

# Why I Had to Leave Brave Church

## From Hope to Disillusionment: My Four Years at Brave Church – Englewood, Colorado

By Philip Faustin

### The Day I Discovered Brave Church

One day, as I was driving down Colorado Boulevard, a sign caught my eye: Brave Church. Something about it stuck with me. It was June 2020, deep into the COVID pandemic. The church I'd been attending had shut its doors, with no indication of when they would reopen. Curious, I looked up Brave Church later that day. Their website gave me hope; they were holding services. For the next couple of weeks, I tuned into their sermons online, feeling out whether this could be my new spiritual home. Eventually, I decided to take the next step—I would visit in person.



### First Impressions

My first visit was in July 2020, and I loved it from the moment I walked in. The sermon was great, but it was the worship that truly moved me. After months of isolation, it felt incredible to be surrounded by other believers, lifting our voices together. There was a sense of connection and hope in that room, something I hadn't realized how much I'd been missing.

### Initial Concerns About Leadership

What concerned me was that the website listed only one elder. I assumed there must have been others who simply hadn't been included yet. But looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight, it's possible there really was only one at the time. Eventually, within a year I noticed additional elders appearing on the website.

### Origins and Name Change

When Brave Church first began, it was known as Harvest Bible Chapel. From what I've gathered, it appeared to be a church plant of Harvest Bible Chapel in Illinois, led by James MacDonald. That church and its pastor became entangled in various scandals. If you're curious about the details, a quick Google search will tell you more. It seems likely that, in light of those controversies, Harvest in Colorado rebranded itself as Brave Church.

### Shifting Focus and Structure

When I first started attending Brave, there was a strong focus on planting and supporting new churches. It seems the original plan to plant independent churches was eventually abandoned. In its place, it seems the church shifted its focus to only opening satellite campuses and producing radio broadcasts where Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub is the common denominator.

### Changes in Eldership and Governance

A couple of years into my time at Brave, there was a noticeable shift in the structure of the eldership. What had initially appeared to be a typical elder board was reorganized into distinct groups: shepherding, stewarding, and supervising. The website listed only one supervising elder and three stewarding elders. The supervising elder was tasked with overseeing Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub, while the stewarding elders were responsible for managing the church's finances.

Something about this new arrangement caused me to wonder how and why it came about and what it meant. As I started asking questions, it quickly became clear that the answers were not forthcoming. I emailed the elders multiple times but never received a response. When I reached out to the church directly, I was simply told to contact the elders.

### **Transparency Issues**

Every church should have bylaws that clearly outline how things are done, including the roles and responsibilities of the elders. Brave does have such a document, but I have not been able to get a look at it. When I asked one elder about it, he seemed completely unfamiliar with what I was referring to. Another pastor acknowledged that he was aware of its existence but admitted he had never read the entire document. When I inquired about obtaining a copy, it quickly became clear that it wasn't going to happen.

### **Concerns About Pastor-Centric Culture**

My unease with the church deepened as it became increasingly centered on Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub. He seemed to have become a celebrity figure, overshadowing the church itself. The use of the moniker "Brave Pastor Jeff" felt like self-promotion, designed to elevate his personal brand. The underlying message—that he was uniquely courageous and capable where other pastors were lacking—further cemented the perception that the church's identity was inextricably linked to his image.

### **Lack of Leadership Transparency**

The church website, updated months ago, conspicuously omits any mention of staff or elders, something that was there before, focusing almost exclusively on the Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub brand. It's unusual for a church website not to feature its staff, leadership, and elders. Typically, these sections include photos, biographies, and contact information. Brave church had gone the opposite direction.

I recently emailed the church again, requesting a list of the current elders and their areas of responsibility. In response, I received only a list of names, with no additional details. After asking for more information, I received an email from an associate pastor questioning why I was requesting such specific details. I explained that the elders were once listed on the website, and it would be helpful to know who they are and what their respective roles entail. Not surprisingly, I've yet to receive any further information or a response. This lack of transparency only raises more questions about the church's leadership structure.

### **Pastor's Stance on Criticism**

On two occasions, I heard Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub preach that criticizing a church or pastor is inherently wrong, labeling those who do so as evil and urging congregants to avoid them. This stance seems both self-serving and dangerous. While unwarranted criticism is certainly harmful, condemning *all* criticism is wrong. It's easy to see the potential consequences of such a stance. It effectively silences dissent, even from the elders, preventing them from addressing legitimate concerns about the church or the pastor's actions.

### **Indicators of Arrogance**

In another sermon, Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub recounted someone telling him they were praying he wouldn't become proud. He expressed anger at this, and I think you can conclude for yourself what that shows.

### **Financial Concerns and Nonprofit Ties**

My research uncovered a concerning detail. Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub has a pre-existing nonprofit,

originally named One Heartbeat Ministries - EIN: 75-3153722, predating his pastorship. Publicly available 990 forms reveal that after Brave Church was formed, this nonprofit appears to have funded radio broadcasts of sermon excerpts, with Pastor Schwarzenraub receiving varying salary amounts over the years. The nonprofit was later renamed Brave and then Brave Media. At some point, Brave Church began donating 5% of its general fund to Pastor Jeff Schwarzenraub's nonprofit. In 2023, this amounted to approximately \$863,000. While the radio broadcast expenses were under \$300,000, the nonprofit's total assets now exceed \$2 million. Furthermore, Brave Church handles all sermon recording and editing, not the nonprofit. It's also reasonable to assume Pastor Schwarzenraub receives a significant salary from Brave Church itself. Details here:

<https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/753153722>

### **Lack of Accountability**

When I inquired with an elder about the nonprofit, he seemed unaware of why Brave Church doesn't handle radio time directly or why Pastor Jeff Schwarzenraub receives an additional salary without apparent justification. My direct request to Pastor Jeff Schwarzenraub for clarification went unanswered, which, while not surprising, is nonetheless disturbing. The question remains: what justifies such substantial sums of money being provided to Pastor Schwarzenraub's personal nonprofit? In my letter, I also asked whether Brave Church compensates him for sermon preparation time and who owns the intellectual property of those sermons. None of those seem unreasonable questions to me.

### **Drawing Parallels with Mars Hill**

In 2021, a podcast was put out by Christianity Today called The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. Here is the description: "Founded in 1996, Seattle's Mars Hill Church was poised to be an influential, undeniable force in evangelicalism—that is until its spiraling collapse in 2014. The church and its charismatic founder, Mark Driscoll, had a promising start. But the perils of power, conflict, and Christian celebrity eroded and eventually shipwrecked both the preacher and his multimillion-dollar platform." There are a few things I disagree with in the podcast but as I listened to it, I felt I was listening to a description of Brave Church, both things that have happened and where I could see things ending up.

Here is a link to the podcast: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill>. There were 19 episodes over 14 months.

### **Dismissal of Critical Analysis**

During a meeting with a Brave Church pastor to discuss my various concerns, I mentioned the Mars Hill podcast. He dismissed it and said that people shouldn't criticize the church. This was both sad and disturbing. Here was a well-documented analysis of the catastrophic failure of a large church, and he seemed completely unwilling to consider that there might be valuable lessons to be learned from it.

### **Historical Context and Warnings**

I think there are also lessons to be learned from Brave Church's origins. I previously mentioned Harvest Bible Chapel in Illinois and its pastor, James MacDonald. I won't delve into the details here, but a quick online search will reveal the consequences when a church is led by an arrogant, narcissistic, domineering, and greedy leader. The elders failed to fulfill their oversight responsibilities, and when outsiders began exposing the issues, they were attacked and even sued. It wasn't until the situation became bizarre beyond imagination that the church and elders finally took action against MacDonald.

### **Dependence on a Single Leader**

I recall a few years ago when Pastor Jeff Schwarzenraub suffered a concussion after falling off his bike. It makes me wonder what would have happened to Brave Church if he hadn't been able to return to the

pulpit? To me it seems that the church's foundation rests on him. This echoes the situation at Mars Hill with Mark Driscoll. When Driscoll fell, the entire structure around him crumbled.

### **Questions About Elder Authority**

It's difficult to discern whether the elders at Brave Church hold any real authority. How are these elders selected? Are they handpicked by Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub? The church bylaws should clarify this, and I wish I had access to read them. Over the years, as the elder structure has been reorganized, was that initiated by the elders themselves, or did they merely comply with directives from above?

Historically, elder boards have often failed to prevent or deal with issues within churches. It sometimes takes a crisis or significant external pressure for them to respond appropriately. Too often, peace and loyalty are prioritized over honesty and accountability.

Another concern arises when elders are also paid staff or receive some form of compensation from the church. Financial ties like these can discourage them from challenging leadership decisions, making them less likely to "rock the boat" when it's necessary.

### **Consolidation of Power**

I'm concerned that some of the changes to the elder board seem to be consolidating power within a smaller group, or possibly even just one person. Once again, the question is how these changes have come about and exactly what has been done. Is this smaller group made up of individuals who simply go along with whatever Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub desires? History shows that this is a common issue in churches, where elders often fail to prevent abuse or stand up against a domineering leader. When power becomes too centralized, accountability diminishes, and that can lead to problems down the road.

### **Membership Meeting Insights**

At a recent membership meeting I was at, it was stated that if something serious were to happen, Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub could be removed—but only with a unanimous vote from the elders. I couldn't help but wonder who came up with that idea. History has shown that elder boards are often ineffective at holding pastors accountable, and requiring unanimity makes meaningful action even less likely. If the pastor is the one appointing these elders, the likelihood of them all agreeing to remove him is virtually nonexistent.

### **The Price of the Pulpit: Questioning Megachurch Pastor Salaries**

A side question I have is: why do many megachurch pastors believe they deserve million-dollar-a-year salaries? Take, for example, a church with \$20 million in annual contributions and an attendance of 7,000 to 10,000 people. Compare that to public officials responsible for much larger populations and budgets:

- **Mayor of Denver, Colorado:** Salary of \$205,990.58, serving a population of 716,234 with a \$1.74 billion budget.
- **Governor of Colorado:** Salary of \$141,000, overseeing 5,914,180 residents with a \$40 billion budget.
- **President of the United States:** Salary of \$400,000, leading 335,893,238 people with a \$6.8 trillion budget.

Some might argue that government leaders are underpaid, but their roles are meant to be about public service, not personal wealth. In contrast, megachurch pastors often seem to align more with corporate executives when it comes to compensation. The question arises: is their motivation rooted in a calling to serve, or in the pursuit of wealth?

Another layer of complexity is how these salaries are determined. Sometimes, churches hire consulting firms to set the pastor's compensation. While this might appear fair and objective, there's ample room for manipulation. Consultants may inflate salary recommendations to curry favor with the pastor, making their services seem more valuable. In other cases, pastors might handpick friends or loyal supporters to oversee church finances, increasing the likelihood of receiving overly generous compensation packages.

When a pastor becomes the celebrity face of the church, it's easy for them to justify high salaries and perks. They might argue—directly or indirectly—that the church's growth and financial success are tied to their leadership and personal brand. Even if they're not explicit, the message is often clear: *without me, this doesn't work*.

### **Warning Signs to Watch For**

I once heard a police detective say that every crime is driven by one of three motives: sex, money, or power. The same can often be said for pastors who have fallen. Because of this, we should keep our eyes open for warning signs in these areas and resist the urge to look the other way when problems surface.

If a pastor has admitted to past sexual immorality, it's wise to remain vigilant for any situations that suggest ongoing problems. Likewise, if a pastor has confessed that his previous ambition was to accumulate wealth, it's important to watch for signs that this mindset might still be influencing his approach to ministry. If a pastor has a desire to be famous, that too can lead to various problems. The pursuit of power can often result in bullying behavior. Power, money, and sex are potent temptations—and without accountability, many spiritual leaders fall prey to them.

Too often, people notice inappropriate behavior but stay silent—whether out of fear of losing their job within the church or concern that speaking up might cause the church to collapse. The justification that "so much good is being done and the church is growing, therefore we can tolerate a little bad behavior" is a dangerous mistake. Ignoring misconduct, even seemingly minor infractions, only serves to enable and perpetuate more serious problems. Turning a blind eye allows these issues to fester and grow, ultimately causing greater harm to the church community.

### **Mysterious Staff Departures**

Another thing I've often wondered about is the way certain staff members seem to just disappear. One day they're there, and the next, they're gone—without so much as a thank you for their time or any explanation of where they're going. I understand this might not be necessary for everyone, but when a high-level staff member vanishes without a word, it raises questions about what's really going on behind the scenes.

At Mars Hill Church, a troubling pattern emerged involving non-disclosure agreements. Staff members were often offered severance packages in exchange for agreeing to remain silent about their time at the church. This was used to cover up some of the more damaging issues that were taking place. It makes me wonder if similar tactics are at play when people suddenly vanish from the staff without explanation.

### **Financial Transparency Issues**

The 2023 Brave Church financial statement revealed a \$50,000 Rabbi Trust, an instrument typically used for highly compensated executives to defer income for tax purposes. My attempt to obtain clarification from the church's CFO regarding this Rabbi Trust was unsuccessful, as my email inquiry went

unanswered. This lack of transparency further compounds concerns about financial accountability within the church.

### **Balancing Good and Concerns**

I can say that, for the most part, the sermons at Brave were excellent. The church is filled with good people who genuinely want to follow the Lord Jesus. However, my concern lies with the foundation of the church itself. There are underlying issues that, if left unaddressed, could cause collapse in the future.

### **Final Reflections and a Call to Action**

When I first mentioned Brave Church to my wife, she was immediately opposed to the idea. Three things stood out to her: the name, the fact that only one elder was listed on the website, and that Pastor Jeff and his wife homeschooled their children. That last concern might seem ironic, considering she had homeschooled all eight of our children through high school—but if you’ve been part of the homeschooling world, you’ll understand why it gave her pause.

Looking back, I have to wonder if I made a mistake by dismissing her concerns. I can’t say for certain, as other factors were influencing her perspective as well. What I do know is that there was solid teaching and times of beautiful worship, and for that, I am grateful. At the same time, the experiences of the past four years have shaped my understanding of the church in ways I never expected. Perhaps, in the end, that understanding—and the words on these pages—will serve a greater purpose.

It deeply saddens me to write this. The temptation is to simply walk away quietly and ignore the concerns that weigh on my heart. But I also realize that in doing so, I would be complicit in the very things I feel need to be addressed. By writing this, I know I may make myself an enemy to some and face possible repercussions. Some will dismiss the questions I’ve raised here, refusing to reflect on their own doubts. If they’re honest with themselves, however, they might have to admit that they, too, have suppressed and ignored things they’ve seen and experienced.

When I look at the many pastors who have fallen and the churches that have been hurt in the process, one thing becomes clear: the fallout from these failures often harms the congregation the most. Many people never return to church, seeing it as a fraud rather than a place of healing and truth.

So, I call on Brave Church and its leadership to look inward and take the necessary steps to address these concerns before a disaster unfolds. I know I am not the only one who has raised these issues. It’s time to listen, reflect, and take action.

### **Recommendations for Transparency and Accountability**

Here’s what I believe needs to be done:

- A public release of the church bylaws, including any changes made over the years, especially those made recently, particularly concerning the elders.
- A public listing of the elders, detailing their responsibilities and providing contact information for each.
- Clarification on whether the church uses non-disclosure agreements when staff are fired, laid off, or quit.
- Transparency regarding how Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub’s salary and compensation are determined, and who is responsible for making those decisions.
- An end to millions of dollars being funneled to Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub’s non-profit, along with an explanation for why this was done.

- A cessation of promoting the "Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub" brand, ensuring the focus shifts back to the mission of the church.
- An explanation of why the decision was made to abandon the idea of planting churches in favor of making Pastor Jeff Schwarzentraub the central figure.
- A disclosure of who the campus pastors are and what their roles entail, ensuring clarity and transparency in leadership.

These steps would go a long way toward restoring trust and accountability within the church, fostering a healthier environment for both leadership and the congregation.

### **Two Additional Resources**

How Do Churches End Up with Domineering Bullies for Pastors?

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/domineering-bullies-pastors>

Signs of Bad Church Leadership

<https://faithfulandfruitful.com/signs-of-bad-church-leadership>

### **The Last Letter**

The following cover letter was to be my last attempt to reach the elders at Brave Church. I had attached this document to it. Unfortunately, though not unexpected, I have yet to receive any response as of March 25, 2025

February 25, 2025

Dear Elders of Brave Church,

I am formally requesting that the attached document be distributed to every elder and that an inquiry be made regarding the questions I have presented.

As this document has not yet been made public, I respectfully ask for a response detailing what actions are being taken by March 25, 2025. Please confirm receipt of this request at your earliest convenience.

I appreciate your time and attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Philip Faustin

### **A Gatekeeper at the Inbox**

For a while, I had been wondering whether the elders were actually receiving the emails I'd been sending. I began to suspect that someone might be monitoring the Brave elders' email address—possibly filtering the messages and selectively choosing which ones to forward.

I was able to obtain personal contact information for two of the elders and reached out to them by phone. As I suspected, neither of them had received my most recent message—and likely hadn't seen any of the others either.

About a week after that phone call, one of the elders reached out and asked to meet the following week. I agreed. He brought along another staff member from the church. To me, the meeting felt like a series

of vague responses with no direct answers to the questions I had been raising. Once again, they reiterated that the church bylaws would not be made available.

The meeting felt generic and there was no opportunity to go through the document I had submitted, point by point. Based on their comments, I doubt either of them had read it thoroughly—or perhaps they simply chose not to engage with its contents. It felt more like they were checking a box, wanting to say they'd made an effort to reach out, without any real intent to have a significant conversation. It was also clear that only a small group at the church had seen the document and certainly not all of the elders as I had requested.

On several occasions they implied that I was merely upset because I wasn't getting the answers I wanted—as if my concerns stemmed from a lack of trust rather than a lack of transparency, even on the simplest matters.

The meeting ended with a request that I refrain from contacting anyone at the church except the two staff members present. I suppose that effectively closes the door on any further attempt to engage with the elders.

### **Goodbye With Love**

I want to end by saying once more: I truly loved Brave Church. If I had only seen what was visible on the surface, I would never have left. But after almost two years of seeking transparency through the proper channels and still carrying unanswered questions, I had to make the difficult decision to leave. Each week, my love for the church was slowly eclipsed by the quiet ache of unresolved concerns. And so, with a heavy heart and grateful for the good, I said goodbye.

### **Why I Still Care**

Some may wonder why, now that I've left, I still care. The answer is simple: history has a way of repeating itself. If my concerns are valid, then Brave Church may be headed toward a scandal or an internal collapse. When that happens, it's not just the institution that suffers—it's the people. Members of the congregation are wounded, sometimes so deeply that they never fully recover. That kind of pain is something I can't ignore. So here we are. If you're someone connected to Brave Church, I hope what I've written will serve as a safeguard—one that protects people like you.

If you would like to reach out to me, you can at: [faustinmail@gmail.com](mailto:faustinmail@gmail.com)