

Willow Creek Elders: Former Pastor Bill Hybels Entered Into Sin Regarding Sexual Misconduct Allegations

Former megachurch pastor Bill Hybels “entered into areas of sin” regarding the sexual misconduct allegations brought against him earlier this year.

“We apologize and ask for forgiveness that the tone of our initial response was not one of humility and deep concern for all the women involved. It takes courage for a woman to step forward and share her story,” the Willow Creek board of elders posted in a statement on the church site. “We are grieved that we let Bill’s statement stand for as long as we did that the women were lying and colluding. We now believe Bill entered into areas of sin related to the allegations that have been brought forth.”

Hybels, the founder of the multisite Willow Creek Church, resigned earlier this year after multiple women alleged sexual misconduct against the pastor. Though Hybels was set to step down come October, lead pastor Heather Larson and lead teaching pastor Steve Carter took on the chief pastoral roles sooner than expected.

The *Chicago Tribune* launched an investigation into the prominent leader, which they published in March.

Last year, elders retained a Chicago law firm that specializes in workplace issues to look into allegations against Hybels involving three women. According to communications from the law firm reviewed by the *Tribune*, that investigation was also to include any other evidence “of sex-related sin, whether conducted or condoned by Bill

Hybels," and be limited to his time as a church minister.

So far this year, two women have told the *Tribune* that they had been contacted by an elder to participate in a review. One of those women, Vonda Dyer, declined to participate, citing concerns about the process. Dyer, a former director of the church's vocal ministry who often traveled with Hybels and whose husband also worked at Willow, told the *Tribune* that Hybels called her to his hotel suite on a trip to Sweden in 1998, unexpectedly kissed her and suggested they could lead Willow Creek together...

Many of the women who spoke with the *Tribune* were loathe to come forward for fear of betraying a man who had encouraged their leadership in a way that no other pastor had before and undermining a ministry that has transformed thousands of lives. But when they heard there were other women who had similar stories to tell, even in the last year, they said their silence could not last.

"That was a bit of a tipping point for me," said Nancy Beach, the church's first female teaching pastor and a prominent leader in the evangelical community. She recounted more than one conversation or interaction she felt was inappropriate during moments alone with Hybels over the years.

"He changed my life. I wouldn't have the opportunities I've had," she added. "I know that. I'm very clear on that. I credit him for that. But then there's this other side."

The Willow Creek elders flatly denied the allegations at the time and accused the women of colluding against Hybels.

Now, the board along with Larsen and Carter have apologized for the way they handled the situation.

Larsen now says:

It was stated that the allegations are all lies, and I do not

believe that. I should have jumped in and declared that personally right away when that statement was made. I believe the stories that Bill had interactions that were hurtful to these women. That is wrong, and I hope and pray that someday this can be made right.

I ask for forgiveness that I did not personally declare that sooner.

The women showed courage in coming forward. In full transparency of what was going on in me, one of the hardest parts for me was that I did not agree with how the information came out in the media, and I allowed that to get in the way of focusing on the pain of these women. I am sorry. I should have listened more to why the women felt like they were forced to take that path.

It was wrong to host those first family meetings and to release those initial posted statements in the way we did. We should have started by listening. As I walked out on stage that first night, I realized that the humility and tone were not right, and I have deep regrets about even holding those meetings. I said things that hurt people, and I am deeply sorry.

It grieves me that people felt like they had to take sides and that this situation has created such division. I long for personal conversations, for ownership, for repentance, for healing.

Carter says:

Specifically, I do not think it should have been said that the women were lying or that they were colluding against Bill and the church. I believe the women and applaud their courage.

I have personally reached out to and connected with several

of the victims and listened to their experiences. I have made private apologies to several of the women and their families for the way they have been treated. I thank God for the opportunity to seek grace and forgiveness from these individuals.

I recognize that I am not blameless in this. I take full responsibility for my actions that contributed to the injustice that was done to these women. I should not have been on stage for any of the family meetings, to pray or lead any part of those nights. I believe now that what our church needed initially was to practice transparency and repentance, to grieve, and to reflect on what Jesus was inviting us into and to listen to the Holy Spirit. I wish I had done more to prevent the hurtful statements that were made, and to advocate more forcefully for what I believe would have been a more humble and biblical approach.

For this, I am deeply sorry and ask your forgiveness.

Moving forward, the board says they are:

- Expanding their investigative efforts to, as best they can, get to the truth around these allegations.
- Eliciting outside expertise in the area of board governance with the hope to not repeat mistakes made in the past and provide the guidance they need to be effective going forward.