

Summary/Synopsis of Concerns regarding the leadership and integrity of Pastor James Welch

- 2018 - Many accomplished prospective pastors who were in discussions with the Lead Pastor Search Team (LPST) expressed reservations and concerns about the FBC bylaws at that time, specifically with governance and the Lead Pastor's authority with staffing, and so the bylaws were revisited and revised in late 2018.
- February 2019 – Pastor James Welch came in view of a call, met with church leaders, and accepted the bylaws & governance structure, and the Lead Pastor position of the 113-year old FBC FT Lauderdale.
- Transition Fund - The Trustee/Budget-Audit Team designated **\$100,000** for the lead pastor to come and “set-up” (aka: Transition Fund); at some point the amount was changed and Paul Weinberg told James Welch the amount had been raised to \$250,000. The trustees/Budget-Audit Team advised that they could only make \$100,000 available for the start-up process. At that point, CPA Sean Dannelly indicated that the refund of the city's Wave tax was approximately \$125,000. The trustees are believed to have agreed to add the Wave tax to the Transition Funds to comply with the higher amount **promised by Paul Weinberg**. These funds were not presented to the Deacon Body. They should have been presented to the congregation for approval (**Bylaws Section 5.2e**)
- The first several months were filled with excitement and total cooperation with Pastor James. The church wanted a leader to give vision and ministry opportunity to reach our city. Many supported his very early campaign to raise money (GAP) to the tune of almost \$1M in pledges.
- The GAP campaign had commitments of nearly \$1M, but there was a significant slowdown in giving as confidence in Pastor James began to wane by Fall 2019. The slowdown can be attributed to several factors: families left the congregation; others felt James was not gaining “buy-in” and were losing trust; others did not see James as a caring shepherd - one who truly showed love toward the body. Money was being spent to advance his agenda for self-promotion & chosen ministries, instead of the well-being of our church and its long-standing commitments to missions and ministries.
- The \$600,000 GAP money that was raised has been spent, and during the time of the spending, the deacons/trustees were not consulted or informed of any of the major expenses **as per the bylaws (Section 4.2)**. The deacons/trustees have never been presented with a complete detailed report of the expenses to account for this \$600,000.
- March 2019: When his term as chairman of the Budget-Audit team ended in March 2019, John Foreman resigned his position as a member of the Trustee Board.
- Fall 2019: A member of the Budget-Audit Team, Joylyn Hinson, resigned her position.
- Monthly Deacon's meetings continued, but the Deacons were never informed of the Trustee and Finance Committee resignations, to the heavy spending, or to the deteriorating financial condition of the church. (**Section 4.2**)
- October 2019: Student Ministry: James discontinued the Lock-in events without ever speaking to the Student Ministry pastor or his staff. JW did not attend the Lock-in, nor did his children. (The final Lock-in had 50 high school students in attendance including 20 first time visitors. It was well staffed and the gospel was presented) He also cancelled Impact Weekend, an event of 20+ years.

- October 2019: A long-time (21 years) Sunday schoolteacher, Harvey Heffield, was suspended for ninety days by the pastor & his executive team. At the next deacons' meeting there were substantial objections from deacons regarding the fairness of the action and the manner in which it was handled. *The Pastor's response to questions was that the deacons needed to "trust" his decisions.*
- October 2019: Church CPA (Sean Dannelly) alerted the Executive Team that spending needed to slow drastically as we were running out of cash.
- January 2020: A church-wide email advised that the Fort Lauderdale Christmas Pageant had been canceled. Neither the Trustees nor the Deacons were involved in this decision. Pageant contributed \$210,000+ during the past fiscal year toward the annual budget. (Bylaws Section 5.2e) Furthermore, "any financial decision or combination of decision that exceeds five (5) percent of the annual budget shall require CONGREGATIONAL approval as a budget modification. Eliminating Pageant had ramifications not only for the majority of church members, but also for our greater Fort Lauderdale community and the communities far beyond South Florida.
- January 26, 2020: At the Deacon meeting, deacons expressed substantial reservations and concerns with the soundness of the executive decision to eliminate the Christmas Pageant and also with the manner in which it was handled. *Once again, the Pastor's response was that the deacons needed to "trust" him.*
- February 24, 2020. A joint meeting was held for the Deacons, Trustees, and Budget-Audit team. For the first time, James acknowledged the existence of serious financial problems. He explained that there had been a "pause" in giving during October, November, and December, as well as January & February. He also acknowledged that he had been too aggressive with expenditures. James further announced major staff cuts had to be made (even though several new staff members were brought on), and spending would have to be scaled back substantially. Some hard numbers were provided but they only related to the recent past. The cuts created a huge ripple effect within the FBC community; many were personally affected and hurting.
- Finance chairman (Romney Rogers) and church CPA (Sean Dannelly) also disclosed that regular expenses and other spending of approximately \$350,000 had already occurred, and that the church's line of credit (for emergencies) had been tapped for \$350,000 to cover the outstanding obligations. In addition, Rogers indicated that the creation of additional indebtedness for \$600,000 was under consideration. (Allegedly, some leaders have even suggested the property located at 501 NE 2nd street would have to be sold to raise additional funds.)

The big picture estimate appears to be as follows: (NOTE: The actual records regarding the following facts and figures are readily available from the church financial records. However, leadership has delayed and allowed only limited access to the records—therefore this partial overview is based on approximations.)

Funds Available to James Welch

-April 2019: FBC undesignated cash on hand	\$600,000	
-James Welch transition fund:	\$250,000 *	*Includes the refund of the city's downtown WAVE tax
-Gap special fund raised	\$600,000	
ALL SPENT	\$1,450,000	

New debt incurred

-FBC credit line	\$350,000
-Loan to pay off credit line & addtl debt	<u>\$250,000</u>
	\$600,000

Estimated SPENT, plus new debt **\$2,050,000**

- February 28, 2020: Deacon Chair/Trustee, Paul Weinberg sent an email stating, “Everyone is aware that we have a budget issue. Let me be clear by saying this **is not Pastor James fault.**” He then gave his assessment of the crisis and acknowledged that even James understood that this was the pastor’s responsibility. “The church seeks.... (2) Pastoral accountability to the Trustee Board, and (3) the Trustee Board’s accountability to the Deacons and congregation.” **(Article 5)**
- May 2020: FBC obtained a loan for \$600,000. \$350,000 will repay the line of credit. The balance will pay outstanding bills.
- The lack of public accountability on the part of FBC lay leadership has created confusion and uncertainty, causing several deacons and other church members to leave the church. Some people have expressed their concern through non-attendance and reduced giving, and now several hundred people in the congregation have expressed a lack of confidence in the leadership of Pastor James. *(Some leaders have tried to discredit those who initiated the petition, and have suggested that there’s no proof that the petition signers are actually church members. But this large group of people going on the record creates a powerful inference that serious conflict exists within FBC.)*
- “Governance protocol: Roles and Responsibility” is a document dated January 2020 and delivered to deacons and trustees. The protocol purports to eliminate or at least **minimize the role of the Deacon body in representing the congregation between church business meetings.**
- February 28, 2020: Paul Weinberg’s email said the “protocol” was released “prematurely,” that it was “an error by the pastoral team,” and that it was “not to be treated as a final document” etc. However, the document certainly *foreshadows the thinking and future intent to create a CEO management style rather than continue FBC’s traditional pastoral/shepherding leadership style.*
- CHURCH ATTENDANCE/GIVING: DOWN long before Covid-19.
 - **Church attendance** leading up to the quarantine, was falling drastically.
 - 2/23/2020 -887
 - 3/1/2020 - 840
 - 3/8/2020 - 760
 - **Giving** has also been down.
 - The exact numbers have not been made available to the deacons, however, at the February 24, 2020 joint meeting of deacons trustees and finance team, Pastor James acknowledged that there had been a significant “pause” in giving during October, November, December. It has been reported/rumored that the downhill turn in regular giving by the church body has been augmented by a few unusually large checks which leadership solicited in order to cover the overspending, reduced giving, and resulting shortfall.
- May 3, 2020: At the Deacon meeting, concerns regarding spending over the past 12 months were expressed. After **great resistance by Budget-Audit Team Chairman, Romney Rogers**, a sub-committee was formed to be given access to the FBC church ledgers. Over the next 4 weeks, resistance continued creating questions as to why transparency was not being given. Romney added himself to the committee. He also added Glenn Leonard (new deacon chair) and Jose Paes-Leme (Trustee nominee) The subcommittee finally met for the first time on Saturday, 5/30.

- In our church governance there is a tight group of staff and lay leaders (Romney Rogers, Paul Weinberg & the Trustees) around Pastor James that have been making the critical decisions for the church over recent months, and sometimes they have disregarded checks and balances that were put in the bylaws by the congregation. This group is now being viewed by many outside as “protecting and covering for” James’ indiscretions and past errors in judgment. They are not giving “full transparency” and when asked, they are only releasing information in pieces. **This further breeds mistrust in our leadership.**

- Some Examples of the Disregard for Checks & Balances (certainly not all-inclusive):
 - “The Deacon chair, with the approval of the Deacon body, shall have the responsibility to select an independent Church Nominating Committee on or before December 1st of each year...” ***The nominating committee was appointed, but the deacon body did not approve it.*** (bylaws Section 5.3d)
 - Members of the nominating committee were allowed to suggest names for future deacons, trustees, and finance, but the tight knit group apparently made the decision regarding who would actually be nominated. (Some members of the nominating committee have acknowledged that the full committee did not make the final decision; indeed, some did not even know the individuals who were being “nominated” by the committee.
 - Under the “co-governance” of Trustees and Deacons, The Trustee Board is authorized to carry out the will of the “church body,” but its decisions must be “memorialized in the minutes” of the Board, and “commitments that are permanent or commit the church for over one year, or have monetary implication of over \$10,000 shall be set forth in writing as separate resolutions and maintained in the Board’s records.” (bylaws section 5.2d)
 - The Deacon body was not kept advised of administrative issues regarding:
 - Resignations of Budget-Audit Team members
 - Conflicts that could impact the church body
 - The over-spending
 - Deacons “...have the responsibility to determine the general policies of the church. They shall function on behalf of the congregation between regular church business meetings. They shall provide oversight for and receive administrative and financial reports from the Trustee Board.” (bylaws section 5.3) The checks and balances that were put in place long before Pastor James arrived were generally ignored **UNTIL** the joint leadership meeting of deacons, trustees, and finance on February 24, 2020. By then, the damage was done. James has stated several times that “**the Deacons are not Congress**”, which is true. But it is also true that he is the pastor, not a CEO.

Other notes and concerns raised

In view of FBC’s existing commitments to other missions programs, some questions have been raised (but remain unanswered) regarding James’s unilateral decisions that:

- (a) April 2019: Gave \$10,000 to his former church, Harbor Community Church in New Orleans. Gave \$10,000 to Vintage Church in Pittsburgh, PA – pastored by his friend, Rob Wilton. **FBC has no affiliation with either of these churches.**
- (b) November 1, 2019: Gave \$20,000 to the Broward Business Council on Homelessness whose public policy may be inconsistent with FBC’s faith and practice statement
- (c) James Welch may have used FBC funds for baseball equipment for his child, a computer for one of his children and possibly his parent’s visit to Fort Lauderdale for the Christmas pageant. NOTE: this is being looked into by the deacon subcommittee.
- (d) James Welch 2019 TITHE: gave a total of \$2000 in 2019 to FBC, while asking congregants to give generously to the Gap Program and leading congregants to be faithful in their tithe. He was confronted regarding his lack of tithing. He is tithing in 2020.

On the positive side, James has been described in glowing terms as a hard worker, highly intelligent, a good preacher, has the best of intentions, passionate personality, and a visionary who makes a wonderful first impression.

However, James has also been described as having a blind spot when it comes to cooperative leadership:

- One leader summarized Pastor James's leadership as
 - (a) Unable to humbly admit mistakes; there is always the BUT word..." BUT you knew who I was..."
 - (b) Unable to project love and care to the flock.
 - (c) Even when talking to some leaders, it's always after decisions have been made.
 - (d) When we want to know why we are where we are, there is always something or somebody to blame or justify; never a FULL admission of responsibilities.

- Others have characterized James's leadership as
 - (a) His "bullying" leadership style is one of "fall in line or you won't last," thus some leaders and staff members have left voluntarily.
 - (b) Many have used the word "toxic" to describe the work environment at FBC for the past year under James
 - (c) His actions and words do not match

- Student Ministry:
 - In April 2019 it was consistently running an average of 90-100 students.
 - It was DOWN to 68 students on February 23, 2020.
 - Student ministry is now down to 10-12 students during the quarantine.
 - NOTE: Several beloved and successful outreach programs were abruptly cut (Impact Weekend, Lock-ins) without consultation with the youth minister, workers or key lay youth leaders

- The Pastor has discussed FBC's "decline" over the last two decades, however, after some early growth signs, church attendance is down since his arrival from 1000-1200 to almost 750. Indeed, he has allegedly said that "400 people may have to leave FBC" before he can develop his vision for the future. James himself proclaimed the need to "prune" FBC because of its imminent demise at the previous many years' downward trend. He never allowed himself to see the positive ministries and leadership that held FBC together for the years before his coming, rather saw only a church that was nose-diving to destruction and needed his leadership to continue to cut and prune (to what end ??? no one knows).

From the PETITION:

Throughout the past twelve months we have had concerns regarding the leadership of Pastor James R. Welch, specifically regarding trust, collaboration, communication, decision making, vision, adhering to the will of the congregation and his lack of respect for congregants and staff. We also believe that Pastor James R. Welch has failed to abide by the church constitution and bylaws.

Pastor James R. Welch has not created a stable environment, but instead has created a toxic environment and polarized atmosphere for both congregants and staff. Without the recognition of mistakes or the willingness to listen to congregants, Deacon Body or Trustee Board there is no hope for improvement and thus no way forward.

We feel Pastor James R. Welch has a lack of attention to, experience and qualification for, or appropriate prioritizing of, the ministerial requirements and interests of our entire church community, as well as a failure to recognize and respect the expertise of professionals in our community.

We feel Pastor James R. Welch has inconsistency in application of the church constitution and bylaws, rules and an ongoing lack of respect toward many of the congregants and staff. A church cannot be run successfully with a one-way avenue of communication. Even when counsel is provided, there is a failure to follow through or a total disregard for the ideas of many; when communication occurs, it is too often delayed and incomplete. There is just an overall feeling that we are losing ground all the time. We need a different, more solid leadership. The morale is too low and we feel it is time for a change.