

One Pastor's Alleged Abuse and Cover-up Across Multiple Megachurches

"There's nothing quite like waking up to discover that your church is being featured on an episode of 'Dateline,'" Pastor Cal Jernigan wrote in a letter to Central Christian Church, the congregation he leads in Phoenix, Arizona.

Jernigan's church has been under the microscope and featured in news headlines after he brought in Caleb Baker to work on their staff as the Lead Student Pastor and Associate Preaching Pastor.

On Feb. 12th Jernigan discovered Caleb was involved in a six month extramarital relationship with another staff member at their church.

Once Jernigan informed the board, Baker and the other staff member were let go, just one day later.

This isn't just one lone accusation made against Baker. Baker previously worked under his father Mike Baker at Eastview Christian Church in Normal, Illinois before he was quietly let go for abusing women in the church. Jernigan claims Caleb's dad, a longtime friend, did inform him of an accusation made against his son "by a woman who felt Caleb acted inappropriately toward her."

Jernigan says, "He assured me his leadership team had investigated this charge and it was proven to be an unfounded and unsubstantiated claim by someone who had it out for his son."

A former Eastview staff member Brooke Yarbrough wrote a lengthy post on Facebook about her experience working for the

church and says what happened in Phoenix, Arizona was “completely preventable.” She says in 2016, while on staff, Caleb was let go for the sexual misconduct. She left the church because of their mishandling of the situation.

She wrote, “The church has to do better. We have to stop trying to cover things up and spin stories to protect predators and allow abuse against the congregations and staff we are entrusted to steward over. I keep hearing these general terms of ‘moral failure’ and ‘extramarital affair’ that insinuates equality and complicity. It has to stop. This is sexual and pastoral abuse and nothing less.”

The elders at Eastview have announced a third party is investigating what took place at the church. They released a statement saying they are aware that their church is “not perfect” but believe they have a strong and healthy work culture currently.

Lead Pastor Mike Baker whose son is at the forefront of the allegations, has resigned from the church. The church wrote that Mike “remains steadfast in his sincere conviction that there is nothing to investigate.” Jernigan obviously disagrees. Mike resigned from the church instead of submitting to an investigation from Eastview’s board.

Jernigan wrote in his letter, “because I was not personally aware of any character issues regarding Caleb, in recent years I began to allow him to use his gift of communication on the biggest platform we have: our weekend pulpit. Nothing, until the revelation of the past two weeks, caused me to doubt the integrity of Caleb. I believed what I saw was the real Caleb. It wasn’t.”

There is still a large misunderstanding in the Western church today about what pastoral abuse looks like. Retired professor of pastoral leadership at Baylor University Rev. Robert Creech told WGLT, “There’s always a power differential between the

clergy and the congregation. And that makes it different than if a clergyman had an affair with someone outside the church, just because there's not a power differential."

When pastoral figures in the church use their position of power to spiritually and physically manipulate others, it's abuse.

"The level of trust between those congregants and their pastors has been eroded by what's happened to them in the past, and they'll carry that with them the rest of their life. Over time, I think it's terribly wounding to congregations to have had that," Creech says.

Jernigan has taken full responsibility for not looking into the Caleb's history more in depth. He says he is taking responsibility for knowing there was an allegation against Caleb when he hired him and chose to look the other way.

For many churchgoers, Jernigan's response isn't enough. They are wondering what it actually means when he says he takes "full responsibility."

Pray for all of those who are involved in this situation. Pray that God's nearness and healing power would wash over each and every person. The body of Christ needs to unify and learn and grow together, not hide and sweep issues under the rug.

We reached out to Jernigan for an interview but have not yet heard back.



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