

I was asked to make a statement about my experience while at HBC from 2009 to 2017. I was hired as the executive director of biblical soul care in November 2009. I was hesitant to take the job based on warnings from others that James was at times unstable emotionally and less than honest with his word. I actually surfaced those concerns and it took many months before I finally accepted the position. James and other senior leaders assured me that any warnings were due to jealousy or evil intent.

The first year I remember James being degrading to me and others. I did call him out on these incidents. He tried to make excuses, but when I told him I would leave if this continued he was much more careful. He rarely yelled at me or tried to mock me after that. He always asked forgiveness when he did. I was told by others I was too valuable so he changes his tone toward me but not others. In the next few years we became closer, and he asked me to help him not to react out of hurt. He claimed that hurt by others caused him to be "too intense". James always saw himself as the victim which helped him justify his anger.

Because I was his counselor I don't feel free to share much of our talks. Almost everything I share in the rest of this statement is public knowledge among the senior leaders of HBC. This is not meant to tear James or anyone else down but to help draw an accurate picture why you must act differently as elders and act now.

I will say James is complicated. He sincerely was grieved at times when he lashed out at loved ones. Other times he felt and said people were like "a piece of crap" and deserved what they got. He is a man of extremes which is part of what make him so charismatic. But this is not the way of a pastor or elder described in several places in the New Testament.

I was on the MLT most of my time at Harvest, not on XLT until later. I did not appreciate the sarcasm and mocking that often went on. Some went along while others just stayed quiet. It was social suicide to confront this type of

behavior. I once told James that sarcasm is the lowest form of humor and not a love language. He adamantly disagreed until I told him I did my doctorate on humor. Over time he actually told the staff we needed to tone down the sarcasm and be more respectful. That lasted for a while but deteriorated over time. This was the pattern. Behavioral correction with no heart change.

The culture was and is one of pride and fear. During one of many church-wide crises I met with a task force to determine what the senior leadership should do to help James (who was on a leave after a break down) and help the church go forward. It may have been around 2012. I shared a private letter with my recommendations. I was told to destroy it and erase any file. I could talk about it in a small circle but it should never get beyond the room. This was the beginning of a lot of what seemed to be paranoia that things might leak.

In that letter I stated that James needed an indefinite sabbatical and his return should be determined not by him but by a counselor and the elder board. I felt his boys should not be elevated in the church for their own good and for his. I felt the elders needed ultimate authority to work with staff and find a balance of mutual deference and respect. I can't recall what else I said but no one disagreed.

Another pattern was we all would agree on a clear path of health and restoration and when brought to James everyone caved. Was it the debt? Was it his uncanny ability to change the narrative and manipulate people? Was it the overpaid senior staff who feared losing their job, friends, and status? Was it the fact that we were in a cult of personality that when push came to shove meant we complied? I often wonder but believe all contributed.

Tammy and I contemplated leaving every year. We weighed the good against the bad. We considered if things were getting better or worse. We did not need the job like so many seemed to, and we did not grow up desensitized to the dysfunction like so many. Every year the tremendous fruit in Soul Care plus James's small strides in areas of concern kept us there.

James believed in biblical counseling and even allowed me

to go part time in 2015 and 2016 to be executive director of the biblical counseling coalition. By then I was seen as the chief health officer. For me that meant a responsibility to call out any unhealthy habits in leadership. I'd say I was like a dog in a whistle factory. I felt everyone on the JLT and XLT were part of the problem including me. I had a couple very clear confrontations with senior leaders, as did others, including some key elders. At one point this resulted in James taking a break, getting outside counsel, and withdrawal from more and more management of staff. All potentially good steps, but none really addressed the issues at the heart or cultural level.

James set up some puppet leaders under him. They did his bidding while protecting him from conflict. Everyone knew he wrote the reprimands, or when others were sent on his errands. By 2016 I was ready to turn in my resignation. James and several elders knew I could not in good conscience stay as Chief Health Officer. It was hypocritical. I wrote a letter to James and he called me in with Rick and Scott to talk me in to staying. I should have left but I was promised change and influence toward health that made me rethink my position. In actuality I lost influence and things deteriorated in the next year.

The accelerated rise of young and less objective leaders like Jeff D., Luke and Landon to the XLT along with the increased power of the Executive Elders who James had great sway with, only made things worse. The stage was set for James to hold all the cards and to get what he wanted done from behind the scenes. I felt for him at times. The debt, the need to see his sons succeed him, the scrutiny he was constantly under. He was caving in under it all. His weaknesses were exposed. His character failed.

I was marginalized, as were others who might check and balance decisions and demeanor. Some show of my influence was made in the elder meetings or on stage at times but it was all in a way to look like their was accountability. I grew more dissident each month.

I did meet with James, Rick and Kent as a men's group and we did challenge each other as far as personal godliness. At times that seemed very sincere. But as far as organizational health I was told I was not an expert and basically should

keep to counseling. I was publicized as CHO but had no real voice in correcting gross organizational dysfunction. I shared with Rick my deep concerns for James's mental state, as did Dallas. We thought he agreed but the next day defended him and did nothing.

The last straw for me was the way the HBF debacle went down. Kent was treated disgracefully, the staff were abused and traumatized, and then James unilaterally destroyed his best work. It woke me up out of a stupor. I was done.

To be fair, there were wonderful moments at Harvest. James was for the most part respectful of me, generous with my family, accepted that he could not ask about soul care sessions with anyone, and did show signs of temporary progress in his emotional health several seasons. The fruit of the gospel was overflowing in Soul Care. This was a big part of why I stayed so long. I see that I was part of the problem, because while I would have renewed hope, I knew others were wrongfully treated and that James at his worst was manipulative and abusive.

Near the end of my time In 2017, I advised the chairmen of the executive elders to stage a walk out and to refuse to come back until James stepped down for a time and they regained authority. I never filled out an exit interview or signed an NDA. I walked away quietly. I wonder now if I should have been more vocal. But to be honest, I felt the elders would not respond well. Again, I did talk to Steve and Randy but to no avail.

I pray for the church and for the elders often. I want to see better days for HBC. I pray that leadership makes the necessary decisions to get back to glorify God and not man (Gal 1:10). Forgive me for being part of the confusion. It is not too late to repent and get right. I am here to help now as needed.

In Christ, Garrett Higbee