

Charismatic Leader Explains Corporal Punishment Abuse Charges

Larry Tomczak, an early leader in the charismatic movement, told *Charisma* Wednesday that charges he used abusive corporal punishment are “baseless” and he will be vindicated once this case works its way through the legal system.

Tomczak had been named as one of several defendants in a lawsuit filed against the Sovereign Grace group of churches, which he founded in 1977 with C.J. Mahaney under the name “Take and Give.” The group has been known by several names over the years including People of Destiny. Recently Mahaney, president of Sovereign Grace Ministries, had come under fire for his authoritarian leadership, and several key churches had left the group of about 100 churches.

Tomczak said he was named in the suit merely as a “co-founder,” even though he had not been in top leadership in that local church—where charges were made—since the early 1980s and actually had left Sovereign Grace in 1996 over his own disagreements with leaders over how they treated his then-teenage son.

USA Today reported that Mahaney, who has close ties to Southern Baptist leaders like Al Moehler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., took a leave of absence in 2011 after complaints were lodged about his leadership style. He was later reinstated as leader of the denomination, which moved to Louisville from Maryland last year. But conflict in the group has continued. In recent months, several churches have split off from Sovereign Grace.

The denomination issued a statement condemning any abuse of children and saying that leaders will investigate the claims

in the suit.

“We consider any allegation of harm to a child extremely serious and we have been working diligently in an effort to learn the truth,” the statement reads. “We ask for patience as we continue to investigate these new allegations. Please continue to pray with us for all those affected by this lawsuit.”

Tomczak moved to have his name removed from the suit. But in a series of legal moves, two additional defendants were named and charges were recently added, including one by an anonymous woman, the courts called Carla Coe, who claimed that Tomczak hit her with plastic and wooden sticks. The alleged abuse began when she was a child and lasted more than two decades. When the woman was an adult, the lawsuit claims, Tomczak beat her bare backside, according to *The Tennessean* newspaper in Nashville, Tenn., where Tomczak now lives.

The suit does not reveal where the alleged incidents occurred, or how Tomczak was acquainted with the woman. Tomczak told *Charisma* this was a “disciplinary parental issue” and it involved a “troubled family member.” He denied all allegations of physical abuse.

The newspaper accounts portrayed Tomczak as a “pastor known for promoting corporal punishment,” apparently because of certain statements in his book *The Little Handbook of Loving Correction*. The book advises parents to use something other than their own hands, like a flexible branch or lightweight stick, to spank their children. Tomczak said he stands by that advice today.