

Willow Creek Interim Pastor to Step Down, Senior Pastor Candidates Out

The search for a new leader at Willow Creek Community Church is back to the drawing board.

Elders at the suburban Chicago megachurch announced Thursday (Jan. 30) that they have released the two finalists they were considering for the role of senior pastor from the search process.

The elders also announced that acting senior pastor Steve Gillen will step down in March.

The church has been without a permanent senior pastor since pastors Heather Larson and Steve Carter resigned in August 2018 as a result of the church's mishandling of misconduct allegations against founding pastor Bill Hybels. Its previous elder board also resigned at that time.

Earlier this week, Willow Creek was rocked by news that Hybels' mentor Gilbert Bilezikian—known widely as “Dr. B”—had been accused of misconduct between 1984 and 1988 by a longtime church member.

Bilezikian denied those allegations to Religion News Service. Church elders, however, said they believe they are true.

Gillen acknowledged the “difficult news about one of our founders and someone who's had a huge impact on many of our lives” before the midweek service Wednesday on Willow Creek's main campus in South Barrington, Illinois.

“Truthfully, I don't want to get into it, because in my sadness, I just want to focus on God. I want to sing songs to him, and I want to one more time in my life acknowledge he is

the foundation of my life and he is the foundation of our church," he said.

Elders had planned to announce a new senior pastor by the end of 2019.

In their update Thursday, they wrote: "While both candidates have strong qualities as pastors, we released both from candidacy. Our consensus was that neither candidate is the long-term leader of Willow Creek; therefore, the search process has continued."

The elder board is working with Christian executive search firm Vanderbloemen to continue its search for a new senior pastor and already has initial interviews with six "strong" candidates this week, it said.

"Our Willow church family and Christian family at large have prayed that God will give wisdom and guide this decision. We trust that God heard our prayers and that the Holy Spirit is at work in this determination," it said.

Gillen has served at Willow Creek for 23 years, according to the elders update. He was lead pastor at the church's North Shore campus before stepping in as acting senior pastor of Willow Creek's main campus 18 months ago.

The church's elders said that Gillen's departure was prompted by the delay in finding a new senior pastor.

"This news is challenging given all that has taken place in the past couple of years," they said. {eo}

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