

The Scandal Roiling One Of The Nation's Biggest Megachurches

A Woman Says Robert Morris, Prominent Evangelical Pastor, Former Trump Religious Adviser And Founder of Gateway Church, Sexually Abused Her As A Child In The 1980s. Morris Has Resigned From Gateway.

By Jaclyn Diaz National Public Radio
1 July (@ 0740 Hrs EDT)

Accusations Of Child Molestation From Decades Ago Have Brought Down As Pastor Who Founded One Of The Largest Megachurches In The U.S. And Once Served As An Evangelical Adviser To Former President Donald Trump.

Texas Pastor Robert Morris Recently Admitted To “Inappropriate Sexual Behavior” With A 12-Year-Old Girl In The 1980s And Stepped Down From His Post At Gateway Church Based In Dallas. The Allegations Were First Published On June 14 By The Wartburg Watch, A Blog Dedicated To Examining Abuse And Other Issues In The Church. The Blog Shared The Account Of Cindy Clemishire, Who Accused Morris Of Molesting Her For Several Years, Beginning When She Was 12.

Now, The Church's Board Of Elders Is Scrambling To Respond To Clemishire's Account. It Addressed The Congregation During Church Services This Past Weekend And Said In An Additional Statement That It Has Taken A Series Of Steps To Respond To The Fallout.

Here's What We Know So Far.

Morris, 62, Is Best Known For Founding Gateway Church In 2000. In Its Nearly 25 Years, Gateway Has Grown To One Of The Largest Megachurches In The Nation, With About 100,000 Active Attendees, According To The Church, And Nine Campuses In Texas And Locations In Jackson Hole, Wyo., And St Louis.

Morris Grew To Further Prominence After Then-Candidate Trump Named Him His Spiritual Adviser And A Member Of His Evangelical Advisory Committee In 2016. Four Years Later, Morris Hosted Trump At Gateway Church In Dallas, Where Trump Referred To Morris And Steve Dulin, Another Gateway Elder, As “Great People With A Great Reputation.”

The Trump Campaign Did Not Respond To NPR’s Request For Comment. But Since Clemishire Has Come Forward, A Trump Campaign Spokesman Told *The New York Times* That Morris Had No Role In Trump’s Reelection Campaign.

Morris Resigned From His Post At Gateway On June 18, After Admitting To Abusing Clemishire. He Has Not Been Charged With Any Crime.

Morris Did Not Respond To NPR’s Request For Comment.

In Her Account As Told To The Wartburg Watch, Clemishire’s Abuse By Morris Began In 1982 When She Was 12 Years Old And Morris Was 21. At The Time He Was A Traveling Evangelist. Their Families Were Friends And Morris, Along With His Wife Debbie And Their Young Son, Would Stay With Clemishire’s Family And Join Them On Trips.

Clemishire Said The Abuse Began On Christmas Night Of 1982, And Continued For More Than Four Years, Taking Place In Texas And Oklahoma. That First Night, Clemishire Alleged That Morris Touched Her Breasts And Under Her Underwear. As She Grew Older, He Attempted To Have Sexual Intercourse With Her.

The Abuse Ended When She Was 16, Clemshire Said, When She Told Her Parents. Her Father Demanded That Morris Get Out Of Ministry Or He Would Report The Abuse To Law Enforcement.

Morris Stepped Away From Ministry Work In 1987, But Returned To Years Later.

Shortly After The Story Was Published, Morris Acknowledged The Allegations Of “Inappropriate Sexual Behavior” In A Statement Shared On Social Media, NPR Station KERA News Reported. The Elders Of Gateway Church Said In This Statement That Morris “Has Been Open And Forthright About A *Moral Failure* He Had Over 35 Years Ago,” “Acknowledged Morris Had Said He Had Several Sexual Encounters With A “Young Lady” When He Was In His 20s And Had “*Repented.*”

This Statement Also Said Morris Left The Ministry For Two Years In The 1980s And Went To Counseling.

In Recent Days, Current Gateway Leadership And At Least One Former Leader Have Claimed They Didn't Know The Full Extent Of The Sexual Abuse, The Explicit Details Of Clemishire's Age At The Time.

But In A Subsequent Update To The Wartburg Watch Reporting Following The Initial Story, Clemishire Said Gateway Church Elders At The Time Knew Of Her Allegations As Early As 2005, When She Sent An Email Directly To Morris' Gateway Email Address. She Told The Publication: "Former Gateway Elder, Tom Lane, Received And Responded To My Email, Acknowledging That The Sexual Abuse Began On December 25, 1982, When I Was 12 Years Old.

But The Church's Leadership At The Time Ultimately Believed "The False Narrative" Morris Gave Them, She Said.

Lane Recently Posted On Social Media That Until Clemishire's Statement On June 14, He "Did Not Know The Severity And Specifics Of The Sexual Abuse She Experienced," Nor Did He Know She Was 12 When The Abuse Started.

In 2007, Two Years After Clemshire's Email To The Church, Her Then-Attorney, Gentner Drummond Sent A Letter To Morris "With The Hope That He Would Help Reimburse Me For The Thousands Of Dollars I Had Expended In Counseling As A Result Of This Abuse. His Attorney Acknowledged The Dates As Well And Then Attempted To Blame Me For The Abuse," She Wrote On The Blog.

Her Current Attorney, Bob Tchividjian, Told NPR, "It Is True That Cindy And Her Counsel Attempted To Settle A Civil Claim Against Morris In 2007 But He Would Only [Do] So If SIGNED An NDA. [Ed.Note: What A Stand-Up A\$\$WHOLE.] She Refused And Walked Away From The Settlement."

Through Her Attorney, Clemishire Declined To Be Interviewed At This Time.

Tchividjian Told NPR That They “Are Currently Evaluating Options,” But It’s Unclear What Those May Be Given The Statute Of Limitations In Oklahoma And Texas For Criminal Prosecution.

One Of The Megachurch’s Elders, Tea Willbanks, Addressed The Gateway Congregation This Past Weekend And Denied Knowing About Morris’ Previous Abusive Actions. He Said As A Father Of Six Daughters, “What Has Happened Is Extremely Disturbing. And I’m Experiencing A Wide Range Of Emotions Like You. As An Elder, I Did Not Know The Truth. And Frankly, Like So Many Of You, My Wife And I Are Shocked, Devastated And Grieving.”

In That Same Address, He Expressed “Compassion” For Clemishire.

Following Morris’ Resignation On June 18, Gateway Church’s Board Of Elders Issued A New, Lengthy Statement On Its Website, Confirming Morris’ Departure And Announcing The Hiring Of Law Firm Haynes And Boone To Launch An Independent Inquiry Into The Case “So That The Facts Can Be Understood,” They Wrote.

“Gateway Church Is Committed To Protecting People — First And Foremost Children And The Most Vulnerable. Abuse Simply Cannot Be Tolerated,” The Board Wrote.

They Said They Didn’t Have “All The Facts” Prior To June 14, When Wartburg Watch First Wrote Of Clemshire’s Experience.

The Gateway Elders Wrote, “The Board Of Elders Is Deeply Committed To Walking In Integrity And Finding The Truth. Having This Inquiry Done By An Independent And Unbiased Outside Law Firm Is Best Practice. This Review Has Begun, And The Board Of Elders Pledges Its Full Cooperation.”

Clemishire’s Attorney, Tchividian, Criticized The Leadership At Gateway For Changing Their Version Of When And What They Knew About The Morris Allegations.

“Only A Couple Of Weeks Ago, The Leadership At Gateway Was Publicly Claiming That Robert Morris” Was Transparent With Them And That The Senior Pastor Had “No Other Moral Failures.” Now They Are Claiming He Had Not Been Transparent With Them And In Fact Had Been Untruthful, Tchividian Wrote In An Email To NPR.

Tchividian Said That His Client Has Been Sharing Her Story For Years “And Has Even Warned A Handful Of Ministries And Churches. Not One Did A Thing.”

A Representative For Gateway Referred NPR To Statements Made By Willbanks On June 22.

###