

PJ's History with Covenant Life and its Significance Going Forward

Introduction and Explanation

What does this paper contain?

This is an account, from the perspective of the resigning elders, of PJ's history with Covenant Life, from the search process up to the present time.

What's not included in here?

So far as we know, we have not included unsubstantiated statements, idle speculation, gossip or slander. To the best of our abilities **this is a factual compilation of the views of the departing elders,** mostly in their own words.

Why is it important that members hear about these concerns now that PJ is leaving?

Members need to be informed so they can be part of the discussion as details of public endorsement and possible financial support for PJ's church plant are being worked out. Additionally, members departing with PJ who appreciate his obvious giftings need to understand his significant weaknesses as well, so that they can help him to build a healthy church.

Our purpose for writing:

Members of Covenant Life should be informed not only of the "headlines" of recent issues, but important details that have not yet been shared with members. **In endeavoring to be gracious to PJ, the CLC elders have not given us a complete account.**

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We believe that this information from the resigning elders will help to clear the confusion that members have experienced in recent weeks.

If we are to build a strong and healthy Covenant Life going forward, the members must be an integral part of the solution. **Inclusion and openness is key.**

Notes:

Bolding, italics and underlining have been added by the editor, as the information herein was taken from oral interviews.

This document is still in DRAFT form and we hope to continue revising as time permits and new information comes in. Your comments and suggestions for improvement are welcome.

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The elders who provided this information have asked for confidentiality, and we have honored their request. None of them, nor the compilers of this paper, want to see their name on the World Wide Web!

IMPORTANT:

Please do not share or electronically transmit this paper to those outside of Covenant Life Church. Please limit distribution to current members, or those recently departed who still love our congregation and who will agree to confidentiality.

A Brief Summary of Issues

PJ has been untrustworthy while at Covenant Life and has caused harm to the church.

- PJ appears to have misrepresented himself in the Pastor Search process. He made promises that upon arrival he refused to keep.
- He broke his promise to provide pastoral care for elders. He did not work at building friendships among the elders and was not warm and kind to some of the staff and volunteers who worked closely with him.
- He failed to show many of his sermons to the preaching team (an established procedure he previously agreed to) and reneged on his promise to take seminar classes and attend an annual workshop (except for once, while still in South Africa).
- He did not behave like a mature leader. He issued ultimatums to the elders but later said he hadn't meant it, or that it was a "miscommunication."
- Instead of investing time caring for Covenant Life members, elders and staff his focus appears to have been on his work with New Frontiers and Advance. Though the church has generously paid his international travel expenses for these trips and the elders have agreed to nearly all his proposals, he has responded with accusations and complaints.
- Leaders need accountability, but PJ has tried to remove accountability and consolidate power in the Lead Pastor role.
- Though possessing an engaging pulpit style, energy and wit, PJ has not been a healing and unifying pastor. He criticized and belittled CLC elders to leaders in Advance and NFI and polarized the congregation. Instead of bringing healing and comfort, he has divided the church and caused harm.

What should Covenant Life's role be in supporting (possibly funding) a church plant to be led by P.J. Smyth? The congregation should be part of this discussion.

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Why Did Five Elders Choose to Resign at a Critical Time for Our Church?

In May and June, 2018, in the midst of a significant crisis for Covenant Life, the following men resigned from the Board of Elders: Bo Lotinsky (Chairman of the Board of Elders), Dave Brown, Tim Harvey (Vice-Chairman of the Board of Elders), David Finch and Adam Malcolm. According to one of the departing elders, one of the most important reasons for resigning involved PJ's character, or what another elder more neutrally referred to as "behavior issues."

Concerns about PJ's Character and Leadership

A broken commitment to pastoral care

Several of the elders shared that PJ had, as part of the hiring process, committed to providing pastoral care for the elders as well as the congregation. "PJ was briefed on CLC's history, the church split, the lawsuit, budget issues, having to let go so many staff and pastors, and the other issues CLC was trying to deal with, including the Constitution – how we were going to govern ourselves."

"As part of the hiring process several of the elders had communicated that the vocational pastors were exhausted from all these things and needed pastoral care. And the whole congregation needed care. PJ was briefed on all that."

The Search Committee questioned PJ about providing care for the elders. PJ wrote that "his highest priority would be to pastor his fellow elders and their wives." But when he started the job a year and a half ago, he immediately stated that he didn't do pastoral care for other elders.

The lack of relationship building

There had been talk about the importance of building a relational team, but one elder said that the elder team became divided from PJ. "PJ never spent time with individual elders."

Another elder amplifies:

"So, here's the sidebar, and I only came to learn this through several of the staff pastors. One of the narratives that PJ will share is that 'the eldership is too big, I can't possibly get to know everybody.' The AC and the FAC say the same. The thing is, though, there are only five or six staff elders. As of January [2018], we had Robin, Adam Malcolm, Kevin Rogers, Will Laing, Brew [Dave Brewer], Greg Somerville and I think that's it. And at that time, Greg had already announced that he was stepping off the team.

So you have five guys. You can't get to know those five guys? PJ would spend a lot of time with Mark and Kevin, but [another staff pastor] tried for fifteen months to get a meeting with PJ. He couldn't even walk into PJ's office and knock on the door and say, 'hey do you have a few minutes to chat?' 'No, you have to talk to my secretary.' And so for fifteen months he tried to get a meeting with PJ and finally got a one-hour meeting. And he said it was a great meeting, and that he'd had a wonderful conversation with PJ, thought it very congenial, warm and friendly. But he had to go through Emily [PJ's secretary] to get that meeting with PJ and he only had that one meeting in the fifteen months PJ's been here."

"And ____, ____, and ____ [three other staff pastors] *never* had a meeting with PJ. Now, when I say 'never had a meeting,' I mean one-on-one, sit down, let's have a conversation. There were staff meetings and

planning meetings involving a larger group, but PJ never took the time to really get to know those guys. To knock on the door and say, 'hey, what's going on?'"¹

Another elder noted that PJ "has limitations and blind spots and I would love to see him more enthusiastic about bringing on and cultivating guys who can fill in those blind spots in him. I haven't seen that in evidence in him."

"He's clearly used to working with smaller teams with a smaller bandwidth of gifts and skills. I think he's been more aware of the difficulties of a large team than he has with [understanding or appreciating] the strengths it can bring."

PJ's confusing and contradictory communication

Several elders spoke to PJ's ongoing practice of saying (or writing) something at one time, then contradicting it without explanation. One elder characterized this behavior as speaking with "a forked tongue."² For example, on the questionnaire PJ was asked to fill out in 2015 when he was being interviewed as a candidate for lead elder, he wrote that he thought preaching should be about 80% expositional. He also agreed that caring pastorally for the other elders on the team, who had been through a lot in the past few years, would be part of his job description. And he agreed to pursue theological training.

When he arrived, he broke all those commitments. The position paper he wrote over the past few months about preaching was highly critical of expositional preaching, at least as practiced at CLC. When he started the job a year and a half ago, he immediately stated that he didn't do pastoral care for other elders. And he asked to defer theological education for a year or two.

Lack of transparency regarding his father's crimes

"So, PJ came in and of course we had the rough landing in January [2016] with his dad and that whole issue. That was the first raising of red flags for some of us [on the elder board]. Because the communication was odd from him. He would give us information, and then we would go out and communicate something [to the congregation] and then he would tell us, 'oh, I forgot about this,' but we found out later that 'I forgot about this' was because a newspaper was about to report on something and make it public."

And so, we're thinking, "Had you *really* forgotten about that, or was it because a reporter called you that it was coming out?" and so it raised a lot of questions about his communication. "And I don't want to say he's lying or being deceptive, but it's just like... he seemed to be handling this without the degree of care that we would be expecting. And maybe that's a cultural thing, maybe it's, you know, how people operate in South Africa, and you grew up there, maybe that's it, but...."

Regarding what PJ knew about his dad's crimes and offenses, the elder most involved in the process says we still don't know. That elder was part of a three-person committee which talked with the African pastors handling the John Smyth crisis in the '90s, and he said those pastors changed their story over time. At first, all of them said that PJ lied about his involvement. Later, they released another statement saying he didn't lie.

² <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/speak+with+forked+tongue>

An engaging presenter but sees questioning as disloyalty.

“PJ can be very engaging when he presents things, and he has an ability to get people [on board] with him,” one elder said.

But a problem he noticed is that “PJ hears fair and reasonable questioning but assumes the questioner must be disloyal. He has evidently never experienced this kind of questioning.”

Stonewalling? PJ refused to answer direct questions put to him.

When they had the elders retreat this spring with three NFI leaders joining them, the NFI elders pressed PJ to explain his thinking in the areas where he had contradicted himself. PJ simply refused to answer the questions. The elder who reported this noted that PJ often prefers to let other elders speak on his behalf even when he was right there. At one point during the retreat, accordingly to this elder, PJ said, approximately, “I suppose it looks like I’m stonewalling.”

The elder noted that PJ’s pattern of avoiding conflict is one he shares with former senior pastor C.J. Mahaney.

A polarizing, not a unifying Influence

Since PJ took office, many members have left CLC. On Sunday, June 24, 2018 there were less than 800 members in attendance. One elder observed sadly, “For PJ, the dear members who have left since he came on weren’t a big deal for him.”

Were the Elders Confused? Picking at Trifles?

“These issues that are in play are not picayune, trifling or any way confused. These issues have been addressed for the last fifteen months, since PJ was installed and those issues began to surface.” “None of this has just come up just in the last few months,” one elder stated.

“Frankly, none of this [the current crisis] is anything that I or the other elders sought but was brought on by PJ’s behaviors. This included the **lack of follow-through on his commitments to the church** and to the many hundreds of hours that he was vetted by the search committee.”

Regarding PJ’s inability to work with board chairman Bo Lotinsky, another elder told me that “during the two years we were in hiatus” (Josh’s last year, the pastor search, etc.) “Mark was the acting lead pastor as he was in the following year as well, and Bo and Mark worked beautifully together in trying to go forward.”

The Preaching Controversy

The issue of preaching came up in the pastor selection process. Several people on the search committee listened to many of PJ’s sermons from South Africa. The Board had phone conversations with people who knew PJ in South Africa. “The elders came to believe that PJ was a gifted speaker but had some problems in the way he handled the Scriptures.³ To rectify these deficiencies, they asked him to participate in the annual Simeon Trust Pastors Workshop. He agreed that he would participate. And he did, in one instance, in 2016 while he was waiting for his visa to come through. He has not participated since. During the last workshop he was abroad on Advance business.”

³ The elder explained: “It’s possible for a preacher to take a text, work it a little bit and then launch into his own agenda. We’re committed to being tethered to the Word.”

“The other theological training that the elder board asked of PJ was to take some seminary classes (*not* to pursue a degree). There are many flexible programs available in our area. He agreed to this.”

“PJ understood that we have a preaching team composed of four elders. Whomever is preaching is required to submit an outline and manuscript. The four elders serve in an advisory role to give input and feedback. He completely understood that arrangement and agreed. But once he was here it became a problem for him.” PJ failed to show many of his sermons to the teaching team,⁴ and there were weeks where he made significant departures from what he had committed to preach.

Failure to do this resulted in some problems, including culturally inappropriate sermon humor,⁵ theological mistakes⁶ and rebuking the church in frustration⁷ without the involvement or concurrence of the other elders.

[As part of the Pastor Search process] several of the elders had asked him to write a paper on his philosophy of preaching. In May 2015⁸ he wrote a paper in which he stated that preaching should be 80% expository. It was a good paper and was a great assurance to the elder board that he understood their concerns, and that he wanted to improve. However, in March 2018 he wrote a paper contradicting the May 2015 one.

Another elder added that, “Many on the Search Committee feel very embarrassed. They say, ‘We did our job.’ We interviewed people who knew him and served with him for years, we listened to his sermons, we looked at his polity, he did a lot of papers. He sent us this lengthy paper on his view of expository preaching, quoting extensively from Simeon Trust... and now we’re hearing that he’s not a fan of Simeon Trust.”

“PJ put another paper out there on his view of eldership and how it should be collaborative and working together.”

Are Cultural Differences at the Root of the Problem?

There have been explanations given that PJ got into difficulties to a large degree because of cultural differences. One elder said, “There is a modicum of truth in that but just a modicum. That was not what got him into trouble.”

“Who we hired was first and foremost a thoroughbred evangelist. He is a totally committed church planter⁹ and a movement leader” in both Advance and NFI [New Frontiers International -- an international church-planting organization based in the U.K.¹⁰]. “The bottom line is, as a church planter -

⁴ This had been the policy and practice for all of the preaching pastors from Joshua Harris’s time up to the present.

⁵ Culturally-inappropriate humor missteps include the video of a bikini-clad woman at the Christmas Eve service, and stage-diving.

⁶ For example, referring to justification as a "process"

⁷ Missions Conference hosted by Covenant Life on May 14, 2016. (Audios [here](#): <https://www.covlife.org/resources/series/Mission%20Weekend%202016>)

⁸ This was during the pastoral search process, before the Search Committee had made the recommendation (in October 2015) to hire PJ

⁹ PJ successfully planted two churches -- in Harare, Zimbabwe and Johannesburg, S.A.

¹⁰ NFI is headed by [Terry Virgo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Virgo): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Virgo

-- which is a high calling -- you pretty much have a free hand and you can pick and choose your own team and establish your own rules and preach how you want to preach.”

PJ’s fellow leaders in Advance/NFI weren’t sure PJ was a good fit for a church like CLC. “And those guys at the time expressed some concern. They said, ‘I don’t know if PJ can submit to this. He’s never done anything like this before. His background is he grabs a couple of his good buddies – close friends – and he plants a church. And then they grow that church, and then his close relationships – they go plant another church. That’s what he’s done. He gets to call the shots; he gets to build his team. And now you’re coming into a situation where the church has been around for forty years, and it’s got established members, it’s got a very established eldership team.’”

“At the spring elders retreat with three leaders from Advance/NFI in attendance, Alan Frow [Advance pastor from California] gave us his experience on leading the church in Los Angeles. He says, “I knew when I came that there would be cultural differences between how we do things in South Africa versus the United States. So when I came on that team I intentionally decided to not lead for three years. I decided I needed to take some time – three years – to get to know the culture, to get to know the team, and get to know the church, before I became the senior pastor. And I advised PJ to do the same thing. I advised him that, “you are stepping into a different cultural situation. You should get to know these guys; you need to give it time and get to know the people.”

So then Steve Van Rhyn said, “Except of course we know that PJ never plays second fiddle to anybody.”

PJ’s philosophy was “front-footed, let’s just move forward and all that.” “In a way, that was attractive to many in the church – engage the culture, etc. – but PJ’s ministry experience was based on being a church planter -- not pastoring/administering a church.”

The elder told us that he became increasingly concerned that “even though there were so many good-faith efforts to let PJ know who we were, PJ, in time, decided that he was the remedy to our past” and “that was the way he wanted to lead – fast, quick, and [have the ability to] pick his own team.”

A Factor that Worsened the Crisis: Interference from New Frontiers

A revealing account by two of the elders concerned the April 20-21, 2018 retreat of the Board of Elders. Three leaders from New Frontiers International (an international church-planting organization based in the U.K.¹¹), were in attendance at the retreat, at the request of PJ. They were invited to help CLC’s elders work through the issues by bringing in an outside perspective.

During the retreat, the three NFI leaders made a demand that the CLC elders decide before the end of the retreat whether or not they would keep PJ on.

That elder regrets that the Board didn't adequately push back against this interference from NFI. (Another elder stated that NFI needs to apologize to CLC.)

The Board wanted and needed more time to discuss the issues with PJ, but the NFI elders insisted on an immediate decision, which resulted in most of the elders voting to let PJ go. (PJ seemed shocked that

¹¹ NFI is headed by [Terry Virgo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Virgo): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Virgo

the other elders stood their ground by voting to fire him. The elder describing this noted that PJ is accustomed to being surrounded by hand-picked people under his authority.)

How New Frontiers “Apostles” Govern their Churches: A Troubling Model?

New Frontiers (NFI) has maintained the "gifted apostle"¹² polity model. ¹³ In practice, one of the elders explained, NFI invests **much power** in their leaders **but requires little accountability**— a model of governance which even CLC's former denomination¹⁴ has moved away from.

He believes this model has worked well within NFI only because their head apostle (Terry Virgo) is so humble.¹⁵ The elder said he has heard almost no teaching from NFI about character, and that is a concern.

One elder noted, “PJ’s had opportunities to seek wisdom not only from the [CLC] elder board but from members of the congregation, but instead he seeks wisdom from his Advance team and from the team he’s being groomed to lead in New Frontiers. (PJ is considered an “apostle” with New Frontiers,¹⁶ and one elder told us that **PJ is being positioned for a top leadership role within NFI.**)

“It seems that CLC was regarded a beachhead for [the movement].” He believes that **PJ’s priority and passions are as a movement leader for Advance and for NFI.**

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Why Did the Board of Elders Vote Twice to Terminate PJ’s Employment?

When the board voted there were four votes total of No Confidence [in PJ’s leadership]. The first two votes were straw votes. In the first two votes, one vote was unanimous that his leadership was seriously flawed and problematic. “In no way was this about the size of the board. There were Constitutional issues: The size of the Board was one of the [areas under discussion], but **the more substantive issue was about the deeper issue of authority.**”

The other issue discussed on the elder board at that time was with respect to his preaching. “The majority of elders did not agree with PJ’s own characterizations of his preaching.” The board asked PJ to be better equipped for his preaching.

These discussions led to two formal votes. The results of the first formal vote indicated that the vast majority of the board thought PJ was not a good fit for the church and it would be best to part ways. Five days later the board voted again; the results were very nearly identical.

¹² Pastor and author Sam Storms writes: “Such “leaders” are thought to possess the Holy Spirit in a heightened degree. They are ... extraordinarily “anointed” to a degree beyond that which is available to the ordinary Christian and in such a way as to put them beyond evaluation or critique.” Entire article [here: http://www.samstorms.com/enjoying-god-blog/post/the-moses-model-a-recipe-for-disaster](http://www.samstorms.com/enjoying-god-blog/post/the-moses-model-a-recipe-for-disaster)

¹³ . “Polity” simply refers to how a particular church assembly chooses to govern itself.

¹⁴ Sovereign Grace Ministries -- now Sovereign Grace Churches

¹⁵ While not officially retiring, Terry’s role is changing. Here’s a [New Frontiers pastor’s explanation](https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/the-emperors-new-frontiers) of how the movement is changing but, in his view, will still be great: <https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/the-emperors-new-frontiers>.

¹⁶ New Frontiers Apostolic Leaders page, [here: https://newfrontierstogether.org/apostolic-leaders/](https://newfrontierstogether.org/apostolic-leaders/)

Why the Elders Reversed Their Decision, Part 1: Pressure from the FAC and (Some) Members

CLC members were told that the Financial Advisory Committee had advised the Board that Covenant Life would likely have to close its doors within a short time if PJ didn't stay, due to members who would leave if PJ wasn't the Lead Pastor. "One elder said, "the FAC and the Travis Earles group told the Board that the church will be insolvent if PJ is let go. I do not share that viewpoint at all."¹⁷

But a significant number of people in the congregation were pushing back against the decision. "There were dozens of emails that poured into every elder." Many of these emails contained "vitriol," the elder said. Letters that said, "we don't care about church polity or the Constitution."¹⁸ We just want PJ. We're happy to let PJ lead in any way he wants."¹⁹

Why the Elders Reversed Their Decision, Part 2: A "Bad Process"

One elder explains: "My reasons for agreeing to withdraw our vote to part ways with PJ was to invite others in the congregation into the evaluation process and to have others examine whether PJ and CLC are a good fit for each other. It appears that instead, an assumption has been made that PJ and CLC are a good fit for each other."

Another resigning elder noted that "the decision about parting ways with PJ was made for good and solid reasons, many of which would still apply. This included concerns about PJ's leadership; he was not a good fit for our church or our eldership." However, after dialogue with the Financial Advisory Committee (FAC) the elder board "realized they hadn't involved anyone else in the church," and because of that that elder "felt that the decision needed to be reversed."

After dialogue with Travis Earles and others, this elder and others "realized that the **process** [in which they had made that decision] was bad," and that "going forward with that decision was going to result in damage to the church." "Not," he qualified, "that the decision was wrong, but [the problem was in] not dialoguing with others." He said that the first two votes to oust PJ had been "based on principle," but the decision to reverse was "a pragmatic one."

Disagreement about the Constitution, and Why it Matters

Before PJ came to CLC he was thoroughly briefed on the contents of the document. One elder in particular "spent an incredible amount of time with PJ explaining the new Constitution." PJ read the Constitution (in draft form) and affirmed it. "PJ spent a lot of time with various elders and with various individuals in the congregation; he was thoroughly briefed on the history and culture of CLC, because so much of the Constitution related to our history as a church."

¹⁷ [Perhaps the FAC is not all of one mind either? This member spoke at length with FAC member Jim Wilson who discounted the doomsday scenario.]

¹⁹ "P.J. can be very engaging when he presents things, and he has an ability to get people [on board] with him," one elder said.

“So he was fully aware that what we [CLC] had embarked upon was a plurality of elders, and that it included a Chairman (a non-staff elder) who would preside over the meetings.” It is the job of the Chairman of the Board to make sure the church constitution is followed.²⁰ (Another elder explained that the Lead Elder and the Chairman roles were separated in the Constitution as a protection against the unaccountable power under which our church had suffered previously.²¹) “All these efforts were designed to ensure that the congregation had as much input as possible, and that no single elder, especially the lead elder, would be able to get away with anything.” “What happened increasingly, was that PJ was not happy being under the Constitution.”

This elder explains what the Constitution regulates and why PJ wasn’t happy with it: PJ wanted control over “the hiring and firing of staff and elders, the size of the elder board, who was on the elder board, who he wanted off, staff he believed should not be part of the team he wanted...” “PJ wanted to appoint the Chairman of the Board himself.”

One elder issued this caution: “Church leadership must have a balance of power regardless of the level of gifting of any leader. Trustworthy or no, we can’t risk compromising the accountability structure we’ve created because of a positive feeling about one charismatic speaker.”

Another Factor that Worsened the Crisis: Lack of Communication from the Elder Board

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Though the problems between the elder board and PJ began fifteen months ago with PJ’s installation, the congregation was only made aware in recent weeks. Many members felt blindsided, and at least two elders said that lack of transparency and timely communication has been an ongoing problem at CLC.

One elder related, “That first Sunday all-morning meeting Mark’s first inclination was to get a bunch of elders on stage and each share what their thinking is, because he was aware that it’s impossible for one man to speak for everyone. But that approach was not practical for a short time²² [during the Sunday service]. There was concern it would lead to more confusion.”

One elder opined that, “Staff elders are still stuck in the SGM mindset²³ of controlling information too much.” There is “too much control of information, too much spin.”

He believes that a lack of transparency is a common dynamic in churches with celebrity pastors, who love control.²⁴ He believes God is dealing with the Church to root out the celebrity pastor phenomenon, which in his view is unbiblical. This elder contrasted the tight information control at CLC

²⁰ The elders’ meetings follow Robert’s Rules of Order to ensure that no elder’s issues are blocked from discussion (something that happened often in the past).

²¹ PJ stated that he wanted to undo that protection through Constitutional amendments. He appears to want a church with no protection from unaccountable leadership. [

²² [Though special members’ meetings – either directly following the service, or on a Saturday or Sunday night – have usually been well-attended in the past.]

²³ [In Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM) churches, which included Covenant Life, any disclosure of difficult issues to the congregation was avoided whenever possible. CLC members voted Dec. 12, 2012 to separate from SGM.]

²⁴ Another elder observed, “Celebrity pastors have proliferated in our day. People want a ‘king.’”

with churches such as Capitol Hill Baptist and the evangelical megachurch²⁵ in Columbia where Dave Brewer is now employed. These churches, he said, have healthier and wiser models of interaction between the elders and the congregation and among the elders.²⁶ The "First among equals" language used by PJ [and Advance²⁷] isn't a biblical concept and as pastor Mike Bullmore notes, "usually ends up with the accent on 'first.'"

This elder told the Board of Elders that they would likely have censored Paul's disagreement with Barnabus and the personal conflicts in various churches described in the epistles, if the New Testament had been run by them before publishing. Yet the apostles weren't afraid to be transparent about imperfections.

Another resigning elder lamented that he "had thought that in the last few years the elder board had moved more in the direction of transparency than it seems we actually have." "I thought we were more 'there,'" he said. He says his own view is "to be as open and transparent to congregants as possible," adding that, "church leadership owes the church the truth."

When the elder was asked how the BOE might be persuaded to improve church communications, **he recommended that members continue to press the elders for transparency**, insisting that they tell the full story and pointing out that members (especially long-term ones, who both give and serve generously) will continue to leave over that issue if they don't.

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Were the Elders Too Accommodating with PJ?

"Ideally, our relations with others are perfectly harmonious, gracious, yet truthful. There's a balance," one elder said. If we put an unbalanced emphasis on [speaking] the truth we err. "But on the other hand, if we over-emphasize being 'gracious' we can forget that we owe ourselves and others the truth."

The latter is what happened, in his opinion. "The elders overextended themselves with PJ. There was an inordinate emphasis on going the extra mile and giving PJ the benefit of every doubt. But PJ never really gave anything in return. There was no accommodation [on PJ's part]."

"Many on the elder board did not think PJ was listening to anyone on the board. He did not seem to be learning from anything they were saying." "That's not just a communication issue. These are issues of openness, transparency, trustworthiness and wisdom and these issues increasingly became the problem. PJ increasingly tried to take control of the board, of actions."

Who Comprises the Advisory Committee and What Was Their Stated Mission?

The Advisory Committee is a recently-formed group of five members who were selected by PJ and the remaining Board of Elders. Mark Mitchell told the church:

²⁵ Grace Community Church in Fulton, MD

²⁶ For example, one elder said, if Mark Dever is outnumbered by his elders in a decision, he defers to the majority because he is representing the team, leading in implementing the team's decisions. Similarly, John Piper and some other prominent pastors define their roles in terms of being responsible for preaching and vision, not as being the one who makes all the significant decisions for the church.

²⁷ From the Advance web site, [here: http://www.advancemovement.com/about/5-statement-of-faith-and-values/](http://www.advancemovement.com/about/5-statement-of-faith-and-values/)

“Committee members have proven their leadership expertise in other church contexts and were commended by the BOE for their initiative, maturity, and wisdom. ***They were among those who appealed to the elders to reconsider upon hearing of the decision to part ways with PJ.***”

“In part,” Mark said, “their initiative qualified them to continue to serve the elders with their counsel.²⁸ In addition, they have served in a number of leadership roles in the church. Myung Yi was vice chairman of the Lead Pastor Search Team and leads a small group. Travis Earles²⁹ recently chaired the Local Missions Committee and has served as a small group leader and ministry team leader. Ed Stockton is the chairman of the board of Covenant Life School. Jim Wilson serves on the Financial Advisory Committee.³⁰ Michael Winn helps to lead the Benevolence Committee and the Greeting Team.”

The charter of the Advisory Committee was “to arrive at recommendations that would be helpful for PJ to reengage.” [i.e., incentives that would make staying on an attractive proposition for PJ.] All of the A.C. recommendations were approved by PJ and the elders who remained on the Board.

The Advisory Committee’s recommendations would have required changes to the Constitution, removing the protections contained therein, such as separating the jobs of Lead Pastor and Chairman. It is to be hoped that now with the departure of PJ, these Constitutional protections can be left in place.³¹

Going Forward: Additional Recommendations to the BOE and the Congregation

BOE should communicate clearly and honestly:

One resigning elder offered these thoughts to the BOE and AC: “I would appeal to you men and the Advisory Committee to be forthright and open in your communication to the congregation. **The communication to date has been one-sided and seemingly lays the blame entirely at the feet of the elders and portrays PJ as a victim.** I do not believe that is your intent – but it is the result of only sharing part of the story and not the whole.”

“Various members of the congregation have shared with me that they find the current communication confusing and disturbing. Their perspective is that the elders are not telling them the whole story. If CLC is to survive, you must be forthcoming in communicating all that has happened and not limit the communication to just a portion of the events that have occurred. Otherwise, I do believe that irreparable harm will result, and trust eroded beyond the potential ability to win back a large segment of the congregation. I do believe that as ministers of the gospel and shepherds of the flock, we need to be open and honest with the church – it is the only real way to engender trust.”

²⁸ One of the elders explained that these men “were essentially self-selected because they had weighed in individually with their concerns.”

²⁹ Travis Earles is a lifelong member at CLC who recently spearheaded the protest against the BOE’s vote to part ways with PJ.

³⁰ The Financial Advisory Committee was consulted and offered affirmative input in the decision to hire PJ.

³¹ “Final Recommendations” from the Advisory Committee: all-church email dated May 24, 2018

Congregation should ask questions of the BOE:

Another elder said that the congregation “should ask questions: What led us to this in the first place?”³² “What brought the Board of Elders to decide to part ways with PJ?” He added that, “This is not P.J.’s church, nor the elders’ church. This is God’s church and He’s going to have his way. There’s a lot at stake here that falls on the remaining elders.”

BOE should delegate to, and empower the congregation:

One resigning elder feels that the Board of Elders “needs to better delegate, empower, and draw on the resources of the church.” [As examples he cited various ministry areas and things like the grievance policy.] “This is an area we’ve all realized needs to be done better, but we haven’t made much progress. Ministry opportunities are less centralized than in SGM days, but there is much more that could be done.” He suggested that things could be delegated to committees of elders [instead of the entire Board], and groups like the ad hoc Advisory Committee. “Other things that [the BOE] could have done, or still can going forward, would be to form committees among the church.”

We asked this elder about the Board’s failure to implement those kinds of changes in the past, pointing out that in general, members have not been allowed to lead, and so everything has typically been left to the elders. He agreed but noted that this would require a change in the way the elders do things. “There’s no desire [on the part of the Board] to hold on to everything. A lot of the failures are not due to malice or conspiracy but more to just a lack of capacity and bandwidth.” “To delegate something that would [potentially] be a great time saver requires you to do more work initially.”

He added, “Nobody ever said [for instance], ‘let’s just backburner this grievance policy’ but there wasn’t the capacity to deal with it in-house and even the thought of parceling it out would take a certain amount of initial effort. There was just one crisis after another.”

³² His own opinion is that what led us to this was “the belief of the FAC and the Travis Earles group that the church will be insolvent if P.J. is let go.”

Appendix: Is it Biblical (or Loving) to Criticize Leaders Publicly?

One elder's thoughts:

"We had a couple of elders meeting recently where a couple of us said to the rest of the guys, "Point to me in God's Word where it says, 'do not speak ill of another person.' Now that sounds bad. There *is* a place in Scripture where it says, 'speak the truth in love' and 'faithful are the wounds of a friend.' It also says do not give in to gossip or slander. But gossip and slander are about spreading falsehoods about somebody, for the intent to harm their character or their reputation, NOT about speaking the truth. And if you read through the New Testament, how many times did Paul identify people *by name* and said, 'this person need to be confronted, that person needs to be removed from the congregation, or that person is spreading strife or slander, or that group of people. I mean, Paul did it *all the time*. And Jesus had no problem saying to the Pharisees, "you brood of vipers."

[I asked him:] Do you think that part of that dynamic is that in Sovereign Grace days our congregation was very schooled in not talking about things that aren't "nice." It's been an education for the congregation to come to a place where we think that it's not sin to talk about things like that. But the congregation I think still has a lot of that mindset, so when you hear anything that sounds like controversy, many in the congregation want to do this kind of thing [covers eyes and ears]."

[Elder:] "What's funny is how many guys will say, 'We're called to believe the best.' And at one point in a meeting [another elder] finally said, 'Show me in Scripture where it says we're called to believe the best.'"

"In 1st Corinthians it says, 'love bears all things, love believes all things,' but we as Christians are also supposed to pursue the truth. I do believe in our church culture there is this desire to be magnanimous, this desire to avoid causing further disputes.

"... In prior meetings we've had in the church, when someone was going to get up and speak, we would talk about how we need to be honest. We need to be open. [But the response would be], 'Well, no -- we can't do that, because that person we're talking about might be offended, and they're going to be sitting right there.'"

"Yes, but you've already had the conversation with them. You've already told them your concerns. They've already acknowledged that they're not willing to agree with you. So there should not be a hesitation to then say publicly what you've already said privately."

"So, as a side note, it's kind of the same thing with Rachael Denhollander's post on Facebook. We have a lot of things that we'd like to publicly correct Sovereign Grace on, but the guys on the team are like, "Well, I don't want to say that because I don't want to offend Sovereign Grace."

"I'm just sharing that that's the mentality: 'I'm worried about offending this person.' I think if we're going to speak the truth, we need to do it in a loving way, and if we're concerned about offending them we should at least tell them, 'I'm going to share this publicly, and I just want to let you know that.'"