

# Most Students, Church Members Defend Liardon After Confession

The pastor-evangelist's church and school are trying to survive after he admitted to a moral failure in December

Leaders of Embassy Christian Center scrambled to hold together their Irvine, Calif., charismatic church, an affiliated Bible school and other related ministries after founder and senior pastor Roberts Liardon's mid-December disclosure of his short-term homosexual relationship with the church's youth minister, John Carrette Jr.

About one-fifth of the church members, 37 of the 180 Spirit Life Bible College students and at least four Roberts Liardon Ministries missionaries departed during the first two weeks after the liaison was disclosed.

Calls for restoration have been hampered by charges of betrayal, accusations of spurned counsel and a possible lawsuit initiated by former Bible school students seeking to recoup unused tuition payments.

"We have gone through something here that has ripped people apart," Larry Black told about 650 worshipers who gathered at Embassy for a Jan. 6 Sunday morning service. "The enemy is at work. He wants to destroy the leadership, the works of God. This is not just a test for the leadership. This is a test for the people of God," Black said.

Black, a minister from Bakersfield, Calif., is filling the pulpit while Liardon, 34, takes a hiatus of at least three

months to recover from health problems and to seek counseling from a group of nationally recognized pastors.

In a statement, Liardon told Charisma: "I have voluntarily taken a leave of absence from the ministry for at least three months and have placed myself under pastoral and professional counseling with a team of ministers headed by Charles Nieman and Trevor Yaxley." Nieman is pastor of Abundant Living Faith Center in El Paso, Texas. Yaxley is based in New Zealand.

"Roberts Liardon is trying to do the right thing," said Liardon's spokesperson, Lawrence Swicegood of A. Larry Ross and Associates, a public relations agency whose media specializations include "reputation management."

"He wants forgiveness," Swicegood said. "He is spending an enormous amount of time in prayer, studying the Bible and [undergoing] counseling, seeking how he can get this horrible thing behind him."

Yaxley, who is providing pastoral accountability, said Liardon is responding well to the process of restoration.

"I'm encouraged. I think Roberts is on his way back," Yaxley said. "He is making good, positive steps. He is not hiding. He is transparent." Yaxley said he plans to make periodic trips to California from his office in Auckland to encourage Liardon.

A timetable has not been set for Liardon's return to ministry, but Black declared to the Embassy congregation that it will happen in God's time and that Liardon and the ministry were yet to see their greatest days.

"It will be a minimum of three months," Swicegood said of Liardon's sabbatical. "At that point the professional counselors will assess how the treatment [is going] and re-evaluate. He [Liardon] is committed to spending the time to make sure he is right with God."

Liardon has never been married. This was his only homosexual encounter, Swicegood said.

As many as 120 former Embassy members now attend California Victory Church in Newport Beach, a nearby congregation started in October by Canadian church-planting leaders George and Hazel Hill.

"We do not know Roberts Liardon and are not connected with his ministry. We are just dealing with the fallout," George Hill said. "A lot of people [who have left] were leaders. A lot of them feel betrayed. You break trust like that, and it is hard to rebuild."

Swicegood said the inappropriate sexual behavior between Liardon and Carrette began in September. In November, Liardon and Carrette received advice from an undisclosed professional counselor and from Les Bowling, pastor of Eagle Rock, a church in Pickerington, Ohio.

Bowling, a longtime Liardon associate, laid out specific steps for Liardon and Carrette that involved removing themselves from ministry, receiving further counsel and resolving other issues, Swicegood said.

Bowling is no longer counseling Liardon. Carrette, the son of

Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International Executive Vice President John Carrette Sr., has resigned from Embassy. He is currently living in Guatemala and could not be reached for comment.

Many people have been devastated by the recent events at Embassy. Daniel Harbour, 45, said he and his wife and five children attended the church for five years. Two of their children are Spirit Life graduates.

"We do not have any problems with Embassy or pastor Liardon," Harbour said. "I pray for pastor every day. But until both sides step up to the plate, there is no reconciliation."

Overseas missionaries apparently received conflicting information about ministry problems soon after Liardon's announcement. "We knew something was up, but we never expected this to happen," said a missionary who has since left the organization. Sixteen other missionaries, including one base leader, have left the field. A ministry spokesperson acknowledged that four people were not returning to the work in Africa, but did not specify if the reason was related to Liardon's confession.

Shocked, many people did not see Liardon's problems coming.

"It was a disappointment, but the vision is greater than the man," said Spirit Life junior Farah Pattisalamuw, 31, who has chosen to stay at the school. "I believe restoration has already begun. I pray that pastor Roberts will come back soon. How can I preach the gospel if I cannot forgive people? That is how revival starts."

Liardon's ministry has offices in England, South Africa and the Philippines. Spirit Life graduates have been sent to missions outposts around the world as part of an effort called Operation 500.

**Steven Lawson in Irvine, Calif.**