

Ministry leader Gothard quits after abuse allegations

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

Bill Gothard, an Illinois-based advocate for homeschooling and conservative dress who assails rock music and debt, has resigned from the ministry he founded after allegations he sexually harassed women who worked at his ministry and failed to report child abuse cases.

Gothard's resignation from the Institute in Basic Life Principles, according to a letter sent to families affiliated with the ministry, came a week after he was put on administrative leave. According to an organizer involved in the whistle-blowing website Recovering Grace, 34 women told the website they had been sexually harassed; four women alleged molestation.

Gothard told IBLP's board of directors he wanted to follow the New Testament command to listen to those who made accusations against him, according to an e-mail sent from David Waller, administrative director of the Advanced Training Institute, to families involved in the ministry. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus directs his followers to "go and be reconciled" if "your brother or sister has something against you."

"To give his full attention to this objective, Mr. Gothard has resigned as president of the Institute in Basic Life Principles, its board of directors, and its affiliated entities," Waller's e-mail said.

Waller said the two institutes will continue under interim leadership, including upcoming conferences in Nashville and Sacramento under ATI president Chris Hogan.

Gothard's ministry had been a popular gathering spot for thousands of Christian families, including the Duggar family from TLC's *19 Kids and Counting*. Gothard's ATI conferences were also popular among families within the Quiverfull movement, who eschew birth control and promote big families.

Gothard has also rubbed shoulders with Republican leaders. He and former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee were photographed at a campaign lunch together; former Georgia governor Sonny Perdue spoke at one of Gothard's conferences; and Sarah Palin, when she was a small-town mayor in Alaska, attended his International Association of Character Cities conferences, declaring Wasilla among Gothard's "Cities of Character."

The allegations against Gothard dovetail with financial woes. In recent years, IBLP's net revenue has dropped significantly, and the ministry is losing money. Between 2009 and 2012, it lost \$8.6 million. Its net assets dropped from \$92 million in 2010 to \$81 million in 2012. It held 504 seminars in 2010, but that number dropped to fewer than 50 in 2012.

Since it started as a class at Gothard's alma mater, Wheaton College, in 1961, more than 2.5 million people have gone through his "basic seminar" training on authority, success, and other issues.

The financial decline came around the same time that the whistle-blowing website Recovering Grace was formed in 2011. A string of allegations has been posted on the website, including one alleging that Gothard molested a woman who was underage in the early 1990s. Four posts allege Gothard engaged in sexual harassment, and four posts allege he failed to report child abuse to Child Protective Services.

Gretchen Swearingen, who goes by her middle name Charlotte, wrote on the website that Gothard requested she come work for him in 1992 at IBLP's headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois, when she was 16. During her time there, she said Gothard would play footsie with her and hold her hand. At one point, she said, he had coordinated a ride from the airport for them to be together. "That's when he first put his hand between my legs and felt me all the way up," she wrote.

Now 38, she said the statute of limitations has expired, leaving her unable to sue. She said she informed her mother, who told her she was lying. Swearingen assumed there was nothing she could do.

"No one was there when the molestation was happening," she said in an interview. "I never had the guts to say anything. I thought if my mother didn't believe me, who would? You're not to bring home false witness against someone at headquarters." She said that she and her mother have reconciled since she wrote her story.

Gothard would create an emotional bond with several women during counseling, said Rachel Frost, who also worked at IBLP's headquarters when she was 16. "There was a very common grooming pattern of creating emotional bonds and physical affirmations, the footsie, the leg rubs, the stroking of the hair, the constant comments on physical appearance," she said.

IBLP is not the only institution in more conservative evangelical circles currently under scrutiny.

Last year, another prominent homeschooling leader, Doug Phillips, stepped down from his ministry, which shut down after he acknowledged an extramarital relationship. The *New Republic* recently published a piece on Patrick Henry College, a school popular among homeschooling families, suggesting that the college had failed to report sexual abuse. In a statement, the college took issue with some of the allegations made in the piece.

In recent weeks, Bob Jones University, which started popular curricula for homeschooling families, fired and then rehired an independent firm to investigate sexual abuse reports just one month before the group planned to release its 13-month review findings. —RNS

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