Report

To: Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC)
Willow Creek Association (WCA)

From: Independent Advisory Group (IAG)

Scope and Group

Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association joined to commission an external independent review and advisory group. The request was for this group to 1.) Consider allegations related to Bill Hybels as founder and pastor of the church and founder and spokesperson of the association; 2.) Review the organizational culture of the church and association; and, 3.) Make recommendations to the church and association for future actions.

Evangelical Christian leaders outside of WCCC and the WCA nominated members for the advisory group. The group chose to be called the Willow Creek Independent Advisory Group (IAG).

The group included: Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent Emerita of The Wesleyan Church, Indianapolis, IN; Margaret Diddams, Provost of Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL; Gary Walter, past president of the Evangelical Covenant Church, Chicago, IL; and, Leith Anderson, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, Washington D.C.

The IAG established its autonomy and worked independently of WCCC and the WCA and any other organizations or individuals. WCCC and the WCA gave full cooperation, but neither was represented on the IAG nor party to the group's work except for providing information as requested by the IAG. The IAG was externally and anonymously funded in their expenses but no member was compensated and no compensation was given to those who provided information.

The observations in this report are not meant to be a complete and exhaustive account of our interviews but a summary of recurring themes. This document is solely the collaborative work of the four members of the IAG.

The availability of an anonymous email and voicemail hotline to the IAG was broadly announced. All messages were received and reviewed by all IAG members. Contacts received an auto-reply notice that the IAG does not respond to media requests nor individual inquiries.

The IAG announced from the beginning that it would decline all press interviews and maintained that practice throughout.

The IAG organized and initially convened in August 2018 and concluded with this report on February 26, 2019. There are no plans for the IAG to continue.

Follow-up to Report

The Independent Advisory Group will not collectively nor any of its members individually publicly engage, defend, explain or comment on this report to the congregation of Willow Creek Community Church, to the Willow Creek Association or to the press, social media, bloggers, public constituencies or others.

Review Process

The IAG met in multiple day sessions (2-4 days each) in each of August, September, October, November and December of 2018, and in January and February of 2019. These meetings were all held in conference rooms of a Chicago area hotel. Extensive written documents were read and reviewed by the IAG between meetings. Most meetings were interviews of a lengthy list of invitees including Bill Hybels and Hybels family members, past and present leaders of WCCC and the WCA, persons who were known by the IAG to have made direct allegations, female and male staff members who worked directly with Bill Hybels and other individuals with pertinent background and information.

In addition to formulating its own lists of individuals, the IAG received additional requests and nominations for persons to be interviewed. The IAG followed through with a combination of invitations and non-invitations. As the interviews unfolded the IAG invited others to participate. Those not invited were deemed to

overlap with other interviewees or to be outside the scope of the IAG. Nevertheless, anyone could submit material to the IAG via the hotline.

All women who made direct sexual conduct allegations participated in individual interviews. Nearly all of the other persons invited to interviews by the IAG agreed to meet. The IAG received broad and candid cooperation with confidential interviews ranging from approximately one hour to as much as five or more hours.

The IAG engaged an external professional IT forensics company to examine the WCCC email system and associated data. However, no related email content was recoverable.

The IAG did not begin with any presuppositions of the likelihood of events or assumptions about the outcome of the process and did not discuss possible conclusions or recommendations during the research and interview process. The approach sought to hear what various parties wanted the IAG to know and to give fair and adequate opportunity to those interviewed as well as for the IAG to ask questions. Conclusions and recommendations were developed upon completion of the review process.

Throughout the review process there were continuing efforts by the IAG to limit the scope of the review to the three-point assignment listed above. Inquiries and suggestions were received to broaden the scope to areas that the IAG considered beyond or not relevant to allegations related to Bill Hybels, review of the organizational culture of WCCC and the WCA and recommendations for future actions.

The following report is divided into three sections: observations, conclusions and recommendations. The members of the IAG recognized from their initial convening and throughout the review process that the process and report would be satisfactory to some and unsatisfactory to others.

Observations

The IAG has collated observations based on multiple interviews and broad review of documents and information. These observations are not based on the report of

lone individuals but on repeated statements and corroborations from separate sources and documents, some of which are contemporaneous with reported events.

Because the IAG is not a government or legal entity, the observations are based upon the consensus of its four members and are unanimous in their summaries below.

It should be understood that legal tools such as subpoenas, testimonies under oath and conclusions beyond a reasonable doubt are the domain of courtrooms and television programs and not the IAG. The IAG has sought to operate on the notion of preponderance of evidence (i.e., more likely to be true than not true) and the expectation that church leaders should be beyond reproach (I Timothy 3:2).

1. Observations related to allegations

- Allegations were made in two areas, overlapping at times: sexually inappropriate words and actions in relationships with individuals; abuse of power and position. Allegations may be understood at various levels. In other words, some may be considered at a lower level of severity and some may be considered at a higher level of severity.
- Most allegations of sexually inappropriate words and actions have been reported in the mainstream and religious press. While greater detail and specificity were reported to the IAG, the overall narrative heard by the IAG is similar to the narrative publicly reported.
- Allegations occurred at various points during Bill Hybels' tenure and were not isolated to specific time periods and contexts.
- There were contemporaneous reports of some of the sexual misconduct allegations to others at the church prior to the 2018 public disclosures. Those who heard the allegation(s) said that they did not believe that they should further report them in the church because of requested confidentiality or because of their understanding of Matthew 18:15-17.
- Allegations of sexual misconduct made by WCCC female staff members occurred within the context of mentoring relationships that crossed

standard boundaries of employment. Bill Hybels initiated these relationships, spending an inordinate amount of time in and outside normal work hours given the roles and responsibilities of their jobs at WCCC. While receiving praise and encouragement, some women reported also experiencing denigrating and dismissive remarks that undermined their confidence.

- Even though Bill Hybels singled them out for their leadership capacity, women who later came forward with allegations parted from WCCC under adverse circumstances that included termination, position elimination or lack of further opportunity. The women reported that the communication of these decisions was abrupt with little clarity in the reasons provided. Some men and women who did not make public allegations also noted that Bill Hybels was capricious regarding their leadership and future roles.
- Male staff members also reported that Bill Hybels singled them out for mentoring. Some of these men reported experiencing denigrating verbal abuse. A commonly repeated phrase was that Bill Hybels would "power up" when he disagreed with them.
- Bill Hybels has publicly and privately denied the credibility of sexually inappropriate words and actions.
- Some persons who had extensive contact with Bill Hybels have asserted that they did not personally witness any inappropriate behavior.

2. <u>Observations related to corporate culture</u>

- The primary scope of the IAG focused on corporate culture related to Bill Hybels, the executive staff and the church elder board.
- The WCCC and the WCA have experienced extensive local, national and international influence, leadership, creativity and success under the direction of Bill Hybels.
- Bill Hybels served as the most evident linkage between WCCC and the WCA, identified as the "face" and serving on the boards of both. His relationship to each entity was not the same. He was employed as senior pastor by WCCC. With the WCA, he was an independent contractor providing speaking, hosting, programming and fundraising services.

- Because of the size and complexity of WCCC and the number of employees at multiple campuses, the management culture appears to vary depending on the level of the organization. At the higher levels of the organization Bill Hybels tended to be more authoritarian, while the majority of the non-executive levels of the organization were managed by policies and standard business procedures. The extent to which his management style permeated lower levels of the church and association was not significantly explored by the IAG.
- Descriptions of Bill Hybels' leadership role as reliant on power, celebrity and position to implement his personal preferences and personnel management are widespread.
- Coworkers, direct reports, employees and non-employees expressed a range of attitudes from admiration to adulation and from friendship to fear. There was a general consistency to many stories and analyses of Bill Hybels' leadership words and actions.
- Multiple interviewees described the leadership style of Bill Hybels as one of command and control with high levels of influence that accompanied the characteristics of a founder and longtime successful leader. Both male and female employees, including critics, often described their relationship to him as one of high respect, admiration and an appreciation of his mentoring. These descriptions were frequently accompanied by reports of fear and reluctance to disagree.
- Although Bill Hybels at times took an abrupt, abrasive and dismissive approach to managing staff, reports of moderating those behaviors later in his tenure were also received.
- Reports were given of unprofessional and inappropriate language, sexual innuendo and lax use of alcohol among staff including Bill Hybels. These reports were connected to descriptions of different levels of staff structure, on and off the church campus, in the United States and overseas and among various but not all senior staff.
- Bill Hybels' management style with direct reports contributed to executive and leadership turnover.
- Board members expressed recurring difficulty in holding Bill Hybels accountable for his leadership and management style.

3. The relationship between Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association

- The mission and corporate culture of WCCC and the WCA are not the same.
- The conferences sponsored by the church during its early years provided training in new programs and styles of church ministry that attracted thousands of pastors and other church leaders. The heavy demands of these conferences and the increasing availability of the content made the original conferences less viable. In many ways, this was a consequence of success as other churches and organizations built upon and expanded what was once innovative and original at Willow Creek Community Church.
- The WCA became a separate legal entity in 1992 to assume responsibility for the church conferences. Over time, this also changed and focused increasingly on church, business and cultural leadership rather than training around church programs.
- There grew a conflicting view of each organization's corporate identity. Church leaders tended to see the WCA as a subsidiary extension of WCCC; the WCA leaders increasingly tended to see the association as separate and equal with outside board members, funding and a large international constituency. The influence and leadership of Bill Hybels was similar in both organizations although more collegial at the WCA and more hierarchical at WCCC.
- WCCC and the WCA recruited and employed many competent professionals who managed well. With multiple levels and departments in both the WCCC and the WCA there appears to be varying iterations of quality and health that are typical of many successful ministries and businesses.
- The WCA had its own executive team and staff, with which Bill Hybels interacted, but which had a fundamentally different function. The WCA had more of a traditional business function in the development and delivery of events and products. Bill Hybels' role was less centered on internal management as the WCA was more external facing to audiences and

donors. The WCA workplace culture was reported as functional and traditionally corporate in nature.

- Overall WCCC and the WCA have established and maintained clear business policies and procedures that give stability to both organizations. However, these policies and procedures were not adequate for certain ongoing management matters and failed in addressing the crisis around the allegations made concerning the words and actions of Bill Hybels.

4. Observations about Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association handling of allegations

- Public opinion and constituencies of WCCC and the WCA generally conflate the organizations and do not consider them to be separate or independent. This led to assumptions that the actions and public statements of each applied to both.
- The WCCC board of elders handled allegations in multiple phases as allegations became known.
- In 2014, the WCCC board received an indirect allegation of an inappropriate sexual relationship leading to an internal investigation.
- The board claimed no credible evidence based on the denial of both parties and no sufficient evidence.
- Later in 2014, board members heard that there may be other allegations. In 2016 the board received more specific allegations. As a result, the board referred these and the original 2014 indirect allegation to a hired investigator. Those bringing allegations chose not to participate in the investigation because of a lack of confidence in the process. The board accepted the investigator's finding in the spring of 2017 that there was no credible factual basis for the allegations.
- Unsatisfied with the board's acceptance of the report, some of those involved in bringing the allegations contacted the Chicago Tribune through an intermediary in late 2017 to consider publishing their stories. At the same time, a new allegation of an inappropriate relationship was brought to the board and given to the hired investigator.

- When allegations about Bill Hybels were introduced in 2014 and later as they became public, the WCA leadership and WCCC leadership had to decide who should deal with the allegations and how the allegations should be handled.
- During 2014-2015 there were non-unanimous informal assumptions that accusations and allegations should be managed by WCCC because Bill Hybels was legally an employee and pastor of the church but held a contractual non-employee relationship with the association. The WCA board and leaders therefore seconded the investigation and adjudication of allegations to the church. WCCC assumed responsibility and limited the association's access to information and process. Three members of the WCA board of directors requested a separate and independent investigation and adjudication of Bill Hybels and resigned from the WCA board when it did not agree.
- The WCCC board lacked adequate cohesion and organized engagement with the events of 2018. Board members have expressed regret that they did not better manage the process related to the allegations and expressed remorse for the pain that the women experienced.

5. <u>Observations about public opinion</u>

- Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association serve different constituencies with some overlap.
- WCCC is a local megachurch based in South Barrington, IL with multiple regional campuses around the Chicago metropolitan area. The church has been a significant ecclesiastical leader in North America, especially among evangelicals and megachurches. While known internationally, the primary reputation and influence of the church is local and national.
- The WCA is an international organization engaging hundreds of thousands of participants from over one hundred countries in the annual Global Leadership Summit (GLS). While retaining its Christian identity and message, the GLS has attracted an audience seeking leadership training beyond Christian ministry organizations and into businesses, non-profit organizations and governments. The extensive diversity of cultures,

languages, ethnicities and economies creates a broad range of understandings and interpretations of the words and actions of Bill Hybels, the organizational culture of WCCC and the WCA and the future of the Global Leadership Summit. This variety compounds and complicates how the WCA manages crises in comparison to the manner in which WCCC manages the same or similar crises.

- Public awareness was initially limited or absent regarding accusations concerning the words and actions of Bill Hybels. Both WCCC and the WCA handled the allegations as an internal management matter.
- The Chicago Tribune was contacted with allegations in late 2017. The newspaper investigated, interviewing those making allegations. Bill Hybels and others from WCCC met with the Tribune reporters close to the publication date. The story was published on March 23, 2018 under the headline "After years of inquiries, Willow Creek pastor denies misconduct allegations."
- Church leadership was not prepared to handle the cascading events. Multiple meetings occurred with different groups of church leaders, consultants, Bill Hybels and his family members. There was inadequate communication among groups as the church sought to make decisions, issue public statements and take actions to address multiple challenges.
- Bloggers started posting opinions. Church family meetings drew thousands of attendees. Other publications joined the communication stream.
- In many ways, the management of the meetings, spokespersons, statements by Bill Hybels and leadership differences became a major public story in addition to the allegations. The church management and mismanagement of the process spilled over to the WCA, with disjointed coordination resulting in parallel sequences of spokespersons, statements, and differences. Venues for the August 2018 Global Leadership Summit began to cancel.
- As containment became more difficult, Bill Hybels announced his immediate early retirement from WCCC and as a contractor and board member of the WCA on April 10, 2018. Bill Hybels' salary from WCCC and payments from the WCA stopped. A legally binding retirement agreement, initiated in 2012 with the Willow Creek Community Church, will conclude in 2020.

- Review of press articles, internet postings and interviews of persons from WCCC and the WCA showed a division of opinions regarding Bill Hybels and the process. Some defended Bill Hybels while others counted the women making allegations as credible and the leadership of WCCC and the WCA inadequate.

- Christianity Today published additional allegations on April 21, 2018 under the headline "Willow Creek Promises Investigation Amid New Allegations Against Bill Hybels."

- Bill Hybels sent a two-page personal reflection to the WCCC elders on May 5, 2018 that echoed the missteps, wrongdoings and apologies that he stated when he announced his retirement on April 10. Neither statement acknowledged nor apologized for sexual misconduct allegations. The elders did not distribute it citing concerns that it was not a full apology nor did they consider that the release was their responsibility.

- The New York Times published a new allegation from a different source on August 5, 2018 under the headline "He's a Superstar Pastor. She worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly." This expanded the crisis for the church leading to the public resignation of the Lead Pastor, Senior Teaching Pastor and all members of the WCCC board of elders.

- The August 5, 2018 article appears to have influenced public opinion and the opinions of many WCCC congregants, employees and elder board members. In the congregation, among church leaders and others the trend increasingly moved toward counting the previous allegations as credible and recognition that church leadership should be changed. However, denials from Bill Hybels and convictions of those who support him indicate continued divided opinions.

6. <u>Observations about the future direction of Willow Creek Community Church</u>

- WCCC has experienced a cascade of unexpected and difficult challenges. As would be expected, some people in leadership positions during the 2014-2018 timeframe reported being fatigued and distressed over what has

occurred, including many who are dissatisfied and disappointed with their own management of these unexpected and difficult challenges. However, as the current church leadership looks to the future there is optimism.

- WCCC leadership has demonstrated an openness to seek reconciliation, both with those who have been harmed and among its current members.
- Church attendance and finances declined on the South Barrington campus as the regional sites reported stability, limited decline and some growth. By the end of 2018 there appeared to be stabilization and growing optimism across the campuses. Most have remained to support their church home into a new and different chapter.
- As the IAG has conducted interviews and research over the final five months of 2018 and into 2019, those talked with reported that there appears to be a majority consensus among congregants that the basic information is public, that opinions about Bill Hybels and WCCC and the WCA are largely established and that it is time to reflect on lessons learned and to move on. This is not to say that all agree. Opinions have been strong and divided. Some choose not to reach closure because they sincerely believe there is continued injustice one way or the other.

7. <u>Observations about the future direction of the Willow Creek Association</u>

- The WCA has a major international event each August called The Global Leadership Summit. Unlike a church where vital signs can be measured weekly, the Global Leadership Summit is measured annually.
- In early 2019 the signs are promising as new Global Leadership Summit venues are recruited and an encouraging number of venues that withdrew in 2018 are returning in 2019.
- The WCA is clarifying its working relationship with the church and its own mission.
- The major unknown is the impact of Bill Hybels' absence as he has been the principal catalyst and personality of the Global Leadership Summit. However, this change was inevitable as Bill Hybels' planned retirement from the church was a precursor to his eventual retirement from the WCA

and the Global Leadership Summit. In other words, the inevitable future changes became immediate.

- The Global Leadership Summit will continue to be linked to its history with Willow Creek Community Church. The WCA will expand with new Summit leadership. It will address its broad international diversity to seek a 21st century influence that is built on the past but creatively adapts to a changing future. The central focus of the Global Leadership Summit is leadership and the Global Leadership Summit can model the best of leadership in the midst of changing circumstances.

Conclusions

1. Allegations of sexually inappropriate words and actions by Bill Hybels in the context of his ministry and leadership of Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association are credible.

2. The credibility of the allegations is not based on any one accusation or accuser but on the collective testimony and context of the allegations.

3. The credibility of the allegations would have been sufficient for Willow Creek Community Church to initiate disciplinary action if Bill Hybels had continued as pastor of the church.

4. Bill Hybels verbally and emotionally intimidated both female and male employees.

5. Over multiple decades, the Willow Creek Community Church boards were unable to provide effective oversight of Bill Hybels.

6. The Willow Creek Association board seconded their responsibility to investigate Bill Hybels noting that he was an employee of Willow Creek Community Church. However, as their chief contract employee and the face of the Global Leadership Summit, they should have taken greater responsibility to understand the nature and context of the allegations.

7. There is no evidence to suggest that the timing of the Chicago Tribune article and the New York Times article was influenced by others or related to the events occurring in proximity to publication of the articles.

8. Because Bill Hybels has retired and is no longer a pastor or employee of Willow Creek Community Church, the church no longer has disciplinary jurisdiction or authority. The church should not take further action.

9. The organizational culture of WCCC and the WCA was positively and negatively affected by the power, influence and management style of the founder and leader. The positive use of power, influence and management style was a source of growth and global impact of the ministry. The negative use of power, influence and management style caused dysfunction in these organizations' abilities to consistently implement policies, manage personnel and handle an unexpected crisis.

10. While there may be negative residual effects in the corporate culture of WCCC and the WCA, the corporate culture issues were primarily related to the presence and leadership of their shared founder and are not necessarily pervasive in the future of the church and association.

11. Some may choose to discount or discredit the past blessings of God on Willow Creek Community Church, the Willow Creek Association, pastoral leadership, past elders and Bill Hybels because of specific words and actions in 2018 and before. Mistakes and sins should not be denied or forgotten but neither should God's blessings and the faithfulness of God's people.

12. The good accomplished is significant and long-lasting and should not be minimized or discredited by allegations and disruptions. The good should be celebrated and perpetuated.

Recommendations

The IAG has no governing or decision-making authority in Willow Creek Community Church, the Willow Creek Association, the personal life of Bill Hybels,

the postings and publications of blogger opinions or press articles. These recommendations are made based upon our review and the actions we believe are in the best future interests of Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association.

The Independent Advisory Group recommends:

1. Consider the objectives of the Independent Advisory Group completed with the submission of this report to Willow Creek Community Church and to the Willow Creek Association .

2. Willow Creek Community Church design and make available a reconciliation process to provide hope and healing for broken relationships.

3. Willow Creek Community Church create criteria to provide financial assistance for counseling or other resources for women and men who were directly harmed by their interactions with Bill Hybels, minimizing their related personal expenses.

4. Bill Hybels independently seek counsel for addressing the issues raised in this report. The counsel sought should be outside of WCCC and the WCA. This should be at his discretion, with his initiative and at the time he chooses.

5. Bill Hybels review any possible financial resources (apart from personal retirement benefits or income) provided to him through WCCC and/or the WCA for support of his ministry after his retirement from Willow Creek and return such resources to WCCC and/or the WCA.

6. Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association continue its policies and practices supporting women at all levels of pastoral and organizational leadership.

7. Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association establish written policies regarding standards of appropriate and inappropriate language, jokes, relationships and use of alcohol by staff and volunteers. These

policies should be communicated on a regular basis with clear mechanisms for reporting and managing compliance.

8. Review email retention policy to protect legitimate confidentiality concerns while recognizing the importance of record retention.

9. Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association establish written guidelines on biblical processes for dealing with perceived and real sins. Include theological and biblical understandings of the exercise and limitations of Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Timothy 5:19.

10. Willow Creek Community Church establish a written policy and procedure for biblical discipline and restoration of church leaders. This policy and procedure should be designed for current church pastors and elders. The policy and procedure should include external supervision with participants who are not part of WCCC and who are experienced and recognized Christian leaders. These external participants should be arranged before any procedure is initiated. Restoration should not imply return to any leadership position.

11. Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association separately establish clear written policies and procedures for external investigation and review of allegations made against any senior staff or board member. Because WCCC is an independent church and therefore does not have a relationship or accountability to a denomination, this policy and procedure should provide a level of external accountability similar to that provided by an established credible denomination. The principals engaged for this purpose should be recruited in advance of any call for their services and the list of principals should be annually reviewed and revised.

12. Willow Creek Community Church maintain a third-party off-site hotline to report misconduct with reports going to the elders or a designated committee of the elders and to a staff department designated by the elders. Review of reports should be an ongoing agenda item for the elders with a follow-up process and adjudication determined and documented by the elders. The

Willow Creek Association provide a similar hotline and follow-up process.

13. Proceed with caution in establishing unusual structures and restrictions on future church pastors and elders based on experiences with the founder of WCCC and the WCA. Future leaders should not be unnecessarily restricted, disciplined or mistrusted because of past behaviors or experiences that did not involve them. Good organizational roles and relationships practiced by other churches and associations should become a template for similar roles and relationships at WCCC and the WCA.

Closing Words

Biblical faith and Christian values are lived out in difficult circumstances. As faithful followers of Jesus Christ, the challenges at Willow Creek provide an unusual opportunity for each believer to effectively think and behave like Jesus. Likewise, the two organizations—Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association —may seize current challenges as opportunities to be humble and faithful models of Christian discipleship and stewardship.

Regardless of opinions, delights or disappointments, the people of Willow Creek Community Church, the international constituency of the Willow Creek Association, bloggers, authors, leaders, followers and all disciples of Jesus Christ—remember and demonstrate the promise of Jesus that "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35 NIV).

The Independent Advisory Group has observed the practice of Christian faith at Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association in situations no one would have or should have chosen. We encountered a range of emotions and attitudes including brokenness, hurt, fear, transparency, trust, faith and hope. We heard a catalog of opinions that were spoken with conviction and passion but also with grace. Clear and strong faith in God and service to Jesus Christ were repeatedly declared and evidenced by those interviewed. They displayed a pervasive sense that God's redemptive purposes will prevail.

May God's grace and mercy be experienced by all.