

Florida church disfellowships pastor after scandal

Michael Thompson of The Tabernacle Church in Melbourne is seeking healing after admitting to a series of affairs

Michael Thompson, who was named pastor of The Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Fla., by its founder, the late Jamie Buckingham, was disfellowshipped by church elders April 9 after admitting to multiple adulteries during his pastorate. Just

five months earlier, Thompson had stepped down from preaching to pursue itinerant evangelism and promote his new book *Face to Face: Beyond Revival*, which was published in February.

Church elders responded with an unusually literal use of 1 Corinthians 5, which counsels Christians to “deliver such a one to Satan” and “not keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral. Put away from yourselves the evil person” (NKJV).

Elder Don Lees told a stunned congregation March 26 that Thompson had told him a family member discovered he was committing adultery. Thompson expressed deep regret, but “I think it was more sorrow of being caught,” Lees said.

Elders called the congregation to fast and pray while examining their own consciences, warned against gossip, and apologized to members for “missing this” despite repeated prophecies about “sin in the camp” the last few years.

Thompson, 40, has separated from his wife and three school-age children. His book has been pulled from the shelves of

Christian outlets.

Elders decided to disfellowship him after a March 27 meeting in which "he said he didn't know how to repent," Lees said. On Sunday, April 2, they exhorted members to "have nothing to do with him."

They also destroyed the Plexiglas pulpit used by Thompson. Administrative pastor Don Williams told members that "a word from God" had said the pulpit was tainted.

Many church members wept openly upon learning of Thompson's fall. Others appeared stunned. Some reacted with anger.

In an April 24 meeting with Charisma, elders Lees, Williams, Ralph Mull, John Sander and Dave LeBeau said Thompson admitted to two short-term affairs several years ago and to one that lasted six years. All three started during counseling with married women.

Lees said Thompson first told him that he'd had "innumerable" one-night stands. "But when we asked him about that in the elders meeting, he said, 'No, I never had one-night stands,'" Lees said.

Mull said Thompson told elders that "he'd lied so much, he didn't know what the truth is." Positive prophecies had been given to Thompson by nationally recognized prophets, one of whom recently exhorted him to complete his book. Mull said there had even been a prophetic word that false accusations would come against Thompson.

One longtime Tabernacle Church member told Charisma he thought disfellowshipping was too strict and denied God's mercy to those affected, but a married couple thought the elders were not harsh enough. They said they left the Tabernacle two years ago after confronting Thompson about repeated rumors of infidelity, which he denied.

Tabernacle elders said no one ever expressed doubt to them about Thompson's morality.

Williams said the church offered to pay for Christian counseling for Thompson, his family members, the women and their families, and one woman accepted. In addition, they appointed "mature" women unrelated to staff or elders to offer confidential counseling for anyone.

Thompson issued a statement to Charisma admitting "long-term sexual sin due to sexual addiction" as well as "massive deception, manipulation and hiding" for which he is "truly sorry, broken-hearted and deeply repentant."

He said he is working with a Spirit-filled therapist who specializes in sexual addiction and that he has joined "several support and accountability groups." His first goal is restoration with his wife and children, and he said he is "prayerfully assessing how to make amends and restitution for my damage to the body of Christ, particularly the Tabernacle Church."

Thompson has not yet supplied a statement of repentance to elders at Tabernacle Church. He said he wanted to wait until he personally understood the full extent of his sin's impact "so that my repentance and restitution will be authentic and

lasting.”

Thompson said he would not return to public or professional ministry.

Sunday attendance at the Tabernacle was down to a few hundred as of April 30. But elders said attendance had been declining before the scandal. “I thought it would be empty,” Lees said.

During the Melbourne Renewal, more than 65,000 people visited the Tabernacle to experience dramatic manifestations of God six nights a week from January to September 1995, and weekly thereafter until mid-1997. As many as a dozen area churches sponsored the renewal, held at Tabernacle Church to accommodate crowds that sometimes exceeded its 2,000-seat capacity.

Williams announced his retirement on April 30. The distressing situation at the church was a factor in his decision, he said.