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SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2018

BREAKING NEWS AT CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

NCAA TOURNAMENT LOYOLA 78, KANSAS STATE 62



Loyola's players celebrate their achievement of reaching the NCAA Final Four with their 78-62 victory over Kansas State on Saturday. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

'WE'RE NOT DONE'

Incredible run goes on as Ramblers become just 4th No. 11 seed to gain Final 4

ATLANTA — The coach of the team that lets nothing get in its way climbed across the press table Saturday at Philips Arena and made his way into the third row of rowdiness.

Porter Moser hugged his wife, Megan, whose eyes were moist, before embracing his crying teenage daughter, Jordan, and each of his sons, Jake, Ben and Max.

Maroon-and-gold mania surrounded the Mosers in the stands and on the floor,

DAVID HAUGH
In the Wake of the News

Yes, as inexplicable as it seems, Loyola did it, going to the Final Four for the first time in 55 years and becoming only the fourth No. 11 seed to do so.

Cinderella is off to the Alamo — and it

the euphoria created by Loyola's emphatic 78-62 victory over Kansas State in the NCAA tournament South Region final that earned the school a trip to the Final Four in San Antonio.

"We did it," Moser said into his wife's ear.

"How about them Ramblers?" Moser screamed like a basketball evangelist. "I

promises to be a trip to remember.

After returning to the court for the celebration, Moser grabbed the microphone as captains Ben Richardson and Donté Ingram hoisted a trophy in front of their teammates, who all wore black "Final Four" hats. Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, the international celebrity smiling in her wheelchair, accepted hugs from players on their way to the grandest stage of their lives.

"How about them Ramblers?" Moser screamed like a basketball evangelist. "I

Turn to Haugh, Page 16

After years of inquiries, pastor denies allegations

Ex-Willow Creek leaders remain unsatisfied with misconduct reviews

BY MANYA BRACHEAR PASHMAN AND JEFF COEN
Chicago Tribune

Last October, the Rev. Bill Hybels stood before worshippers at his packed sanctuary and made a stunning announcement. After 42 years building northwest suburban Willow Creek Community Church into one of the nation's most iconic and influential churches, Hybels was planning to step down as senior pastor.

"I feel released from this role," he said, adding that he felt called to build on Willow Creek's reach across 130 countries with a focus on leadership development, particularly in the poorest regions of the world.

After introducing his successors, he invited church elders onstage at the expansive church to lay hands on them and pray.

What much of the church didn't know was that Hybels had been the subject of inquiries into claims that he ran afoul of church teachings by engaging in inappropriate behavior with women in his congregation — including employees — allegedly spanning decades. The inquiries had cleared Hybels, and church leaders said his exit had nothing to do with the allegations.

An investigation by the Chicago Tribune examined those allegations and other claims of inappropriate behavior by Hybels, documented through interviews with current and former church members, elders and employees, as well as hundreds of emails and internal records.

The alleged behavior included suggestive comments, extended hugs, an unwanted kiss and invitations to hotel rooms. It also included an allegation of a prolonged consensual affair with a married woman who later said



The Rev. Bill Hybels

Turn to Pastor, Page 10

Young activists stand up against gun violence

Fla. school shooting moves students to demand change

BY VICKI ORTIZ HEALY AND ESE OLUMHENSE
Chicago Tribune

Pumping their fists and chanting "student power," thousands of young activists swarmed Union Park on Saturday, joining a nationwide cry for gun reform while using the spotlight to also demand solutions for everyday violence on Chi-

IN WASHINGTON: Students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School took the stage at the March for Our Lives rally and called for Congress to enact stricter gun controls in response to the nation's decadeslong stretch of campus shootings. **Nation & World, Page 27**

cago's streets.

"I don't have anything to lose — not a paycheck, not an endorsement or a fancy beach house," said Caitlyn

Smith, a 12-year-old Chicago Heights girl who was chosen by her peers to address a March for Our Lives Chicago crowd so large it spilled outside the park boundaries and blocked traffic nearby. Smith described how she became determined to end Chicago violence after her older brother was shot in the head outside her family's former Englewood home seven years ago. The crowd erupted into cheers

Turn to March, Page 16



ABEL URIBE/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Thousands of people gather Saturday in Union Park for the March for Our Lives Chicago rally against gun violence.

Mental health assistance is at breaking point
Business

TOM SKILLING'S WEATHER

High 44
Low 29

Complete forecast in Nation & World, Page 39
\$3.99 city and suburbs,
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Pastor denies misconduct claims

Pastor, from Page 1

her claim about the affair was not true, the Tribune found.

Elders of the church — appointed members who oversee Willow Creek's administration and pastor — had conducted the reviews after claims about Hybels came to their attention more than four years ago.

Pushing the investigation were two former teaching pastors and the wife of a longtime president of the Willow Creek Association, a nonprofit organization related to the church. Some of those pressing for more scrutiny say the church's prior investigation had shortcomings in their opinion and at least three leaders of the association's board resigned over what they believed was an insufficient inquiry.

A humanitarian aid agency also chose not to renew its sponsorship of the church's Global Leadership Summit over concerns about the association's process for reviewing complaints about senior leaders.

Hybels sat down with the Tribune for a lengthy interview last week and at times grew emotional as he flatly denied doing anything improper and dismissed the allegations against him as lies spun with the intent of discrediting his ministry.

The pastor said he has built his church with a culture of open conversation, strength and transparency, and said he could not understand why a group of former prominent members of his church — some of them onetime close friends — have "colluded" against him.

"This has been a calculated and continual attack on our elders and on me for four long years. It's time that gets identified," he told the Tribune. "I want to speak to all the people around the country that have been misled... for the past four years and tell them in my voice, in as strong a voice as you'll allow me to tell it, that the charges against me are false. There still to this day is not evidence of misconduct on my part."

"I have a wife and kids and grandkids," he added, praising the elders for their work to look into the allegations. "My family has had enough and they want the record clear. And they feel strongly supportive of me saying what I have to say to protect my family and clear my family's name as well."

In the case of the alleged affair, the wife of the association's outgoing president said the woman confided in her, expressing regret and misgivings. She later denied the alleged affair when contacted by an elder investigating the matter, according to internal documents and interviews.

Hybels also denied the alleged affair during an initial inquiry in 2014. The elders said they believed him.

Elders have a vital oversight role at Willow Creek. Among their duties is to "carry the ultimate responsibility and authority to see that the church remains on a true biblical course" the church's website says. That includes an annual review of the senior pastor, and "confronting those who are contradicting biblical truth or continuing in a pattern of sinful behavior."

Last year, elders retained a Chicago law firm that specializes in workplace issues to look into allegations against Hybels involving three women. According to communications from the law firm reviewed by the Tribune, that investigation was also to include any other evidence "of sexualized sin, whether conducted or condoned by Bill Hybels," and be limited to his time as a church minister.

So far this year, two women have told the Tribune that they had been contacted by an elder to participate in a review. One of those women, Vonda Dyer, declined to participate, citing concerns about the process. Dyer, a former director of the church's vocal ministry who often traveled with Hybels and whose husband also worked at Willow, told the Tribune that Hybels called her to his

hotel suite on a trip to Sweden in 1998, unexpectedly kissed her and suggested they could lead Willow Creek together.

She said she hoped Hybels would acknowledge his alleged behavior was wrong and look to God for forgiveness.

"I would love for him to experience that kind of redemption," she said.

Asked about Dyer's allegations, Hybels told the Tribune that they are false and that he never did anything inappropriate with her. He had invited her to a conference area of his hotel suite, he said, to discuss adding a song to church programming. He said he was unsure why Dyer would now make the claim.

"I've never had an unkind word or a falling-out of any kind" with Dyer, Hybels said. "I've never had a cross conversation with her. Then, in the last four weeks, a story from (1998) with untrue allegations, pops up right at the same time that these other ones are being molded together to discredit my ministry. And I'm like, how convenient."

The church's highest-ranking elder, Pam Orr, said she is confident that the church's inquiries were thorough and reliable.

"We felt really good about the conclusions that we came to, and then put the matter to rest," Orr told the Tribune in an interview. She said the board hired a "very qualified" outside lawyer to conduct an investigation and that he came back with the same conclusion.

Orr said the church was not presented with any clear evidence that Hybels had behaved inappropriately.

The board of the Willow Creek Association, a nonprofit founded by Hybels that trains Christian leaders around the globe, also considered investigating the allegations that Hybels had behaved inappropriately but ultimately dropped the matter, internal documents show.

Three association board members resigned, after arguing to the board at the time that they believed the elders' review had been inadequate.

Many of the women who spoke with the Tribune were loath to come forward for fear of betraying a man who had encouraged their leadership in a way that no other pastor had before and undergirding a ministry that has transformed thousands of lives. But when they heard there were other women who had similar stories to tell, even in the last year, they said their silence could not last.

"That was a bit of a tipping point for me," said Nancy Beach, the church's first female teaching pastor and a prominent leader in the evangelical community. She recounted more than one conversation or interaction she felt was inappropriate during moments alone with Hybels over the years.

"He changed my life. I wouldn't have the opportunities I've had," she added.

"I know that I'm very clear on that. I credit him for that. But then there's this other side."

Humble beginnings

One of the nation's most influential pastors, Hybels grew Willow Creek from a group of zealous 20-somethings inside a Palatine movie theater to one of the largest megachurches in the U.S., hosting more than 25,000 worshippers at its main campus in South Barrington and seven satellite sites any given weekend.

The Willow Creek Association has expanded Hybels' vision to more than 11,000 churches worldwide that share Willow's core philosophies.

From the beginning, he has affirmed women in leadership, tapping them to serve as elders, key volunteers and teaching pastors. Last October, Willow Creek made history in evangelical circles by naming a woman as lead pastor or effectively as chief executive of the megachurch.

"I feel so conflicted about the whole situation because I'm so protective of the reputation of the church,



The Rev. Bill Hybels, center left, shown Dec. 23 at Willow Creek in South Barrington, said he could not understand why former church members and employees — some of them onetime close friends — have "colluded" against him.



Vonda Dyer, shown with husband Scott — both former Willow Creek members — said Hybels kissed her during a 1998 trip.

not just here but globally," Beach said. "But I have confidence that the truth matters. Even though he's 66 years old, there are still young women in his path. I certainly wouldn't want one of my daughters or anyone else to be in this kind of situation."

The #MeToo movement has spurred women across industries and academia to break their silence about sexual harassment or abuse. In the church community, many say there is a higher standard for religious leaders.

"In the Christian world, a consensual affair is still an extremely serious offense," Beach said.

Beach has known Hybels since he arrived on his Harley-Davidson more than 45 years ago at her church in the northwestern suburb of Park Ridge. The intrepid youth pastor had a magnetic effect on the teens.

"His leadership horsepower did captivate me, and we have a lot in common in terms of our gift mix," said Beach, now 60. "We're both communicators, both leaders."

When Hybels and others set out to start their own church in the Palatine movie theater three years later,

Beach and many others from the youth group eventually joined them. Within a year, the church had grown to 1,000 people, many of them spiritual seekers who never had set foot inside a church.

Beach served as a key volunteer. She joined the full-time staff in 1984 to oversee the artistic elements of the worship services, and 10 years later she was preaching on a regular basis.

In 1992, Hybels expanded Willow's reach around the world by establishing the Willow Creek Association. He rose to national prominence, eventually serving as a spiritual adviser to President Bill Clinton around the time of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

At least twice a year, a team traveled overseas to host conferences or coach church leaders. During these travels, Hybels scheduled side trips on his own, sometimes to coach, sometimes to catch his breath, Beach said.

In 1999, he asked Beach to tack two extra days on to a European trip and meet him on the coast of Spain to coach a church, she said. With two young children

and a working husband at home, Beach didn't want to extend the trip but said she also didn't want to disappoint her boss.

But during their two days there, work took a back seat to leisurely walks, long dinners and probing personal conversations, she said.

Over a three-hour dinner, she said he told her that she needed to loosen up and take more emotional risks. He asked her what her most attractive body part was, then told her it was her arms, she said. It also wasn't the first time he talked about how unhappy he was in his marriage, she recalled.

"I'm thinking, 'As a good friend, I'm going to be a sounding board for him,' which is totally inappropriate on my part, but I didn't see it that way at the time," she said. "I knew him since I was 15. He was my pastor. In all those years, nothing inappropriate had happened between him and me."

But something had changed, she recalled. After dinner, Beach said, Hybels invited her to his hotel room for a glass of wine. Before she left, she recalls him giving her an awkwardly long embrace.

"He would always say,

ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ERIN HOOLEY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

"You don't know how to hug. That's not a real hug." So it was like a lingering hug that made me feel uncomfortable. But again, I'm trying to prove that I'm this open person."

The next day, Beach recalled, Hybels didn't seem happy. They didn't have any more long conversations and flew separate flights home. A week later, he asked Beach to stay after a management team meeting and suggested they not tell anyone about what happened in Spain, she said.

"I was so embarrassed. I was like 'Oh, no. We're fine.' And I never did," she said. "I didn't tell my husband until recently when all this stuff came out. I just put it in the category of 'That was really strange.'"

She did tell church elders in 2016 about the alleged incident but later declined to cooperate with an inquiry that she believed didn't meet the criteria of a truly independent investigation.

In the years to come, Hybels occasionally invited Beach to his house after midweek worship services to catch up, she said, adding that she stopped going when she realized he invited her only when his wife



Hybels, right, chats with worshippers in 1989. From the beginning, he has affirmed women in leadership, tapping them to serve as elders, key volunteers and teaching pastors.



Hybels built Willow Creek into one of the largest megachurches in the U.S.; it hosts more than 25,000 congregants at its main campus and seven satellite sites any given weekend.

was away. Hybels, in the interview with the Tribune, insisted that he does not give hugs and denies doing anything inappropriate with Beach, at times bringing his hand down on a table in frustration. Beach had been a close friend, he said, and was a strong enough leader in his church that she would have had the freedom to tell him at the time that she was offended by something he did. He said he recalled not giving Beach latitude to do as much teaching at Willow

Creek as she might have liked but said he did not know whether that had triggered her making allegations against him. Regardless, he insisted he did nothing wrong. "When (the allegation) surfaced in 2016, I was like, no, who twisted that one?" Hybels told the Tribune. "I don't talk about women's appendages. But there was chatter mostly from other women around (Beach), and I probably said people say they wish they could wear the same outfits you do. That it got brought up as

potentially something sexual is maddening." **'It felt like a proposition'** Raised in rural Iowa in a conservative Christian community that eschewed the idea of women in the pulpit, Vonda Dyer discovered a whole new world at Willow Creek when she came east to attend Wheaton College. She was immediately drawn to Willow's contemporary sound and approach to evangelism and volun-

teered on the vocal team. She eventually became a full-time employee in 1997. She met and married her husband, Scott, a youth music pastor also at Willow. Both became part of Hybels' travel team and accompanied him on more than a dozen trips. But Vonda Dyer said she made it into Hybels' inner circle and accompanied him on more trips.

Since Hybels spent most of his summers at a second home in South Haven, Mich., he occasionally took Dyer and others out on his sailboat, Dyer said. On one such excursion with another female colleague, she said he joked that any woman who drops the winch handle had to give the men on the boat a "blow job." Dyer told her husband at the time, an account that he confirmed recently to the Tribune. Hybels denied making the remark, calling it "disturbing."

Scott Dyer said Hybels coached men to avoid being alone with any woman besides the man's spouse — known as the Billy Graham Rule, highlighted recently by Vice President Mike Pence. Yet Hybels didn't seem to abide by that rule when it came to Vonda, said her husband of now more than 26 years. Hybels invited Dyer to meet alone several times, they said.

"I trusted her character entirely, so I knew nothing would happen," Scott Dyer said. "But I was like, that feels like a violation of what you've told everybody... I was uncomfortable with it, and I voiced that to her."

On one international trip, Hybels invited Vonda Dyer alone to his hotel room with explicit instructions to exclude her husband who was there too, the Dyers said. On another trip, Hybels called her up to his room and answered the door, freshly showered, wearing slacks with no shirt and just staring at her, she said. He made a casual remark, she said, before she returned downstairs, wondering why she had been called there in the first place. Her husband remembers being told by Vonda about that as well.

"It was these situations that were not enough to say that it crossed a major line," she said, "but enough to make you go, 'Whoa, what was that?'"

Hybels denied that alleged incident occurred.

Vonda Dyer said Hybels did cross a line in Sweden in February 1998.

Dyer was getting ready to go to bed when Hybels summoned her to his room. Her roommate at the time said in an interview with the Tribune that she remembers picking up the phone and relaying Hybels' message.

Dyer recounted that she went to Hybels' room where he poured wine and invited her to stretch out on the couch while he sat in a separate chair. She said she presumed it would be a quick chat when he told her that he had taken Ambien, a sleep aid.

The conversation quickly turned uncomfortable, she said, when he started complimenting her appearance and criticizing her husband, and suggested they lead Willow together. She said he came over, put his hands on her waist, caressed her stomach and kissed her.

"He told me what he thought about how I looked, very specifically, what he thought about my leadership gifts, my strengths," she said. She recalled Hybels told her she was "sexy." "That was the night that he painted a picture of what great leaders we would be. We could lead Willow together."

"It felt like a proposition," she recently told the Tribune.

She immediately told him he should stand up and go to bed, she recalled. As she left his hotel suite and pulled the door shut, she recalled bursting into tears, still clutching the door handle.

"The Holy Spirit spoke to me: 'Get out of here,'" she said. "All I heard the Holy Spirit say to me is, 'If you stay in this room, you will be destroyed.'"

The next morning at breakfast, Dyer said, Hybels approached her and asked whether anything had hap-

"He changed my life. I wouldn't have the opportunities I've had. ... I credit him for that. But then there's this other side."

— Nancy Beach, Willow Creek's first female teaching pastor, who recounted interactions over the years with the Rev. Bill Hybels she felt were inappropriate

pened that would prompt her to tell the elders. She said she recounted the details and told him if he did it again, she would report it. Though Dyer was contacted independently by one elder this year, she has never shared details of what happened with current elders or church investigators, because she didn't think the church would take her allegations seriously.

Hybels told the Tribune he never kissed or touched Dyer.

"I don't even want to dignify... I have never touched another woman's stomach other than my wife. Why in the world would I touch Vonda Dyer's stomach?" he said.

He said he has a strict protocol for taking sleep aids such as Ambien because he never wants to be out of control, and characterized the rest of Dyer's story as completely false.

"This has reached a point that I can't sit silently by and listen to these allegations anymore," he said. "I will dispute what she said to my dying breath. She is telling lies."

Dyer recalled that she told her husband about what had happened in Hybels' hotel suite soon after she returned, which he confirmed to the Tribune. But she said she did not tell church officials at the time, confident she had sufficiently admonished Hybels.

She did confide at the time in her "small group" — a quartet of church women who met regularly to support one another's spiritual journeys. One of those in the group was Betty Schmidt, an original elder at Willow Creek and current member, who confirmed being told about the unwanted kiss in Sweden.

As time went on, Dyer watched Hybels and how women acted around him. By 2000, she remembers that she started to suspect he was flirting, if not trying to seduce others too. She said she confronted him and, after listing the specific women, told him to knock it off. He didn't deny it, she said.

"Understood," she remembers him saying. Hybels told the Tribune he did not recall the conversation.

Two years later, she was terminated. She has not alleged any connection between her termination and her confrontation with Hybels and has not taken legal action.

When told of Vonda Dyer's story, church elders said they did not know of it.

"We can only act upon what's brought to our attention," Orr, the highest-ranking elder, said.

Dyer said she is speaking up now because she does not want Hybels' behavior to continue what she believes is damaging the church.

"It is God who saves and redeems and heals," she said, "but he wants none of this behavior in his people, in his church."

An inquiry begins

In the fall of 2013, Leanne Mellado was planning to move to Colorado with her husband, Jimmy, the longtime president of the Willow Creek Association.

Amid the goodbyes, a friend asked Leanne Mellado for a private conversation. Something had happened with Hybels, Mellado recalled the woman said. The friend arrived at the Mellados' home, curled up on the couch in the fetal position and began to sob, Mellado recalled in an interview.

Mellado said the woman

told her things had started after a meeting at Hybels' home in Inverness, when the pastor pulled her in for an extended hug, which left her feeling awkward. The relationship progressed through intimate communication over email, the woman said.

Mellado told the Tribune that the woman told her the two eventually had consensual encounters, including oral sex.

Leanne Mellado and the woman exchanged a series of emails. After seven months, Mellado said she decided that the time had come to tell the elders.

It was up to the elders to investigate, uncover the truth and protect everyone, Mellado believed, including this woman.

She had an additional concern. Her husband's new employer, Compassion International, helped sponsor Willow Creek's Global Leadership Summit. It would be irresponsible, she said, for the charity to renew that sponsorship without making sure the woman's allegation had been properly vetted.

Leanne Mellado emailed the woman in late March 2014 saying it was time for light to shine on what had happened. But the woman did not want to cooperate.

"I hope you understand. But if it comes to forcing me, I will be silent," the woman wrote in an email reviewed by the Tribune. "I feel I should not have trusted you." The woman did not respond to Tribune requests for comment.

But by April that year, Mellado had shared her concerns with Willow Creek's highest-ranking elder at the time, Brian Johnson.

Johnson, who did not respond to requests for comment, told Mellado in text messages that he found 1,150 emails between the woman and Hybels but was not able to read them. He then alerted other elders about the situation, said Pam Orr and Rob Campbell, two elders at that time.

The woman urged Mellado to drop it because the board did not have the woman's firsthand story "which for all anybody knows could be a made-up lie," she wrote in an email.

By then it was too late. Mellado had shared the allegations with Johnson. In addition, she also had sought pastoral counsel from John and Nancy Orberg, former teaching pastors at the church. Nancy Orberg was then on the board of the Willow Creek Association.

Orberg reached out to Johnson to emphasize the need for a "fair and thorough investigative process... that has high integrity which protects all parties in pursuit of what is true."

But Orberg and Mellado would allege later that the elders' review was not as thorough as they had expected.

On April 6, 2014, a Sunday, Johnson and another elder asked Hybels about the alleged affair, and he denied it, Campbell said. Though Hybels offered his electronic devices and financial records for review, the elders were unable to read the emails.

Hybels told the Tribune that his email had been hacked twice in the last 20 years, so he made sure his messages weren't archived to prevent sensitive pastoral matters from leaking out.

Also on April 6, Orr contacted the woman, who also denied any affair. Later that day, the woman wrote an apologetic email to Mellado.

"Some of what I told you happened... the institutions, the flirting. But there is no truth to the other things," she wrote in an email, adding that she had invented the rest because she was angry with Hybels and the church.

Hybels remembers meeting two elders backstage that day after he preached, and being told he was being accused of having an affair with a woman he describes as a friend.

"It was shocking to me," he told the Tribune. "I told them in the first 30 seconds of hearing it, 'This is a lie. There is no truth to this.'"

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Ex-leaders unsatisfied with reviews

Pastor, from Page 11

Hybels said he knew the woman was angry with him at the time for not giving her a job. He said she showed up on the doorstep of his home the following night sobbing and apologized for having lied to Mellado about Hybels, adding that she had considered taking her own life.

"It came like a meteor out of the sky," he said of the allegation. "To this day, I cannot understand. I have no way of knowing what was going on in her mind."

Less than a week later, Hybels emailed Nancy Orterberg and told her the woman had "made it all up," Orterberg said.

Orterberg, though, was unsatisfied. She and other members of the association board pushed for an independent investigation.

Orterberg recalled that her frustrations with the pastor mounted while the initial allegations of an affair were being considered by the Willow Creek Association board. She recalled that during that debate, Hybels told her that the woman at the center of the inquiry was suicidal. He said he continued to offer her counseling — a clear conflict, in Orterberg's view, for someone in Hybels' position.

The elders, though, didn't share Orterberg's alarm because, Campbell said, Hybels was fulfilling his pastoral duty and had kept elders informed every time the woman reached out to him.

After hearing this, Orterberg renewed contact with another woman who, eight years earlier, had confided in Orterberg about her own allegedly inappropriate encounter with Hybels.

The woman told Orterberg about hugs that went on too long and flirty emails and texts using what she said was the code word "moon" — a reference to a time they had been on Hybels' boat alone gazing at a full moon in the night sky, Orterberg said.



The Rev. Bill Hybels preaches in 1985. An attorney hired by Willow Creek elders last year said his investigation of Hybels found no pattern of misconduct.



JAMES MAYO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE
Hybels in 1974, Willow Creek lost an event sponsor over concerns about how complaints are reviewed.

The woman also told Orterberg in 2014 that she had stripped naked on his boat and swam in front of Hybels, Orterberg said. The woman did not allege sexual contact, Orterberg said.

Orterberg took notes — reviewed by the Tribune — on the conversation, in 2014.

Orterberg says she sent the notes to her board colleagues and tried to persuade the woman to talk with a private investigator. But the woman balked at an

emailed reply, saying she did not want to be singled out as an accuser.

What she allegedly did on the boat, she said, did not compare to Hybels' alleged extended and consensual affair with another woman.

"The main reason: if (the first woman) does not come clean there is clearly no case — and having my name out there associated with him, as little as a deal as it is comparatively, does not do any good other than me looking foolish," she wrote in an email reviewed by the Tribune. The woman did not respond to Tribune requests for comment.

Hybels scoffed when asked by the Tribune about that alleged incident on the boat, saying he did recall the woman swimming at night near his boat, but denied doing anything improper or maintaining an inappropriate relationship with her that included coded messaging.

The word moon was not a code word and instead was a reference to leisure time in South Haven, he said.

"When the moon would come up over the trees she thought that was the most

wonderful manifestation of God's beautiful, creative hand," Hybels said. "Look at the moon, everybody. This became a thing. She's a religious, spiritual person."

Once again, Orterberg said her pleas ended in frustration. Church elders informed the association in late 2014 that they considered the matter closed. Without any clear evidence, they had found nothing indicating an improper relationship, elders said. In December, the association board decided to drop the matter, too.

Mounting concerns

For Orterberg and two other board members, the decision was the last straw.

Orterberg, along with Jon Wallace, president of Azusa Pacific University, and Kara Powell, executive director of a research center at Fuller Theological Seminary, resigned from the association board in January 2015, later citing what they deemed an inadequate review.

"It is our firm belief that leaders should be open to examination of and accountability for our actions," Wallace and Powell said in a joint statement provided to the Tribune earlier this month.

Orterberg told the Tribune that the board's decision not to pursue another inquiry was, in her opinion, a "complete abdication of fiduciary responsibility," and left the board vulnerable to litigation if the allegations were proved true.

Soon after, there was more fallout from the board's decision. Compassion International chose not to renew a long-standing sponsorship of the Willow Creek Association's Global Leadership Summit.

"The decision was made, in part, as a result of Compassion's concerns over WCA's process for reviewing complaints regarding Willow Creek Community Church senior leadership," the organization said in a statement.

Still, for much of 2015 and 2016, Leanne Mellado and Nancy Orterberg would, together and separately, continue to seek more accountability.

It was in this period that Mellado reached out to Hybels' wife, whom she considered a close friend, to ensure she knew about the allegations swirling around her husband.

For nine months, John Orterberg tried unsuccessfully to set up a meeting between Hybels and the four of them. Hybels said he would meet with them as a group only if he could do one-on-one meetings first. Concerned Hybels may try to intimidate them in individual meetings, they refused, Orterberg said.

Hybels said the Mellados and Orterbergs are at the center of what he describes as the collusion against him, describing the couples as a kind of "vacuum cleaner" pulling in false accusations.

Both couples denied orchestrating a campaign to bring Hybels down by gathering false claims to bring against him. The last four years have been painful, they said.

"It's absolutely not the case," John Orterberg said. "This information came to us in a way that was unlooked for, unwanted, and it put us in a terrible situation. To say I was motivated to

find a problem couldn't be further from the truth."

He added, "I love Willow Creek dearly."

Pam Orr, the leading Willow Creek elder, said she realized that those pushing for continued investigation were not going to drop the matter unless the elders did something drastic.

"By 2016, it had become clear there was a whisper campaign," Orr said. "It was the overall persistence. Their claim was that we hadn't done a thorough investigation."

In August 2016, five elders gathered with the Mellados, Orterbergs, Beach and Schmidt for a frank conversation about their concerns. Beach disclosed her alleged hug in Spain. Schmidt disclosed Hybels' alleged kiss with another woman in Sweden but didn't share Dyer's name.

In March 2017, Lynne Hybels wrote to Leanne Mellado, saying she had been shocked and disoriented by the allegation of an affair, and had eventually talked with the woman who Mellado said made the claim. Lynne Hybels wrote that the woman again had denied the affair.

"I believed her," Lynne Hybels wrote, lamenting what she said were breaches in confidence and asking Mellado to "drop this battle, or whatever it is." Lynne Hybels did not respond to messages seeking comment.

Hiring outside attorney

By then, Willow Creek elders had taken a more dramatic step, hiring attorney Jeffrey Fowler of Laner Muchin in Chicago, a law firm that specializes in workplace issues.

Fowler reached out to the Mellados and Orterbergs requesting their participation in a renewed investigation. The Mellados and Orterbergs brought on as an adviser Basyle Tchividjian, a former sex-crimes prosecutor in Florida and founder of a nonprofit group that helps victims of sexual abuse and abuse of power by clergy members.

Tchividjian later outlined for Fowler what he viewed as deficiencies in Willow Creek church's earlier handling of the Hybels situation, calling it a " cursory examination of Pastor Hybels' electronic devices, finances and travel records."

Tchividjian said the Mellados and Orterbergs would participate in Laner Muchin's investigation only if it was, in their view, "thorough, objective, and independent."

In an interview with the Tribune, Fowler said his work led to no findings of misconduct, even if the investigation was somewhat hampered by not having the full cooperation of many involved in the matter.

"After looking at thousands of documents, after interviewing 29 people, and doing as much as I possibly could, I concluded that there was no basis for believing that Pastor Hybels had engaged in a pattern and practice of misconduct, and to the extent any specific incident had been raised with me, I concluded that his actions in those instances were not inappropriate," Fowler said.

In April 2017, Fowler closed his investigation, clearing Hybels. The elders declined to release a full copy of any final report to

the Mellados and Orterbergs, and a copy was not provided to the Tribune.

Just weeks ago, another woman who alleged Hybels made improper contact met with Fowler and Orr to hear the results of the investigation of her claims. The woman, who asked not to be identified, said she told church leaders last summer that Hybels had put her in several uncomfortable situations, which included remarks about how she looked in her clothes and an invitation to a hotel room.

Hybels denied anything improper occurred and provided emails that he said showed he discouraged the woman's suggestions to go to his hotel room for a glass of wine.

The woman also described witnessing an episode with another woman on a boat in South Haven, where she said Hybels had suggestively touched the woman's bare leg.

During the course of the investigation, she said, Fowler asked her to identify the model of the boat and presented a pair of images. He told her later that he questioned the validity of her account because she had failed to identify Hybels' boat correctly, she said.

Fowler said he interviewed 11 witnesses related to claims made by the woman, and did not conclude her account was credible. He acknowledged sending her images of boats because Hybels had indicated to him he was reaching for a switch in the well of his boat and had done nothing wrong.

"I sent the photos to that individual, and she responded by sending me a photo of about a 12-foot-long, single-sail boat with no well whatsoever," Fowler told the Tribune. "It would have been in my mind absolutely impossible for there to have been six people on a boat and none of the (others) had seen what she said she saw."

Hybels denied the account to the Tribune, noting with emotion that his son was on the watercraft at the time. The pastor said he believes the woman has been totally discredited.

"I'm out of explanations," he said, adding, "I'm so exhausted of hearing so many lies that I've stopped playing detective."

Fowler ended this most recent inquiry and issued a report in February, again clearing Hybels of misconduct. The woman resigned and declined the church's requests to keep it confidential.

Hybels' successor as lead pastor, Heather Larson, echoed his contention there had been collusion against him. "This situation has been heartbreaking for me," she said in a statement.

For Betty Schmidt, the former elder who has been a member of Willow Creek since the beginning, the most recent controversy over the investigation of Hybels has "been very disappointing and disillusioning."

"There was nothing like (Willow) in the first 15, 20 years," she said. "People were coming to Christ. They were finding their spiritual gifts. They were being forgiven of pasts that could have been very horrible. ... There was power, God's power. Somehow that's kind of gotten tarnished."

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