

Megachurch founder Bill Hybels denies reports of sexual misconduct

Church elders and an outside firm investigated and cleared Hybels. But recently several former employees went public with their accounts—and doubts about the investigations.

by Religion News Service staff and [Christian Century staff](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue



Bill Hybels in 2012. Photo by Marc Gilgen via Creative Commons.

Bill Hybels, co-founder of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, one of the nation's largest megachurches, has been investigated because of allegations of inappropriate behavior with women in his congregation and on its staff.

Those inquiries cleared Hybels. He and the church elders posted statements denying the allegations on the Willow Creek website after [the *Chicago Tribune* published a report in late March](#).

The report included accounts that were the subject of those inquiries, as well as others that women recounted to the *Tribune*, including the following:

- Vonda Dyer, a former director of vocal ministry at Willow Creek, said Hybels called her to his hotel suite on a trip to Sweden in 1998, where he made

comments about her appearance, kissed her, and suggested they could lead Willow Creek together.

- Nancy Beach, the church's first female teaching pastor, said Hybels asked her to extend a European trip in 1999 to coach a church in Spain. While there, he invited her to long dinners; commented on her arms, which he called her most attractive body part; confided he was unhappy in his marriage; and invited her to his hotel room for a glass of wine and an uncomfortably long hug.
- Leanne Mellado said she alerted church elders and former teaching pastors John and Nancy Ortberg when a friend told her in 2013 she had had a consensual affair with Hybels, including intimate email and oral sex. The unnamed woman later denied it when contacted by an elder.

Unsatisfied with elders' investigation into the allegations shared with Mellado, Nancy Ortberg, who was a member of the Willow Creek Association board, and other board members pushed for an independent investigation, according to the *Tribune*. When that didn't happen, Ortberg resigned from the board, along with Jon Wallace, president of Azusa Pacific University, and Kara Powell, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute and a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Last year, Willow Creek elders hired Jeffrey Fowler of Laner Muchin in Chicago to renew an investigation, according to the *Tribune*. Fowler, a lawyer specializing in workplace issues, closed the investigation last April, clearing Hybels of any misconduct, although he told the newspaper the investigation did not have the full cooperation of many involved.

Among the concerns the former church staff expressed was lack of full access to documents and records for the investigation, the *Tribune* reported.

Hybels announced last year he would step down in October as senior pastor of the church he co-founded. In his statement, he said the allegations coming out now are an effort "to try to keep me from ending my tenure here at Willow with my reputation intact."

"Let me be clear: none of these allegations are true," he said.

Pam Orr, chair of the Willow Creek elder board, wrote in a statement, "We have full confidence in Bill's character, and we look forward to him continuing in his role as senior pastor until he transitions as planned." —Religion News Service staff, with added information

FOLLOWING UP (Updated October 5): Bill Hybels resigned April 10 as senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church. While still denying the accounts of sexual harassment and extramarital affairs, he apologized for having “often placed myself in situations that would have been far wiser to avoid.” He also wrote, “I realize now that in certain settings and circumstances in the past I communicated things that were perceived in ways I did not intend, at times making people feel uncomfortable.” After Hybels resigned, Heather Larson, who had been executive pastor, became the lead pastor of Willow Creek, and Steve Carter became lead teaching pastor, as had been previously planned.

Larson, Carter, and the elders publicly apologized in June for the way the church responded to accounts of misconduct by Hybels. “It was stated that the allegations are all lies, and I do not believe that,” Larson said. “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.” She also said the congregation’s leaders should have “started by listening” in its first meetings after several women spoke to the *Chicago Tribune* about sexual harassment and assault by Hybels. [Carter added his assessment](#) that the way the church elders investigated those accounts had been unjust. The elders in their own statement said they were “expanding our investigative efforts to, as best we can, get to the truth around these allegations.”

A few weeks later Carter, Larson, and the entire board of elders resigned after another woman came forward with an account of sexual abuse by Hybels. “Trust has been broken by leadership, and it doesn’t return quickly,” Larson said. “There is urgency to move us in a better direction.”

Missy Rasmussen, one of the elders, said the board now could see the flaws in its investigation of multiple accounts of sexual harassment and assault by Hybels, including some from former staff members—all of which he has denied. “We are sorry that our initial statement was so insensitive, defensive, and reflexively protective of Bill,” Rasmussen said. “We exhort Bill to acknowledge his sin and publicly apologize.”

The board will leave in waves by the end of the year, Religion News Service reported, and Steve Gillen, who pastors a nearby campus of Willow Creek, one of the nation’s largest megachurches, stepped in as interim lead pastor.

Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association [commissioned four Christian leaders to form an independent advisory group](#) to review their “organizational culture” and accounts of sexual harassment by Hybels. Jo Anne Lyon, general superintendent emerita of the Wesleyan Church, and Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, are cochairs, while Margaret Diddams, provost of Wheaton College, and Gary Walter, past president of the Evangelical Covenant Church, are also members. They were nominated by evangelical Christian leaders outside of Willow Creek, according to a statement released in late September.

The independent advisory group “will work autonomously,” with the church and association providing information and other cooperation as needed. The group estimates it will deliver its recommendations in early 2019.

FOLLOWING UP (Updated March 12, 2019): The accounts of “sexually inappropriate words and actions” by Bill Hybels are credible, according to the recently released report of an independent group of Christian leaders advising the northern Illinois megachurch. It said the group concluded Hybels also verbally and emotionally intimidated both male and female employees, Religion News Service reported. The incidents occurred in multiple decades, and neither the church nor the connected Willow Creek Association did enough to stop him. The association announced in February that it will change its name to the Global Leadership Network.

Issues with the corporate culture at both the church and association mostly were related to their shared founder and don’t necessarily pose a problem moving forward, the report said. It suggested that the church should provide financial assistance for those harmed by Hybels.

Versions of this article appear in the print edition under the title “People: Bill Hybels” and in the Following up section.