

Megachurch pastor John Ortberg faces new church investigation

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue



John Ortberg preaches at Menlo Church in May 2020. (Video screengrab)

In early July, megachurch pastor John Ortberg claimed his congregation had “extensively investigated” concerns about his son and found “no misconduct.”

Now elders at Menlo Church, a Bay Area congregation of 5,000, say their initial investigation fell short and have announced plans for an additional “supplemental” investigation.

“While many of you know that the Board took immediate action upon learning of these concerns, we understand our initial investigation could have gone further and included specific expertise in child safety and sex abuse issues, and it could have been informed by conversations with a wider group of people,” church elders said in an email to the congregation on July 11.

Ortberg was placed on leave last fall after church leaders learned he had withheld information about his son from them, a move they described as “poor judgment and

a betrayal of trust.”

In July 2018, Ortberg’s younger son—who volunteered with children at the church and in the community—told his father he experienced what church leaders called an “unwanted thought pattern of attraction to minors.” The senior Ortberg did not tell church leaders or staff about what he had learned from his son. Nor did he act to prevent his son from working with children.

Church leaders finally learned of Ortberg’s decision after his older son, Daniel Lavery, wrote to them expressing concerns.

As reported by Religion News Service, the elders hired an investigator who talked to church staff and Lavery, among others, but never spoke with Ortberg’s younger son or with any parents of children who had contact with him. The church consistently defended its investigation as “independent” and said no misconduct was found.

Yet, after the identity of the volunteer and his ties to Ortberg became public in June of this year, congregation members began to push back against the elders.

“After carefully listening to our community these last several days about the investigation into a former church volunteer, we want to first acknowledge the Board’s ownership in what we have done to contribute to the pain and distrust many of you are feeling right now,” the elders said in the statement. “Fundamentally, we did not provide the transparency that our community deserves and as a result have eroded the trust some of you place in our leadership.”

Church elders said they would begin a “supplemental investigation” to be overseen by a committee including elders, parents, staff, and volunteers.

On social media, Lavery expressed disappointment in the church’s announcement and called for Ortberg to be removed as pastor.

“This plan is a non-starter, a confession of failure, and a disgrace,” Lavery said on Twitter.

During an online church service, Eugene Lee, an executive pastor at Menlo Church, acknowledged the recent controversy at the beginning of his sermon.

Lee did not specifically mention Ortberg in his opening remarks, instead mentioning “a hard week for our church.”

“I have talked to so many of you who are hurting, disappointed, confused and heartbroken, and I am so sorry you are feeling that way,” he said. “We are listening and praying, and we hear your concerns. We are listening to your questions, and we understand your disappointment.”

Lee also said church leaders were working on “significant next steps.” —Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (UPDATED AUGUST 10): John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Church outside of San Francisco, has resigned following accusations of misconduct. Last year, it was revealed that after learning that his youngest son was attracted to children, Ortberg continued to allow him to volunteer with children—both in the church and in the community. Ortberg’s son has not been accused of any misconduct or abuse.

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