

Menlo Church investigation finds no direct evidence of sexual abuse

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [November 17, 2021](#) issue

A third-party investigation at one of Northern California's most prominent megachurches ended in October with a report that found no evidence the pastor's adult child had acted on his confessed attraction to minors.

"After interviewing 104 witnesses and reviewing or analyzing more than 500,000 documents, Zero Abuse Project did not find any disclosure or other direct evidence the volunteer in question sexually abused a child," said the report by the firm hired by Menlo Church, near San Francisco, to study its handling of the confession.

In 2018, one of pastor John Ortberg's offspring, referred to only as "Individual A" in the report but identified in earlier news reports as Johnny Ortberg, confessed to having long been sexually attracted to children.

John Ortberg, a best-selling author who played a role in exposing misconduct by former Willow Creek pastor Bill Hybels, did not report the confession to church staff or other leaders. Nor did he remove Individual A from volunteering with children at the church or insist the volunteer stop coaching a youth sports team.

The matter remained secret until another Ortberg family member, Daniel Lavery, informed church leaders. The pastor was suspended in late 2019 and was then allowed to return, but the congregation was not told about the family connection between Individual A and their pastor.

"Zero Abuse concludes that the decision of the Senior Pastor not to disclose to church leaders or others the conversation he had with the volunteer, as well as the decision of the church Elders not to be fully transparent about this situation, caused significant damage to the Menlo community," the report states.

The report found leaders had harmed the church by withholding key information from congregation members, including the fact that the church volunteer who had confessed to being attracted to children was a member of Ortberg's family. Ortberg resigned in summer 2020 after months of controversy at the church.

The review by Zero Abuse also uncovered an unrelated incident of sexual misconduct by a staff member at Menlo. During the review, the church learned a staff member had allegedly solicited nude photos from a teenage boy while serving on staff at another church.

“We advised and assisted Menlo in reporting this case to the authorities and also advised Menlo to terminate the employment of this individual,” Zero Abuse stated in its report. “Menlo did terminate this individual’s employment and communicated this case to its community and the public.”

Zero Abuse also found that Individual A was often alone with individual youth group members, including giving them rides home, but found no evidence of grooming or abuse. At the time, church rules did not ban volunteers from being alone with children or youth.

The report also raised concern about a laptop belonging to Individual A, which had gone missing at one point. Several witnesses reported that Individual A was concerned about their search history being reviewed, because of visits to sites about people who were attracted to children. Individual A denied any illegal activity, according to the witnesses Zero Abuse spoke to.

“In our conversation with him, Individual A also denied doing anything illegal with the laptop. However, he did decline our offer to examine the laptop,” the report stated. The report also stated the evidence “supports a conclusion that Individual A’s laptop had a search history related to his attraction to children.”

Zero Abuse recommended Menlo Church take several steps, including hiring a full-time child protection director, strengthening its child protection policy, and expanding its mandatory reporter training. It also recommended that the church undertake a restorative justice process in order to rebuild trust.

In response to the report, transitional pastor John Crosby and session chair David Kim wrote a letter to the congregation. “We mourn the hurt we have caused,” they wrote, “and we hope the completion and findings of this investigation are the next steps in a healing journey.” —Religion News Service