

Mars Hill 'Most Abusive, Coercive Ministry Culture I've Ever Been Involved With,' Says Paul Tripp

A letter from nine Mars Hill Church pastors to their fellow elders offers the most trenchant criticism yet of controversial megachurch pastor **Mark Driscoll**, who recently stepped down for at least six weeks amid a series of accusations.

The pastors did not mince words in their lengthy Aug. 22 letter concerning Driscoll, who has been caught up in allegations that include plagiarism, inappropriate use of church funds and abuse of power:

- [W]e direct that he steps down from ministry, submitting himself under the authority of the elders of the church, who will oversee the details of his restoration plan.
- He must step down not only from the pulpit, but from all aspects of ministry and leadership.
- He will continue to receive his salary so long as he continues to cooperate with the restoration plan set before him by the elders of **Mars Hill Church**.

The letter was posted within a Mars Hill online network and provided to Warren Throckmorton, a Grove City College psychology professor who has been blogging updates about Mars Hill.

The 4,000-word letter suggests there were insufficient layers of accountability at Mars Hill, a congregation of an estimated 14,000 people at 15 locations in five states, and that power was consolidated at the top with Driscoll given free rein to do what he wanted.

The pastors included quotes from conversations with Paul Tripp, a widely respected evangelical pastor who is seen as a “pastor to pastors” and was on the Mars Hill’s Board of Advisers and Accountability before he resigned in June.

“This is without a doubt, the most abusive, coercive ministry culture I’ve ever been involved with,” Tripp is quoted saying in the letter.

One of Tripp’s concerns was the way the church governance was set up.

“You can’t have a church culture where you essentially have a very tight circle and everyone else is your enemy,” he said.

Tripp declined to an interview request.

“This letter, as with past letters voicing accusations toward Mark Driscoll will be processed in accordance with Article 12 of the church’s bylaws,” a statement provided by public relations firm head Mark DeMoss said. “This means the accusations will be thoroughly examined and a report issued when the review is complete. In the meantime, it does not seem appropriate to comment on specific accusations before/while they are being formally reviewed as we don’t want to circumvent the process prescribed by the governing body of Mars Hill.”

The church’s bylaws, which spell out how the church is governed, are not public. It’s also unclear what the governing body entails, as DeMoss was unavailable to respond to more questions. The pastors in the letter suggest that the bylaws do not offer church elders much authority.

“While the current bylaws greatly restrict our authority, we believe we must act like elders none-the-less,” they write. “It is time to take responsibility for our church, regardless of how much our current bylaws prevent us from exercising that authority.”

The pastors suggest that there has been a lack of transparency from the leadership, especially surrounding Driscoll's ouster from the Acts 29 Network, a church-planting coalition of more than 500 congregations that he helped found.

"We have been repeatedly told that no one from the A29 board talked to Mark or to our board prior to removing Mark from the network," the pastors wrote. "The truth is that multiple members of both boards had been in direct contact with each other, and with Mark, exhorting and rebuking him over the course of months and years, and to say or imply otherwise is deeply misleading."

The pastors also cited issues of "questionable transparency and truth-telling" surrounding church finances and the Mars Hill Global Fund, along with a controversy last year involving a conference on charismatic theology called Strange Fire. In addition, there are charges Driscoll plagiarized, inflated his book sales, and transitions and resignations from its board, including Tripp and pastor James MacDonald.

The letter cited another recent letter, from Mike Wilkerson, who, along with other former Mars Hill pastors, sent a list of allegations to church elders regarding Driscoll. The pastors suggested that the statement put out from the church at the time was misleading.

"Even this Thursday we put out a statement claiming that Wilkerson's formal charges were being 'reviewed by the board and the elders,'" the letter from the current pastors stated. "This is misleading as it gives people the impression that the elders as a whole are able to take part in reviewing and adjudicating the case."

As of Thursday, Mars Hill would not provide information about who will oversee Driscoll during his time off from the pulpit; neither did it provide a copy of the church bylaws requested by Religion News Service.

The pastors' letter ends by quoting a sermon from Driscoll from 2006.

"I just shudder to say this, but if I should ever say or do anything that the elders would need to fire me, do not be loyal to me," Driscoll said. "Be loyal to Jesus; be loyal to your elders. Be loyal to the pastors in your church."

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