

New York Office of Children and Family Services

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In February 2020 ministry leaders at The Chapel (TheChapel.com) received allegations related to Wayne Aarum concerning his tenure as The Chapel's senior high youth pastor in the late 1990s.

Given the seriousness of the allegations, Chapel leaders engaged the attorneys at MinistrySafe (MinistrySafe.com) to conduct an independent investigation.

Wayne Aarum has not served on Chapel's staff for many years but is currently employed as camp director in a child-serving capacity at Circle C Ranch, located in Cattaraugus County, NY.

The MinistrySafe investigation revealed allegations of inappropriate interaction with female teens involved in The Chapel's student ministry, as well as inappropriate interaction with teens and young women involved in Circle C Ranch camp ministries, in a time period spanning more than two decades. Because these allegations indicated a *pattern of inappropriate behaviors* subject to New York state mandatory reporting requirements, MinistrySafe recommended a report to law enforcement officials and the New York Office of Children and Family Services (<https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/contact>), as well as complete cooperation with state officials. Reports were made to law enforcement agencies in Cattaraugus County and Erie County.

The MinistrySafe investigation included communication with scores of individuals with relevant information, including 21 women alleging inappropriate touch, and 27 individuals offering additional information that corroborated various elements of the complained of behaviors. These corroborating fact witnesses included former Circle C employees, church leaders and volunteers who witnessed inappropriate behaviors. Additional victims are suspected by the lead investigator: "My friend wants to speak, but she is afraid."

Several women who spoke to the lead investigator requested confidentiality out of fear of the Aarum family and Circle C Ranch supporters. The majority of camp board members are family members, and several of the victimized women who have spoken out and are known to the Aarum family have received threats from camp supporters. An earlier investigation occurred at the request of a prior Circle C board member: this investigation yielded a recommendation that Wayne Aarum be removed from his position as camp director at Circle C. The recommendation was rejected, the investigation (undertaken by a respected local law firm) was closed, and the board member who requested the investigation resigned.

In the course of the MinistrySafe investigation, these behaviors were communicated:

- stroking legs (outside clothing and on bare skin)
- stroking genital area- outside clothing
- touching vaginal area- outside clothing (in shorts or jeans)
- touching, rubbing and stroking breasts, outside clothing
- stroking labia, outside clothing
- stroking from hips to breasts, clothed, on the side of the body
- touching legs and knees
- hand placed on upper thigh
- pressing penis into back of girl (hugging from behind)
- rubbing penis repeatedly in a girl's presence
- extended hug of a partially dressed girl
- backing a girl into a wall
- backing a girl into a bed post
- cornering a girl, then approaching her, placing forehead to forehead
- long, groaning, full frontal hug, while rubbing back, sides and upper buttocks of girl
- hug with hands on buttocks
- hug with hands in back jeans pockets
- hugs from behind
- pressing into girl from behind (genitals pressed against her back)
- kissing and stroking a girl's hair
- kissing a girl's forehead
- pressing into the 'V' of open legs of a seated girl
- pulling girls into the 'V' of HIS open legs (pressed against genitals)
- inserting his hand into the crossed legs of girl
- back massages (touching buttocks/ low back/ sides of breasts)
- physically restraining a girl from leaving his presence, while alone in a room after dark
- requiring detailed confession of sexual behavior from a girl, while alone in a room after dark
- forcing intimate or confessional discussions
- requiring expression of intimate emotional or traumatic details
- whispering intimate statements ("I love you"/ "you are so beautiful"/ "you are so special"/ "you are the most beautiful girl"/ "you are my favorite")
- picking up a girl from school / taking her alone to a location with no others present, 'snuggling' on a couch
- requiring or participating in detailed discussion of sexual behavior

These behaviors, occurring with unrelated female minors, were corroborated by others:

- hand rubbing inside of thigh
- side hug with hand under armpit
- side hug with hand cupping breast
- seeking out opportunities for physical interaction w/ girls (whether wanted or not)
- holding hand or hands
- forcing unwanted physical contact on a girl (long full-frontal hugs, hand-holding etc)
- failing to honor preference NOT to be touched
- teen girl sleeping in his lap
- teen girl 'snuggling' with him on plane
- teen girl sitting in his lap
- talking face to face- within inches of girl- in the dark

- meeting with girls alone, in the dark
- meeting with girls and young women alone, in his office, after 'lights out' in camp
- meeting with girls and young women after midnight, alone
- meeting with girls alone in less easily seen locations
- ordering all others OUT of a cabin to 'counsel' a distraught teen girl on her bed, alone
- 'counseling' a teen girl in emotional crisis, alone
- meeting 1/1 with girls late into the night (1,2 and 3 am)
- stroking the leg of an uncomfortable girl who had previously alleged sexual assault at home
- conversations with girls in or on their beds
- choosing a new 'favorite', dropping the previous one
- vilifying (to others) girls who did NOT accept his overtures
- excessive interest in girls who fit his physical profile (pretty/slim)/ ignoring girls who did not

Various voyeuristic behaviors were witnessed by others, including:

- entering girls' cabins without knock or announcing
- entering women's staff housing without knock or announcing
- entering cabins where girls were changing, unannounced
- staying* in cabins where girls were partially clothed
- staring at specific girls in a manner noticeable to staff members and chaperones

Former camp staff members communicated that Aarum typically targeted specific girls who were pretty, slim, emotionally fragile or those who had 'father issues'. This *targeting* progressed to the point that former staff members remembered telling each other when girls arrived at camp that 'Wayne will like that one' or 'that will be one of Wayne's girls'.

Camp staff members stated that Aarum utterly failed to follow stringent camp policy concerning physical contact with the opposite sex, while remaining militant about enforcing it for others: *camp policy concerning physical touch applied to everyone but him.*

Several former staff members in supervisory positions remember various girls and young women complaining of Aarum's behavior, asking for help in avoiding him. As well, various staff members said they had reported these behaviors to camp officials, including Wes Aarum Sr., father of Wayne Aarum, who served as camp director prior to Wayne Aarum. Written evidence of at least ONE of these reports exists in the form of a contemporaneous writing kept by a former staff member.

Girls, now women, who participated in the investigation said that the behaviors became so normalized that they assumed others, including parents and ministry leaders, knew and approved.

Those who told of the most egregious behaviors made these statements:

- *I thought I was the only one.*
- *He told me he cared about me more than anyone else.*
- *He told me he cared about me more than my own father.*
- *I wanted to believe he really CARED; I wasn't just the 'flavor of the month'.*
- *He told me I was special and beautiful.*
- *If I tell, will anyone believe me? (indicating an imbalance of power)*

In addition, these statements were attributed to Aarum by others, including former staff members in supervisory positions:

She can't come back to youth group: her parents think I was having sex with her.
(spoken to a high school girl)

I've seen bigger tits on the cow down the road.
(spoken to a middle school camper, with other camp staff members present)

Let's say I raped and impregnated (15-year-old female worker).
(spoken in a camp staff training related to sexual harassment, with camp staff present)

Survival of the fittest is shooting (boyfriend) in the head, then taking (girlfriend) and raping her on the spot.
(spoken to camp staff members in a training/teaching context)

That guy is too worried about pleasuring his penis.
(spoken to staff members about a former staff member)

In sum, the MinistrySafe investigation revealed an ongoing pattern of harmful behaviors -- blatantly inappropriate in a child-serving environment-- occurring in a closed environment at the hands of a pinnacle employee at a camp controlled almost entirely by family members. In this closed environment, this employee has been allowed to normalize various borderline and explicitly inappropriate behaviors.

Many of those who participated in the investigation stand ready to communicate concerning their personal experiences, whether as victims or corroborating witnesses. *Several victims are afraid to do so*, given the experience of those who previously communicated *directly* with Circle C camp leaders.

For additional information, or access to names and contact information of those willing to speak with state authorities, please contact:

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