

The No. 1 Takeaway for Every Single Believer From the Bill Hybels/Willow Creek Scandal

Church leaders do not need standing ovations.

That was my first thought as I read in March about how congregants of Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago rose to their feet to cheer in support of then-Pastor Bill Hybels, who had just denied multiple allegations of sexual misconduct reported by the Chicago Tribune.

“The accusations you hear in the Tribune are just flat-out lies,” Hybels reportedly said at the meeting.

In April, Hybels fast-forwarded his retirement plans and abruptly resigned. At that meeting, which also ended with a standing ovation, Hybels admitted only to putting himself “in situations that would have been far wiser to avoid.”

Willow Creek’s woes now continue, thanks to its larger-than-life founding pastor. New harassment allegations against Hybels surfaced in a New York Times report over the weekend. Co-pastor Steve Carter then resigned, and the congregation announced an independent investigation would look into Hybels’ alleged history of misconduct. Whether co-pastor Heather Larson will stay remains an open question. Meanwhile, another question looms large: What will other pastors and churches learn from this sorry episode?

If they take away anything, it should be this. You can have all the clever innovations, seeker-friendly methods and oversight structures in the world, but trouble will catch up with you if you’re afraid to hold a leader accountable.

A unique sadness hangs over this particular situation because

so many of us had a sense that Willow Creek was supposed to be different.

Hybels founded Willow Creek Community Church in 1975. He went door-to-door asking neighbors why they didn't attend services, and he designed a church around their objections: multiple service times, age- and affinity-based programming, and no churchy jargon that would be off-putting to a newcomer. Willow Creek catered to religious "seekers" and by the 1980s was one of the largest churches in America. The separate Willow Creek Association, founded in 1992, creates training materials for its more than 13,000 member churches from 90 denominations and 45 countries. Willow Creek is one of the most admired and widely imitated churches in America.

Much of the admiration is well-deserved. Willow has resisted the allure of partisan politics that dominated and then compromised so many other evangelical churches' witness over the years. The church has poured its heart into local outreach rather than culture wars. Neighbors in Chicago and beyond have benefited from that discipline.

Unmoored from any denominational tradition and flung across expensive neighborhoods, the entrepreneurial startup grew like a tech stock in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, it has been the envy of the evangelical world and spawned thousands of imitations. Yet along the way, experiences of Hybels' alleged victims didn't come to light. Or if they did, they were apparently not taken seriously.

The so-called seeker-sensitive multisite church model that Willow Creek inaugurated is truly a reflection of its place and time: individualistic and celebrity-obsessed. Looking back, it is insane to think people believed this was the way of the future. It was so dependent on Hybels himself and so enamored with management formulas that the importance of timeless virtues, including humility at the top and courage among the rank and file, tragically fell by the wayside.

To be sure, Hybels didn't make it easy for congregants to view him as a mere mortal in need of accountability. Just look at his obsession with leadership succession. That the process of finding a successor took six years signals what it was: an exercise in self-aggrandizement. Who could replace the great Bill Hybels? Well, no one, apparently. Willow Creek appointed two pastors to follow him.

Another sign of trouble: Before Hybels' resignation, he was going to remain an active member in the congregation in retirement. That almost never goes well; a much-loved pastor's continued presence can undermine new leadership. For Hybels to seek exception to this well-understood rule made it another exercise in self-aggrandizement. It served his unmet psychological needs better than the needs of the congregation and its mission.

My prediction is that Willow Creek and the leadership training seminars that bear its name will soon cease to exist without Hybels. Demand for the seminars has been too closely linked to the personality and credibility of Hybels. It withers without him.

Willow Creek did many things right over the years and is, I trust, trying to do the right thing now with this new investigation. But the damage is done, and the seeds of its downfall were sown long ago.

After 35 years of management gurus, economies of scale and efficiency gains, Hybels has proved that you cannot run a church like a crisis PR firm. Churches need oversight, confession and repentance. Willow Creek has instead been mired in damage control and media relations.

Maybe it's time for a new rule: No more standing ovations for pastors. God knows them fully. We do not. Judgment and mercy belong to him alone. It is enough to bring our hands together in prayer.

Applause is a distraction and a temptation that we—and they—would be far wiser to avoid.

Jacob Lupfer, a frequent commentator on religion and politics, is a writer and consultant in Baltimore. His website is . Follow him on Twitter at @jlupf. The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily represent those of Religion News Service.

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