

# Bill Hybels Declines Invite to Willow Creek's Reconciliation Service

Willow Creek Community Church plans to hold a service Tuesday (July 23) in hopes of moving on from the troubles involving its founding pastor, Bill Hybels.

In what they said will be their last public statement about the allegations of sexual misconduct against Hybels that have torn the church apart over the last year, the church's elders called on past and present church attenders to attend a service of "worship and reflection" at the evangelical Christian megachurch's main campus in suburban South Barrington.

They also called on Hybels to repent.

"After such a traumatic experience, what does it look like to enter into a gospel-centered season of reconciliation?" said an email update from elders sent to members Friday.

"Because reconciliation is from God, we prayerfully entered into His work with humility and grace, undertaking a systematic approach to actively listen, learn and apologize."

The service and the statement are the church's latest attempt to move on from the controversy that led to Hybels' early retirement last year.

More than 10 women have publicly accused Hybels of sexual misconduct and abuse of power over the last year, beginning with a March 2018 report in the *Chicago Tribune*.

The church initially defended its pastor before admitting he had sinned and apologizing. The entire elder board and Hybels' successors eventually resigned, and an outside investigation

found the allegations against Hybels were credible.

Hybels has denied all the allegations.

Willow Creek's new elders have spent six months reaching out and listening to the people involved in those allegations and hope the church now can enter a season of healing and reconciliation, according to the update.

But not everybody who came forward with allegations of misconduct against Hybels was contacted by the elders. Julia Williams is among those who weren't.

And Williams—who has described the former pastor's flirtatious behavior toward her at the gym while she was attending Willow Creek in the 1980s—isn't sure the church is ready to put Hybels in the past.

She doesn't think there's anything church leaders can say to make the controversy go away. At least not yet.

"I'm just really feeling like they have one last chance kind of to make this right," she said.

"I don't think there's any kind of a do-over. I think it has to be extremely straight, and it's kind of like a one-shot deal. To put this to rest, it's going to have to be very, very direct."

Since they were installed earlier this year, members of Willow Creek's current elder board have spoken with former elders, current and former staff, church attenders and people who raised concerns about Hybels going back to 2014, according to the update.

"We believe your allegations about Bill," the elders' update said, addressing the women who came forward with stories of Hybels' misconduct.

In a statement posted on blogger Julie Roys' website, Vonda

Dyer—a former director of the church’s vocal ministry who has also accused Hybels of misconduct—recounted her last meeting with the current elders.

At that meeting, Dyer said, Hybels’ former assistant Pat Baranowski shared three hours of testimony. Baranowski told *The New York Times* last year that Hybels allegedly engaged in sexual activity with her.

Dyer said Baranowski shared more details with the elders during her meeting.

Baranowski’s testimony “left many of the elders weeping, some face down on the table in disbelief and mourning,” according to Dyer.

“If they are saying that they believe Pat’s allegations about Bill, which this statement affirms, then the truth about Bill’s sin is far worse than anyone has been willing to say publicly,” Dyer said.

The elders’ statement “lacks the specificity that I wish it contained,” she said.

But, Dyer said, she was grateful the elders said they believed the allegations and appeared to retract the narrative that the women who came forward are “liars and colluders.”

The elders’ statement also addressed the church’s initial response to allegations against Hybels, saying its actions led to verbal and written attacks against the women, as well as ministry leaders who advocated for them.

It asked those who had sent such messages to examine their actions and reconcile with the people they had targeted.

It also asked Christians to “join us in extending God’s grace” to former elders, who, it said, were misled by Hybels and did not act with malice when they initially denied the allegations.

Elders also said in the update they had reached out to Hybels. But, it said, “he has chosen not to engage in dialogue at this time.”

The update closed by urging Willow Creek to reconcile and move on.

“May we grow in compassion, grace, forgiveness and unity on the path of reconciliation that we now walk,” it said.

Dyer said she hopes elders will provide more details at Tuesday’s service to give needed closure to Willow Creek attenders, the global church, the women who have come forward and their advocates. She also hopes elders will continue the reconciliation process with those women privately even if they no longer plan to speak about it publicly.

“I welcome the next steps in that process,” she said. “I hope one day to stand again with my brothers and sisters at Willow Creek reconciled, in the unity of the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.”

Williams is afraid to get her hopes up too high.

She has heard from other women that the elders received their stories with empathy, and the women felt heard. But, she said, she feels that if the elders are wise, they’ll cancel their planned service of worship and reflection.

There’s too much left to be said and done, according to Williams.

“You can sit in a room, and you can cry, weep for everybody. But if you don’t go outside that room and publicly express that sorrow because of what you’ve heard, none of it—they’re just words,” she said.

“And that’s what I’m afraid of.” {eo}