

Preemptive Love board cuts ties with founders

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Preemptive Love, a nonprofit long championed by Christian influencers and celebrities for its work in Iraq and elsewhere, plans to cut ties with its founders after former employees complained of an abusive work environment and misleading fundraising practices.

Jeremy and Jessica Courtney, former missionaries who founded the Preemptive Love Coalition in 2007, were placed on leave in the summer of 2021 to allow the charity's board of directors to address concerns raised in a letter from more than two dozen former employees.

After reviewing the preliminary findings of an investigation by Guidepost Solutions, a consulting firm hired to review the former employees' allegations, the board resolved that the Courtneys would not return from their leave of absence and no longer have a role with the organization, a representative of Preemptive Love confirmed to Religion News Service.

In [a statement](#) posted on the Preemptive Love website, the board promised to work to improve the organization's culture and to improve its transparency.

"The board cannot ask staff members to serve others with excellence in the name of peacemaking if the organizational culture itself is not healthy and vibrant. We must invest in our own community with the same heart and compassion that we invest in vulnerable communities around the world," the statement read.

The board also asked for patience as it makes changes to Preemptive Love and promised that more details about its future would be forthcoming.

“We are asking for the trust of staff, of partners, of supporters and our broader community dedicated to the important peacemaking and humanitarian work accomplished every day by this organization,” the statement read.

In mid-December, Ben Irwin, a former director of communications for Preemptive Love, posted a long article on Medium.com detailing his concerns about the Courtneys, presenting a starkly contrasting picture than the mission outlined by Preemptive Love’s leadership.

Stated goal to ‘unmake violence’

According to its website, the organization does relief work in the Middle East and Latin America as part of a broader goal of “working together to unmake violence and create the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.”

Jeremy Courtney, who grew up in Leander as the grandson of a Baptist minister, attended Howard Payne University and earned his Master of Divinity degree from Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary.



In speeches and conversations with donors, he long has said Preemptive Love began with a cup of chai and the story of a girl with a broken heart. Courtney, who had moved to the Middle East intending to be a missionary after 9/11, had relocated to Iraq in 2007 to work on humanitarian relief.

As Courtney sat in a hotel, a man approached and told Courtney that his cousin’s daughter had a heart defect and no local doctor could treat her.

“You are an American. Is there something you can do?” Courtney recalled the man saying in a 2011 TED Talk given in Baghdad. “Ultimately, I decided to help this little girl,” he told the TED audience. “I decided to suspend my questions and to jump in and love first.”

That meeting led the Courtneys and some friends to form a nonprofit that would raise money to provide heart surgeries for Iraqi children. The group’s name was the Preemptive Love Coalition. “Now, unlike a preemptive strike, where I seek to get you before you get me,” Courtney explained in his TED Talk, “preemptive love is where I jump forward to love you before you love me.”

Preemptive love also meant trying to help people even if you lacked the expertise to solve their problems. That can-do attitude worked, and by March 2009, Preemptive Love had raised more than \$220,000 to provide 26 heart surgeries for Iraqi children.

The following year, the organization raised about \$300,000 to provide surgery for 23 more children, along with follow-up care. Preemptive Love would eventually pay for surgeries for hundreds of children and set up a program to train local doctors to perform lifesaving surgery.

Shift in focus to refugee relief

After the rise of the Islamic State group, Preemptive Love shifted to providing relief for refugees in Iraq and other war-torn countries such as Syria. In 2020, Preemptive Love had its best year ever—raising more than \$13 million to support a team of “global peacemakers” who provide food and water and other assistance while spreading the gospel of loving first.

The Courtneys’ work proved particularly attractive to Christian influencers and young Christians such as Dane Barnett, who were disillusioned with politics and wanted to change the world. A secular organization,

Preemptive seemed to be infused with faith.

Barnett began raising funds for Preemptive Love in 2011, while a student at Cedarville University, a Christian school in Ohio. Barnett, who said he'd been born with a congenital heart defect, was drawn by the organization's aid to heart patients.

"If I had been born in Iraq, I'd need a place like Preemptive Love to save my life," he said.

Barnett had also grown concerned about the evangelical subculture he had grown up in, feeling it was too focused on power and not enough on living like Jesus. Preemptive Love, he said, offered a way to find meaning by helping others.

"The concepts of preemptive love—of loving anyway, loving your enemies, loving first, all those taglines that we used in marketing and fundraising over the years—really did feel like an alternative to the way the American church was running," he said.

He eventually spent five years on staff.

Concerns voiced about the organization

Despite the success of Preemptive Love, Barnett had concerns about the way the organization was run. Anyone who disagreed with the Courtneys was belittled or pushed out.

Amanda Donnelly, the group's former chief marketing officer, said she was fired by Jeremy Courtney after she disagreed with his wife, Jessica, the charity's chief program officer.

“The minute I crossed her it was over for me,” she said.

Donnelly, who was based in the United States, said she and other senior leaders had been summoned to a meeting in Iraq with the Courtneys in early June with a week’s notice, purportedly to work out their differences.

The meeting, which would have included visits to refugee camps, was supposed to help leaders regain trust and to put the “fire of God” in their bones, according to an email from Courtney that was obtained by Religion News Service.

When Donnelly balked, she was let go. She also filed a formal human resources complaint.

In an email, Courtney told the staff at Preemptive Love that Donnelly and other leaders were not “fast in crisis,” a term the charity uses to describe its work.

“There will not be two classes of ‘citizens’ in this community,” he wrote. “Our top leadership team won’t be allowed to earn money off the pain and accomplishments of those they are unwilling to walk with face to face in the places where the substance of our work is taking place.”

Overstated work in the field

Along with her concerns about the work culture at Preemptive Love, Donnelly and other staffers worried that Preemptive Love’s marketing overplayed the organization’s work in the field.

In December 2019, *World* magazine, an evangelical publication, raised questions about Preemptive Love’s work in Syria, reporting the claims made in fundraising appeals did not match the work being done on the ground. The charity has long denied the assertion, though it did admit misstating the scope of some of its work in Syria.

A report on the Preemptive Love website states that its work in Syria began in March 2016 and ramped up after the fall of Aleppo in December of that year. A letter on the charity's website also claims in the final weeks of 2016, after Aleppo fell, Preemptive Love raised \$6 million more than it had projected. According to a representative from Preemptive Love, \$2.6 million of those funds were restricted.

However, while it was raising millions for its work in Syria, Preemptive Love did not hire its first staffer in that country until February 2017. The charity now has three staffers there.

Most of the initial relief work by Preemptive Love in Syria was done by partner organizations, despite claims by Courtney that "our team" was on the ground.

Michelle Fisher, chair of Preemptive Love's board and a longtime friend of the Courtneys, told RNS in an email information about its partners was withheld to protect their safety.

"Because Preemptive Love's mission is to serve vulnerable people in some of the most difficult and dangerous places, the organization has chosen to protect our partners by not publicly identifying them, especially on the internet," she told RNS in an email response.

"The regions where partners are located are often religiously, socially and geopolitically complex. There are many scenarios where working with a U.S. organization can put people and the partner organization itself at risk."

Preferred dramatic story to telling the

truth

Former staffers told RNS they believe in the work being done by Preemptive Love and that the funds collected by the charity are used to help people in desperate situations. But they are concerned that Preemptive Love has preferred a dramatic story to the truth.

In his Medium post, Irwin linked to a pair of videos that he said were misleading. One details a food delivery in the city of Fallujah, Iraq, in 2016, after the city was retaken from ISIS. In the video, aid workers in Preemptive Love T-shirts distribute bags of food. At one point, Jeremy Courtney breaks in, saying that the distribution was interrupted by a clash between religious and tribal leaders.

“That has settled down now and we’ve been allowed to come back in and continue the distribution and so we have now distributed 52,000 pounds of food, 24,000 liters of water to about 500 families who were in desperate need of this kind of support,” Courtney says in the video.

In reality, said Irwin, Courtney was 200 miles away from the violence and edited his narration into footage of the event.

Another video shows Courtney near a bombed-out mosque in Mosul when the sound of an air strike is heard, followed by an explosion and shaky footage of people taking cover. Courtney tells the camera that there was an explosion a few meters away and that “shrapnel flew everywhere.”

That too was edited—the strike landed at some distance away. Raw footage posted by Irwin shows people milling about, relatively unconcerned.

“He didn’t need to sensationalize it,” said Irwin.

Fisher told RNS both Courtney and Irwin approved the edits.

“The time-stamped raw footage from the trip in question indicates that this video was intentionally edited to have a broader interpretation by the viewer than the actual events that transpired,” she told RNS.

Putting safeguards in place

The board “has already begun implementing safeguards to ensure that this issue is never repeated,” she added.

Fisher also told RNS Preemptive Love is committed to transparency about its work. She admitted the group’s leadership had not always presented information in the most transparent way.

“As a board, we have determined that while the impact of the actual work by the field teams and partners often exceeds the public narrative, there have been some instances where leadership has made the decision to present material in a way that is ambiguous and potentially allows for some misinterpretation of context or surrounding events,” she said in an email.

Gene Tempel, founding dean emeritus of the Lilly School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, said storytelling is an essential part of fundraising. Stories draw people in and help them connect with those being helped by a charity, he said.

“But we would like to see honesty in the storytelling and not exaggeration,” he said.

Tempel advocates for brutal honesty and transparency in fundraising—telling people how their donations will be used and why they are needed.

Tempel said that fundraisers who stretch the truth don’t only hurt their own organization, they undermine other charities by sending a message to donors that nonprofits can’t be trusted.

“Transparency and accountability are the two buzzwords in philanthropy,” he said. “So be transparent and hold yourself accountable.”