

Crisis Intervention Team

Executive Summary of Recommendations and Findings

Ephesians 4:11-16 “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Galatians 6:1-3 “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

“Spiritual Abuse is the mistreatment of a person in need of help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment.” The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse. David Johnson

The American Association of Christian counselors have a simple definition of spiritual abuse: “Spiritual abuse is the use of faith, belief, and/or religious practices to coerce, control, or damage another for a purpose beyond the victim's well-being.”

Spiritual Abuse: Spiritual abuse occurs when someone experiences treatment that confuses, weakens, and decreases their perception and walk with God. It comes from a perceived spiritual influence of a pastor, counselor, or church system that controls in a negative manner. The response commonly is the victim wrongly claiming full responsibility for the cause of their negative feelings, often causing increased painful emotions and behaviors driven by guilt and self-depreciation. Jerry Dahl

Process Summary

In February, 2015 Converge Great Lakes was asked by the Valleybrook Church leadership to come alongside the church to help navigate a situation precipitated by allegations raised by a former pastor. Converge Great Lakes accepted the invitation and agreed to provide guidance and resources.

The purpose of the Converge Crisis Intervention Team was twofold:

1. To talk with anyone within the entire framework of Valleybrook Church, including past and present members, attendees and staff and assess if anyone was subjected to spiritual or emotional abuse at Valleybrook since its origination; and, if necessary, to refer those people to appropriate Christian counseling resources. If other attendees expressed an interest to have time with the counselors, they were also welcomed to set up appointments.
2. To analyze and organize findings from those conversations, and if any situations are deemed abusive, to make recommendations to the Overseers to make needed changes to ensure that by God’s grace this would not occur again.

The aim was to objectively listen to any concerns people wanted to raise. Probing questions were posed to clarify topics brought up by the people being interviewed. Many people had positive things to say and most were careful in their concerns.

Interview Facts

- The Converge Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) consisted of eight persons plus two administrative persons taking notes for two separate sub groups conducting interviews. The two team leaders each have Masters degrees in Counseling and together have a combined 52 years of pastoral experience. One team leader received his Masters degree in counseling from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois and the other team leader is licensed in Michigan (their bios as well as bios for the rest of the team are attached to this report as Appendix One).
- The CIT Conducted 57 appointments in 30 minute interviews March 9-10, 2015.
- Everyone within the framework of Valleybrook Church, including the former pastors who have resigned, was welcome to set up interviews.
- More than 28 hours were spent interviewing both current and former Valleybrook members and attendees. Most interviews were face to face. Some were phone conference. All were interactive. There were five additional appointments booked that were no-shows.
- The tenure of people met with ranged from charter members of the church to newer attendees of only a few weeks. Some people had left the church within one year of the former Lead Pastor's beginning and some were still at the church and considered it their home.
- No letters or written correspondences were allowed to be introduced unless the person consented to and attended an interview (only one exception at the request of the Valleybrook Overseers). A significant number of people brought in written documentation.
- Converge Great Lakes has received legal counsel throughout this process.
- Two counseling agencies were vetted as primary referral agencies (see Appendix Two).

In order to protect the confidentiality of those interviewed, this summary is written with general statements describing the spiritual abuse that occurred. This summary was formed from the very specific and heartfelt testimonies of those we interviewed. Each statement represents numerous stories we heard in the interview process.

The fundamental question we sought to answer was this:

- **Did the pastoral staff fundamentally use their positions and authority to cultivate dysfunctional trust, manipulate people, and violate the code of ministerial ethics? (see Appendix Three)**
The overwhelming answer is yes.

There is a clear and widespread pattern of spiritual abuse led by the former Lead Pastor, embraced by the former Co-Lead Pastor, the former Teaching Pastor, and the current Executive Pastor. This abusive approach to ministry was taught to others. Some of the Overseers, whether intentional or not, also participated in this abuse at worst and at best were silent when it was taking place.

The CIT saw evidence there is a systemic dysfunction in the leadership culture of Valleybrook which has become toxic. It is evident God has done many good things at Valleybrook. However, the toxic environment has caused some of this to unravel.

The following statements represent the findings of the CIT's investigation:

- **The pastoral staff exploited the trust of many by creating exclusive dependence on itself.**
 - Multiple people conveyed a very similar story of being told they were very special and they would play a significant role in the future of the ministry at Valleybrook, and then, later in the relationship when they resisted the former Lead Pastor's spiritual/emotional insights, they were shamed.
 - Over and over again, the former Lead Pastor is reported to use statements which gave him exclusive and significant influence ("no one cares more about you than me" or "I love you and know what you need

more than anyone else”, etc.). Multiple people reported feeling like they had unwittingly put the former Lead Pastor up on a pedestal as a result of these kinds of interactions.

- Many people reported that the former Lead Pastor would get them to divulge very intimate details of their lives and then later use that information against them.
 - People reported the leadership increasingly separated the church from other pastors and churches.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would build doubt in people’s minds regarding their family of origin, and then would berate their families and pressure them to sever ties.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would frequently say or whisper in their ear: “I love you”, “You are chosen”; or something to the effect that “no one else loves you like I do”.
 - People reported that after tearing them down and pointing out all their faults in a very harsh way, the former Lead Pastor would then tell them how only he loves them and only he has invested so much into their lives.
- **Manipulation of past issues in a person’s life was frequently utilized to develop extreme and exclusive loyalty resulting in an unhealthy codependency on a particular leader.**
 - Time and time again, the former Lead Pastor was reported to convert conversations to a counseling type conversation seeking to glean some personal struggle. Once that information was gleaned, it was often used in conflicted situations as a reminder of a person’s struggle.
 - The former Lead Pastor was reported to be able to “see” someone’s heart and life with clarity and accuracy. This “special ability” of the former Lead Pastor created a false sense of superiority about him. If people resisted his insights the former Lead Pastor was reported to say things like: “after all I have done for you, you treat me this way” or “you have hurt me more than anyone else ever has”, etc.
 - People reported that the former Lead Pastor said that he could “see” that there was sexual abuse in their past and when this was rebuffed or denied, he responded by assuring them that they had simply repressed the memory of the abuse.
 - Many used the word manipulation, some saying it was used to control and steer you.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would speak prophetically into a person’s life, telling them they had “the spirit of...” It might be the spirit of deception, offense, suspicion, etc.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would take his knowledge of a person’s past (their “wounds”) and use that to manipulate and direct people; even if a person showed progress or overcame an issue, there would always be something else he knew about you that needed to be overcome; he thus became the determiner of a person’s wellness.
 - People interviewed said the former Lead Pastor had a way of turning a person’s question into an accusation.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would bring people into a deep loyalty using phrases like, “We are going to be special friends”.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would foster secrecy in relationships, suggesting that no one else would love you like I do; he would build a “special” relationship with people and lead them to believe that it was a unique relationship that no one else had; they would then need to prove themselves worthy of such love given to them; one way to prove that was not to question him.
 - **There was a clear pattern of increasing guilt and shame for those who attended counseling sessions with some of the leaders.**
 - For example, some of those interviewed confided in the former Lead Pastor with very intimate personal and emotional information. The former Lead Pastor used this information to propose that they needed to separate from their family of origin. If there was any resistance to these suggestions, the former Lead Pastor would get angry, cry, raise his voice, or use his physical stature to intimidate someone into silence/agreement.
 - Many people reported leaving these kinds of conversations in shock and tears only to realize a few days later that the conversation had been manipulated.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would often point out to anyone who questioned him how much he had done for them and how unique a love he had for them.

- People reported he had a way of shutting down opposition or questioning by making a person doubt themselves.
- **Unquestioning loyalty to the former Lead Pastor was frequently demanded by use of angry outbursts and shame.**
 - Multiple people reported being shocked by how quickly the former Lead Pastor could become angry in conversation and shift that conversation to his personal sense of betrayal and pain. Things like “you hurt me and the very fabric of this church” or “I am crushed by your questions” would leave people apologetic, passive, and uncertain about their own sense of things.
 - People used the word “rage” to describe the former Lead Pastor’s intense anger in these conversations.
 - People reported that questions or push-back would often be responded to with anger or turning back on the person as having a spiritual problem.
- **There was a pattern of berating and emotional outburst followed by offering affection and a promise of personal investment.**
 - Many people talked about how loving the former Lead Pastor was at their first interaction and how lavish he was with affection. Then, if an angry outburst occurred and he yelled or berated someone, it was quickly followed with “you know I love you” and an expression of affection. This created a significant cycle of shame and emotional abuse effectively silencing someone.
 - Some reported feeling ashamed after these kinds of interactions.
 - Many reports were given of anger outbursts or intense finger pointing, followed by very intimate expressions of love or reminders of the specialness of their relationship.
 - People reported the former Lead Pastor would verbally berate people, even with foul language, and then speak about how much he loved them and only he loved them enough to speak such truth to them.
 - Many people were promised uniquely “special” roles in the ministry. Things were said to multiple people such as: “we are going to build the future of Valleybrook on your strengths.”
 - People said a phrase was coined to describe being confronted about your issues by the former Lead Pastor (“I got Lebsacked”). This involved being confronted and torn down only to be followed up with affection. We heard this term multiple times. People were discouraged, removed, or marginalized.
- **There was a dysfunctional work environment.**
 - People reported there was no real sense of boundary from a professional boss relationship to a counseling relationship; these were comingled routinely and normalized; this had the ultimate effect of making the work environment an emotionally unsafe place to work.
- **There was a repeated pattern of division being cultivated between a person and their family of origin.**
 - This appears to have often begun in the “Wounded” Course when a person was coached to investigate their family of origin. People were frequently encouraged to find some level of abuse in their family. This was facilitated by multiple staff pastors and key volunteers. It was reported that teens were taken through courses which could pit them against their family of origin.
 - An apparent process began to develop over the last several years where someone was encouraged to sever ties with their family of origin and to declare Valleybrook their new family. As part of this process, some were encouraged to find a new “parent” figure to fill that role moving forward.
 - Many spoke of the pressure to sever (“release”) ties with family of origin.
 - People reported that the former Lead Pastor would create doubts in their minds about their families and gradually they would believe that their families were the cause of their woundedness and separation was required to be well.
 - A number of people said the former Lead Pastor “hammered away” at their families.
 - Some said the former Lead Pastor told them, “They never loved you” (speaking of their family of origin).

- It appears that many people have written letters severing ties to their families of origin. Many more were encouraged to create a “wedge” within their family to gain distance from the “father who does not love you.”
- **Hesitant questions got defined as a lack of faith, and power and authority were used to demean others.**
 - The spiritualization of any kind of resistance reportedly happened over and over. Things were said like “you just don’t have the faith” or “there is a spirit of fear dominating your thinking right now”.
 - While thinking for oneself was heralded from the pulpit in messages, people reported that when they came to the former Lead Pastor or the former Co-Lead Pastor with genuine questions, hesitations, or simple disagreements, they were accused of having a darkness come over their spirit. Over and over we heard the phrase “spirit of offense, lust, fear, suspicion, opposition, etc.”
- **There was a pattern of ungodly language, including profanity, used to describe those who struggled.**
 - People reported profanity was expressed in multiple settings by multiple pastoral staff and was encouraged to be used by congregants when they were struggling emotionally (“sometimes that word is the only word to express what you feel”). However, the profanity went beyond emotional counseling and seemed to pervade staff meetings and casual conversations.
 - Many reported the use of “the F-bomb” word being used by staff.
 - In addition, people reported vulgar language was used to describe people in the congregation during staff conversations/meetings; coarse language and sexualized comments seemed to be normal.
- **There was a pattern of inappropriate (and ungodly) language which berated people who left or disagreed.**
 - Many people reported communicating to the former Lead Pastor and the Overseers their concerns and reasons for leaving. Often, they were described as “apparently, they didn’t want to get well” (which is the church’s tag line from John 5:6). In many cases, the concerns raised seem to have never been seriously considered.
 - Some people were made fun of after leaving.
 - Reports were given of being called names when disagreeing with the former Lead Pastor.
- **Confidential counseling information was routinely shared in a variety of contexts with no attempt to shield someone’s identity.**
 - People reported there were no boundaries between counseling contexts and then public interactions referencing those private conversations; staff members were counseled while at work with no real sense of any boundaries.
 - People reported that material from the “Wounded” Course and “Pure” Course were drawn upon in other contexts outside of those settings.
 - Several people reported hearing very personal graphic information of other people’s counseling sessions; there was no attempt to shield someone’s identity in sharing this information; these counseling details were linked to names in multiple settings thereby violating any sense of confidentiality.
- **There was a well-established pattern of triangulating people against one another (or not speaking directly to the people involved).**
 - The triangulation seemed to happen at multiple levels. This was especially apparent with people who left Valleybrook and the explanations on why they left. Some reported lies were spread about why a person left. This was often discovered when people left Valleybrook and they would reconnect with another former attendee only to find out what was said about their departure.
 - Triangulation was discovered when the former Lead Pastor created division within a particular team by pitting one member against another.
 - People reported that the former lead pastor would try to separate families by driving a wedge between family members instead of trying to bring them together.

- **There was evidence of an inappropriate relationship between the former Lead Pastor and the former Co-Lead Pastor.**
 - The “knitting” relationship between the former Lead Pastor and the former Co-Lead Pastor became a normative doctrinal point within Valleybrook Church with no biblical basis.
 - Many people talked about the “knitting” relationship which had formed between the former Lead Pastor and the Co-Lead Pastor. Many used words like “icky, creepy, and weird”.
 - No one reported seeing anything of any sexual nature between the two of them.
 - Many people reported hearing the former Lead Pastor say that he would “see the former Co-Lead Pastor the first thing in the morning and would be the last person he would see in the evening.”
 - At some point, the two of them began sharing one email account and did all meetings together.
 - Many people reported that the former Lead Pastor and the former Co-Lead Pastor increasingly talked about their relationship as the central focus of sermons.
 - Team #2 listened to the message dated August 11, 2013 where the concept of “knitting together” was presented to the congregation, and, in the opinion of this team, the scriptures were utilized out of context. The application that Pastor Doug was like the Apostle Paul and Pastor Nate was like Timothy was confusing.

Other Patterns and Concerns Brought Up

- **Many people talked about how the “chosen paper” became a point of conflict.**
 - While from the pulpit it was explained that there was room for disagreement, when people sought an audience to clarify, discuss, or even disagree, they were met with dismissal, anger, spiritualizing, or intimidation.
 - People used words like arrogance and pride and the exclusivity of Valleybrook as “the Israel of God’s affection”.
- **Allegedly the former Lead Pastor was informed of a sexual abuse allegation toward a minor in his church by an adult in the congregation.** The information on the allegation was never reported.
- **Many people talked about spiritualized vulgar language which had a repressive effect.**
 - “Valleybrook has a Spirit of a whore”
 - “You look like a “d” troll”.
 - “You love the attention on stage and prostituting yourself”
- **Some reported questionable language being used from the pulpit.**
 - There was report of discomfort bringing young family members to services.
- **Reports were of a centralization of power for the former Lead Pastor and the Overseers.**
 - Concern was expressed that change in Constitution and Statement of Faith were never done properly according to the former constitution. Many people sought to get a copy of the changed constitution and could not get a copy.
 - A change in the stance of baptism required for membership was alleged to have not been fully communicated to the congregation.
- **Concerns were brought forth regarding financial management which requires further investigation.**
 - There is a repeated pattern of questions regarding the handling of finances at Valleybrook Church as well as Mary Clark’s and Doug Lebsack’s involvement in its mismanagement.
 - Concerns were expressed that the former Lead Pastor had eliminated the systems and controls put in place to manage money; checks and balances that had been put in place were eroded and control was consolidated.
 - The church’s use of a ministry house which is owned by a Foundation was reported. There was a question as to who is living in this house and whether there is proper documentation surrounding the housing allowances of the pastors.
- **The Role of the Overseers**
 - People reported there is very little trust of the current or former Overseers.
 - People reported there is a pattern of either neglect and/or complicity. A significant number of people reported attempting to convey their concerns to the Overseers but with little response or effect. When confronted or questioned people said there is a pattern of silence or weakness.

- Based on people’s reports, there appears to be a pattern of blaming the victim with phrases of “you must have misunderstood”, “You need to listen to that sermon again” or “you shouldn't have come at that time to the Overseers meeting”.
- The Overseers allowed the errant teachings of Doug, Nate, Grant and Mary to continue.
- The changes to the Statement of Faith and Constitution were allegedly done without adequate congregational knowledge or voice.
- People voiced concern regarding how/why the Overseers allowed spiritual and emotional abuse to happen.
- **The Role of the Staff**
 - Based on testimonies received, the CIT’s opinion is the Executive Pastor and the former Teaching Pastor were directly responsible for spiritual abuse along with the former Lead Pastor and former Co-Lead Pastor.
 - People reported the Executive Pastor used profane language with others.
 - It was reported that the knitting relationship between Pastor Mary and Dan Green was improper and required an intervention by Mr. Green’s family.
 - It was not as clear from the interviews if the other primarily support staff were involved in spiritual and emotional abuse. The only other person mentioned as a person participating in belittling people was the Community Life Pastor.

Recommendations from the CIT to Valleybrook Overseers

- All management level pastors should resign if they have not already done so, and be given a short severance package conditioned upon professional counseling. The interviews were inconclusive whether any support staff need to resign.
- A Converge representative should read aloud the general findings and recommendation to the church at a designated church-wide meeting.
- A professional review or audit should be conducted immediately by an outside entity. If embezzlement or significant mismanagement is discovered, consideration of legal action should be examined.
- Terminate the Valleybrook version of the “Wounded” course and eventually replace with the originally published “Wounded”. Suspend the “Pure” Course for the next season of ministry. They can only be restarted when professionally trained people can facilitate the classes.
- Confrontation of Doug, Nate, Grant, and Mary as the key people creating and maintaining this abusive environment.
 - The confrontation should require confession statements to be written, approved by the transitional leadership team, and read to the congregation only after genuine repentance begins to bear fruit.
 - Each of these four pastors needs to enter into a humble, submitted restoration process pursuing true healing and wholeness. If in agreement, teams will be set up involving at least 2 pastors from other churches and a few leaders from within the church. Professional counseling is a required must for each.
 - If they refuse to submit to a restoration process, their ordination and/or licensing should be stripped and their clergy status removed. A simple letter of refusal to repent should be drafted by the Valleybrook Overseers which can be shared in the future with any prospective new church employment opportunity.
 - If they refuse to meet with the Crisis Intervention Team and Valleybrook leadership, and submit to the recommendations of this report, the Valleybrook Overseers will revisit the severance arrangement.
 - Suspension of all full-time vocational ministry should take place until the restoration process is completed, no matter how long that process takes.
- Transitional Leadership Needs
 - Find and hire an interim pastor (minimum of 1 year) who can do the following
 - Love on this wounded congregation
 - Preach Christ and the cross as the means of forgiveness and wholeness
 - Current Overseers need to immediately read a confession of their failure in leadership to the congregation written in consultation with the Executive Minister of Converge Great Lakes.

- Current Overseers tender their own resignation once the transition period is completed, or before if it becomes apparent they cannot function in the new environment.
- Develop a transitional leadership team that would have representatives from outside the congregation and a few from inside (current Overseers who would be stepping down at the end of the transitional period). This transitional leadership team should include the interim pastor and two to three outside Converge leaders. Part of their responsibility will be to develop a process by which future leaders can be identified and brought into the leadership as an Overseer by the end of the transitional period.
- If it is discovered that proper procedures were not followed in changing to the current Constitution and Statement of Faith, then at least for this transitional period, the previous Constitution and Statement of Faith should be followed. After the transitional period is completed, if there are any changes to be made to the Constitution and Statement of Faith, proper procedures should be followed.
- The remaining administrative staff is given counseling paid for by the church which might include a group therapy session by Gerry Dahl for the remaining staff.
- Counseling should be paid for by the church for those interviewed and who were recommended for counseling by the Crisis Intervention Team.
- Simplify the church's ministry structure to core practices and review which departments have been deeply influenced by the former leaders.

Conclusion

A total renovation of the leadership culture of Valleybrook needs to take place. This will take time and require much prayer and commitment on the part of those who remain. The churches of Converge Great Lakes and others stand ready to walk side by side with you during these days. Our prayer for Valleybrook is, in spite of all that has taken place, that one day God will be glorified once again in this place.

If anyone would like a copy of this report they can obtain one by sending an email to glbcoffice@gmail.com. To receive the report you need to provide your full name, whether you are currently a member or attendee of Valleybrook, and, if not, when you left the church, and a contact phone number.