

July 11, 2022

Dear Saddleback Family,

As you know, a year ago, we began the search for our next Senior Pastor. With over a million pastors around the world as alumni of our *Purpose Driven Training*, we had quite a pool to choose from.

During our search, we enlisted the Vanderbloemen Group, a well-known and highly respected Christian ministry and executive search firm, to help us. We did *not* employ them to *find* our next pastor, but rather to do *rigorous background checks and due diligence* once we had identified a candidate. So Vanderbloemen did an extensive check on all aspects of Pastor Andy Wood's ministry at Echo Church and came back to us with a 100% positive recommendation. Based on their independent, third-party evaluation, along with close to 50 hours of interviews and discussions that our own Elders did, Andy Wood was approved as our next Senior Pastor.

The day after our Elder's decision was publicly announced on June 4, a former Echo Church staff member posted an accusation online claiming abusive staff culture under Andy's leadership. It was clear that this person felt deeply hurt, so we immediately launched *three* additional investigations to learn what was behind these accusations.

In *our* church family, we take any accusation of any type of abuse seriously. One purpose of our church is to heal people who've been hurt. As the mother church that founded *Celebrate Recovery*, it's possible that no other church has helped more hurting people heal and deal with every kind of hurt, abuse, wound, mistreatment, addiction, or other hurtful issues. Not only have over 30,000 people personally experienced recovery, restoration, and reconciliation through CR at Saddleback, millions more around the world have experienced healing from every imaginable kind of hurt through our sister churches using our CR process.

So, learning of this accusation, we immediately did three things: First, our Elders opened our own investigation. Second, we reengaged the independent, third-party Vanderbloemen Group and asked them to reopen their investigation and especially investigate the allegations that surfaced. Third, we hired another independent firm, Middlebrook & Goodspeed, to evaluate the credibility and thoroughness of Vanderbloemen's investigation.

After four long weeks, we can now report to you that both the Vanderbloemen firm, and the Middlebrook & Goodspeed firm, have completed their follow up investigations and have issued the following conclusions below:

"The team at Vanderbloemen interviewed former employees, former volunteers, peers, and current employees to ask them about their experiences with Andy. The sample can be said to be thorough. After our work, we concluded there is no systemic or pattern of abuse under Andy's leadership, nor was there an individual that we felt was abused."

Wanting to ensure the thoroughness and competence of Vanderbloemen's findings, we recruited another independent third party firm, Middlebrook & Goodspeed, to evaluate the investigation, process, and findings. Here is their conclusion:

"Based upon the testimony and evidence provided by Vanderbloemen's background team, we believe the investigation was objective, thorough, transparent, and truthful. The investigation was done in a manner to protect the identity of the witnesses which is essential to obtaining the truth. We feel that a conflict of interest did not exist in this investigation and that Vanderbloemen's team followed all the leads provided to seek the truth. Further, there was nothing in the materials and interviews we reviewed that would lead us to contradict Vanderbloemen's finding that there was no pattern of abuse nor abuse towards an individual."

Based on these conclusions from two experienced and unbiased firms, we can now say with complete confidence that the investigations have **CLEARED** Pastor Andy Wood of the accusations made by a former employee.

We will now resume moving forward with the process of installing Andy Wood as the next Senior Pastor of Saddleback Church in September. Thank you for your patience while we did our due diligence, so that these investigations could be completed. We wanted the truth.

We will now turn our attention to planning a celebration of Pastor Rick and Kay's unprecedented 43-year ministry, and then welcoming Pastor Andy, Stacie, Caedmon, Sammy, and Karis as our newest members of the Saddleback Family.

This would be the end of the story for many organizations. But it's not the end for us at Saddleback. *Because we belong to Christ*, we always care about anyone carrying hurt in their heart. While disappointment and hurt are not the same as abuse, 1 Peter 3:8 command us to *"Live in harmony with each other, be sympathetic, love each other, have compassion, and be humble."* And Hebrews 12:14 says *"Make every effort to live in peace with everyone."* So, we will never stop praying for, and seeking, personal reconciliation where there has been conflict or misunderstanding.

Also, one of our staff values Pastor Rick has taught us is *Never Stop Learning!* So, even when there's been conflict or confusion, we look for new insights and skills that will help us grow and be better in the future. This conflict did not happen at Saddleback, but we are still interested in learning from it. We invite experts to give us their wise counsel in ministering to the hurts, habits, and hang-ups of people.

We know that we must minister in the *REAL* world, not the *IDEAL* world. In our broken world, there will always be conflict, disagreements, and disappointments, so recovery and reconciliation in relationships will always be needed. Because of this, our church is committed to practicing Romans 12:18 “*As far as it depends on you, do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible.*”

Thank you for your continued prayers. We look forward to celebrating both our past and our future with you in the days ahead!

Saddleback Elders

