

Were Pastors Pushed Out in Conspiracy by Church Planters?

The former lead pastors and founders of Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Florida, Stovall and Kerri Weems have filed a federal complaint against the Association of Related Churches (ARC) and three other pastors claiming they “masterminded” a conspiracy to take over the church and oust the pastors from their roles, reported this week.

The Weemses have been embroiled in a legal battle with Celebration Church since April 2022, when, as Charisma News reported, the 12,000-member church in North Florida released findings from an internal investigation that included allegations of financial misconduct and fraud, among others. Weems resigned his position in April 2022, but denied the allegations.

“I shall not and cannot be connected to any church in which the leadership abandons the clear biblical principles and scriptural qualifications for governance and oversight,” Weems’ letter of resignation stated.

The complaint filed by the couple names ARC, a non-profit church planting organization, along with two other pastors who previously served as overseers of Celebration and another pastor. The complaint, in part, read:

“Defendants were consumed by greed and the desire to advance their own financial and business interests when they deliberately targeted Pastor Weems and those closest to him because he rejected their unbridled church growth model and was focused on missionary work and developing supporting businesses that defendants perceived as a significant threat to their economic interests.”

In an overview, the complaint claims “the case arises out of a continuing unlawful conspiracy masterminded by the defendants to protect and expand their church growth business interests and endeavors and the substantial income they generate by destroying Plaintiffs (the Weemses) and eliminating them as perceived threats and competitors, which included engineering a takeover at Celebration Church of Jacksonville, Inc. to allow Defendants to effectively gain control over its operations and substantial assets, cover up numerous criminal and tortious acts committed in the process, and frame the Weemses for financial crimes they never committed.”

Founded by Chris Hodges, also the founder and senior pastor at Church of the Highlands in Alabama, ARC is one of the largest church planting organizations in the country and has helped launch more than 1,000 churches since 2000. Hodges is named as a defendant in the complaint.

Dino Rizzo, executive director of ARC and associate pastor at Church of the Highlands, is also named as defendant in the lawsuit. Rizzo was an overseer at Celebration Church until September 2021, reported. The third pastor named as a defending is John Siebeling, who leads the Life Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and is a founding board member at ARC.

The complaint says that ARC used its “significant influence and power as a vehicle to facilitate and conceal their nefarious scheme.” It also claims that the “Defendants intentionally caused substantial and other irreparable harm to the Plaintiffs through a pattern of unlawful and often criminal acts that included extortion, psychological abuse, wire fraud and computer crimes which ultimately caused over \$100 million in damages.”

Celebration Church is not an ARC-planned church, but historically donated approximately \$150,000 to \$200,000 per year to ARC to benefit church planting operations, media reports say.

Stovall Weems told in January 2023 that he came to the realization in 2018 that Celebration Church had become too “corporate” and focused on generating attendance and revenue and needed to focus more on missions working and simplifying the church.

The Weemses developed a new vision antithetical to ARC’s growth model, including a new plan that would establish several entities to house and fund Celebration Church’s operations.

The federal complaint says that the Plaintiffs demand judgment against the Defendants, awarding:

- Compensatory damages in appropriate amounts to be established at trial;
- Punitive damages in appropriate amounts to be established at trial;
- Injunctive relief prohibiting Defendants from engaging in the tortious and unlawful misconduct alleged herein;
- Costs associated with this action; and
- Such other and further relief as the Court deems just and appropriate to protect Plaintiffs’ rights and interests.

“The Plaintiffs hereby demand a trial by jury on all issues triable,” the complaint concluded. {eoa}

Join Charisma Magazine Online to follow everything the Holy Spirit is doing around the world!

Shawn A. Akers *is the online editor at Charisma Media.*