

Liardon Preaches First Sermon After Stepping Away From Pulpit

The pastor, who admitted to 'moral failure' in December, continues to seek counseling

Pastor and writer Roberts Liardon recently preached for the first time since he stepped away from the pastorate three months ago after admitting to a "moral failure." The founder of Embassy Christian Center in Irvine, Calif., gave a 30-minute message at his church on March 10 and spoke on keeping the faith. In December, Liardon, 36, confessed to a short-term homosexual relationship with the church's youth pastor, John Carrette.

"Those around me asked me to come today," said the charismatic pastor, who was dressed in a conservative gray suit. He received a standing ovation from about 650 people in attendance.

Liardon told Charisma that his counselors—particularly El Paso, Texas, pastor Charles Nieman—had encouraged him to preach sooner than later. "Charles Nieman wanted me to come back sooner, but I was not comfortable with that," Liardon said.

While Nieman supported Liardon's return to the pulpit, it was Embassy's staff that invited him to speak, said Ray Valcarcel, an Embassy member and one of Liardon's in-house counselors.

Liardon told the Embassy congregation that his appearance was "just for one Sunday." He had announced in December that he

would stay away from the pulpit for at least three months. He has made announcements and taken an offering during some services since his December admission, but this was his first sermon.

"I am still working with my counseling," he told the audience.

"[We have] gone through some great dramatics in the last few months," he said, not specifying what they were. "Our church has gone through a it is OK. God is in charge. He does not come to destroy. He comes to lift you."

Moving forward in faith, he said, includes "conquest, and turning things around." He then told the congregation: "We are doing well. We are going to continue to win the lost."

Liardon told of talking with a waiter who, upon learning Liardon was a pastor, confided in him, "You don't know what I have done." The story drew laughter from the congregation when Liardon added: "I can really say that now, too. Thank God for forgiveness."

After the service Liardon told Charisma: "It felt real good. I could feel the love of the people."

Of the last two and 1/2 months of rehabilitation, he said he has learned a lot about God's love and forgiveness and how to "just let the Word work in me."

Media coverage of the scandal has been difficult for him, he added: "We just have not had to deal with [the media] before." He admitted the hardest thing for him personally has been

“taking personal responsibility and understanding how [my actions] affected so many people.”

He added: “I appreciate the Cross a whole lot more.”

The scandal triggered an exodus from Liardon’s church and from his accredited school, Spirit Life Bible College. Some leaders who left complained that Liardon did not accept initial pastoral counsel from a leader who advised him to step away from the pulpit for one year. Others were upset that Liardon’s mother, Carol, insisted on running the ministry while her son was on his brief sabbatical.

Because Liardon’s ministry is independent, he is not required to follow rehabilitation policies that are mandatory for ministers who belong to denominations or ministerial fellowships. The Assemblies of God, for example, requires pastors who commit adultery to sit out of ministry for at least one year. If they have a repentant attitude, they may be allowed to return to the pulpit during the second year, depending on the specific counsel of district officials, said the church’s spokesperson, Juleen Turnage.

In a random survey, Charisma found no denomination or church network that allows fallen ministers to return to ministry after only three months.

Liardon will not preach every Sunday, he said, but he left open the possibility that he may preach again as his counseling progresses. He did not say when he would return full time to the pulpit.

Steven Lawson in Irvine, Calif.