

## Why I (John Liebner) terminated my membership at REDACTED Church: A Disclosure

### Acknowledgment of Bias

The following narratives suffer from the same vulnerability that any testimony suffers when presented without the benefit of cross examination. The principle of attribution bias (self-serving bias) asserts that perspectives differ and tend to favor the point of view of the witness. In view of this inherent bias I provide minimal detail regarding the cause of the problems set forth below and focus on the *stewardship of the resolution*. The three examples provide irrefutable outcomes and ethical implications unbecoming of a leadership professing faith in a biblical view of justice and love.

### Primary Disclosure

I terminated my membership with REDACTED because among the leadership I observed a pervasive pattern of ethical impropriety as evidenced by disregard toward conflicts of interest and abuse of power toward congregants who followed biblical process for presenting complaint.

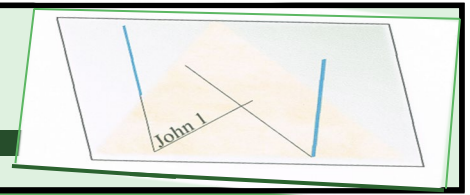
### First Example: John Liebner “Fired by Duplicity”

In the fall of 2016, following an extended disability leave and an aborted return-to-work plan due to termination of disability pay, leadership offered me a choice to resign from staff and remain on campus as an on-site counselor or return to full-time staff position. Resignation meant focusing solely on counseling practice with use of office but loss of income. Remaining on staff risked immediate increase in stress due to return to full-time employment but with the economic security of income.

Leadership encouraged me to take the resignation path with the written guarantee of 10 referrals per month. This guaranteed to me an hourly fee in exchange for my reserving 10 hours per month to receive referrals from REDACTED. This 10-referral guarantee gave me an income safety net from which to get my practice going to replace income lost from shift from staff to on-site counselor. I chose to shift to on-site. But within the first month when I did not receive a retainer fee from REDACTED and I inquired about how to bill for services, leadership told me that they meant guaranteed *up to* 10 hours a month.

This meant immediate economic hardship on the one hand and ethical impropriety on the other. First, despite being offered in writing 10 hours guaranteed as the terms for my choosing the on-site path, I now faced immediate hardship-the kind of hardship leadership wanted to help me to avoid. But worse, if I couldn't rely on the 10-hour retainer fee and actively sought referrals, I couldn't guarantee the hours to satisfy REDACTED and choosing between seeking referrals and referring REDACTED to leadership for retainer-based referral to me created an unethical conflict of interest between referring a congregant for their welfare or for my own.

When I presented my complaint to leadership about this problem, *they admitted the mistake in communicating the terms on their part but intended to stick with those terms and to*



***not offer me an opportunity to reconsider the original option to remain on staff.***

Despite admitting their role in presenting ambiguous terms, they rejected my request for reconsidering the remaining on staff option because I was told, “You made the choice.” Further, in email communication through which I expressed grievances, I received the implied ultimatum that if I persisted in seeking an explanation for why they refused offering me a second opportunity to choose, we would need to part ways.

REDACTED intervened and to my relief and his credit he recognized the problem and while I still was not given the choice to return to staff, I received the agreement to honor the terms as originally written. However, on a personal level after almost 10 years on staff with no feedback to suggest I was not wanted, the facts certainly invite the implication of duplicity on their part. Was the offer really in my best interest? Their actions proved that my original choice served their preference. I was not wanted on staff.

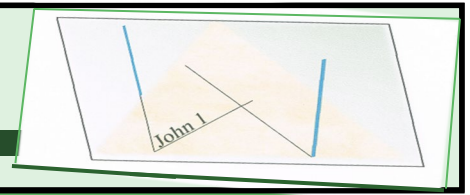
**Commentary:** In the secular world this would hurt but at the same time makes perfect sense. Business operates on the whim of authority. Yet, most businesses operate with policies that guarantee employee recourse through Human Resources. At REDACTED I was treated more like an objective, a problem that had to be resolved without leadership sharing information with me about their motives. “You made the choice” begs the question as to what prompted me to choose their recommended option? If they admit misrepresenting the terms but refuse to revisit the options and offer me a chance to choose, then by duplicitous design my first choice served in their interest. Refusing a second chance proves by default an intent to remove me from the staff without the appearance of firing me.

### **Example Two: REDACTED Humiliated**

In the summer of 2018, after hearing about the way leadership managed REDACTED firing, my suspicions were confirmed—what happened to me was not an isolated case. Despite REDACTED tenure as director of Children’s Ministry and though part time (anyone who works in nonprofit ministry puts in more than part-time in hours and effort) she certainly deserved better than the treatment she received. For whatever reason for her firing, was she such a threat risk that she had to be escorted out of the building without the opportunity to pack up her belongings?

Did anyone in leadership correct this wrong *by announcing to the congregation that REDACTED had been grossly mistreated and deserved a public apology*? How was REDACTED departure announced? Someone in leadership made the decision to include a duplicitous statement at the bottom of an the church weekly email that wished REDACTED well in her next endeavor.

**Commentary:** As a critical thinker, I wondered why make this announcement in an obscure way? If REDACTED by her choice was moving on, then why not make the announcement public before the congregation? Shouldn’t the congregation participate in offering its blessing and appreciation to REDACTED for her efforts with their children? Clearly, this “buried at the bottom of an email” tactic served in the interest of whoever wanted to avoid public scrutiny for their role in how they executed REDACTED’s firing. Consider: “Neither as being lords over God’s heritage but being examples to the flock” (1 Pe 5:3).



### Example Three: REDACTED “Defamed by Implication”

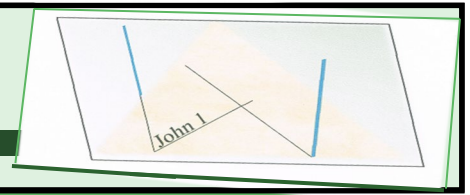
**Context:** When I first heard about the charges leveled against REDACTED—that he groomed a female congregant for sexual abuse purposes and covered his indiscretion by reporting it to no one but his wife—several questions arose immediately because the charges failed to align forensically and clinically with the profile of the case. The actual content of the indiscretion failed to rise to the level of a civil misdemeanor much less a crime. The characteristics of the behaviors defined in the case failed to rise to the level of an abnormal psychological diagnosis. In other words, the victim narrative asserted by church leadership failed to account for the discrepancies in the facts of the case and therefore presented a false positive assessment to the congregation.

Adjudicating this case goes beyond the scope of this disclosure. However, as I received basic elements of the story and assessed the case within the parameters of forensic and clinical profiles, **an objective (and hence just) assessment pointed toward a female mature youth lacking discretion and initiating a conversation that reflected an invitation to folly and a middle-aged adult male drawn into the indiscretion with the intent of participating in it.** Both parties acted within the ambiguous cloak of counselor/counseled, neither naive to the intentions of the other.

The public narrative of a naive victim of predatory behavior presented by church leadership reflected significant subjective interpretation of the facts not objective definition. The public narrative presented by the church reflected what individuals, ill-equipped to manage this case, imagined based upon pressure from a popular social-cultural philosophy of identity politics and social justice activism. Several outcomes lend credibility to this assessment.

First, the victim so-called, posted on social media a lengthy imagery-enriched docudrama account from the premise of sexual grooming and in the name of the me-too movement. Despite a session member’s direct denial that the charges against REDACTED included sexual grooming or that the process was unaffected by me-too philosophy—the session not only complied with the social media account by virtue of its silence and disinterest to distance itself from it publicly, a session member who also voted to receive REDACTED’s resignation posted comments affirming the “victim’s” dramatic rendering of the case and by extension as a session member demonstrated solidarity with the victim’s account and charge against REDACTED.

Second, an inquiry about various behaviors characteristic of the profile most likely to fit the forensic and clinical assessment of the identified victim, received affirming first-hand accounts from persons who observed the identified victim at earlier stages of development. The observed behaviors described aligned with those characteristics of identified victims profiled in the forensic and clinical narratives. In other words, a careful, objective approach toward gathering and examining the facts rendered a significant contrast with the narrative not only chosen by the session but propagated with resolve by the session. The session resolved to use the word “victim” and by this resolve demonstrated solidarity with defamatory opinions against REDACTED while representing the “victim’s” case as unassailable.



## Summary

Acknowledging the ever-present influence of attribution bias, this disclosure offers my rationale for terminating membership at REDACTED and supports the premise for the founding a nonprofit ministry on ethics that regard conflicts of interest as improper and disregard toward complaints about conflict of interest as abusive use of power. I provided three examples that demonstrate behavior unbecoming of leadership entrusted with a sacred oath to exemplify biblical justice and love in the course of stewarding ministry. Each example: Fired by duplicity, humiliated in firing, and defamed by implication demonstrated conflict of interest masked by leadership's duplicitous rendering version of the outcome.

## Disclaimer

The information provided in this disclosure represents an assessment of personal experience and observation that serves as an impetus to initiate a ministry project based on a distinguishing and compelling interest for the incorporation of a professional-ministry code of ethics that makes public to congregants behaviors becoming of and definitive for stewards of ministry. This disclosure informs for the purpose of educating the reader about the process involved in distinguishing faith communities based upon discerning ethics and not based upon presuming motives of leadership. This disclosure makes no claim of insight to motives or individuals or entities considered.