

As scandal-plagued pastor returns, questions linger

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COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (RNS)—After disgraced evangelical leader Ted Haggard decided to start holding prayer meetings at his Colorado home, advisers and observers, perhaps not surprisingly, reacted with disappointment.

But the fact that he's chosen to host the meetings within a few miles of the Colorado Springs megachurch that dismissed him three years ago—because of a sex and drug scandal involving a male escort—has drawn stronger reactions.

Ted Haggard

"When you think of the ethics of that, it, to me, just defies explanation," said H.B. London, who chaired Haggard's restoration committee and is vice president of church and clergy at [Focus on the Family](#), also in Colorado Springs.

Joe Trull, editor of the journal [Christian Ethics Today](#), said starting a religious gathering near one's former church is "disrupting" and can lead to accusations of "sheep stealing" from a former flock.

"I don't think he should ever start a church or a group in the same community as his former church," said Trull, co-author of a book on ministerial ethics. "That's just verboten."

Ethicists say cases of fallen clergy run the gamut, as does the appropriateness of their return to ministry. While some succeed and turn to work beyond the pulpit—such as chaplaincies or writing opportunities—others never are able to minister again.

Haggard's decision to start the prayer gatherings after the high-profile scandal has drawn support from the more than 100 attendees at his first prayer meeting on Nov. 12, as well as criticism from hundreds of responses to an online column by London that questioned his return. His former [New Life Church](#) said in a brief statement that it wished "him and his family only the best."

Ironically, Haggard's former church, which now attracts thousands of worshippers, was born out of small sessions he held in his basement nearly 25 years ago.

Both London and Michael Ware, who served on the board of overseers at New Life shortly after Haggard's dismissal, recalled that Haggard assured them he would never start a new church in Colorado Springs.

"It was the decision of the ... overseers that Ted relocate to a city of his choice for his future and for his restoration," said Ware, senior pastor of Victory Church in Denver. "That was just what we recommended was the most healthy thing for him at that time."

Haggard, who also resigned as president of the National Association of Evangelicals in the wake of the scandal, did move away for a time and lived in Arizona. Last year, New Life announced that Haggard had ended a "spiritual restoration" process and had an "accountability relationship" with Pastor Tommy Barnett of Phoenix First Assembly, who had been on the restoration committee.

"It was pretty much of a mutual thing, because we saw that it wasn't really going anywhere," London said of the committee, which also included Jack Hayford, former president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. "We were concerned about his lack of submission to spiritual authority."

Attempts to reach Haggard for comment were unsuccessful. His home

voice-mail message included an announcement about the time of the prayer meeting.

The Gazette in Colorado Springs reported that Haggard says he now has a self-selected “accountability team” of five pastors from nondenominational evangelical churches, and he has met with them for the past several months.

Glen Stassen, a professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, said he believes forgiveness is a central aspect of recovery from a scandal like Haggard’s, but so is an appropriate process including discipline.

“I am not a perfect person myself,” said Stassen. “I’m really reluctant to be judgmental, but I really am in favor of restoration and disciplined processes and staying with them.”

It may be possible for people “who have done something far worse” than Haggard’s transgressions to be restored, Stassen said.

“Will the person be honest in the future and will the person be faithful to others?” are questions that must be asked in circumstances like Haggard’s, he said.

“Sometimes we can do that, we can be restored, but sometimes if people don’t go through the process, they may not.”

London has had personal experience with that process, having watched the “failure” of his father, a prominent pastor who had an extramarital affair with his secretary but who went on to become a seminary president after a five-year period of restoration.

After the Haggard scandal, the younger London’s ministry at Focus created a booklet on “Pastoral Restoration.” He estimates that about half of those

who enter such a process succeed.

But London wishes any attempts at future success by the former pastor had happened later, and elsewhere.

“We know it’s a free country,” he said. “We’re just disappointed that it ended up this way.”