

Megachurch pastors leave Reformed evangelical network amid child abuse scandal

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(RNS) Two pastors have left a Reformed evangelical group after a pastor from the Maryland megachurch they oversaw confessed to covering up sex abuse claims, the latest chapter in a public struggle over evangelicals coming to terms with abuse within their ranks.

Pastors Joshua Harris and C.J. Mahaney left the leadership council of The Gospel Coalition, a central hub for the Reformed evangelical movement, after a trial involving child abuse at Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, which both men have overseen.

A criminal trial that concluded last week raised questions about what pastors at Covenant Life knew about the abuse and why steps weren't taken to stop it.

Nathaniel Morales, 56, was convicted Thursday (May 15) of sexually abusing three underage boys between 1983 and 1991 when he was a youth leader at Covenant Life.

During testimony, former Covenant Life pastor Grant Layman suggested that he withheld information from the police about the abuse allegations against Morales.

"Did you have an obligation to report the alleged abuse?" public defender Alan Drew, who represented Morales, asked during cross-examination. "I believe so," Layman said. "And you didn't," Drew responded. "No," Layman said.

Layman, who is Mahaney's brother-in-law, stepped down from his role at Covenant Life in March.

Mahaney and Harris are among a coterie of evangelical leaders who are trying to push the movement toward an embrace of Reformed theology, which has

traditionally been the domain of Presbyterians and other followers of John Calvin, the 16th-century French theologian.

Reformed theology differs from some evangelical teaching in key aspects, particularly on the question of salvation, and it has roiled life within the Southern Baptist Convention, where 30 percent of pastors now consider themselves Calvinists, or Reformed.

The allegations of abuse cover-up that have dogged Mahaney's leadership—he was never personally accused of abuse—in recent years have also cast unwanted attention on the Reformed network he helped start and have sent leading Reformed pastors rushing to his defense.

Mahaney founded Covenant Life in 1977 and now leads Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville, Kentucky, which is also the home of Sovereign Grace Ministries, a national association of 80 Reformed evangelical churches.

Mahaney could not be reached for comment, but Harris tweeted Monday that he needed to focus on repairing the Maryland megachurch, which he inherited from Mahaney in 2004: "I resigned the @TGC Council because I don't want the present challenges at my church to distract from this terrific ministry. Godspeed, TGC!"

Mahaney and Harris are no longer listed on The Gospel Coalition website, which boasts of leaders such as Al Mohler, president of Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City; and Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

An employee at The Gospel Coalition said no further comment was expected.

Harris said in a tearful sermon on Sunday (May 18) that he has asked the church's board to consider placing him on administrative leave while the church continues to investigate the issue. "We have a zero tolerance policy of abuse of any kind," Harris said, urging people to go to the police if they know of any abuse.

Harris said that because of a separate civil lawsuit, church leaders are unable to speak openly about what pastors knew what when. "Right now, we're still getting conflicting information," Harris said.

In a statement released last year, Covenant Life leaders said they didn't know about the abuse until "many years later."

Nearly a year ago, Mohler, Keller, and others came to Mahaney's defense after he was accused in a lawsuit of covering up sexual abuse of children. Mahaney announced that he would pull out of a conference called Together 4 the Gospel due to ongoing lawsuits, though he was seated in the front of the audience with conference leaders.

Mahaney took a leave of absence from Sovereign Grace Ministries in 2011 after other pastors in the network charged him with "expressions of pride, unentreatability, deceit, sinful judgment, and hypocrisy." Six months later, the group reinstated Mahaney, declaring full confidence in him.

In October 2012, the same month that a lawsuit was filed, Mahaney stepped down from Sovereign Grace Ministries to focus on pastoral ministry. Two months later, Harris' Maryland church voted to leave the Sovereign Grace network.

In a sermon a year ago, Harris acknowledged that he had been sexually abused as a child, telling the congregation amid the ongoing lawsuit, "Please don't allow the circumstance to draw you away from faith in Jesus."