

Return Date: No return date scheduled
Hearing Date: 9/23/2020 10:30 AM - 10:30 AM
Courtroom Number: 2102
Location: District 1 Court
Cook County, IL

FILED
5/22/2020 7:34 PM
DOROTHY BROWN
CIRCUIT CLERK
COOK COUNTY, IL
2020CH04310

**IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS
CHANCERY DIVISION**

GILBERT BILEZIKIAN,)
)
)
 Plaintiff,)
)
)
 v.)
)
)
 SHOJI BOLDT, BARB BUTZ, JEFF CHOH,)
 SILVIA ESCOBAR, JEFF MASON, MICHAEL)
 ROTH, JOHN SLEETING, MARY SQUARE,)
 and WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH,)
)
)
 Defendants.)

9315805

Case No. 2020CH04310

COMPLAINT FOR EQUITABLE RELIEF AND DAMAGES

Now comes plaintiff Gilbert Bilezikian, by his attorneys, and for his complaint against defendants Willow Creek Community Church and each of its Elders, Shoji Boldt, Barb Butz, Jeff Choh, Silvia Escobar, Jeff Mason, Michael Roth, John Sleeting, and Mary Square, states as follows:

Venue

1. Venue is proper because Cook County is a county in which the transaction or some part thereof occurred out of which the cause of action arose.

Plaintiff

2. Plaintiff Gilbert Bilezikian is a resident of Du Page County, Illinois. Plaintiff is an American author, professor, lecturer, scholar and theologian on matters pertaining to Christianity including but not limited to gender equality. Due to his Th.D (Doctor of Theology), plaintiff is often referred to as “Dr. B”. He was born June 26, 1927.

3. Plaintiff earned his B.A. from the University of Paris, his M.Div. (Master of Divinity) from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and his Th.D. from Boston University.

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He also pursued a seven-year post-doctoral program at Ecole des Hautes Etudes at the Sorbonne in Paris. For 20 years, plaintiff was a professor of Biblical Studies at Wheaton College. He interrupted his tenure at Wheaton College to assume for three years the presidency of Haigazian University in Beirut, Lebanon, and to teach two years at Trinity College in Deerfield, Illinois. In 1981 and then again in 1992, the students, faculty and administration of Wheaton College awarded to plaintiff the distinction of Senior Teacher of the Year.

4. Plaintiff co-founded defendant Willow Creek Community Church (“Church”) with Bill Hybels (“Hybels”) in 1975. The Church is an American non-denominational and multi-generational Evangelical Christian megachurch. Hybels became the first pastor of the Church. Plaintiff was a member of the original leadership team and among the first Elders of the Church. In 2000, Hybels was quoted by *Christianity Today* as stating "There would be no Willow Creek [Church] without Gilbert Bilezikian." In 2015 the Church staged a celebration to honor plaintiff under the banner "Dr. B Our Living Legend" at a packed and buoyant United Center in Chicago on the Church’s 40th anniversary.

5. In addition to numerous articles, plaintiff has published six books on matters pertaining to Christianity. They are:

- *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family* (1985 1st Edition & 2nd Editions; 2006 3rd Edition; Baker Academic)
- *Christianity 101: Your Guide to Eight Basic Christian Beliefs* (1993 Zondervan)
- *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness*
- *How I Changed My Mind about Women in Leadership* (a chapter in the compendium, 2010 Zondervan)
- *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy* (1977 Baker; reprinted 2010 Wipf and Stock)
- *Eglise, Ouvre-Toi* (i.e., Church, Break Down Your Doors) (1980s’)

Plaintiff's books and writings are quoted far and wide. At least four are still in print and sales thereof provide royalties to plaintiff: *Beyond Sex Roles* (now electronic only); *Christianity 101*; *Community 101: Reclaiming The Local Church As Community*; and *The Liberated Gospel*.

6. Plaintiff is frequently invited by Churches from different Christian denominations to speak, consult and meet to discuss matters concerning the Christian faith and practices, and for which plaintiff is often paid honoraria.

7. Plaintiff married Maria Lenart in 1957 and has been devoted and committed to her and to their marriage vows for 63 years. Plaintiff has always been a vocal critic of sexism and misogyny, and an ardent advocate of gender equality and of adherence to marriage commitments. He was in the forefront advocating that the Bible teaches that women are co-equal with men. In 1985 he published *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*. In 1988, he was one of several who drafted the statement, "Men, Women, and Biblical Equality," which laid out the biblical rationale for gender equality and was drafted in his dining room. In 2010 he contributed a chapter to the compendium *How I Changed My Mind about Women in Leadership*. Plaintiff's advocacy of gender equality precipitated not just dissent from other scholars, etc., but hate mail as well. One dissenting biblical scholar, Wayne Grudem, was quoted as saying that "*Beyond Sex Roles* has regrettably been widely influential, Gilbert Bilezikian has been one of the three or four most influential egalitarian scholars."

8. In 2000, *Christianity Today* quoted Hybels as saying that without plaintiff, "There would be no Willow Creek—no small groups, no women in leadership, no passion for service." The publication added: "Not everyone at Willow Creek initially agreed with Bilezikian's position on women's ministry: among others, Hybels himself taught the traditional view of male headship.

After months of study and debate, the church decided that it would support women in any position of leadership—teacher, preacher, elder.” As a result of plaintiff’s advocacy, women came to and continue to occupy a significant part of the Church’s leadership. Indeed, four of the eight defendant Elders are women.

The Defendant Church And Elders

9. Defendant Church is a non-profit corporation organized under the laws of the State of Illinois with its headquarters located in South Barrington, Cook County Illinois. The Church has several satellite locations for services in Cook County, Du Page County and McHenry County. The South Barrington location sits on approximately 155 acres that include an auditorium with 7,095 seats, making it one of the largest auditoriums in the United States. The Church’s administrative offices are located in South Barrington and where its Board of Elders meet.

10. The Church is operated by a Board of eight Elders who serve as representatives of the Church and operate much as a board of directors, setting policy and the like for the Church. They are nominated and approved by the congregation. They are defendants Shoji Boldt, Barb Butz, Jeff Choh, Silvia Escobar, Jeff Mason, Michael Roth, John Sleeting, and Mary Square. Each of them signed the January 28, 2020 defamatory letter published on the Church’s website and later read aloud at the February 2, 2020 services and videotaped for YouTube as set forth below.

Disagreement Between Plaintiff And Hybels--Plaintiff Stops Preaching At Church

11. When Pastor Hybels began managing the fast-growing Church like a Chief Executive Officer, a theological disagreement emerged between plaintiff and now Senior Pastor Hybels as to how the Church should be led and managed. As a result, in or around 2000, during

a discussion, Pastor Hybels told plaintiff that he should not preach at the Church any more. Although their relationship continued and did not break off, plaintiff chose not to preach at the Church again.

Ann Lindberg

12. Ann Mitchell is an individual who first married as Ann Swezene and later remarried as Ann Lindberg (“Ms. Lindberg”). In recent years, Ms. Lindberg has made public statements on her turbulent life including the following in tweets or, on January 31, 2020, to journalist Julie Roys. She publicly stated that she has been “through a tremendous amount of abuse from early childhood on” (January 31, 2020) and that she is “a survivor myself of more than one person in authority over me” (April 26, 2018). She has publicly stated that she had “a very abusive marriage” (January 31, 2020) with a “crazy scary ex” (July 31, 2018). She publicly stated that she has been “in therapy since 1987, plus 9 years of concurrent group therapy” (July 27, 2018). She publicly stated that she has PTSD (July 26, 2018).

13. Ms. Lindberg also publicly stated that “I can say that memory is a tricky thing. If one has been in counseling, which I have been for 31 years, some things thought about long enough can begin to feel true that aren't” (April 11, 2018). She further publicly stated that “We all tend to shade the truth for our benefit” (April 23, 2018).

14. One of plaintiff’s functions at the Church was to counsel those in need. Ms. Lindberg (then Ann Mitchell) attended services at the Church in the mid-1980’s, approached plaintiff and asked for his help in her situation of extreme need. She was struggling in the midst of difficult circumstances that included abuse, indigence and emotional issues. Plaintiff agreed to counsel her. While some improvement occurred as a result, plaintiff eventually noticed that she was becoming attached to him in unhealthy and inappropriate ways. As a result, plaintiff

referred Ms. Lindberg to professional counseling which she now had the resources to afford.

Contact between plaintiff and Ms. Lindberg then came to an end.

15. Sometime later, some occasional and amicable communication between plaintiff and Ms. Lindberg resumed. Plaintiff frequently travelled for his work and would often send postcards of places visited to family and friends and that would include past and present students and mentees.

16. During 2006, Ms. Lindberg remarried, marrying Mark Lindberg (Ms. Lindberg having divorced her first husband Paul Swezene whom she had married in the late 1980's). Subsequently, on January 10, 2007, Ms. Lindberg sent to plaintiff an email that lauded and celebrated plaintiff but also, while it noted the upward, positive trajectory of her life, reflected her struggle with the "perception of reality":

From: Ann.Lindberg@sungard.com
 To: DrBGil@aol.com
 Sent: 1/10/2007 9:15:26 AM Central Standard Time
 Subject: Hello

Dear Gil, hello. I have thought of you any number of times and wish I was going to be in town this Wed to hear you speak. I will have to buy the DVD, the next closest thing.

* * *

Marriage is going well; Mark is wonderful and the kids are flourishing. I continue to go through the transition of absorbing so many fast changes in my life. Changes, no matter how good, can be stressful and alter one's perception of reality. That is, in fact, the question that is uppermost in my life right now, that is "what is reality?" I continue to wrestle with that as it applies to my daily life and my priorities and passions. And for some reason, getting married and having wonderful things happen to me has added a dimension of fear that I did not have before-that is the fear of losing things and people I hold very dear. I'm struggling to re-orient myself so that God remains my number one relationship and all the rest falls in behind.

* * *

Anyway, I hope all is well and I hope I will be able to make it to see and hear you in person next Wed, though not this. It was good to hear Bill speak so glowingly of you and good to know you are not too dis-encharmed with WCCC to be willing to preach. Though WCCC is not perfect, I do believe it offers great hope to the world and continues to struggle to grow and change and adapt and reflect God's glory.

fondly,

Ann E. Lindberg
[position and company address]

17. Plaintiff was sufficiently concerned that he responded in a January 15, 2007 email as follows:

From: DrBGil@aol.com
To: Ann.Lindberg@sungard.com
Sent: 1/15/2007 8:23:31 PM Central Standard Time
Subject: Re: Hello

Now that your life is settled and secure, you may be suffering from posttraumatic stress syndrome and the depression that often accompanies it. You have been bravely battling for survival for years. Could be that, as the stress has eased up, the emotional damage that was inflicted on you in the past is catching up with you. Better get help and get things fixed before your husband starts worrying about you.

Prayers, gB

18. On June 21, 2009--more than 20 years after they first met--Ms. Lindberg (now married to Mark Lindberg) sent another laudatory and celebratory email to plaintiff, noting that "I have grown to love you since I met you in 1985" and hoping "for a 'thank you' sort of service from WCCC and the church worldwide to honor you and feel our gratitude":

Subject: Re: Hello!
Date: 6/21/2009 9:18:34 AM Central Standard Time
From: Ann.Lindberg@sungard.com
To: DrBGil@aol.com
Sent from the Internet (Details)

Gil, that makes practical sense except for two things: the love of friends poured on you can help you gain strength. Two, for your friends' sake, if you are passing away, we need the chance to love you and say "good bye.". I would like that chance. I have grown to love you since I met you in 1985. I also hope that you are strong enough for a "thank you" sort of service from WCCC and the church worldwide to honor you and feel our gratitude. We need the chance to honor and celebrate and then to weep and say possible good byes, like when Paul began his journey to Jerusalem and Rome. Please consider this, dear Gil, and if you don't want to or question its wisdom, please forward to Bill for his prayerful consideration? Please don't leave me without a goodbye. I also plead with you to allow your funeral/memorial service to be open to the church

because many of us need to weep together and celebrate you to begin to heal. Please let that be two separate events: pre and post mortem. I love you and hope to see alive again this side of Heaven. Ann (Swezene) Lindberg

19. In or about 2010, Ms. Lindberg asked plaintiff to meet her new husband. Plaintiff, however, did not see any usefulness in such a meeting, especially given that Ms. Lindberg herself had expressed some reservations about her husband having a “fear reaction” after such a meeting. Ms. Lindberg then asked that plaintiff at least email with her husband, which request plaintiff reluctantly accepted as a concession that would satisfy her. Then followed emails between plaintiff and Mr. and Ms. Lindberg. In the emails, however, her husband grew angry and threatened to physically assault plaintiff.

In 2010 The Church Advises Plaintiff To Cut Off Email Contact With Ms. Lindberg

20. That led Ms. Lindberg to contact the Church Elders in 2010 complaining about the discord in the correspondence between plaintiff and Mr. and Ms. Lindberg. The then-Elders referred her complaint to an Elder Response Team (“ERT”) made up of two staff members Chris Hurta and Scott Vaudry. They met with Mr. and Ms. Lindberg and separately with plaintiff. Thereafter the ERT advised plaintiff, without more, to simply cut off email contact with Ms. and Mr. Lindberg and said they had given similar advice to Ms. Lindberg. Neither they nor anyone else at the Church conveyed to plaintiff any conclusion or belief that plaintiff had engaged in any inappropriate behavior of any sort or even that he had been accused of inappropriate behavior. Neither they nor anyone else at the Church conveyed to plaintiff that he was now under any restriction of any activity at the Church. Plaintiff continued to minister unhindered at the Church (teaching, counseling, mentoring and the like) as he had done in the past. Indeed, five years later in 2015 the Church staged a celebration of plaintiff under the banner “Dr. B Our Living Legend” at a packed and buoyant United Center in Chicago on the Church’s 40th anniversary.

21. In violation of the ERT's 2010 advice to Ms. Lindberg to cut off her contact with plaintiff, four years later on September 17, 2014 Ms. Lindberg sent a handwritten letter to plaintiff. Although the letter did not accuse plaintiff of any inappropriate behavior or the like, plaintiff found it bizarre, fanciful and not reality-based. The letter referred to a certain "friendship/relationship" that never existed. The letter concluded with an acknowledgement that she has "always had and have love and respect for you, dear friend" and "See you in heaven!":

9/17/2014

Dear Gilbert,

I have been wishing I could have talked with you for about 8 years or so now, but never got the chance--and, of course won't get to now.

I never wanted to hurt you when I talked with Chris Hurta, the Elder's assistant. The only reason I did so was because I had a concern for Willow that had been bothering my conscience for some time.

Our friendship/relationship heated up with a bang around 1985. We were both lonely and there was a strong gravitational pull between us. I think I might have married you had you been single, but you weren't. I loved the cards and letters you sent me when traveling and our talks.

My concern came because of the jealousy I noticed from other women when you showed me attention. I wasn't sure you noticed. It did make me reconsider if I was the "only" or if there were others. I knew I would never cause a scandal, but I wasn't sure about them. That and only that was the reason I broke my silence. I wish I had the courage to have the conversation with you privately but also didn't want to leave my husband out. My concern was that you might die and suddenly speak up and cause harm to Willow--which I knew you wouldn't want. I have always had and have love and respect for you, dear friend.

Love,
Ann

PS. See you in heaven!

Ann (Mitchell/Swezene) Lindberg

Plaintiff refused to respond. A copy of said letter is attached as Exhibit A.

Concurrently In 2018 The Church Is Roiled By Sexual Misconduct Allegations Against Its Senior Pastor And Criticized For Its Response

22. On March 23, 2018, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article detailing allegations of sexual misconduct by Senior Pastor Bill Hybels spanning decades, including a prolonged affair with a married woman, although this was retracted by the woman herself. The *Tribune* wrote that Elders of the Church had conducted an internal review of Hybels' behavior which led to no findings of misconduct, and which led to the resignations of at least three leaders of the board of the Willow Creek Association a/k/a Global Leadership Network (an offshoot of the Church that Hybels founded in 1992) over what they believed to be an insufficient inquiry. All accusations were denied by Hybels. On April 10, 2018, Hybels announced that he was resigning as Senior Pastor effective immediately, stating he did not want to be a distraction to the Church's ministry, that he would leave the board of the Willow Creek Association and would no longer lead Willow Creek's Global Leadership Summit.

23. On April 21, 2018, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Christianity Today* reported more misconduct allegations against Hybels not included in the initial investigation. Church Elders received reports of other unwanted sexual comments and advances by Hybels that not been previously investigated by the Elder board. On August 5, 2018, *The New York Times* reported extensively documented allegations of sexual misconduct against a tenth reported victim that were not included in any previous investigations or reports. Co-lead pastor Steve Carter resigned the same day. The entire Elder board and co-lead pastor Heather Larson resigned on August 8, 2018 following a joint apology for mishandling the investigation.

24. On August 13, 2018, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that the Church had paid \$3.25 million to settle two lawsuits over child sexual abuse by a church volunteer. The Church denied any negligence in the two cases. In September 2018, the Church and Willow Creek

Association announced the formation of what they called an "Independent Advisory Group" to investigate the numerous allegations against Hybels. *Religion News Service* reported in December 2018 that the alleged misconduct and admitted mishandling of the allegations had led to a \$3 million budget shortfall for 2018, the elimination of 50 full-time positions, a 9% reduction in attendance across all the church's campuses, and a reduction in attendance of at least 15% at its main South Barrington Campus.

In 2018 Church Refuses Plaintiff's Request For An Investigation Of Allegations Against Him

25. On August 10, 2018 Ms. Lindberg and another woman in collaboration began blogging anonymously through the fictitious pseudonym E. S. Martin. Although the August 10, 2018 blog did not refer to plaintiff by name, it mentioned Hybels by name and in a thinly-disguised manner referred to plaintiff as "a founding elder and biblical scholar" and as a "founding elder at Willow Creek—not Bill Hybels." There is no "founding elder and biblical scholar--not Bill Hybels" other than plaintiff. The blog claimed that plaintiff had engaged in "sexual perversion" and has "enabl[ed] sexual perversion in other senior leaders as he has been doing for decades". The blog claimed that plaintiff had initiated chest-to-chest "awkward hugs" to anonymous women from which he seemingly derived sexual satisfaction. The blog also noted that "the elders made the decision that Bill [Hybels] had not done anything inappropriate". The blog also noted that "No one seems to be willing to expose [plaintiff] [which] means, he will keep doing what he's been doing for decades and he will keep enabling sexual perversion in other senior leaders as he has been doing for decades and by that make impossible any attempts to 'clean up' Willow Creek."

26. The blog contained an anonymous witness' account of a chest-to-chest "awkward hug" from a "founding elder at Willow Creek--not Bill Hybels". The anonymous witness

graphically describes her visit to plaintiff's home in "early/mid 2014", at which time plaintiff gave her a chest-to-chest hug as soon as she entered plaintiff's living room. At that time and within earshot of his wife, plaintiff "bounc[ed] my breasts up against his chest as if he was dribbling a basketball quickly and in short intervals", and "fond[led] my breasts up against his chest". She further notes that "Later that year, I made the decision to end our friendship after he exposed himself to me in his underwear (incontinence diapers)."

"Below is a detailed and highly graphic and very disturbing account of one such "awkward hug" from a founding elder at Willow Creek—not Bill Hybels. The witness chooses to remain anonymous and asks for privacy. I am publishing her personal account with her permission as detailed below.

I arrived at his home around lunch-time for one of our typical meetings. His wife was upstairs resting in her bedroom. When I entered the living room to greet him and give him a hug, he puts his left hand behind my back. I tried to give him my typical side hug which keeps my breasts from touching the person I hug. But that didn't happen.

He instead pulls me firmly against him and my breasts are pressed up against his chest. I was taken by surprise and hurriedly tried to pull away. I did so briefly, but then he pulls me back in firmly. Again, I tried to pull away. Again, he pulls me back in. It happened at least three times and very quickly. He was bouncing my breasts up against his chest as if he was dribbling a basketball quickly and in short intervals. All the while, he had a gloating grin on his face, enjoying the bouncing of my breasts up against his chest. I finally was able to put both my hands between our chests and pry myself away from him. My elbows and forearms hurt due to the pressure I had to exert in order to finally be able to pry away.

I was furious! And when he saw my furious facial expression, his gloating grin changed to 'concern'. He asked me, "What's wrong? Are you in pain? Are your breasts tender from your period?"

I was not in pain, I was furious! After fondling my breasts up against his chest, he tried to divert the "awkward" moment and the conversation to his 'concern' for my tender breasts and my period.

* * *

Since the beginning of that year, the year of the "awkward hug", I had been growing weary of our friendship. His attitude toward me that year had been growing extremely hostile and I didn't know why. Later that year, I made the decision to end our friendship after he exposed himself to me in his underwear (incontinence diapers). That was "the last straw" that led me to end our friendship. I have had little interaction with him since. The "awkward hug" incident took place in early/mid 2014. "

A copy of the August 10, 2018 blog is attached as Exhibit B.

27. The anonymous witness' account is not just false, but absurd. In 2014, plaintiff was 87-years old. Yet this 87-year old man is accused of sexual assault in his own living room within earshot of his wife, and of having the dexterity of a young athlete in order to administer the "awkward hug" as "if dribbling a basketball quickly and in short intervals". Moreover, after being allegedly assaulted by plaintiff, the anonymous witness remarkably chose to come back and again visit plaintiff, at which time she says plaintiff "exposed" himself in "incontinence diapers". In fact, plaintiff has not worn diapers since he was a baby.

28. On August 13, 2018, three days after the August 10, 2018 blog, a new E.S. Martin blog appeared in which the anonymous blogger(s) purported to quote an anonymous woman who identified plaintiff by name and claimed that during a walk with her in Wheaton, Illinois plaintiff sought to make the woman look at a poster in a store-front of a man wearing only a speedo with his legs spread. This, the anonymous woman claimed, prompted plaintiff to burst out laughing. She called this act "perverted to me". She concluded that "I have chosen to share this particular account at this time because of what I have been reading lately regarding the pattern of obsession over nudity and [neo-] pornography and indecent exposure among sexual predators and among Willow Creek senior leaders. And this account fits the pattern." A copy of the August 13, 2018 blog is attached as Exhibit C.

29. Then on September 21, 2018 a new E.S. Martin blog appeared. This blog also referred to plaintiff by name. The blog accused the Church and others of "covering up" for plaintiff. The blog stated that "Seeking accountability for DrB's actions is proving itself to be a much more daunting task than seeking accountability for Bill [Hybels]. DrB is linked to not one but to three major Christian institutions which have covered up for him for decades.

Additionally, some, not all, individuals who are seeking accountability for Bill and WCCC have a close friendship with DrB; so, they are either silent about DrB or extremely hostile toward the women raising allegations against DrB. Also, the women can't go to DrB. DrB has already revealed his defense which is to deny and attack and try to invalidate his accuser(s)." A copy of the September 21, 2018 blog is attached as Exhibit D.

30. The anonymous September 21, 2018 blog claimed that a "secondary witness" referred to as "Intel" said that Wheaton College "remove[d] DrB from his teaching responsibilities for one semester as a form of reprimand for his sexual misconduct toward women". In fact, plaintiff was never "removed" from his teaching responsibilities for any reason. Far to the contrary, Wheaton College accorded plaintiff a well-deserved sabbatical in the fall of 1990 prior to his retirement in 1992. This allegation is belied by the records of Wheaton College.

31. Plaintiff was able to discover the identities of the two anonymous women who collaborated on the pseudonymous E.S. Martin blogs, one of whom was Ms. Lindberg. Beginning on or about August 13, 2018 (three days after the first blog and on the date of the second blog) plaintiff on numerous occasions and repeatedly in 2018 and 2019 asked leadership in the Church, including Pastor Gillen and the Elders, to investigate the allegations in the blogs against him. Plaintiff eventually advised the Church the names of the two women who collaborated on the blogs, including Ms. Lindberg. In a January 28, 2020 email sent at 12:05 that morning to Elder Boldt--eighteen months after his first request for an investigation--plaintiff summarized his numerous previous requests: "Like a voice in the desert, I call again for a full investigation that would involve me as prime accused. I wonder why that basic right in every humane institution is denied to me at [the Church]".

32. Notwithstanding his numerous requests for investigation, beginning on August 13, 2018 to the early morning of January 28, 2020, the Church flatly refused to undertake any investigation. On January 28, 2020, following plaintiff's last email request for an investigation that very morning, the Elders published their defamatory January 28, 2020 letter below.

33. These 2018 anonymous blogs were the first time the then 91-year plaintiff heard any allegation by anyone that he had engaged in any abusive behavior.

December 20, 2019 Meeting With Four Elders

34. Although the Elders refused to investigate the allegations in the 2018 blogs, in December 2019 four of them requested to meet with plaintiff to obtain his views on how to heal the strife in the Church was still roiling from criticism that it had mishandled the investigation of Bill Hybels for sexual misconduct and the wholesale resignation of the prior Board of Elders and co-lead pastors Heather Larson and Steven Carter as a result. Plaintiff agreed and met with Elder Boldt, Elder Sleeting, Elder Butz and Elder Escobar in plaintiff's home on December 20, 2019. The discussion focused on the issues spawned in the wake of Hybels' tenure at the Church and the divisions and recriminations that ensued. No discussion was had about any of the accusations against plaintiff posted in the 2018 blogs or by anyone else.

35. In an email the following day, Elder Boldt thanked plaintiff under the rubric "Some ideas to break the logjam of recriminations, accusations and division". She wrote to plaintiff: "I am grateful for our time yesterday and the grief and wisdom expressed. I have forwarded your thoughts below to the rest of the elders and we hope to have some discussion and follow-up with you in the new year."

36. As of January 24, 2020, the Church was still roiling from the criticism that it had mishandled the investigation of Bill Hybels for sexual misconduct and the wholesale resignation of the prior Board of Elders and co-lead pastors Heather Larson and Steve Carter as a result.

Ms. Lindberg's January 25, 2020 Blog

37. On Saturday January 25, 2020 Ms. Lindberg published a blog on Facebook which was republished the same day in a blog by Julie Roys, a journalist who blogs as a Christian media outlet. Lindberg's blog claimed that during the period of October 1984 to 1988, plaintiff had pursued and engaged in unwanted sexual contact with her. "From October 1984 to 1988", Ms. Lindberg posted, plaintiff "pursued an inappropriate relationship with me. It began with subtle flirtations after weekend services, and grew to include hand holding, emotional sharing and intimacy, kissing and fondling, and pressure to have sex". She claimed that "[o]ne night, as we were walking to my car, he turned around in a hallway, pushed me hard against a wall, grabbed a breast and stuck his tongue down my throat" and that on occasion he would "begin wildly kissing me" while "I would push him away" or "would reach for my hand, my waist, and other places." She claimed that plaintiff confided to her about his "unhappy marriage". She claimed that she "started attending Willow in 1984 [as a] vulnerable and a heartbroken new believer, and grew to become a weekly attender involved in various volunteer and leadership programs" and was "victimized" by plaintiff. She claimed that she herself "believed that I was the only one who could help him." She also noted that plaintiff "was Bill Hybels' professor and mentor, and was very influential in the development of Willow Creek Community Church." She also claimed repeated unsuccessful attempts to have the Church accept her allegations and "to apologize publicly by name, to Bill's victims [and] Dr. B's victims". A copy of the post is attached hereto as Exhibit E.

38. Ms. Lindberg's allegations of plaintiff's behavior during the period October 1984 to 1988, however, were false. Indeed, her allegations are belied by her laudatory and celebratory emails to him dated January 10, 2007 and June 21, 2009 and her letter to him dated September 17, 2014, all twenty or more years after the alleged abuse and all written during the time of her second marriage. Indeed, the September 17, 2014 letter was written four years after Ms. Lindberg had complained to the Church about plaintiff and had been advised to cut off all contact with him.

The Elder's January, 2020 Defamatory Statements

39. On Tuesday, January 28, 2020 three days after Ms. Lindberg's January 25, 2020 post--and without contacting plaintiff to seek his comment and response to, much less denial of, Ms. Lindberg's allegations and without otherwise engaging in any investigation--the eight defendant Elders published on the Church's website and thereby published to the world the following defamatory letter that referred to and accepted the truthfulness of Ms. Lindberg's post, accused plaintiff of having pursued and engaged in unwanted sexual contact with her in the mid-1980's, conflated plaintiff with Pastor Hybels, and apologized for the pain plaintiff's behavior had caused Ms. Lindberg:

January 28, 2020

Dear Willow family,

Over the weekend, a longtime Willow Creek congregant made her personal story of abuse public. This story involves Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian (widely known as "Dr. B"), a mentor to Bill Hybels. We are heartbroken for what this congregant experienced and are deeply sorry for the pain this has caused her and her family.

Approximately 10 years ago, she presented church officials with assertions that Dr. Bilezikian behaved inappropriately toward her. While Dr. Bilezikian has never been an employee of Willow Creek, he has been active in the life of the church for decades. At

the time, the church's Elder Response Team (ERT) met at length with the woman and with Dr. Bilezikian. The team believed the woman's claim that Dr. Bilezikian engaged in inappropriate behavior dating back to the mid-eighties, including but not limited to hand holding, hugs, kissing, inappropriate touching, and sending overly personal communication. The ERT did restrict him from serving, but the restriction was not adequately communicated, resulting in Dr. Bilezikian serving and teaching in various capacities over the years. This was wrong, and we are sorry.

Over the past years, behavior has been brought to light that is both harmful and unacceptable for a Christ follower. This sinful behavior that we believe was demonstrated by Dr. Bilezikian and Bill Hybels was wrong, and we hold any person entrusted with leading at Willow Creek Community Church to a higher standard. Leaders carry a mandate to shepherd the body of Christ and guard against sinful behavior (1 Peter 5:2-4).

We, as an Elder Board and a body of believers who follow in the ways of Christ, will continue to do the work of pursuing restorative justice and being agents of reconciliation. We are committed to learning from the past to better support our community and those who are hurting. Please pray for all involved.

If you have experienced abuse from leadership at Willow, past or present, please contact us at 630-682-9797, ext. 1291.

In His service,

Willow Creek Elder Board
 Shoji Boldt
 Barb Butz
 Jeff Choh
 Silvia Escobar
 Jeff Mason, Chief Governance Officer
 Michael Roth
 John Sleeting, Secretary
 Mary Square

40. The Elders' January 28, 2020 letter referred to "a longtime Willow Creek congregant" who "[o]ver the weekend . . . made her personal story of abuse public." None of the Elders who signed the statement had ever met or spoken with plaintiff or conducted an

investigation of him and none were in office in 2010. Indeed they responded with their letter only three days after the congregant “made her personal story of abuse public” without any attempt to contact plaintiff for a response.

41. The Elders’ January 28, 2010 letter was reported by religious publications and social media sites, including Religion News Service, which distributed the story to numerous media outlets. In the days following the January 28th letter by the Elders, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Post*, *Black Christian News*, *Premier Christian News*, *Urban Christian News*, *Christian Leaders.com*, *Relevant*, and a nightly newscast by the CBS television station in Chicago all reported on it. In fact, the plaintiff learned about the Elders’ letter from people who had seen these media reports.

42. On January 31, 2010, three days following the Elders’ January 28, 2020 letter, plaintiff sent an email to Pastor Gillen, copy to Elder Boldt, asking for a meeting with the Elders as soon as possible in accord with his previous requests in 2018 and 2019:

From: drbgil@aol.com
 To: sgillen@willowcreek.org
 Cc: sboldt@wccservvolunteer.org
 Sent: 1/31/2020 12:41:05 PM Central Standard Time
 Subject: Urgent call. gB

Greetings,
 This is to request a meeting with the WCCC elders and pastor as soon as possible, before February 14 after which I will be out of town. I can make myself available any time, day or night, except for Thursday evening, February 6. The purpose of this gathering would be to make up for the encounter that should have taken place a week ago or earlier.

Thank you,
 Gilbert Bilezikian

Plaintiff’s email was ignored. There was no response whatsoever.

43. Instead of responding to plaintiff’s email for a meeting, the defendant Elders made sure to reinforce their defamatory message and damage to plaintiff by having Elder Mary

Square read their January 28, 2020 letter aloud at the Sunday, February 2, 2020 services at the South Barrington auditorium before a live audience of congregants and then put the video of her reading on *YouTube*. Thus, the Elders made sure that the world could now not only read their January 28, 2020 letter on their website but see a video of it being read to a live audience of congregants at services as well.

44. Then on March 10, 2020, the Elders published a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) in which they reiterated their apology for the behavior of plaintiff claimed by Ms. Lindberg, the allegations of which they unreservedly accepted:

Because of Dr. B's influence in our church, the times he was publicly thanked, and his involvement despite his restriction, we deemed it necessary to apologize to our church family and to make it clear we do not condone his behavior in this public format.

45. The Elders' January 28, 2020 letter that was published to the world on a website and on a video accused plaintiff, a co-founder and spiritual pillar of the Church, of having pursued and engaged in uninvited sexual contact with a long-time congregant. This letter was published in the charged climate of the national "Me Too" movement. While this movement has encouraged survivors of sexual harassment and violence to confront abusers, it has also been exploited to condemn innocent men on the basis of false claims and without any notion of due process for the accused. It is in such a feverish climate that the Elders and the Church published their letter against plaintiff and adopted Ms. Lindberg's accusations within three days of her post and without contacting plaintiff for a response or otherwise investigating her claims.

46. The Elders and the Church spontaneously rushed to judgment to condemn plaintiff, their long-term congregant and co-founder, for alleged behavior dating back 35 years or so, and did so in a mere three days without even an investigation or contact of plaintiff. They on the spot over-reacted to criticism of the former Elders' response to the allegations against Pastor

Hybels (which had nothing to do with plaintiff except for “guilt by association”) and to the allegations of Ms. Lindberg posted just three days before. The Elders and Church ignored even recent well-publicized examples of false accusations that arose through the #Me Too movement, prominent among them being the false accusations of sexual behavior against the Duke Lacrosse team and the men in a University of Virginia fraternity.

47. The Elders and Church ignored fundamental and deeply embedded notions of due process to “cancel” a devout husband, father of four, and mentor to hundreds. It is ironic that a Church that purports to devote itself to God decided to instead play God and uncritically accept Ms. Lindberg’s accusations.

Count I (Defamation *Per Se*)

48. Plaintiff hereby incorporates paragraphs 1 through 47 as paragraph 48 of this Count I for defamation *per se*.

49. The Elders’ statements that plaintiff had engaged in “inappropriate behavior dating back to the mid-eighties, including but not limited to hand holding, hugs, kissing, inappropriate touching, and sending overly personal communication” with a long-time congregant and that he engaged in “harmful” and “sinful” and “wrong” behavior toward or caused “pain” to her and engaged in behavior “unacceptable to a Christ follower” were defamatory on their face and false.

50. The Elders’ statements that the Elder Response Team “believed the woman’s claim that Dr. Bilezikian engaged in inappropriate behavior dating back to the mid-eighties, including but not limited to hand holding, hugs, kissing, inappropriate touching, and sending overly personal communication” were defamatory on their face and false. The statement that the 2010 ERT so “believed” her claim is belied by the fact that the ERT did not convey any such

belief to plaintiff, merely stating that he should cut all ties with her and not in the least imposing any restriction or condemnation of plaintiff. Indeed, the statement that the 2010 ERT so “believed” her claim is belied by the fact that the ERT did not convey to plaintiff that she had even alleged that plaintiff had engaged in any inappropriate physical contact. The statement is also belied by the fact that the Church five years later in 2015 would stage a celebration to honor plaintiff under the banner "Dr. B Our Living Legend" at a packed and high-spirited United Center in Chicago on the Church’s 40th anniversary.

51. The Elders’ statement that “[t]he ERT did restrict him from serving” was defamatory on its face and false. No such restriction was conveyed to plaintiff and in fact plaintiff continued to minister at the Church in the full and open view of all leadership and congregants of the Church. Indeed, the Elders effectively admit the falsehood of their claim by claiming that “the restriction was not adequately communicated, resulting in Dr. Bilezikian serving and teaching in various capacities over the years.” It is absurd to believe that plaintiff could be permitted to openly minister at the Church when so restricted without anyone taking action to enforce the purported restriction. Moreover, it is equally absurd to believe that in the face of such alleged restriction, the Church five years later in 2015 would still stage a celebration to honor plaintiff under the banner "Dr. B Our Living Legend" at a packed and buoyant United Center in Chicago on the Church’s 40th anniversary. It is equally absurd to believe that in the face of such alleged restriction, four Elders would request and have a meeting with plaintiff in December 2020 to seek his guidance on Church matters, then forward his thoughts to the rest of the Elders, and then express the desire to have some discussion and follow-up with him in the new year.

52. The Elders' statements imputing that the congregant's claims were truthful and that plaintiff had in fact engaged in the behavior claimed by the congregant were defamatory on their face and false. Thus, the Elders stated that "behavior has been brought to light that is both harmful and unacceptable for a Christ follower" and that "[t]his sinful behavior . . . we believe was demonstrated by Dr. Bilezikian and Bill Hybels was wrong . . ."; and that "We are heartbroken for what this congregant experienced and are deeply sorry for the pain this has caused her and her family." The Elders statement that they were "pursuing restorative justice and being agents of reconciliation" similarly imputed that the congregant's claims were truthful. In addition to the January 28, 2020 letter, the Elders' March 10, 2020 FAQ repeated that the Elders had accepted the truth of the congregant's accusations, stating "we deemed it necessary to apologize to our church family and to make it clear we do not condone his behavior in this public format."

53. In addition to the falsity of the defamatory statements of the Elders noted above, they were unprivileged and caused damages to him. The defamatory statements noted above were defamatory *per se* because they (1) impute that plaintiff has committed a crime, (2) impute that plaintiff is unable to perform, or lacks integrity in performing, his duties of office or employment, and (3) impute that plaintiff lacks ability, or otherwise prejudices plaintiff, in his trade, profession or business. The defamatory statement that plaintiff engaged in "including but not limited to hand holding, hugs, kissing, inappropriate touching" imputes the separate crimes of assault and of battery (720 ILCS 5/12-1(a) and 720 ILCS 5/12-3). In addition, plaintiff's employment and profession includes writing, speaking and consulting on matters concerning the Christian Bible and Christian morality, including advocating for gender equality and the inviolability of marriage and against misogyny. The defendant Elders' statement therefore

prejudices him in his profession, trade or business as well as imputes that he lacks the ability to so write and teach and imputes that he lacks integrity in performing his duties of office or employment. His audience will not trust him to teach on matters of Christianity and moral precepts and will deem him hypocritical and immoral. Indeed, the Elders' statement expressly included that plaintiff's behavior was "unacceptable for a Christ follower" and the like:

Over the past years, behavior has been brought to light that is both harmful and unacceptable for a Christ follower. This sinful behavior that we believe was demonstrated by Dr. Bilezikian and Bill Hybels was wrong, and we hold any person entrusted with leading at Willow Creek Community Church to a higher standard. Leaders carry a mandate to shepherd the body of Christ and guard against sinful behavior (1 Peter 5:2–4).

54. Plaintiff is entitled to damages for the damage to his reputation. Plaintiff is also entitled to punitive damages.

55. Plaintiff is also entitled to an injunction ordering the Church to remove from the internet the January 28, 2020 defamatory letter signed by the Elders, the video showing Elder Mary Square reading the defamatory letter to the congregation on February 2, 2020 and the March 10, 2020 FAQ that apologized for plaintiff's behavior, and ordering the Church and Elders not to use or disseminate the letter and video again.

WHEREFORE, plaintiff prays for judgment in the amount of his damages, for punitive damages, for injunctive relief, for his costs, and for such other and further relief as this Court deems just and equitable.

Count II (Defamation *Per Quod*)

56. Plaintiff hereby incorporates paragraphs 1 through 47 as paragraph 56 of this Count II for defamation *per quod*.

57. The Elders' statements that plaintiff had engaged in "inappropriate behavior dating back to the mid-eighties, including but not limited to hand holding, hugs, kissing,

inappropriate touching, and sending overly personal communication” with a long-time congregant and that he engaged in “harmful” and “sinful” and “wrong” behavior toward or caused “pain” to her and engaged in behavior “unacceptable to a Christ follower” were defamatory and false.

58. The Elders’ statements that the Elder Response Team “believed the woman’s claim that Dr. Bilezikian engaged in inappropriate behavior dating back to the mid-eighties, including but not limited to hand holding, hugs, kissing, inappropriate touching, and sending overly personal communication” were defamatory and false. The statement that the 2010 ERT so “believed” her claim is belied by the fact that the ERT did not convey any such thing to plaintiff, merely stating that he should cut all ties with her and not in the least imposing any restriction or condemnation of plaintiff. Indeed, the statement the 2010 ERT so “believed” her claim is belied by the fact that the ERT did not convey to plaintiff that she had even alleged that plaintiff had engaged in any inappropriate physical contact. The statement is also belied by the fact that the Church five years later in 2015 would stage a celebration to honor plaintiff under the banner "Dr. B Our Living Legend" at a packed and high-spirited United Center in Chicago on the Church’s 40th anniversary.

59. The Elders’ statement that “[t]he ERT did restrict him from serving” was defamatory on its face and false. No such restriction was conveyed to plaintiff and in fact plaintiff continued to minister at the Church in the full and open view of all leadership and congregants of the Church. Indeed, the Elders effectively admit the falsehood of their claim by claiming that “the restriction was not adequately communicated, resulting in Dr. Bilezikian serving and teaching in various capacities over the years.” It is absurd to believe that plaintiff could be permitted to openly minister at the Church when so restricted without anyone taking

action to enforce the purported restriction. Moreover, it is equally absurd to believe that in the face of such alleged restriction, the Church five years later in 2015 would still stage a celebration to honor plaintiff under the banner "Dr. B Our Living Legend" at a packed and buoyant United Center in Chicago on the Church's 40th anniversary. It is equally absurd to believe that in the face of such alleged restriction, four Elders would request and have a meeting with plaintiff in December 2020 to seek his guidance on Church matters, then forward his thoughts to the rest of the Elders, and then express the desire to have some discussion and follow-up with him in the new year.

60. The Elders' statements imputing that the congregant's claims were truthful and that plaintiff had in fact engaged in the behavior claimed by the congregant were defamatory and false. Thus, the Elders stated that "behavior has been brought to light that is both harmful and unacceptable for a Christ follower" and that "[t]his sinful behavior . . . we believe was demonstrated by Dr. Bilezikian and Bill Hybels was wrong . . ."; and that "We are heartbroken for what this congregant experienced and are deeply sorry for the pain this has caused her and her family." The Elders statement that they were "pursuing restorative justice and being agents of reconciliation" similarly imputed that the congregant's claims were truthful. In addition to the January 28, 2020 letter, the Elders' March 10, 2020 FAQ repeated that the Elder's statement accepted the truth of the congregant's accusations, stating "we deemed it necessary to apologize to our church family and to make it clear we do not condone his behavior in this public format."

61. The Elders' statements also defamed plaintiff by falsely and deceitfully conflating plaintiff with Pastor Hybels who had been accused by women other than Ms. Lindberg with sexual misconduct including adultery. Thus, the Elders' statement stated that plaintiff was "a mentor to Bill Hybels" and went on to say "This sinful behavior that we believe was

demonstrated by Dr. Bilezikian and Bill Hybels was wrong and we hold any person entrusted with leading at Willow Creek Community Church to a higher standard”. The Elders’ references to Pastor Hybels falsely and deceitfully reinforced tarnished plaintiff with guilt by association.

62. In addition to the falsity of the defamatory statements of the Elders noted above, they were unprivileged and caused special damages to him. Plaintiff’s special damages are that he will lose royalties on the sales of his four books and honoraria on speaking and consulting engagements. Potential buyers will not trust him to write, speak or consult about matters of Christianity and moral precepts and will deem him hypocritical or immoral. Indeed, the Elders’ statement expressly included that plaintiff’s behavior was “unacceptable for a Christ follower” and the like:

Over the past years, behavior has been brought to light that is both harmful and unacceptable for a Christ follower. This sinful behavior that we believe was demonstrated by Dr. Bilezikian and Bill Hybels was wrong, and we hold any person entrusted with leading at Willow Creek Community Church to a higher standard. Leaders carry a mandate to shepherd the body of Christ and guard against sinful behavior (1 Peter 5:2–4).

63. Plaintiff is also entitled to an injunction ordering the Church to remove from the internet the January 28, 2020 defamatory letter signed by the Elders, the video showing Elder Mary Square reading the defamatory letter to the congregation on February 2, 2020 and the March 10, 2020 FAQ that apologized for plaintiff’s behavior, and ordering the Church and Elders not to use or disseminate the letter and video again.

WHEREFORE, plaintiff prays for judgment in the amount of his damages, for punitive damages, for injunctive relief, for his costs, and for such other and further relief as this Court deems just and equitable.

Count III (False Light)

64. Plaintiff hereby incorporates paragraphs 1 through 47 as paragraph 64 of this Count III for false light.

65. The defendants Elders' and Church's actions in publishing their January 28, 2020 letter on their website, reading it to their congregation on February 2, 2020 and then making a video of it and posting it on YouTube, and in a March 10, 2020 FAQ apologizing for plaintiff's behavior, placed the plaintiff in a false light before the public; the false light would be highly offensive to a reasonable person; and defendants acted with actual malice, that is, with knowledge that the statements were false or with reckless disregard for whether the statements were true or false.

66. As a result, plaintiff has experienced economic and non-economic damages, including emotional distress, mental anguish, and harm to reputation.

67. Plaintiff is also entitled to an injunction ordering the Church to remove from the internet the January 28, 2020 defamatory letter signed by the Elders, the video showing Elder Mary Square reading the defamatory letter to the congregation on February 2, 2020 and the March 10, 2020 FAQ that apologized for plaintiff's behavior, and ordering the Church and Elders not to use or disseminate the letter and video again.

WHEREFORE plaintiff prays for judgment in the amount of his damages, for punitive damages, for injunctive relief, for his costs, and for such other and further relief as this Court deems just and equitable.

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