

Four Gateway elders removed after pastor's sex abuse

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DALLAS (RNS)—Four elders at Gateway Church, whose senior pastor stepped down earlier this year, have been removed after the results of a law firm's investigation of sexual abuse allegations against the pastor were announced in a sermon Nov. 3.

The removals are the latest responses by one of the country's largest evangelical Christian churches to allegations brought by Cindy Clemishire in June that Gateway's founding pastor, Robert Morris, 63, had molested her in the 1980s, when Morris was in his 20s and she was 12.

Soon afterward, also in June, the church retained law firm Haynes and Boone to investigate. Church elder Tra Willbanks announced on Sunday the attorneys discovered all but three elders had been aware of Morris' history with Clemishire, now 54, and her age at the time of the alleged abuse.

"We now know that there were elders and employees at Gateway who knew before June 14, 2024, that Cindy was 12 at the time of the abuse," church elder Tra Willbanks said. "Both groups are fundamentally wrong and simply cannot and will not be tolerated at Gateway Church."

While Willbanks declined to identify the elders who were removed, the names of elders Jeremy Carrasco, Kevin Grove, Gayland Lawshe and Thomas Miller no longer appear on the church website, according to multiple news accounts.

‘Heartbreaking and vile’ abuse

Morris publicly acknowledged his involvement with a young woman two days after Clemishire made her accusations, and Gateway leaders acknowledged in a statement that he had confessed to “a moral failure he had over 35 years ago,” but initially said they had no idea the person involved was a child.

Clemishire has disputed that claim, saying a church leader responded to an email she sent in 2005 informing them of her age. A transcript later came to light in which Morris discussed making a payment to Clemishire in restitution.

On Sunday, Willbanks forcefully said church leaders support Clemishire.

“What happened to Cindy Clemishire was heartbreaking and vile,” he said. “We denounce sexual abuse in all of its forms, and we feel deep sorrow for those who have been victimized by such despicable actions,” he added.

The investigation’s results also prompted reforms to Gateway’s leadership structure and bylaws. Church staff will no longer serve as elders, Willbanks said.

“We must bring this level of independence and objectivity to our eldership, and it has been lacking in the years past,” he said.

In early October, some members filed a lawsuit claiming financial misconduct at the church. On Sunday, Willbanks said the church is cooperating with a criminal investigation into the claims as well, but said the church is not the subject of the investigation. He also reported Morris had made financial demands, which the church plans to reject.

Significant drop in attendance at main campus

Last year, Lifeway Research, in conjunction with the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, listed Gateway, which Morris founded in 2000, as the ninth largest church in the United States and one of the fastest growing, with about 25,000 worshippers attending every Sunday.

On Nov. 1, however, the *Dallas Morning News* reported attendance is down by 40 percent at the main campus in Southlake.

Morris was a member of Donald Trump's evangelical advisory board during his 2016 presidential campaign, and in 2021 took part in an initiative to energize conservatives ahead of Trump's 2024 run for president. Trump visited the church in 2020 during his failed reelection bid.

In 2017, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott enlisted Morris to support his push for a bill restricting access to bathrooms for transgender children.

The summer's allegations prompted state legislators to call for changing the statute of limitations for sexual assault, harsher penalties for mandatory reporters who fail to follow up on accusations and reforming nondisclosure agreements for sexual abuse survivors.

Secular and religious advocacy organizations have been pushing for such reforms, as well as the elimination of the use of nondisclosure agreements in sexual assault cases.

State Rep. Jeff Leach, a conservative Christian who chairs the powerful Judiciary and Civil Jurisprudence Committee, told a local NBC affiliate he plans to use his pulpit to change laws to benefit survivors of sexual assault.

"As a born-again believer, I love the bride of Christ. I want to protect the

church. But the church in many cases, like in the case of the pulpit at Gateway, has been defiled," he said. "We ought to be stepping up and turning over tables and protecting victims."