

Pastor John Ortberg Allowed Volunteer Who Was Attracted to Minors to Work With Children

John Ortberg, a popular evangelical author and megachurch pastor, betrayed a “bond of trust” by allowing a church volunteer who admitted being attracted to minors to still work with children, according to a statement from the elders at the Bay Area church he leads.

“In July of 2018, a person serving in the Menlo Church community came to John and shared in confidence an unwanted thought pattern of attraction to minors,” the church’s elder said in a statement. “The person assured, to John’s satisfaction, that the person had not acted on the attraction and sought John’s support. John believed the person and provided prayers and referrals for counseling.”

But Ortberg took no steps to bar the person from working with minors, according to the elders. He also did not talk to other staff or church members about the situation.

The church’s statement did not name the third party who brought Ortberg’s actions to the church’s attention. On Sunday (Feb. 2), Daniel Lavery, Ortberg’s estranged son, posted a message on Twitter saying he and his wife had reported the pastor.

Lavery said that a church member had confessed having “obsessive sexual feelings about young children” for years and that they had intentionally sought out “unsupervised” positions where they could volunteer with children—including volunteer opportunities that included overnight travel. He also said that the church member told him “John Ortberg had

continually encouraged this person in their unsupervised work with children.”

After speaking to the church member, Lavery said he and his wife confronted his parents about the situation. He said that John Ortberg and his wife, Nancy, were aware of the church member’s confession. He also wrote that John Ortberg defended his handling of the situation and said that their advice was dismissed—in part because both Lavery and his wife are transgender. Lavery also said that Ortberg did not know if the church member was still traveling overnight with children.

Lavery, who writes the Dear Prudence advice column for , said that he suggested that the church member seek treatment and immediately stop volunteering with the church. He also said he wrote to John Ortberg and urged him to report the situation to the church’s elders. When his father did not do that, Lavery said he and his wife reported their concerns to the church board.

Following that conversation, John Ortberg went on leave.

Lavery said that he did not know if the church member had ever acted on their attraction to minors.

“I have no firsthand knowledge of any criminal activity, and I have real compassion for anyone trying to treat sexual compulsions with accountability and oversight,” he wrote on Twitter. “But the situation they had created was risky, unsafe and unsustainable.”

In their statement, Menlo Church leaders say they hired an independent investigator to look into the concerns over John Ortberg’s handling of the church member.

“Based on that investigation, interviews with supervising staff across Student’s and Children’s ministries, and a review of detailed volunteer records, the Board has not found any misconduct in the Menlo Church community, and the

investigation did not reveal any allegations of misconduct," their statement reads. "Nevertheless, the investigation showed John exhibited poor judgment that was inconsistent with his responsibilities as Senior Pastor."

The church's elders say that if any abuse allegations are raised in the future, those allegations will be reported to law enforcement. A church spokesperson said that church member in question was a part-time volunteer in the past and has not volunteered at church events since concerns about them were reported to the board.

The church spokesperson also said the investigator was empowered to search for allegations of misconduct but would not give details, such as whether or not the investigator spoke to parents of children the volunteer had interacted with or with the children themselves.

Such details were confidential, said the spokesperson.

According to the statement, John Ortberg agrees that "he did not handle this matter consistent with his responsibilities to Menlo Church and the Board's expectations of him."

Furthermore, the statement continues, "He deeply apologizes for his action and decisions, and is committed to the safety and integrity of our community and to ensuring that such a situation does not arise again."

Church leaders recently adopted a "restoration plan" that would allow John Ortberg to return to the pulpit, pending the board's approval, but did not indicate whether John Ortberg had been disciplined or reprimanded for his actions.

Their statement also outlined the church's child protection policies, which bar volunteers from being alone with children.

John Ortberg did not reply to a request for comment. However, after RNS emailed the pastor, a church staffer sent RNS the

statement from the elders.

A former teaching pastor at Willow Creek, John Ortberg and his wife, Nancy, made headlines in 2018 when they raised questions about the conduct of megachurch pastor Bill Hybels. John Ortberg is a popular speaker and author of books like *Soul Keeping*, *The Life You've Always Wanted* and *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. He also hosts the *What Were You Thinking?* podcast.

Lavery said in his Twitter comments that the church's response was puzzling—as John Ortberg apologized, yet the church found no misconduct.

“As a non-churchgoer, I have no position on what an appropriate ecclesiastical response might be, and I am not aware of the full scope of the investigation,” he wrote. “This has been personally devastating, and broken the trust that once existed between me and the Ortberg family. I have no further public statements to make at this time.”

This story has been updated to clarify that the church volunteer no longer works with children and no misconduct was found.

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