipline was for trivial issues. For example, one time she was disciplined for not drinking enough water throughout the day.

One former resident also described the lack of privacy in the residents’ bedrooms. She states, “The other thing was the girls’ dorms. They took the doors off and put see-through curtains on the dorms. I would turn my light off so no one would see me changing. Mel would be walking through our dorm rooms when the staff was off on Sunday. I went back to the board and filed a complaint there and with Happy Haven. They have it the same way. Every single girl who went through here was hurt by that. It was light-colored curtains like white-yellow where you could see through them. My door was right



when you walked into the hall. If the hallway door wasn't closed, my curtain opened in the center, and that was my biggest fear to make sure that it was closed. That's what I feel was inappropriate for any girl. It breaks their privacy." When asked about this allegation, a former matron explained that the reason for the curtains was to ensure that if a resident became suicidal and locked the door, staff would be able to reach her. However, she also mentioned that, to her understanding, Mel was only allowed in the dorms for building maintenance and under no other circumstances. She also recalled that Mel could stand at the end of the hall looking into the dorm area, which may have felt uncomfortable for the residents. Another resident said that when the doors were removed, the matrons could come in at any time, and although the matrons sometimes knocked before entering, it gave her nightmares that she could not have a door she could close.

Yet another allegation that was brought by multiple women is that Mel and Barbie very often perpetuated lies, half-truths, and broken promises, using secrecy and manipulation to cover them up. One matron reports that Mel gave her an awkward hug twice and told her multiple times that he did not hug any other of the staff or residents. She later discovered that was untrue as he gave hugs to multiple other women. She was reportedly bound by a demand for secrecy, like the others at Aquila Villa, so she remained unaware of his dishonesty until she left the home and could communicate freely with others. She also states that Mel and Barbie repeatedly made promises to her that they failed to keep. Another similar allegation comes from a former resident. She reported that Mel and Barbie made many promises to her that they did not keep causing her much distress. She felt that they were dishonest with her in several areas, including when they falsely claimed to have reported a man who sexually assaulted her and her minor siblings to the authorities. This allegation could not be confirmed or disproved.

## Direct Quotes from Former Matrons and Residents II

**"We only had fifteen minutes to shower, and then, we couldn't come out of our dorms without permission. Even to go from the project room to the bathroom, we had to ask them."**

**"The girls dorms, they took the doors off and put see-through curtains on the dorms. I would turn my light off so no one would see me when I was changing. Mel would be walking through our dorm rooms. My curtain opened in the center, and that was my biggest fear to make sure that it was closed. That's what I feel was inappropriate for any girl. It breaks their privacy."**

**"He wanted to be a father figure in my life. He wanted to be in the place of my father. He claimed that he was God's authority over my life. I was to obey him and honor him just as a father and that would be the only way God would bless me."**

**"Just the way that us as Matrons were required to treat the girls, I'm seeing now was very wrong, the ways that we would not allow them to even whisper to each other. There were all these rules in place that we, as matrons, needed to make sure that the girls followed. It was a very strict, tight road to walk."**

**"I was so fearful to make anybody upset. I still viewed life through a victim's lens, and I felt powerless to help myself, and still was putting all the responsibility on myself for the other people's happiness. I feel angry sometimes that they stole such a precious time of my life and made it so awful."**

**"The matrons were not allowed to show any emotion or cry in front of us, or they got in trouble."**

**Direct Quotes from Former Matrons and Residents II cont'd**

**“So much secrecy. We were not allowed to talk about any stories from our past. It was quite awkward at the table, but usually, one or two jolly matrons would keep the chatter going.”**

**“The hardest part for me was having my clothes gone through upon arrival and every clothing item touched, not being able to make my own decisions, treated like a child.”**

**“My relationship was very difficult with them. They attempted to take the place of my parents and I was not comfortable with that.”**

**“I also was often very tired. I’ve had trouble with sleeping for a long, long time. But they were very harsh about it and accused me every time they saw me fighting to stay awake. I’d get in trouble. Some days were plain misery. I’d only get extra rest in the afternoon or during quiet time if they thought it was okay. I never had much say in it at all.”**

**“One of the biggest ways Mels used to control us was that we were not even allowed to open the door and go outside on our own unless we had permission. Stupid little choices look absolutely huge because of being stripped of so much choice. As you can see, our schedule was extremely rigid and controlled in almost every way.”**

**“And just how trapped I felt that we couldn’t even go outside or anything by ourselves. And yes, it was that bad; we couldn’t even go outside, not even on the porch, without consent from a matron first.”**

**“One thing that was extremely hard is that it felt like us girls never really had any space, even in our own rooms, as the walls don’t go all the way up to the ceiling. So even in there, we couldn’t even really cry or anything without the other resident girl hearing, and we weren’t allowed to let the other resident girls know anything about our personal lives.”**

**“We were constantly watched by matrons no matter where we went. For one, it was so we didn’t tell other people about trauma that happened in our life. And for two, it also was a protection for Aquila Villa and Mel and Barbie... We weren’t allowed to talk to other people and tell it was hard at Aquila Villa. Sometimes I would try to vaguely share with [a family member] about some of these different things, but I was not allowed to talk about things that happened in the home, and so I would vaguely talk about them. And then I would always say, ‘I just really see I need to die to myself still.’ Also, cause Mel would sit in on every phone call, I did not have the freedom to really tell them about things that hurt and stuff.”**

**“Everything was kept very secretive from us resident girls. Even when we were told we were gonna leave, we weren’t allowed to tell anyone until Mel would make the announcement.”**

**“A few times she, [Barbie], got pretty upset at me, and she would slam the door in my face.”**

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## A Matron's Story

The alleged control by Mel and Barbie did not end at Aquila Villa. One matron reports being pressured to move in with and care for Barbie's elderly parents. Her story below is compiled from her own words.

"The majority of the pain that I experienced was when I left Aquila Villa, and I was, in a sense, required to go take care of her [Barbie's] parents. The pressure that I felt in doing that was just like it felt like I couldn't say no. So, I was at Aquila Villa for two-and-a-half years, and when the two-and-a-half years came up, I was going to move on. However, Barbie's parents were at a place where they needed somebody there to take care of them basically 24/7, and the girl who was there before me, which was [REDACTED], she was there after she left as a matron, and she was at the place where she was just completely burned out. She was so low and so needing to get out of there, and so I was like her lifesaver and Barbie's lifesaver. Barbie did not feel like she could handle taking care of her parents by herself. And so, she was desperately needing someone to take [REDACTED] place. And so even though I didn't really have peace about it, and I didn't really want to go, I agreed to it because of just the intense pressure that I felt. [The previous caregiver] shared some things with me about what it was like to take care of their parents and it concerned me, so I brought it to Mel and Barbie and just shared with them, 'You know, this is what [she] is saying about what it's like to take care of your parents. This doesn't feel good to me.' And yet they said, '[She's] burnt out, and you're not. And so you'll be able to handle things much better than [she] was able to, and it'll be a much more restful place for you than it is here at Aquila Villa.' And so they promised me that it would be a restful place and that things would be much better for me or I would be able to handle things much better than what [the previous caregiver] could because I'm at a much better place than where she was at. And so they really did not validate what [the previous caregiver] was saying as being accurate. And so, I went directly after Aquila Villa. I quickly discovered that what [the previous caregiver] was saying was actually true, that Barbie's parents are very difficult to take care of, and that this would not be a restful place for me.

"And yet, I was not allowed to talk to anybody about it. Barbie did not want people to find out how difficult her parents were. And she just felt like it would be dishonoring. And so, she didn't want me to talk to anybody about just the anger and the frustration and just the spirit of control and manipulation there was. She didn't want anybody to know about that. And so I wasn't allowed to talk to anybody about it. Her parents would get angry and frustrated with each other a lot, and also, her dad was very, very unstable emotionally and would be very suicidal. And so, I was always required to keep him as happy as possible so that he doesn't go into this downward spiral of depression and suicide. With his emotional instability, he would threaten to kill himself sometimes. There were times when he would walk around without pants. And sometimes, he would just walk off, and we wouldn't know where he's at. And then I would have to go look for him. And then Barbie would get all upset and angry about it. There was so much family drama, and I was always caught in the middle of things and was not allowed to talk to anybody about it.

"I moved into the basement there in the summer of 2021, and then in February of 2022, her mom passed away of stroke. And so in my mind, I'm thinking I can finally leave, because I was so done, and I was so ready to get out. And yet whenever I would bring it up to Mel and Barbie about how I wanted to leave they did not want to hear. And Barbie especially did not want to hear it.

"Whenever I brought it up, how I don't like the situation that I'm just there by myself, they would [say], 'But, what if we would just bring in another girl to live with you so that you're not here by yourself?' And so, they asked multiple other girls if they could come move in with me. Nobody wanted to come live with me. I felt so stuck. And I felt so alone there because I hardly had any time off, and I was working basically 24/7. I did have one day a week off where I had off until 3:00 in the afternoon. I also had three evenings away a week; however, they wanted me to do some specific things for those evenings. That was basically my only time off. I was stuck there by myself with just him for seven months until I finally left. During that time period, I got so low and to the point where I just wanted to die.

"Whenever I would bring it up, Barbie especially did not want to hear about me leaving because she knew how unstable her dad was and she was afraid that if I would leave after he just lost his wife, it would be enough for him to just kill himself. And so I was, in a sense, there to keep him alive. And it was just a very isolating, lonely experience. And even to maybe just kind of give you a picture of how isolated I felt there: Barbie would say things

like she hoped her dad would pass away before I left just because it felt too big to her to think of not having anybody there. She would make me promise to never tell anybody. I just told her later then that I cannot keep those promises. And I'm sorry for making those promises to never tell anybody because it was more than what I could handle.

"After Barb's Mom passed away, my dad had some concerns about me just being there by myself, and rightfully so. But then Mel went and talked to him about it and [said], 'We're taking care of her. She's doing fine. Don't worry about her.' That was not the case at all. I was not being taken care of. My dad didn't show any concern after that because Mel just basically told him to keep his hands off of the situation. They were looking at finding another girl to move in with me, but nobody wanted to, so Barb ended up coming over during the night sometimes just so that I'm not by myself. This was their plan of taking care of me, so Dad and Mom didn't have to worry.

**A third party independently raised concerns that a young woman was being required to live with Barbie's father alone following his wife's passing. They reported that Mel suggested a solution when he was challenged about the situation. According to the source, his proposed solution was for Barbie to spend nights at her parents' place while he stayed alone at Aquila Villa with the residents. This solution left Mel alone at Aquila Villa with the residents raising concerns about impropriety. At least one board member rejected this idea, and the source believed the subject was dropped.**

"They were only paying me \$1200 a month before taxes came off for being their CNA basically working day and night shifts. I should have been getting paid several times that amount. They were even just taking advantage of me financially. I was basically a live-in CNA working day and night shifts. There were times that I was up almost all night. It felt like whenever I would actually share with them how I was doing; they just didn't want to hear it. They would try to use Scripture to manipulate me to stay longer, and it just was a very isolating situation.

"On Christmas Eve, I wanted to go home and be with my family because they were together for Christmas Eve. And yet, they didn't allow me to go because the rest of the family wanted to be with their own families. And so, I was the one who was supposed to be there with her parents on Christmas Eve because none of the other siblings wanted to be there. And so then I wasn't allowed to go spend time with my family.

"It seems like there have been a lot of unhealthy emotional attachments between Mel and us girls. And as I looked into that, I realized that there were some unhealthy ways that I was attached to him as well. Maybe not quite in the same way as some of the other girls were, but there were a few people who asked, 'So why didn't you just leave?' Or, 'What kept you there as long as you were, especially after her mom passed away?' And I didn't really know how to answer that for a while.

"I realized that there were some unhealthy soul ties that I had with Mel that, in a sense, bound me to just what he wanted. Mel knew how to draw us emotionally. Mel would treat us girls like he was courting us in a sense, like he was treating us like his girlfriends. And the ways that he would do that was telling us he loves us, telling us we're beautiful handmaidens of the Lord, telling us how amazing we were doing, even dreaming about my wedding sometimes. In a way, I never got that kind of affirmation from my own dad. And so, I just soaked it up from him, and then it turned into a lot of manipulation and control. And because he hooked us emotionally, he could in a sense, just guide us to do or almost manipulate us to do what he wanted us to do. So, I had a meeting with Mel and Barbie back in February or March, and Emanuel was there as well. Emanuel is the one who has been advocating for us quite a bit. And in the meeting, they did realize that what was going on at Barbie's parents was wrong. However, with what went on at Aquila Villa, and some of the things I shared with them about that and the soul tie I had with Mel, Mel did not own up to that. He agreed to having a soul tie with one of the girls who were like daughters to them, but he didn't feel in his heart that was happening with anybody else. And he felt like any of us girls who took his affirmations in a wrong way was our fault. He felt like if we weren't mature enough to handle his affirmations without getting too emotionally attached, it was basically our fault. That just really sent me for a loop. I was shocked to hear that because it just showed me how much he's still not seeing things. And so I told Mel about how concerned I am about them opening the ministry before there is a time of proving and some true serious repentance. I mentioned how I have very strong cautions and hesitations about them opening the ministry back up again this fall."

## Direct Quotes from Former Matrons and Residents III

**“Counseling time was uncomfortable, and I learned to sit at the opposite end of the table close to the door so I could exit if I needed to. For me, it was not safe, and I didn’t share information. He would occasionally insist that I shake his hand. Sometimes, I would, but other times, I wouldn’t as I didn’t think it was healthy. I put boundaries in place so I wouldn’t allow too much physical contact.”**

**“We were trained and controlled as matrons to not listen to the girls but to shove stuff down their throats until they didn’t feel the way they thought and until they bent for us. The girls pretty much had no opportunity to even begin processing. And if they did begin to process, it was just like we had to tell them not to feel the way they did, and they needed to leave the past behind and not even be triggered. I could beat myself up for this... I did it to girls. I thought it was right because Mel and Barbie said it was how girls overcome their past.”**

**“I didn’t even want to go there anymore because it didn’t really help. And he just wanted to put a bunch of rules on me, how I was or wasn’t supposed to dress or what I wasn’t allowed to do. He didn’t really care about me. It was just all about the outside and making him happy.”**

## Inappropriate Counseling Methods

Among the many complaints of impropriety, there were multiple reports of ineffective and even harmful and inappropriate counseling methods at Aquila Villa. Almost every source reported one-on-one counseling with Mel, causing the women to feel uncomfortable or, at worst, unsafe and violated. They reported that Mel would not maintain appropriate physical boundaries during counseling. Several women reported that Mel repeatedly touched himself inappropriately during counseling.

Other concerns included the lack of training among staff members about how to appropriately address trauma and behavioral issues. Every source that was interviewed reported that Mel and Barbie did not have the necessary training to appropriately counsel women. Women reported that Mel and Barbie both did not sufficiently address past traumas, often instructing them not to mention it more than once. Several women also claimed that they left Aquila Villa feeling completely unequipped for “the real world.” Lastly, there were severe confidentiality issues with the women having their photos taken while at Aquila Villa to be shared in a Newsletter, causing potential shame and embarrassment.

According to multiple sources, Mel and Barbie counseled the women at Aquila Villa, with Mel as the primary counselor. Several women reported having many counseling sessions with Mel alone, while one woman reported that she usually had counseling alone with Barbie and that a matron was typically present when Mel counseled her. They mentioned that it was always behind a closed door. Mel would allegedly often sit right beside the woman being counseled on the couch. Sometimes, he would reportedly hold her hand or offer to do so. One woman said that he never held her hand because she would not let him. Another reported that he never attempted to hold hers. Yet another said that he would force her to shake his hand, but she often refused. Because most (if not all) of the women who resided at Aquila Villa had undergone some kind of trauma, having a man in a room alone with them was quite triggering and painful. One woman mentioned she always positioned herself close to the door just in case she would have to escape the room. While this report cannot speak to Mel’s intentions, his close physical proximity to the women, even holding their hands at times, caused another



layer of trauma to the women who looked to him for help.

Another significantly painful aspect of having Mel alone in counseling sessions was the fact that some of the women needed to heal from past sexual violence. Without another woman in the room during their counseling, some of the women felt unsafe to do so. This was exacerbated by the fact that Mel was not appropriately trained in the kind of counseling that was necessary to effectively help survivors of sexual trauma.

Of significant concern to numerous people was the fact that Mel and Barbie, as well as the staff members, did not have appropriate training for administering a residential home or for counseling. Women reported that when they disclosed trauma connected to sexual assault or other abuse in their past, they were instructed to pray about it and forgive and leave it in the past. If they continued to struggle, they were allegedly told that they needed to simply let it go and that it was dealt with already through praying one time. One woman said that Mel would put his hands on her and feel the demons coming out of her.

The matrons reported that they did not receive the necessary training to equip them to carry out their duties at Aquila Villa. They often felt helpless and unsure of how to handle the situations that arose from the trauma and mental health challenges the residents faced. They reportedly received little help from Mel or Barbie about these issues except for instructions to discipline those who were not “obedient.”

One matron reported that there was a woman who came to Aquila Villa with severe psychosis. This resident needed much more assistance than Aquila Villa could offer, and it allegedly became a safety issue. The matron reached out to Mel and reminded him that if the staff members could not handle a resident, that resident was to be dismissed from the program. Mel allegedly insisted that she should stay. The matron reports that the resident left after eighteen months in worse condition than she came.

Several women have expressed profound pain and disappointment because when they left Aquila Villa, they

## Positive Experience

**Not all of the feedback from former residents was negative. One former resident stated the following:**

**“Honestly, had I not been at Aquila Villa, as hard as it was, I wouldn't be at where I am at right now. Mel and Barbie were tremendous tools in helping me fight for life. Aquila Villa was a step in my journey to healing and freedom. And I still consider Mel and Barbie quite close friends. I know their hearts intended it all for good. And I realize we all make mistakes. I hope we can all forgive even though it may be harder to forget. One thing I would highly recommend should this ministry continue though is that the administration be professionally trained counselors and therapists. This would make such a big difference. I know that after Aquila Villa I came back home and sometime later started seeing a trained Christian therapist. And that really made the biggest difference for me. I assume to believe that had Mel and Barbie been trained to be in the position they were in, things would have looked a lot different. Mel and Barbie are really the sweetest people. But I believe working with depression and more requires knowledge of what is actually going on in the body and the brain. And how to handle it correctly. My trained therapist knew after only like two or three sessions exactly where I was at and what I needed. And that made all the difference. When someone is so hurt and depressed and anxious that they can barely speak a word anymore then something is awfully wrong and requires immediate attention.”**



had even more trauma to overcome and found themselves under-equipped for life outside of Aquila Villa. One woman said, “I came away from Aquila Villa with the mindset that if I didn’t feel hurt or sad or anything like that and I just died to myself, would have my quiet time every morning, read lots of spiritual books and journal lots that I would be a good Christian. That worked at Aquila Villa, but not in the real world.” She also reported that she did not know how to get a job or find an apartment when it came time for her to leave. When she asked Mel for assistance, he denied her request.

One final breach of ethics and confidentiality that was of some concern was the fact that photos of the residents were published in the Aquila Villa newsletters. This potentially causes embarrassment and shame as well as a sense of being on display to the world as a “struggling woman.” The permanency of the Newsletter does not allow the women who move on from Aquila Villa to withdraw their photo from the public. Another potentially unethical practice was brought forward by one of the residents who was called on to write a short entry for the Newsletter. She said that she felt forced to write a positive piece about her time at Aquila Villa so that she could graduate from the program. She felt she was forced to lie about her time there so that she could obtain her freedom to leave. This is also a violating and unethical practice.

### **Direct Quotes from Former Matrons and Residents III cont’d**

**“Toward the end, when I was getting ready to leave, I was like, I don't know how to rent a house. I don't know any of this. How am I supposed to do this? And he's like, ‘Well, you're going to have to go find it yourself.’”**

**“The next few months were a disaster. I was supposed to be mentoring a girl who was dealing with a lot of psychosis... She started doing and saying really weird things....I didn’t know what to do anymore. Night after night, I went to bed shaking and trembling. And I told Mel again, I can’t do it anymore, but he wouldn’t hear of it in any way. She ended up being there for a year and six months altogether and left in worse condition than when she came. The thing is, Aquila Villa was in no way set up for that.”**

**“During counseling sessions, Mel would read scripture after scripture to me about what it’s like to live the Christian life, taking out the bad fruit, having an attitude like the Beatitudes, dying to self, and so forth. About 90% of the time, that’s what the counseling sessions consisted of: reading scripture and telling me how I needed to be spiritual. The thing is, I was trying, but I was never good enough.”**

**“I had one one-on-one session with Mel more than I didn’t, and I was extremely uncomfortable. But again, I was not able to have a voice and speak out about how I was feeling.”**

**“Counseling was done in such a way that felt controlled and manipulated. Also, some of it was based on my past experience with my parents, and when things got tough, there were topics that I didn’t want to talk about. I would just exit the room. For me, it was a trigger of my past. I feel like the counseling session should not be one-on-one and definitely not a male involved unless the wife is included.”**

**”**

# Expert Opinion

*by Kate Kleinsasser, B.A. in Psychology/Crisis Counseling*

"It is unhelpful (at the least) to label anyone as a counselor unless they have undertaken the training and education deserving of that role. Although one may operate in much of a counseling description in guidance, advice, and listening, it can be confusing and harmful to take on a role that is ill-defined and lacking proper expectations. That said, anyone in a helping role that is working with individuals with a history of trauma should at minimum, be aware of attachment patterns, signs, and symptoms of specific traumas, and some of the normal coping mechanisms generally employed. This plays into the ethical considerations that should be discussed in the development of healthy counseling facilities. When a counselor or staff member does not understand the impact of trauma on the whole person, they are at risk of further exploiting the vulnerable by even unintentionally attaching themselves in unhealthy and harmful ways to the traumatized.

Trauma affects the whole person; body, soul, and spirit. When we are only addressing the spiritual needs of a person, such as saying, "Pray and move on," we are further enhancing the fragmentation that occurred in their traumatic experience instead of giving them personhood back by caring for their body and emotions as well as their spirit.

There are four main attachment styles; secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. Many survivors of trauma have developed anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment to cope with the unsafe relationships in their experience. They have often not learned healthy and secure attachment in their biological families. Because of this, they are vulnerable to attaching themselves in unhealthy ways to counselors, and it is the responsibility of those in the helping professions to be aware of proper boundaries that will not further exploit them when they are vulnerable.

A young woman may crave physical touch that she never received from her biological parents, but a male counselor should be aware that his touch could cause her to attach deeply and harmfully to him and evoke a deeply sexual and emotional response. This same dynamic is common when a male counselor enters into the intricate and personal details of a woman's story alone. Although the male may be pure in motive, he can often cause significant harm by stepping in too close and inviting an intimate emotional attachment that causes unnecessary confusion and struggle for the counselee. It is the responsibility of the counselor to be aware of these attachments and to establish the necessary preventative boundaries. Many times... a male "counselor" breaches healthy boundaries and evokes unhealthy attachment styles in the counselee. When the woman/girl honestly expresses her attachment the fault most often comes back to her instead of the counselor as she is the one that needs help in many people's understanding.

In order to avoid unhealthy attachment, one must understand what healthy and secure attachment looks like and live in the reality of safe relationships. Counselors should be in securely attached relationships of trust and be working in a restorative team of trained professionals and laypersons to avoid being the only emotional security of the counselee.

Healing involves attention and care for the whole person. When one's body, soul, and spirit are intricately cared for, personhood and dignity is given back to the suffering. It is of utmost importance that we respect this process with intentional confidentiality. The goal is to untangle the confusing web of their traumatic experience in a safe and confidential space and coach them into a future full of hope and an identity beyond their suffering in a restorative community. This can only be done well when survivors are not constantly reminded of their past identity through a breach of their privacy as photos, newsletters, and prayer requests are shared with the public. When excerpts of their stories and testimonies are freely disclosed to the public, survivors will feel discriminated against for the growth of the organization instead of safely coached into a healthy community that accepts them as friends and family in Christ."

## Community Response

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The alleged impropriety at Aquila Villa gradually came to light within the community as a few people began to notice concerning things about the ministry in 2019-2020. When the first allegations were brought forward, Mel Esh was still an Elder at Charity Christian Fellowship. Emanuel and MaryAnn Esh, also of CCF, first began to hear accounts from some of the former matrons of Aquila Villa. MaryAnn's gentle and compassionate nature made her exactly the kind of safe person that these women needed to begin untangling their stories of pain and confusion. As she shared these things with her husband, Emanuel, he advocated for the women and joined her in offering support and guidance. As Emanuel is an advisor to the ministry of CCF, he reports that he brought their concerns to the leadership team at CCF and began to advocate for the women involved.

According to multiple sources, the ministry team at Charity Christian Fellowship was slow to recognize the severity of the harm being done at Aquila Villa. However, once they understood the concerns, they withdrew their support for Mel and Barbie's involvement in ministry to young women.

A few sources said that the leaders at CCF first became aware of the allegations in 2020. Reportedly, the ministry team at CCF was not initially supportive of those bringing the allegations against Mel and Barbie. One former resident recalls confiding in a pastor at CCF about what she was facing. He allegedly responded by telling her that she was "just an oversensitive girl." However, Emanuel and MaryAnn Esh remained deeply concerned about what they were hearing and sensing. They advocated for the women and advised the leadership of CCF to take the allegations seriously.

Charity Christian Fellowship held a member meeting on June 19, 2023, to discuss the allegations against Mel and Barbie. While such concerns were typically addressed at "Brothers Meetings" (for men only), this meeting was also open to women. Anyone who had concerns was invited to share them with the church. Mel and Barbie attended, and Mel gave a short confession. One attendee noted that it was brief and failed to address the more profound misconduct allegations. However, she deeply appreciated the leadership of CCF for opening this meeting up to the women instead of discussing it only among the men. Sometime following the member's meeting, Mel and Barbie began a one-year sabbatical from Aquila Villa, and Mel stepped down as an elder of CCF. Some sources report that Mel's fellow leaders at CCF required him to step down. However, one source says they waited for him to do so voluntarily.

On April 10, 2024, there was another member meeting at Charity Christian Fellowship to address further concerns about Mel and Barbie. The CCF leadership team released a statement to the church at this time. In the statement, they thoroughly voiced their support for the women who came forward about their mistreatment at Aquila Villa. The statement also states that they recognized a "major failure of oversight in the way Aquila Villa was formed and operated." They summarized the allegations against Mel and Barbie as "emotional abuse and control." There was no reference to any of the inappropriate physical encounters with Mel that several women have reported. However, the statement said they had shared a more comprehensive disclosure of the allegations with Mel and the Aquila Villa Board. The statement also stated that Mel and Barbie had chosen to move to another church. Finally, the statement ended with a pledge to learn what it means to care for the vulnerable and to "dismantle the thinking patterns and beliefs that allow these abuses to occur." (To view the whole statement, visit [www.justicecommission.org](http://www.justicecommission.org))

When asked why Charity Christian Fellowship took so long to take a firm stance in this case, Emanuel Esh, Advisor, explained that the ministry is on a learning curve. He reports that they are being proactive in learning about abuse and working to create policies to address it. Emanuel also reported that any further responsibility for Mel and Barbie and the ministry at Aquila Villa has been released to their new church (Crossway) and the Board of Directors.

As Emanuel and MaryAnn Esh became aware of potential misconduct at Aquila Villa, Daniel Leid and his wife, Lydiann, also began to be concerned. Daniel Leid was a Board Member of Aquila Villa for 3 ½ years. The Leids are also attendees of Charity Christian Fellowship. They report that they observed concerning behaviors at church, such as Mel always sitting beside one or two of the Aquila Villa staff or residents in church. They also noted that the matrons of Aquila Villa were required to monitor all of the residents' conversations with others.

Daniel Leid, as part of the board, felt concerned with what he calls "an invisible wall" between the board and what took place at the residential facility. He reports that the board was set up mostly for logistics, such as finances and planning, and short ministry updates by Mel and Barbie.

Daniel reported raising concerns at a board meeting about the matrons at Aquila Villa working an excessive number of hours each week. He allegedly told them, "The recipe we have for matrons creates burnout." He reports that Mel's response to this concern was that "they [the matrons] came with pre-existing conditions."

Possibly the most serious concern that Daniel Leid experienced during his time on the board was when he discovered that Barbie was often uninvolved in life at Aquila Villa. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Barbie allegedly quarantined at her parents' home for two weeks, leaving Mel to live at Aquila Villa alone. Daniel was concerned that the board was not made aware of this until after it happened. Later, Daniel heard from Mel that Barbie was also spending nights with her elderly father, so a former matron was not alone with Barbie's dad during the night. This left Mel to be alone on call at Aquila Villa. Daniel reports that he told Mel to inform the board about this happening.

Daniel Leid reported observing other things from Mel that showed a lack of wisdom and discernment. For example, during one board meeting, there was a discussion about who would administrate Happy Haven (the new home next to Aquila Villa). Daniel reports that because of difficulty finding a couple, Mel suggested a single woman and a divorced man, both from CCF, could be the house parents together. This deeply concerned Daniel, as he believed this would have been unethical.

One of the graduates of Aquila Villa needed a temporary place to stay one year after her graduation from the facility. Daniel and Lydiann Leid offered her accommodation while she sought a more permanent solution. This allegedly caused Mel to become quite displeased with Daniel. He reports that when he asked Mel what they should do instead of letting her stay with them, Mel told him, "Give her a few hard knocks." At the next board meeting, Mel proposed to make a new rule for board members that they would need to have Mel and Barbie's permission to host a former graduate.

These concerns and the fact that they went mostly unheard by Mel Esh ultimately led Daniel Leid to resign his position on the Board of Directors for Aquila Villa. When asked what he would like to say



now about the situation, Daniel said, “I clearly have and do call Mels to follow God and let go of ministry. A few weeks later, Mel told me, ‘That was from God, and I did not want to hear it.’ I would like to plead with leaders and parents to be discerning where you recommend and send vulnerable people to. Ask a few graduates how it was for them and if they recommend it to others.”

## Conclusion

At the end of this investigation, Aquila Villa was scheduled to reopen under the name Stories Made New, with Mel and Barbie taking on revised roles in the organization and with Ernest and Yvonne Witmer as interim administrators for both Happy Haven and Stories Made New.

Two days before the release of this report, on September 5, 2024, The Justice Commission shared its findings with the Board of Directors, the new administrators for Stories Made New, and their advisors. The Board of Directors and the new administrators showed appreciation for the advice and information provided in the briefing. The following day, they informed The Justice Commission that Mel and Barbie had resigned their positions at Stories Made New. A source close to the Board reported that the Board is requesting that Mel and Barbie move off the premises. They offered these statements the following day.

**As a board we have been made aware of these allegations and we are making changes in the organization, leadership, structure, and approach to ministry. We are grieved by the hurt that has occurred. The resignation of Mel and Barb Esh has been accepted. We appreciate the input and help from various sources as we seek to fulfill the vision of Stories Made New to bring single women who are struggling into fulfillment and purpose in Jesus Christ.**

— Stories Made New, Board of Directors

**As current administrators at Stories Made New, we take these allegations toward Mel & Barbie Esh—founders of the original Aquila Villa ministry—very seriously. We are committed to best practices and appreciate the work The Justice Commission has put into this investigation. We find it confirming of new protocols we have already implemented and look forward to ongoing collaboration with others. The well-being of our resident ladies and staff is a top priority to us!**

—Ernest & Yvonne Witmer

Mel and Barbie Esh declined to comment on the allegations, instead offering the following statement.

**It has become apparent to us that some of the young ladies who were once a part of Aquila Villa were adversely affected by the thought of us returning. We desire wholeness and healing for all. For the best interest of the young ladies and the future of the ministry we believe it is time to step away. We are laying it down completely. In all this we have desired God to have His way. And through His leading we have come to this place.**

—Mel and Barbie Esh

The Justice Commission has offered consulting services to the Board of Directors for Stories Made New to help them develop policies and procedures that protect future staff and residents of Stories Made New and Happy Haven; however, this offer has not yet been accepted.

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## The Justice Commission

The Justice Commission is a survivor advocacy organization offering victim advocacy, assistance with crime reporting, and investigations into misconduct and abuse. The Justice Commission also offers consultation and internal investigation services to churches, ministries and organizations to assist them in their commitments to safety and integrity.

The Justice Commission was founded by Rebekah Cooper and David Cooper. Rebekah Cooper has been a volunteer victim advocate assisting in investigation, police reporting, and victim consultation part-time for several years. Both David and Rebekah have a desire to bring justice to the world around them and believe that true peace and justice go hand-in-hand.

*The Justice Report* is an investigative journal that highlights cases of injustice within the community. The purpose of *The Justice Report* is to give a voice to the voiceless and to educate the community on how injustices take place.

**Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable. Speak out in order to judge with righteousness and to defend the needy and the poor.**

**Psalm 31:8-9**