

Potter's House Group Loses Churches Amid More Charges of Rigid Control

As many as 160 churches recently pulled out of Wayman Mitchell's Christian Fellowship Ministries

Controversial pastor Wayman Mitchell's Potter's House movement is embroiled in another bitter internal fight that some insiders say is shrinking the number of participating churches. Sources close to Charisma say that as many as 160 of the movement's approximately 800 churches have left the group.

The Potter's House movement, officially called Christian Fellowship Ministries (CFM), was started by Mitchell in 1983 when he broke away from the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. It is headquartered in Prescott, Ariz. Other names associated with Mitchell's churches include "The Door" and "Victory Chapel."

Some of the pastors who have left the movement are apparently upset by the direction that CFM appears to be headed. There are claims that Mitchell—whose movement has long been dogged by criticism that it is controlling, intimidating and manipulative—routinely uses foul language and derogatory remarks in the pulpit.

Mitchell refused to comment, but short excerpts of his preaching obtained by Charisma appeared to support these concerns.

However, CFM pastor Harold Warner, 51, a veteran Mitchell

loyalist who pastors a church in Tucson, Ariz., told Charisma that Mitchell is not the sort of man many of his enemies have portrayed him to be.

"He is a good, strong leader," Warner said. "We are given great freedom to pursue our ministry, and it isn't this horribly oppressive atmosphere."

Warner said those pastors who pulled their churches out of CFM are "people who have gone in a different direction."

"All the men who have left are the products of [Mitchell's] ministry, not a bunch of clones," he said.

Pastor Larry Neville, who worked with Mitchell from 1978 to 1991, said there once was a move of God in the Potter's House. However, as time went on, "They got backed into 'no TV' and isolationism, and that is unhealthy," he said.

"They're not sinning, but they're not moving on," he added.

Neville said there was no way to explain clearly the first exodus from CFM, which occurred in 1990. But as any group grows, he added, there needs to be a lot of change, and "some of those changes were not made."

Neville explained that as many of Mitchell's young converts matured they wanted to go beyond Mitchell's basic principles of evangelism, winning souls and the multiplication of the local church.

“Some of them wanted to reach out and mature. They wanted a larger expression of the faith, and so a split came,” he said.

That split resulted in some of Mitchell’s most trusted colleagues pulling out of the group. When Colorado pastor Ron Jones, who had worked with Mitchell since the early 1970s, severed his ties in 1990, at least 100 pastors followed him.

Neville said that in trying to assess why about 160 churches left, it is important to understand CFM pastors are encouraged to aggressively plant churches, so a small number of pastors who disagree with Mitchell could result in a large number of churches leaving the movement.

The exodus becomes more of an issue of loyalty to their founding pastor than one of disagreement with Mitchell. It’s all about “a personal relationship with someone they love,” he said.

Mitchell agreed with Neville’s assessment, pointing out that about 100 of the approximately 160 churches reported to have left CFM recently did so because of their loyalty to one pastor.

However, Bryan Hupperts, who was a part of Potter’s House for about seven years and was in the process of being groomed to be a CFM pastor, disputed Neville’s speculations.

He said Neville is just trying to be a peacemaker and put a good face on a bad situation.

For example, when Hupperts questioned the authority of his former pastor in the Potter's House, he says he was told, "You do not question my headship—ever."

Hupperts added that former Potter's House pastors leave the movement because of unhealthy control, and after they leave they are afraid to talk about their experiences. "Some of them have family in the Potter's House. They'll end up getting targeted. They can be pretty vicious," he said.

One former leader who spoke on condition of anonymity echoed Hupperts' comments.

"This is a worldwide movement. There are families who have not spoken for years, brothers who are pastors all the way to the Philippines who were separated by this group and had years of not even speaking, churches that have been deliberately split, children who don't talk to their parents."

—Jeremy Reynolds