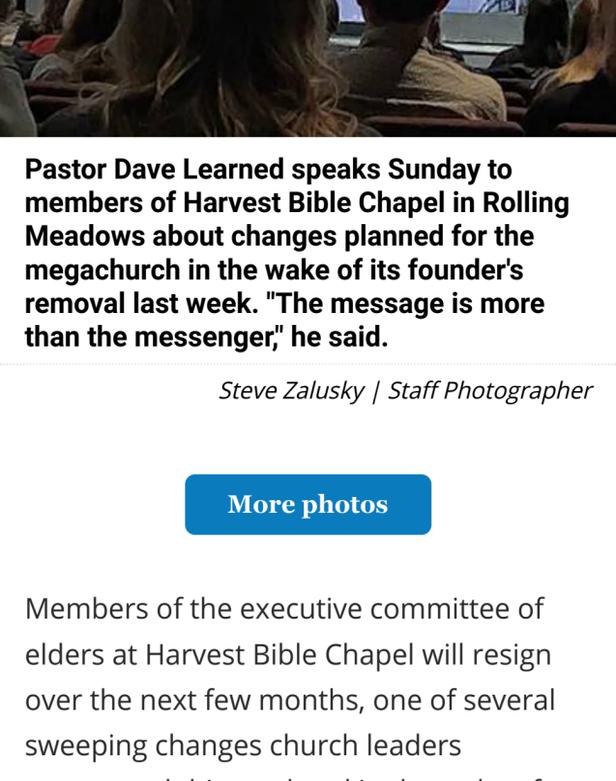




Church leaders to resign as Harvest Bible Chapel announces sweeping changes

By **Steve Zalusky**
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Pastor Dave Learned speaks Sunday to members of Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows about changes planned for the megachurch in the wake of its founder's removal last week. "The message is more than the messenger," he said.

Steve Zalusky / Staff Photographer

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Members of the executive committee of elders at Harvest Bible Chapel will resign over the next few months, one of several sweeping changes church leaders announced this weekend in the wake of founder and Senior Pastor James MacDonald's removal last week.

Other changes including the installation of a new leadership team, a new committee to improve oversight and accountability, the returning of the Naples, Florida, campus to its elders, and the suspension of plans for a Hinsdale campus.

The moves come at the end of what executive committee member Bill Sperling called "without question one of the most difficult weeks in the history of the church."

"We, as the larger elder board, have made mistakes and we own these," Sperling said in a message initially given at Saturday services, then replayed by video Sunday. "We are truly sorry and ask for your forgiveness."

The church abruptly dismissed MacDonald last week after recorded conversations surfaced in which he purportedly discusses a plan to put child pornography on the computer of Christianity Today magazine's chief executive officer and about whether a church critic was having an affair with the publication's editor-in-chief.

MacDonald, who founded the church in Rolling Meadows 31 years ago and grew it into an entity with eight campuses and 12,000 members, had agreed to take a sabbatical in January amid complaints he wielded too much authority and lashed out at critics.

"After much time spent in earnest prayer and constructive dialogue, we collectively determined that Pastor James' conduct could not be called above reproach," Sperling told church members Saturday, adding that there was a "sinful pattern of inappropriate language, anger and domineering behavior."

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This weekend, church leaders urged members to have patience as they work to put things back in order.

"Harvest Bible Chapel was not founded on a great pastor or a great staff, but on a great God and on the gospel of grace," the Rev. David Learned said Sunday. "The message is more than the messenger."

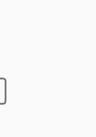
Besides installing new leadership, the church also will shift the composition and structure of the full elder board, Sperling said.

"We recognize now that the large size of our elder board -- over 30 men -- has made it difficult to make decisions during times of adversity," he said.

A new team called Harvest 2020, consisting of congregants, staff members, outside professionals and elders, will conduct a deep review of the church over the next several months, with the aim of improving oversight, accountability and transparency, Sperling said. It will be led by Rick Korte, a corporate CEO who will be serving Harvest voluntarily.

"I know this is a difficult time for all of us," an emotional Korte said Saturday. "I'm a congregant. I'm part of this family."

"What we're asking you is to give us some time. Give us time to look at the failures, to dig deeply into what we have done wrong," Korte said. "Give us the chance to fix this."



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