

News Watch Article: DG232

NEW CHALLENGES FACING GARY EZZO AND GROWING FAMILIES INTERNATIONAL

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Two and one-half years ago the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL published an article outlining the cultlike characteristics of Gary Ezzo's Growing Families International (GFI): Scripture twisting, authoritarianism, exclusivism, isolationism, and physical and emotional endangerment of children.¹ The organization, established in 1987, reaches over 1,500,000 parents around the world through church-based Christian parenting programs such as Preparation for Parenting and Growing Kids God's Way and secular materials such as the top-selling *On Becoming Babywise*.

In the past, Ezzo has denied the validity of our concerns as well as similar issues raised by others, including Focus on the Family and John MacArthur's Grace Community Church. He credits such concerns to bias or misperception² — a point addressed in a follow-up JOURNAL article on GFI.³

In the past year, however, Ezzo has faced new challenges. Several former supporters of his ministry have broken off their ties with him, citing character-related concerns.

Ezzo Excommunicated, Declared Unfit for Public Ministry. On 30 April 2000 Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship (LHEF), a church Ezzo had been a member of for years and that had previously stood by him,⁴ excommunicated Ezzo. The elders' statement asserts that Ezzo had a "pattern of sin," making excommunication necessary:

When it comes to himself and other matters that reflect upon the question of his integrity, there is a pattern in Gary of struggling with the truth. Rather than waiting on God's provision, when confronted in his sins Gary readily sets aside integrity and seeks to protect himself by a rejection of the very spiritual authority God placed over him for his own spiritual welfare. Furthermore, by the fruits of his life, especially his words, Gary has manifested a lack of Christian character essential to leadership in the church.⁵

The statement adds, "As Gary's elders we believe he is biblically disqualified from all public ministry." Ezzo left the church several weeks before the excommunication was finalized.⁶

In a public response to LHEF, Ezzo states that "while at Living Hope, no accusation of wrongdoing or suggestion of misconduct was ever presented to us in writing, in person, by email, or phone, let alone the commencing of a church discipline process."⁷ He says that LHEF brought forward charges against him only after he voiced concerns with them and "quietly" left the church.⁸ Ezzo's comments contradict those of his former elders, who state that they confronted Ezzo with his sins, pleaded with him to repent, and excommunicated him on the "basis of facts established by biblical process."⁹

Ezzo points to two committees he commissioned to look into the charges. Both committees "continue to affirm" Gary Ezzo, his wife Anne Marie, and their ministry. One committee is made up of GFI Regional Representatives and the other one Ezzo says is "independent of GFI organizationally," but he has not named its members.¹⁰

Ezzo's current pastor, Ron Seidel of Granada Hills Community Church, has also dismissed LHEF's charges against Ezzo.¹¹ He and the two committees Ezzo commissioned expressed frustration at LHEF's unwillingness to meet with them to discuss Ezzo's situation.¹²

Key Ezzo Staff Members Leave. Soon after Ezzo's excommunication, several of his key staff members and associates resigned their positions. Not all would comment publicly on their reasons; those who did communicate with the JOURNAL indicated that concerns about Ezzo played a role. Bob Gaby, a nine-year board member for Ezzo's nonprofit organizations, resigned as Chairman of the Board of Christian Family Heritage (CFH) on 16 August 2000. Gaby expressed concern over Ezzo's public response to the actions of LHEF, where Gaby is a member.¹³ Two days after Gaby's resignation, CFH board secretary Sharon Nelson, a medical doctor who has endorsed Ezzo's books, resigned.¹⁴ Laurie Moody, a visible GFI "contact mom," resigned the same week, saying that Ezzo's response to LHEF played a role in her decision.¹⁵

Two high-profile GFI employees resigned without public comment: Mark Severance, a frequent GFI spokesman and assistant to Ezzo,¹⁶ and Paul Luedke, Ezzo's son-in-law, who had been at GFI for five years.¹⁷

MacArthur: Ezzo's Problems Represent a Pattern. LHEF was not the first church to raise concerns about Ezzo's character. John MacArthur's Grace Community Church (Grace), where Ezzo had served as pastor of family ministries and developed his parenting programs, publicly rebuked him in October of 1997 for lacking accountability and truthfulness,¹⁸ the same issues raised by Living Hope.

On 25 July 2000, after LHEF excommunicated Ezzo, John MacArthur issued a new statement: "This has clearly become a pattern of behavior with Mr. Ezzo....It appears rather obvious on biblical grounds that Mr. Ezzo's refusal to heed his own church's discipline disqualifies him from Christian leadership or public ministry in any context. After all, the first and most important qualification for those who would lead the church is that they be above reproach."¹⁹

The church that Ezzo had been a part of before coming to Grace had also raised concerns about him, asking him to resign his positions due to his "authoritarianism, exclusivism, and division."²⁰

Ezzo responded to MacArthur's more recent comments, stating that it was he who had voiced concerns before leaving. He referred to the "integrity of the church staff and elders," and said MacArthur's "newest claims...once again reminded [us] of the reasons we left Grace Church."²¹

Accounting Firm Terminates Its Relationship with Ezzo. During 2000 Ezzo also lost the support of his accountants. In February Ezzo's accounting firm of more than nine years, Hamilton, Boynton, & Speakman, terminated its relationship with Ezzo. While the firm itself will not comment publicly, Chris Hamilton, a partner at the firm and a long-time friend of the Ezzos, states that Ezzo lied to him regarding an embezzlement investigation at GFI.²²

Ezzo had requested the investigation in August 1999, but in February 2000 he reversed himself, telling Hamilton that the money in question was a loan to his son-in-law Robert Garcia and less than the amount Ezzo had previously stated;²³ yet, Garcia himself has said he misappropriated funds.²⁴ At Garcia's request, Hamilton also verified that money had been, in his opinion, "embezzled."²⁵

Dan Busby, a Vice President at the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, explained that "embezzlement itself is not typically reason enough for an accounting firm to terminate a relationship with an audit client," but an attempt to mislead auditors might be.²⁶

When asked by Christianity Today about the misuse of funds at GFI, Ezzo responded that if there were any offense it was against him and his wife: "It has not had an effect on public ministry, and therefore it's not something for public dialogue."²⁷

Lack of Repentance. The matter of public discussion is something about which Ezzo and his former elders disagree. The statements from both Grace and LHEF referred to 1 Timothy 5:20 and pointed to a pattern of sin and lack of repentance that made public rebuke necessary. "Scripture demands that unrepentant sin in cases such as this should not be covered up or handled in secret," noted MacArthur.²⁸

The elders at LHEF stated, "Though it grieves us to speak of our brother's failings, our greater commitment to God's glory, the authority of Scripture and the purity of the flock which God has entrusted to us to shepherd compel us to bring public rebuke when a public minister continues in sin."²⁹

Ezzo's Future. Ezzo's vision for his future also seems to differ with his past associates. While three churches over almost 20 years have deemed Ezzo unfit for Christian leadership, Ezzo himself sees no need to step down as head of GFI. In a Christianity Today interview Ezzo asserted, "We have no reason to change anything....[We] have no unresolved conflicts in our lives, relational conflicts that impair our public leadership."³⁰

Rather than accepting personal responsibility, Ezzo portrays the character-related concerns as a spiritual attack stemming from his ministry's positive impact. He responded to LHEF: "Do we get tired with all this stuff? We certainly do. It robs all of us of precious ministry time and resources....There is one who loves to sow confusion among the brethren. Satan is not happy with the message of God-directed parenting and the restoration of the Christian family....He is the father of lies and sadly he weaves his work even among God's people."³¹

– Kathleen Terner

NOTES

1. Kathleen Terner and Elliot Miller, "More than a Parenting Ministry: The Cultic Characteristics of Growing Families International," *Christian Research Journal* 20, no. 4 (1998): 10–19, 27, 43–45.
2. E.g., Gary Ezzo and GFI Administrative Staff, "The Community Perspective: A Special Report, A Response to the Christian Research Institute," Internet publication, 26 October 1998; final draft of 3 December 1997 letter from Gary Ezzo, on file at CRI.
3. Kathleen Terner and Elliot Miller, "A Matter of Bias? Examining the Response of Growing Families International to Criticism," *Christian Research Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998): 32–42.
4. E.g., GFI's 11 November 1997 response to Grace Community Church's 16 October 1997 public rebuke of Ezzo was "submitted to, reviewed, and approved for distribution by the elders of Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship."
5. "Elders' Statement Regarding Gary Ezzo's Church Discipline" (LHEF Statement), Living Hope Evangelical Fellowship, Granada Hills, CA, 30 April 2000.
6. Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo, "A Special Letter from Gary and Anne Marie Ezzo to Ministry Friends and Associates" (Ezzo Response to LHEF), 14 July 2000.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. LHEF Statement.
10. Ezzo Response to LHEF.
11. 16 May and 25 July 2000 interviews with Pastor Seidel.
12. Ezzo Response to LHEF.
13. 21 August 2000 e-mail from Bob Gaby.
14. 19 August 2000 e-mail from Sharon Nelson.
15. 22 August 2000 e-mail from Laurie Moody.
16. 24 July 2000 phone call with Kim Meier at GFI confirming Severance no longer worked for the company; 23 October e-mail from Chris Hamilton confirming Severance was not fired but resigned.
17. 31 July 2000 e-mail from Paul Luedke.
18. "A Statement Regarding Gary Ezzo and Growing Families International," issued 16 October 1997 by Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA.
19. John MacArthur, "Gary Ezzo and GFI" (Grace Statement 2000), Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, 25 July 2000.
20. Terner and Miller, "A Matter of Bias?" 34.
21. 26 July 2000 letter from Gary Ezzo addressed to "Friends and Ministry Associates."
22. 10 August 2000 e-mail from Chris Hamilton.
23. Ibid.
24. 23 May 2000 telephone interview with Garcia; 11 August 2000 e-mail from Garcia.
25. 10 August 2000 e-mail from Chris Hamilton.
26. 10 August 2000 e-mail from Dan Busby.
27. Kathleen Terner, "Unprepared to Teach Parenting?" *Christianity Today*, 13 November 2000, 72.
28. Grace Statement 2000.
29. LHEF Statement.
30. Terner, 72.
31. Ezzo Response to LHEF.