

From Christianity Today, Online Edition, posted 10/27/2000

Unprepared to Teach Parenting?

Two churches long associated with Babywise author Gary Ezzo denounce his character and fitness for Christian ministry.

By Kathleen Turner | posted 10/27/00

Two California churches have issued statements saying that Gary Ezzo, president of Growing Families International (GFI), is unfit for Christian ministry. Both of the churches have interacted closely with Ezzo.

Ezzo and his wife, Ann Marie, developed the popular yet highly controversial infant-feeding program outlined in *Preparation for Parenting*. They also developed the bestseller *On Becoming Babywise* and several church-marketed programs for parents, including *Growing Kids God's Way*.

Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship of Granada Hills, California, officially "excommunicated" Ezzo on April 30. Ezzo and his wife had already stopped attending the church.

The elders of Living Hope issued a statement saying they believe Ezzo is "biblically disqualified from all public ministry" because of a lack of truthfulness, Christian character, and accountability.

Two other congregations have taken similar punitive measures against Ezzo in the past 20 years.

Living Hope is the congregation to which Ezzo said he was accountable when Sun Valley's Grace Community Church, pastored by author John MacArthur, severed its support for Ezzo and GFI.

Grace Community is where Ezzo served as a staff member and first developed his parenting programs. Grace disavowed all association with GFI in October 1997, publicly rebuking him due to divisiveness.

Grace Community also rejects GFI curriculum. "[Ezzo] failed to draw a clear line between what is biblical and what is his preference," Phil Johnson, an elder at Grace Community, told the *Southern California Christian Times* in September. "The whole thing is fraught with danger. It obscures what is biblical."

MacArthur issued a second statement on July 25, saying he believes Ezzo is disqualified "from Christian leadership or public ministry in any context" and that character issues Grace brought to Ezzo's attention years ago remain unresolved. More than 15 years ago, His Vantage Point Church in Laconia, New Hampshire, asked Ezzo to step down as pastor-teacher in part because of his divisive conduct.

Churches are not the only ones severing ties to Ezzo and GFI. The accounting firm of Hamilton, Boynton, and Speakman terminated its relationship with GFI in February. The firm has issued no corporate comment. But Chris Hamilton, a partner at the firm, says Ezzo misled him personally regarding the firm's investigation of whether GFI funds were misappropriated.

Further, several key GFI staff members have quit the organization. These actions have added to the controversy surrounding Ezzo and GFI. The Ezzos' program for "parent-directed feeding" (PDF), their advice about physical punishment for young toddlers, and the lack of independent research to support their methods, have generated an international controversy among Christian leaders, pediatricians, and lactation experts.

Apology requested

During a lengthy interview with Christianity Today in August, Ezzo said his critics have unjustly maligned him and misrepresented the work of GFI. Ezzo told CT he is due an apology from Grace Community Church.

Ezzo and GFI supporters dismiss criticisms, pointing to many success stories in which infants sleep through the night and older children are more obedient when parents use GFI methods.

Bufe Karraker, senior pastor of Northwest Church in Fresno, California, says members of his congregation have used GFI materials for seven years. Karraker declined to address the concerns of Grace Community or Living Hope, but he reaffirmed what he considers the positive value of GFI curriculum.

"We have profited tremendously from the Growing Kids materials. We are going to continue using it because it helps our people," Karraker said.

Children whose parents take the program are well-behaved and "the children whose parents don't are terrors," Karraker said.

In response to his ouster from Living Hope, Ezzo submitted himself this year to two ad-hoc groups, which examined Living Hope's findings. The first panel was composed of GFI regional representatives. The second was made up of anonymous individuals who are "independent of GFI organizationally."

The GFI regional representatives said they could not endorse the discipline process carried out at Living Hope, whose elders declined to meet with either group.

Living Hope has not provided specific details concerning Ezzo's alleged misconduct. Neither of the ad-hoc committees found cause for Ezzo to remove himself from Christian ministry or GFI leadership.

Ezzo questions the motives of Living Hope's leadership. "If you have the Ezzos in your church and if the Ezzos are leaving for some reason, that does create a dilemma," he told CR. "The idea of the threat of church discipline against a national leader and the motive behind it is at least somewhat suspect."

Ezzo says the elders carried out the excommunication only after he expressed unnamed concerns with them and then left the church voluntarily.

The Living Hope elders' statement tells a different story. It notes that, in accordance with Matthew 18, they called upon Ezzo to acknowledge his offenses, pleaded with him to repent, and were saddened by his "persistent unwillingness to respond to biblical admonition."

Ezzo also questions the integrity of the elders at Grace, saying their statement represents "blatant deception." Grace was not willing to have its actions evaluated, he says, and "[we] believe they owe us a public apology."

Ezzo's current pastor, Ron Seidel of Granada Hills Community Church in California, dismisses the concerns of Living Hope's elders based on his belief that they mishandled the discipline of another Living Hope ex-member who is an associate of Ezzo's and now attends Seidel's congregation.

Is Ezzo who he says he is?

An inquiry by CT into Ezzo's background surfaces many new questions about his training, his conduct, and his professional interactions. Parents trust Ezzo to be professional and authoritative on parenting, yet many are not aware that he has no professional background in child development, medicine, or breastfeeding support.

Ezzo, GFI, and his publisher have attributed to him three different academic degrees that he does not have. Ezzo stated in writing that he had an associate's degree in business from Mohawk Community College in

Utica, New York, even specifying a major and a grade-point average. He never graduated from that school, officials say.

GFI and Ezzo's publisher, Multnomah, have both said he earned a master's degree in Christian education, but he holds no such degree. The master of arts in ministry that he does have gives significant credit for life experience and is designed for noncollege graduates.

Ezzo has remained silent on at least two occasions when he has been publicly but erroneously referred to as "Dr. Gary Ezzo." One of these was a national radio ad for one of his books.

A former Multnomah employee—responsible for the ad at the time—said that Ezzo may not have heard the reference in the ad. But the former employee confirms that Ezzo listened to the ad and did not comment on this error, although Ezzo did discuss other changes.

Three months after the radio ad aired, a church secretary in Billings, Montana, confirmed by telephone that Ezzo requested no correction when he saw a bulletin listing him as the church's featured speaker and twice calling him "Dr."

Questions about Ezzo's qualifications are relevant because his infant-feeding advice is inconsistent with standard medical recommendations—but he stresses that following GFI programs is necessary for the optimal development of children.

Both Babywise and Preparation for Parenting tell parents that not following PDF principles is a potential health concern and that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) supports Ezzo's recommended number of feeding times.

GFI's Web site displays an extensive chart listing the similarities between Ezzo's feeding recommendations and those of the AAP. Parents are not told, however, that the AAP does not support scheduled feedings and has in fact issued a media alert about the poor weight gain and dehydration that may result.

More specifically, AAP officers have passed both district-level and nationwide resolutions clearly stating that Ezzo's PDF program "outlines an infant feeding schedule inconsistent with AAP recommendations."

Nevertheless, Ezzo told CR that the pediatricians' association is "starting to agree with us on a number of issues—we're feeling pretty good about it."

Ezzo's books also tell parents that two leading breastfeeding authorities, Jan Riordan and Kathleen Auerbach, support their recommended number of feeding times.

The books do not mention that Riordan and Auerbach's breastfeeding guide specifically warns readers of failure-to-thrive babies associated with GFI programs.

Although Ezzo does instruct parents to feed babies when they are hungry, he also tells them that there are "minimum" and "acceptable" times between feedings and warns them not to consistently feed sooner than scheduled. This advice is what distinguishes PDF from advice given by any professional organization dedicated to infant health.

In the past, Ezzo has claimed to have "hundreds of pediatricians" who provide him with "expert medical advice." He has yet to release this list. Several years after first developing his feeding program, Ezzo did add pediatrician Robert Bucknam as coauthor of Babywise. He also began listing a "medical advisory board," including some pediatricians who speak to the benefits of the program in their own families and practices.

Yet the scientific support for the medical validity of Ezzo's infant programs has been limited to the results of GFI's own studies based on "convenience samples." Research professionals considered such data little more than a collection of anecdotes.

Missing money: a public concern?

Recent financial woes at GFI have also heightened concerns about Ezzo's professional conduct. Chris Hamilton of Hamilton, Boynton, and Speakman told CT that Ezzo requested the firm's involvement in an "embezzlement investigation" in August 1999. Ezzo reversed himself by February 2000, telling Hamilton that he had loaned money to his son-in-law, Robert Garcia, and that it was not a significant sum Ezzo had earlier specified in writing.

Yet Garcia told CT that he himself misappropriated funds from GFI. At Garcia's request, Hamilton also confirmed that money was, in his words, "embezzled."

There have been no criminal charges in connection with the misuse of funds. Reliable anonymous sources told CT that nearly \$500,000 was involved. (GFI has estimated annual revenues of \$4 million, according to media reports.)

Asked by CT about the financial problems, Ezzo said that "if there was any offense" it was against him and his wife.

"It really doesn't matter, and it's not of any public interest," Ezzo said. "It has not had an effect on public ministry, and therefore it's not something for public dialogue."

Shortly after the incident came to light, the Ezzos solicited donations through their Community Perspective newsletter. They appealed to "every parent who is now experiencing a good night[']s sleep" because of Babywise or Preparation for Parenting to send in a tax-deductible gift to the Ezzos' nonprofit arm, Christian Family Heritage (CFH), to meet "the growing challenges across America and around the world."

CFH, which helps pay for parenting education, has not publicly released its annual report. CFH is not a member of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

Intimidating critics

Ezzo has a well-established pattern of sharply rebutting his professional critics. He has characterized his Christian critics as "wicked" and lumped them with others he calls "anti-God." He has described others as "marsupial," "primitivistic," "prideful," and "theologically naïve."

Ezzo has also tried to intimidate those who write about him. In one striking case, after the newsweekly World ran a story by senior writer Roy Maynard that detailed criticism of GFI, Ezzo concocted a disparaging interview transcript from two previous phone conversations with Maynard. Ezzo sent letters to World editor Marvin Olasky calling for an investigation and suggesting the magazine consider asking for Maynard's resignation. He asked Maynard's church elders to take disciplinary action against him. Ezzo wrote two markedly different versions of the interviews. Frank York, his editorial director at the time, says there were no audiotapes.

Steve Rein, then a professor at Virginia Commonwealth, discovered the two theoretically verbatim but differing interviews on GFI's Web site. In response, GFI asked legal authorities to take criminal action against Rein, but no charges were ever filed.

York says Ezzo asked him on another occasion to obtain legal information about how to report Grace Community's MacArthur to the IRS, but he asked York to conceal Ezzo's involvement in the request.

York recounts phoning, e-mailing, and faxing all correspondence with an attorney from York's home. He paid fees with a personal check, later reimbursed by the Ezzos.

MacArthur's office says Grace Community is unaware of any IRS investigation. Because York became concerned about the nature of these activities, he saved copies of documents to corroborate his account.

No plans for changes

During his exclusive interview with CT, Ezzo remained upbeat about GFI's future. But both Living Hope and Grace Community paint a starkly different portrait of Ezzo. The elders' statement at Living Hope says, "It saddens us to know that Gary has failed to repent of former sins which we confronted, and even sadder still we have learned from him that he continues to widen the circle of his lies, slander, gossip, and false accusations.

"Because of his persistent unwillingness to respond to biblical admonition ... we are fearful that Gary's heart has been hardened.... In the end, it was his impenitence that caused us to put him out of the church."

Similarly, the recent statement by MacArthur notes that Ezzo still neglects to address the integrity issues Grace brought to his attention years ago, even though he had promised to do so.

Asked by CT about his intentions for his future leadership of GFI, Ezzo replied, "I have no plans to make any changes.

"We have no reason to change anything," Ezzo said. "[We] have no unresolved conflicts in our lives, relational conflicts that impair our public leadership.... We really do attempt to fulfill Romans 14:19 to the glory of God."