

Bill Hybels Says Christians Distorted Facts About Visit From Muslim Cleric

The pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago says people wrongly judged him for inviting an imam to speak

One of the country's biggest churches, criticized for inviting a Muslim speaker in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, has defended its actions and rebuked detractors for rushing to judgment.

Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC), the Chicago-area fellowship known for pioneering "seeker-sensitive" ministry, refutes claims that it gave its pulpit to a local Islamic leader and says that widely circulating reports of what happened are inaccurate and distorted.

The South Barrington, Ill., church, which weekly draws about 17,000 people, has been criticized in reports regarding the visit in October by Faisal Hammouda, a Muslim imam, less than a month after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Among those who spoke out was Tom White, director of The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), a ministry to the worldwide-persecuted church. White criticized the church's invitation to Hammouda in an editorial he wrote in a VOM publication.

In the article—titled "Have We Shamed the Face of Jesus?"—White alleged that Hammouda "shared the pulpit" with Willow Creek pastor Bill Hybels. White claimed that as Hammouda made statements about Islam such as, "We believe in

Jesus more than you do, in fact,” Hybels did not correct the Muslim cleric.

“In an effort to ‘love,’ [WCCC] left out the truth,” said White, whose criticism also was reported in Charisma.

Hammouda’s visit is not the first to spark criticism at the church. Some members were unhappy in August 2000 when Hybels interviewed then-President Clinton at a leadership conference hosted by the church.

WCCC produced a three-page statement correcting what it called the “substantial errors of fact” and “distorted details” in reports about Hammouda’s visit. It said that he had been invited to help members learn more in light of the religious tensions following 9/11 and to model “how a Christian can dialogue in a winsome way with someone who has radically different views.”

The service was not intended to compare Christianity and Islam or address the persecution of Christians in Muslim countries. “Such suffering occurs, [and] is deeply distressing to us, but was not the purpose of that particular service,” the statement said.

Hammouda was not invited to “speak from the pulpit,” but to respond to some questions in “a friendly, respectful dialogue.” During the exchange, Hybels made “clear distinctions” between Christianity and Islam, the statement added. It would not have been appropriate to challenge every erroneous point made by Hammouda and not doing so “should not be construed as an endorsement.”

The statement said that reports of one particular comment that “created a huge reaction”—when Hammouda said he believes in Jesus as much as Christians do—did not note the reaction of Hybels, who “rolled his eyes with incredulity,” or the congregation, which laughed.

Reports with “a few snippets taken out of context” suggest the church does not preach Christ as the only way to God or does not know the difference between Allah and God. “Surely we’re not asking too much that you check the facts, and give our ministry and our senior pastor the benefit of the doubt,” the statement said.

The report said that WCCC hoped critics would “come to see their mistaken conclusions about us, and have the integrity to use the means they employed for misinformation to set the record straight.”

VOM spokesman Todd Nettleton said that the ministry had not received a copy of the statement. Willow Creek spokeswoman Tammy Kelley said the statement had been made available from the beginning of the year to people who contacted the church to ask about the controversy.

Andy Butcher