

Leaders Concerned by Haggard Church Visit

Ministers involved in restoring the former pastor questioned whether he was ready to return to the pulpit.



Nov. 21, 2008 – Prominent Christian leaders expressed concern in November over Ted Haggard’s appearance at an Illinois church, where he repeatedly apologized for the scandal that led to his dismissal from the Colorado megachurch he founded.

The leaders were involved in restoring Haggard after he left New Life Church in 2006 amid accusations that he solicited a male prostitute and purchased methamphetamines. Noting that Haggard had distanced himself from the restoration process, the leaders questioned whether his speaking at Open Bible Fellowship in Morrison, Ill., on Nov. 2 was premature.

One leader close to the situation said Haggard should be affirmed by a recognized leadership board before returning to the pulpit. “Ted has said he’s sorry, but sorry is something someone says when they’re caught,” said the leader, who asked to remain anonymous due to the sensitive nature of his position. “We haven’t really seen repentance as far as submission to leadership.”

H.B. London, a leader at Focus on the Family who also was involved in Haggard’s restoration process, said it is likely difficult for someone of Haggard’s stature to resist the public eye. “To sit on the sidelines for a person with that kind of personality and gifting is probably like being paralyzed,” London told the Associated Press. “If Mr. Haggard and others like him feel like they have a call from God, they rationalize that their behavior does not change that call.”

Haggard, the former president of the 30 million-member National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), agreed to leave Colorado Springs after the scandal broke in November 2006. He then entered a restoration process facilitated by New Life Church, which agreed to pay his \$138,000 salary through December 2007. He moved his family to Phoenix in May 2007 to attend Phoenix First Assembly of God, where he was to be counseled by its pastor, Tommy Barnett.

In early 2008, Haggard cut his ties with New Life Church, whose leaders later released a statement saying Haggard's restoration process was "incomplete." They said an "accountability relationship" would continue between Haggard and Barnett. Haggard has since returned to Colorado Springs.

Foursquare President Jack Hayford, who was part of Haggard's original restoration team, said it is unfortunate that Haggard is apparently going his own way. "Having joined with the many leaders who earnestly and patiently sought to graciously serve Ted amid the crisis born of his own admitted struggle and failure," he said, "it is both incredible and regrettable to hear ... of his choice for such a self-distancing pathway."

Haggard did not respond to *Charisma's* requests for comment.

During his two sermons on Nov. 2, Haggard never described a restorative process or accountability structure he might be undergoing, but instead spoke of a Christian's need for "internal transformation."

He repeatedly apologized to members of New Life Church, the NAE and "the body of Christ at large," and expressed regret over the harm he caused his family. "All my shame and sin was placed on [my wife]," he lamented. "People treated her as if she had fallen."

Haggard, who appeared at the Illinois church with his wife, Gayle, said his temptation to engage in homosexual activity might have resulted from a sexual experience he had as a 7-

year-old with a male worker employed by his father. "I tell you that simply as an explanation, and certainly not as an excuse," he said.

"When I [turned] 50 years old ... for some reason, what happened to me as a child started to produce fruit."

Haggard said he was at one time suicidal. Then two months before the scandal broke, he said he drove to New Life Church in the middle of the night and begged God to deliver him. "When the scandal happened it was bittersweet for me because I knew this was Jesus completing His work inside of me," he said. "I knew that this was the door to healing for my life."

Haggard said he was getting back on his feet financially by selling life insurance.

New Life leaders expressed gratitude for Haggard's "many years of dedicated leadership" and wished him well in his business endeavors. Although it was not clear whether his appearance at Open Bible Fellowship marked a return to vocational ministry, the leaders said they could not, at this time, endorse such a move. —**Paul Steven Ghiringhelli**