

# When does church conflict become spiritual abuse?

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Concerns about spiritual abuse have become common in recent years—at churches large and small.

Consider the fall of megachurch pastors like Mark Driscoll, of the now-disbanded Mars Hill Church in Seattle, and Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago, both accused of creating toxic cultures ruled by fear and intimidation.

Elders at Saddleback Church, one of the nation’s largest congregations, recently said an investigation found “no pattern of abuse” at a church run by Andy Wood, who has been named successor to Saddleback founder Rick Warren. The elders noted there had been conflict at Echo Church, where Wood and his wife, Stacie, were longtime pastors, but added that “disappointment and hurt are not the same as abuse.”

Elders at Hope Community Church in Austin, a small multiethnic community, came to a similar conclusion after the conflict there led to allegations of spiritual abuse. As a result, half the church left amid calls for an outside investigation.

At the heart of these conflicts is a question: When does a disagreement, an unhealthy culture or the normal challenges of church life turn abusive?

The answer is not always clear. But there is a growing consensus spiritual abuse is real and something to be worried about.

Spiritual abuse, at its core, involves the misuse of spiritual authority. And it goes beyond run-of-the-mill church conflict, said Scot McKnight and Laura

Barringer, co-authors of *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing*.

Instead, there's a pattern of using spiritual ideas to manipulate or coerce others, they said.

"What is good is used to harm and deceive," said Barringer.

## **'Power through fear culture'**

In their book, McKnight and Barringer describe what they call a "power through fear culture" at unhealthy churches, which often revolve around a powerful pastor or leader. In that kind of culture, even a small disagreement with a pastor could lead to a spiritual war.

The backlash to questions is often disproportionate, said McKnight, and can lead to people being shunned or fired. In response, some people do whatever they can to prove their loyalty, while others will keep their concerns to themselves, putting up with unhealthy behavior out of fear of hurting the church.



Lisa Oakley (Courtesy of the University of Chester)

Lisa Oakley, associate professor in applied psychology at the University of Chester, describes spiritual abuse in her co-authored book, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse*, as a “systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behavior in a religious context” and sees it as related to emotional and psychological abuse.

“This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism,” she wrote.

One of the most widely publicized examples of allegations of spiritual abuse in recent years took place at Mars Hill Church in Seattle, which was retold last year in a popular podcast from *Christianity Today*.

Led by Driscoll, known for his in-your-face style of preaching and his embrace of hypermasculine theology, the church grew quickly to one of the largest congregations in the country.

It imploded in 2014, prompted by allegations of bullying, plagiarism and spiritual abuse that eventually led Driscoll to step down. His resignation came just a few months after he was kicked out of the Acts 29 church planting network for “ungodly and disqualifying behavior.”

## **Driscoll blamed Satan, social media, secular culture**

Driscoll was interviewed last year at a 2021 leadership conference run by Echo Church in San Jose. During a conversation with Wood—soon-to-be lead pastor of Saddleback Church—Driscoll described the troubles at his

former church as a “board war” and blamed the devil, social media and secular culture for causing church conflict.

Church governance should be set up to protect a pastor’s power, he argued.

“You’re going to have people who are literally in your organization, sent there by Satan, to seek to steal, kill and destroy,” he said. “And they’ll call it love and accountability.”

After leaving Mars Hill, Driscoll moved to Arizona, where he now is pastor of Trinity Church in Scottsdale. He has also embraced charismatic and Pentecostal ideas about leadership. During his talk, he said modern-day apostles—whom he described as mostly suburban megachurch pastors—should rule over churches and other pastors, rather than those churches and pastors being overseen by a local church board or elders.

Driscoll’s idea met with enthusiastic approval from Wood, who described Driscoll as a mentor, someone who had helped shape his ministry and befriended him and his wife.

“We love you guys,” Wood told Driscoll.

In a statement, Wood defended Driscoll’s appearance at the conference, noting he was “not given a speaking platform” but was interviewed about lessons he’d learned from his experiences.

“The conversation was intended to help other leaders avoid the same mistakes he made and was a sincere attempt to help people lead with love.”

## **Questions seen as disloyalty**

Lori Adams-Brown, a former associate campus pastor at Echo Church, argues Wood has followed Driscoll’s example too closely. Adams-Brown and

her husband, Jason, joined the staff of Echo in 2019, after two decades as missionaries. Early on they said they learned that asking questions was seen as an act of disloyalty. Any complaints or concerns about the church were seen as “gossip” and expressly forbidden.

“If you gossip, you’ll be fired,” Adams-Brown told RNS.

An Echo spokesperson said the church has a confidentiality policy designed to prevent gossip and sharing church secrets but declined to share that policy.

Things went south for Adams-Brown when church leaders began making plans to hold in-person, outdoor, socially distanced services early in the pandemic. Adams-Brown said that in a staff meeting, she raised concerns about how they were going to pull off adding in-person services to what they were already doing.

Before long, Adams-Brown said she was accused of being disloyal and undermining Wood. That conflict eventually became abusive, she told RNS in an interview. She and her husband also detailed their concerns in a letter to Echo Church elders.

“There is a culture of never questioning, silencing, rewriting the narrative, and Andy with all the spiritual authority has to be followed without question,” they wrote.

## **Submit or leave**

At Hope Church in Austin, what started as internal conflict also led to accusations of abuse. Tensions at the church exploded after the departure of James Gómez, a former associate pastor at Hope. His departure led to confusion and anger among church members.

The elders gave church members two choices: submit or leave. Church

elders also brought a “prophetess” to a church meeting, where she detailed an elaborate dream about the lead pastor being under attack by the devil. They also cited two prophetesses in their report.

“To make it clearer, in the words of two prophetesses in our church, we are here because the evil one has used the words of a few to inflict damage upon our church,” they wrote.

The conflict at Hope cost Cristal Porter her church and her job. She’d been working at the church part time when Gómez resigned. When she asked questions, she said, church leaders saw her as disloyal.

Kyle Howard, a preacher and trauma-informed soul care provider, sees the use of prophetesses to bolster leaders at Hope as troubling. Howard, who has spoken to Hope members and is advocating for an independent investigation, said that crosses the line from unhealthy church practice to abuse.

“They leveraged spiritual power—that is supposed to be used to reconcile—and made it a tool to silence people,” he said.

The conflict at Hope, and churches like it, is unlikely to be resolved without significant outside help, said Steve Joiner, executive director of the Institute for Conflict Management at Lipscomb University in Nashville. He called the situation at Hope a “level 5” organizational conflict, made worse by social media.

He also said once a conflict hits level 5, each side sees the other as evil. They also feel the need to protect others and so they broadcast their concerns to the world.

To deescalate that kind of conflict, churches need outside help, said Joiner. That can be hard in what he called a “personality-driven church,” where everything revolves around a charismatic leader. Those kinds of churches

rarely have good organizational systems in place.

A church in level 5 conflict will need at least 6 to 9 months to deescalate, said Joiner. That would require everyone involved to agree to a set of rules dictated by an outside conflict management expert. But he said church leaders often have a hard time doing that, saying that “big personalities hate being controlled.”

“The problem can no longer be solved by pointing out who is right or who is wrong,” he said. “There has to be a series of processes they agree to that allow them to lower the temperature enough to function.”