

**Willow Creek Governance Review
2014-2018**

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Introduction

Willow Creek Community Church experienced painful times during the Spring and Summer of 2018. After several waves of accusations of wrongdoing, the Senior Pastor accelerated his retirement, the new Lead Teaching Pastor resigned, the new Lead Pastor resigned, and then all the members of the Elder Board resigned according to an orderly transition plan that was completed on January 17, 2019, when the new elders were installed.

After these resignations, the Elder Board made several key decisions, including appointing a team of congregants, staff, and elders to conduct a formal board governance review. The charter for this governance review team was to:

- Evaluate the Elder Board's handling of allegations against the Senior Pastor
- Evaluate the organizational structure for proper oversight and accountability
- Evaluate the monitoring reports and other input received by the Elder Board
- Evaluate processing of information and decision-making by the Elder Board
- Evaluate how decisions are communicated and actions are taken
- Evaluate where trust is broken between Elder Board and senior leadership
- Communicate changes that can help restore trust in Elder Board oversight

The governance review team was composed of three elders, two staff, and two congregants. The aim was to appoint a team that included elders but that was not composed of a majority of elders. The team brought in an independent governance expert to analyze written documents, interview past and current elders, write a report of the findings, and make recommendations for improvement of governance.

Regarding the first bullet point of the charter, the team identified an overlap of responsibilities with the Independent Advisory Group and asked that group to evaluate the board's handling of allegations against the Senior Pastor.

The team set the scope of the review to cover governance structure, board process, and group dynamics. The team decided to focus on elders serving during 2014-2018 because these years cover the period when the allegations arose. Most elders serving before 2014 would have been off the board before any allegations came to the board's attention. Key staff who had some level of access to the board during this timeframe were also interviewed.

Steps taken to gather the data included:

- Reviewing the Bylaws
- Reviewing the Elder Board Policy Governance Manual
- Reviewing all board minutes from 2014-2018
- Reviewing monitoring reports from 2014-2018
- Interviewing all 21 elders who served any part of 2014-2018
- Interviewing six leadership staff who had interactions with the Elder Board
- Interviewing the former Senior Pastor

All these interviews were conducted with individuals face-to-face, or by telephone, by the independent governance expert. Staff members and former elders on the team provided confirmation that data collected was accurate. The congregational members on the team served to ensure the credibility of the process. This is the report of the governance review team's findings from these interviews and recommendations for improvement of governance at Willow Creek Community Church.

This report does not cover the nature of the allegations against the Senior Pastor or the quality of internal and external investigations conducted in response to these allegations. Those matters were addressed through the work of the Independent Advisory Group. This report does not cover the governance of the WCA, a legally separate organization, now called the Global Leadership Network. In addition, this report should not be considered legal advice and does not make any recommendations relating to compliance with the law.

Though the Elder Board at Willow Creek tended to function well in their fiduciary responsibilities and spiritual oversight of the church, its weaknesses in governance involved their interactions with the Senior Pastor and their inability to hold him accountable. Following, are (I) the contributing factors to the breakdown of effective governance, (II) the confluence of contributing factors, and (III) the 14 governance recommendations.

I. The Contributing Factors to the Breakdown of Effective Governance

In 2008, Willow Creek streamlined its complex governance structure to a single Elder Board and started using policy-based governance. This was a productive change that kept the elders out of operational decisions and cleared up organizational confusion. The board policy manual has been comprehensive and well-written. Yet, governance effectiveness broke down under the crisis of dealing with allegations of inappropriate behavior by the Senior Pastor. While the individuals selected to be elders met Biblical qualifications, highly unusual circumstances, certain board protocols, a tight time frame, and intense media scrutiny combined to form a perfect storm in 2018.

The interviews conducted with elders and staff focused on governance structure, board process, and group dynamics. The analysis surfaced 13 factors representing areas needing improvement. Many of these factors contributed to the way the board handled allegations as they arose and the crisis in responding to the *Chicago Tribune* article. The confluence of these 13 factors led to reduced effectiveness of the Elder Board during the crisis, and in the following weeks, a breakdown of trust between the Elder Board and staff. These factors all contributed to the governance breakdown, are all intertwined, and are presented below in alphabetical order.

Board capitulation: Whether from celebrity status, 40-plus years of experience, forceful statements, or fear of an outburst, the board would too often defer during board disagreements and let decisions go the Senior Pastor's way. This was not a "yes board" but they would often acquiesce if the Senior Pastor took a strong stand. The individual board members tended to be high-functioning individuals but, as a group, ultimately deferential. When the Senior Pastor spoke sternly, many of the board members would quickly fall in line.

Celebrity status: The Senior Pastor was larger than life for many. Most board members gave deference to him. This made it difficult for some elders to challenge him in a meeting. Some of the elders thought they were unwittingly giving him special treatment and tiptoeing around significant issues to prevent conflicts. Some board members struggled with feelings of insecurity when the Senior Pastor was in the room. They felt like they were sitting in board meetings with a celebrity.

Consensus decision-making: Under policy-based governance, a board will discuss issues in enough depth to attempt to achieve consensus rather than merely lobbying and voting. Consensus does not

mean that everybody agrees, but that those opposed can understand how the others came to their opinion and can support decisions outside of the board meeting and “speak with one voice.” This is a best practice in governance. On the Willow board, there was a misunderstanding about consensus and agreement. The board was zealous about reaching full agreement. They used the word “alignment” to signify a willingness to move ahead together in unity. This was an admirable trait taken too far and sometimes slowed the board’s ability to act to a crawl. This practice reduced the board’s ability to react quickly in a crisis.

Constricted information flow: One of the key principles of policy-based governance is to establish a single point of contact with the staff. Such an approach makes it easier to hold the Senior Pastor and staff accountable. It also helps the board to stay out of operational decisions. When moving to policy-based governance, the Senior Pastor also wanted a single point of contact with the board. He wanted to receive emails or phone calls only from the Board Chair. The board agreed to his request. This meant that if an elder had a question about any matter, he or she had to go to the Board Chair who would then go to the Senior Pastor. The Senior Pastor would then direct staff to gather the information, send it to the Board Chair, who would then send it to the other elders. This unnecessary and burdensome protocol increased the risk of constricted information flow.

Controlling behavior: The Senior Pastor sometimes exhibited overly-controlling behavior in board meetings. He typically did not attempt to lead each conversation. Instead, he would wait for elders to voice their opinions about an issue, then he would “weigh in” and wait for the elders to fall in line. If a conversation was not going his way, he would tend to become more forceful.

Culture of fear: The Senior Pastor’s presence in meetings brought apprehension and discomfort for some elders and staff. It was difficult to confront him or disagree with him on issues he felt strongly about. Many avoided correcting him or asking tough questions in board meetings for fear of his reactions. The elders had previously confronted the Senior Pastor regarding multiple instances of verbally abusing staff before this timeframe.

Elder selection process: The normal process of selecting new elders to replace open positions was for the Elder Board to appoint an Elder Selection Committee. The committee would open nominations from the church, interview all the candidates, then bring the list of nominees to the elders. The current Elder Board would then make the final selection and announce the results to the congregation. This process was dominated by the Senior Pastor in at least two cases within this timeframe.

Emergency policies: The board policy manual included specific policies on how the board should handle emergency situations, such as “moral failure of, or criminal allegations against” the Senior Pastor. These policies gave a clear framework for the board to know how to respond to a crisis, but they still needed enough time to meet face-to-face as a board. The constricted time during events of March 22-25, 2018, as discussed below, did not allow the board to implement their policies.

Executive sessions: Executive sessions are when the board meets without its Senior Pastor to allow for more open discussion among board members. Opening and closing every board meeting with an executive session is a best practice. The Senior Pastor strongly resisted the use of executive sessions. Before 2014, the board only called an executive session when discussing the annual performance reviews. Some elders noted that the board would act differently when the Senior Pastor was not in the room.

Founder's syndrome: Leaders with a long tenure sometimes struggle to retire. The founder's identity becomes enmeshed with the organization he or she created. Symptoms include the organization functioning according to the founder's personality, the founder unable to make himself or herself retire, the founder disrupting the succession planning process, and the founder selecting his own successor. Succession planning and choosing the next Senior Pastor is clearly the responsibility of the board. The board wanted to interview external candidates, but the Senior Pastor strongly discouraged that. He drove the succession process and the board reluctantly allowed it.

Lack of effective accountability: No elder would say that the Senior Pastor willingly placed himself under the authority of the board in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, it is difficult for any board to hold a Senior Pastor accountable more than he or she is willing to submit. The Senior Pastor only had a basic level of accountability to the board and any deeper level was strongly resisted by him. Yet, the Elder Board could have tried harder. Added to this was the dual-role problem. The Senior Pastor was employed by the church but was also paid by the Willow Creek Association. It became unclear when the Senior Pastor was working for the church and when he was working for the WCA. This made tighter accountability more difficult.

Performance review: Historically, annual performance reviews had been a painful process for the elders because of the Senior Pastor's defensive outbursts. The board improved the process to make it go smoother and include feedback from all his direct reports and all Lead Pastors. Unfortunately, leadership staff were warned by their peers not to give any negative feedback that could be traceable back to them for fear of repercussions from the Senior Pastor. As a result, most of the negative feedback was not offered up by the staff to the performance review committee, and any negative feedback was offered in a generic way. Some negative feedback was asked to be softened at the request of some board members believing the repercussions would not be worth it.

Senior Pastor as elder: At Willow, the Senior Pastor was not only the Senior Pastor, but also an elder and voting member of the Elder Board. One potential problem with the Senior Pastor being a voting member of the Elder Board is blurred accountability. Because elders served only a single four-year term and then were required to roll off the board, the Senior Pastor could overpower any Board Chair with his forty-plus years of experience. On several occasions, the Senior Pastor would forcefully object and board decision-making would slow down or come to a standstill.

II. Confluence of Contributing Factors

All these factors came together within a tight timeframe to contribute to the regretful family meetings on March 22-25, 2018. Effective governance broke down during an unusual and high-pressure situation resembling a perfect storm.

As the Board Chair worked with the planning group to draft a statement from the Elder Board, the board had a small window of time on Wednesday evening to comment on the draft. The article had not yet been released, so they did not know what the statement would be responding to.

The *Chicago Tribune* article was released online late Thursday evening, March 22. The new allegations in this news article were distressing. The Senior Pastor strenuously denied all the allegations. To the staff, this felt like an attack on the church. The group meeting together to figure out how to respond, which included senior staff and the Board Chair, decided to launch an aggressive defense. As a board, the

elders were not opposed to this approach. Given the one internal and two external investigations that uncovered no evidence of wrongdoing by the Senior Pastor and no knowledge of any new allegations before the article was released, an aggressively defensive posture seemed appropriate at the time.

The executive leadership of the staff called family meetings for the next evening, Friday, March 23, and Monday, March 26. The staff and board had less than 24 hours to respond to the article. Some of the elders were upset that no one asked their opinion before calling these family meetings. Many of the elders thought this was an unwise move.

On Friday afternoon, the board held a conference call to comment on the board statement regarding the allegations that would be made public. They disapproved the existing draft and asked specifically for changes including: don't use arrogant language, don't say we 100% believe he has done nothing wrong, don't say he will remain in his position through October, and don't say he has our complete support. They were in consensus that while they would stand by the work they had done as a board, they were concerned about the new allegations that had just been reported. In the end, the format of the family meetings gave the impression that the Elder Board was fully supportive of the Senior Pastor and all he had to say.

The board tacitly approved of the draft, because they did not call a halt to the process or demand to see the revised statement. But they did not formally approve the statement either and were not in agreement with it.

That evening, the Senior Pastor attacked his accusers with the apparent full support and knowledge of the Elder Board. Though none of the elders thought the evening went well, many thought it was good enough immediately after the family meeting. But most of the elders reported they left feeling unsettled. They had been in a meeting they did not call that left the impression of full support for the Senior Pastor, which was what they explicitly wanted to avoid.

In addition, the protocol of the board only communicating through the board chair made communication difficult. The tight time frame, less than 24 hours, made it difficult for the board to meet in person or execute their emergency policies. The misunderstanding of consensus decision-making contributed to them not being able to make swift decisions to act.

In the following weeks, the Elder Board started backing away from their original statement that was filmed and emailed. This led to consternation among the staff who thought the board was fully supportive of the Senior Pastor. They felt betrayed and, as a result, trust was broken between the staff and Elder Board. Then, the resignations that followed led to increasing distrust in the congregation.

In hindsight, this broken trust could have been avoided with some key changes.

First, from a governance perspective, there was a false sense of urgency around responding to the *Chicago Tribune* article. The family meetings immediately following the article did not need to happen that weekend. The board needed time to process the new information and determine an appropriate set of responses. The board could have stepped in to cancel the planned family meetings. But with less than 24 hours of notice, it was impossible for the elders to call a board meeting to do so. Also, calling a family meeting on any campus was an operational matter in the hands of the Lead Pastors.

Second, the Board Chair needed more support from the rest of the Elder Board. During this critical time, the planning group would have benefitted by having two or three elders in the meetings during the week leading up to the release of the article. They were following the protocol they had in place of the single point of contact through the board chair, but this was too much pressure for one elder. Yet, all the elders were responsible to fulfill the obligations of their careers and most were not able to suddenly take a week off.

Third, there was unnecessary compartmentalization of information and communication between board, leadership team, and staff. If the various groups had interacted more openly together, they would have learned the board was not giving their full support to this aggressive response or the Senior Pastor.

Fourth, the board did not have a leave of absence policy in the case of a scandal involving the Senior Pastor. They failed to intervene during a crisis. They could have cancelled the family meetings. They could have asked the Senior Pastor not to speak at them, but the decision-making process was impacted by the tight timeframe and many of the 13 factors mentioned above.

Fifth, if the board had built genuine relationships with senior level staff over the years, it would have been easier to weather the storm without breaking trust with the staff.

III. Governance Recommendations

In the New Testament, elders are charged with the responsibility of overseeing, caring for, and protecting the congregation. The apostle Peter wrote:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

These recommendations are offered in the spirit of helping the elders fulfill their role of overseeing the congregation and rebuilding trust with the staff and congregation.

The following are 14 recommendations for change to mitigate the factors mentioned above and improve the governance of the church in the future. These recommendations are limited to governance practices only. Even with these improved governance processes in place, we cannot claim that the problematic events described above would have been avoided.

1. Retain Policy-Based Governance: Policy-based governance did not cause or allow the problems the congregation faced in 2018. Moving away from this form of governance would be a mistake. The board needs to clearly understand the distinction between ends and means, or governance and operations. The board needs to continue to stay out of operations and focus on governing. With an organization with this level of complexity, the board needs to stay in their lane.

2. Increase Accountability: Consider changing the governance structure so that the Senior Pastor reports to the Elder Board, is not an elder, does not vote, but instead serves under the authority of the Elder Board. Increase accountability and develop a practice for asking soul-keeping questions. All Willow

ministry staff need a personal accountability group of some kind. These can be with people inside or outside of the congregation. Unfortunately, no board can effectively hold a pastor or ministry staff person accountable unless they are willing to invite trusted people into their private life. But creating a culture of accountability can go a long way toward preventing future scandals.

3. Clarify Communication Protocols: Revisit the Board Chair role and former restrictive communication patterns. Clarify which staff the elders can contact directly, if any, for additional information. Set this in board policy. Reclarify what kind of contact staff can have with board members. Consider launching an annual retreat or quarterly informational meeting with board and executive team meeting together.

4. Redefine Consensus Decision-Making: Train for proper understanding and use of consensus, voting, alignment, and the “one voice” principle. Under policy-based governance, if the board cannot achieve consensus, then they should take a vote. It is not ideal, but it usually serves the organization better than waiting too long to act. After the meeting, the board members should speak with one voice, only saying what action was decided by the board, and should not report the outcome of the vote or who was opposed and why.

5. Conduct Regular Executive Sessions: Executive sessions, where the board excuses the Senior Pastor for a part of the meeting, is a best practice in governance. The Elder Board should consider conducting routine executive sessions at beginning and end of each meeting. These can be formalized in the typical agenda for a board meeting.

6. Enhance Elder Board Policy Governance Manual: The current board policy manual is generally in good shape. The board needs to review bylaws and all policies annually. The board started well in 2008 but the board policy manual did not get much attention during the 2014 through 2018 time period. Many of the recommendations listed here will need to be formalized as new or revised policies in the board policy manual. Several formatting improvements would make the board policy manual easier to reference for elders.

7. Upgrade the Crisis Management Plan: In a time of crisis, a governing board sometimes needs to go beyond existing policies and act, especially if the crisis involves the Senior Pastor. If a Senior Pastor is suddenly incapacitated, the board should act immediately to appoint an interim Senior Pastor. Strengthen the existing crisis management plan with examples of various moral crises and how to respond, including how to handle allegations against the Senior Pastor or a Lead Pastor, and when to put a leadership staff person on an immediate leave of absence.

8. Form Theological Subcommittees: As new theological issues emerge; the incoming board should continue the practice of appointing ad hoc subcommittees of the Elder Board or special task forces as needed to develop theological statements for Willow on specific issues. Tapping outside experts can provide valuable assistance to the board in working through challenging issues.

9. Establish New Board Member Pipeline: Consider creating a new elder development program that invites those who may wish to be candidates to the Elder Board to attend governance training and increase the opportunities for them to be informally vetted to produce fewer negative surprises. Perhaps these candidates could observe the opening segment of several board meetings as a part of this experience. This will increase the pool of capable candidates ready to serve.

10. Adjust Elder Selection Process: Improve the elder selection process with an emphasis on balance between chemistry and courage. In the past, the current Elder Board made the final selection of new elders. For theological reasons, some will want to keep that practice in place. For the purpose of rebuilding and maintaining trust of the congregation, consider changing the elder selection process so the official elder selection committee makes the final decision instead of the Elder Board. Ensure that the selection committee is populated by a majority of non-elders.

11. Improve Elder Onboarding: Improve onboarding and mentoring for new board members. All new board members need to be fully briefed on key information and events from the past that may not be public knowledge. All new board members need to receive training or read materials about policy-based governance. This will allow new board members to step in and start contributing productively from their first meeting.

12. Review Relationship with the WCA: Given all that happened in 2018, Willow Creek Community Church and the WCA, now called the Global Leadership Network, should undertake a special review of the relationship between the two organizations. These legally separate organizations have a written cooperation agreement that may now need to be updated. For example, going forward, no staff should be employed by both organizations to increase accountability on both sides. Special attention should be given to the use of the name and the brand of Willow Creek.

13. Send Out Elder Teams: The church may benefit by encouraging more interaction between the elders and staff. Consider developing a policy where more than one elder will be sent to represent the Elder Board at any campus or with any group of staff.

14. Build Bridges with Staff: Except for the practice of inviting staff from specific ministries for dinner each month, the leadership staff and elders have been kept in separate compartments. This lack of familiarity can allow mistrust to fester in a time of crisis. Schedule events and venues where board and staff can get to know each other as fellow believers in Jesus and co-laborers at Willow Creek.

It is possible to rebuild the broken trust between the Elder Board and staff, and between the Elder Board and congregation. The place to start is with the paid staff at Willow Creek. Rebuilding trust first requires transparency. Then it requires consistency. The Elder Board needs to do what it says it will do. The staff will then work together with the Elder Board to rebuild the trust of the congregation. As the Apostle Peter wrote: *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.* (1 Peter 5:10-11)

Respectfully submitted,
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