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INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION REPORT

MICHAEL & BRENDA GATLIN LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

On June 6, 2024, Vineyard USA (“VUSA”) engaged Guidepost Solutions (“Guidepost”) to investigate allegations of leadership misconduct by Brenda Gatlin (“Brenda”) and Michael Gatlin (“Michael”) in relation to their VUSA positions.¹ Both Brenda and Michael served as co-pastors of Duluth Vineyard Church (“Duluth”) and translocal leaders with VUSA. In late 2022, allegations of sexual misconduct by the Gatlin’s son Jackson Gatlin (“Jackson”) were reported and a subsequent investigation was initiated by Duluth.² Shortly after the Jackson allegations came to light, dated allegations of local and translocal leadership misconduct and spiritual abuse involving Michael and Brenda were reported via the Guidepost 24-hour reporting email (“Hotline”) and to VUSA directly.³

In March 2023, VUSA requested that Guidepost review allegations made against the Gatlins that were previously reported to key VUSA Executive Team members in 2014. As a result of that review, Guidepost provided findings based on limited interviews⁴ and a review of available documents and communications.⁵ (Appendix A) This current investigation extends beyond the 2014 allegations to include additional reports of leadership misconduct and spiritual abuse involving staff and leaders who served with the Gatlins in their various Duluth and translocal positions throughout their tenure in the Vineyard movement.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

A. Scope

Guidepost was hired to investigate allegations of leadership misconduct and spiritual abuse concerning Brenda and Michael in their translocal roles with VUSA. The scope of the investigation did not include allegations previously investigated by GRACE involving claims of sexual misconduct by Jackson. While Guidepost made every effort to focus on the Gatlins’ translocal roles, in some instances it was difficult to separate the translocal roles from their staff roles at Duluth because they served at both Duluth and in various VUSA positions simultaneously. In addition to investigating the alleged misconduct by Brenda and Michael, Guidepost also reviewed and assessed VUSA’s knowledge and responses to the allegations.

B. Methodology

Guidepost used standard investigative practices to gather relevant information for this investigation. These included but were not limited to:

- Review and analysis of relevant documents
- Interviews of VUSA Hotline reporters and other witnesses relevant to the investigation
- Interview of Michael Gatlin

¹ Translocal roles include area, regional, and super regional leader positions as well as members of VUSA Executive leadership and board members of other VUSA affiliated ministries.

² In January 2023, Duluth engaged GRACE to conduct an investigation into allegations of Jackson Gatlin’s past sexual misconduct, and to assess any failures related to Duluth’s management, policies, or culture that may have contributed to their response.

³ Six reporters contacted the Hotline in 2023 to report allegations of leadership misconduct and spiritual abuse by Brenda and Michael.

⁴ Guidepost interviewed the reporter of these allegations as well as two VUSA Executive Team members familiar with the original report of allegations.

⁵ <https://vineyardusa.org/update-regarding-duluth-vineyard/>

To encourage participation in this investigation, VUSA contacted individuals who had previously reported allegations directly to VUSA and encouraged them to speak to Guidepost. On May 31, 2024, VUSA also publicly announced the Guidepost investigation.⁶ On June 17, 2024, VUSA also emailed information about the investigation to area, regional, VUSA Board, and Multiply Vineyard (“Multiply”) leaders who had worked with Brenda and Michael. Guidepost followed up directly with these leaders, some of whom agreed to an interview. In total, we interviewed 35 individuals, including former and current Duluth staff members, translocal leaders, and Vineyard USA senior leaders and board members. Of the 35 interviewees, nine (26%) were solely associated with Brenda and/or Michael through their Duluth positions, 17 (48%) were associated with them through translocal/national roles, and nine (26%) were associated with them through both Duluth and translocal/national roles.

Many witnesses who were interviewed requested confidentiality out of concern that they may be identified. As a result, Guidepost offered confidentiality to those we interviewed except for Michael Gatlin. To protect the identities of witnesses, pseudonyms were used, and certain identifying information was redacted or modified. When consistent information was received from multiple witnesses and sources, we aggregated that information to maintain confidentiality.

As part of our investigation, we also interviewed Michael who was cooperative with our efforts and made himself available for a lengthy interview on September 6, 2024. He answered willingly and was candid with his responses. We presented Michael with specific allegations and examples cited within our report for his response.⁷ He was not provided any information relative to our findings prior to his interview. Within this report, we provide Michael’s response to the specific thematic issues we identified. Guidepost emailed Brenda inviting her to participate in an interview, but she never responded.⁸ Additionally, we were told by VUSA that, based on previous communication, Brenda was unlikely to participate in the investigation.

The investigation was conducted and this Report was prepared without any undue influence by VUSA or others. The findings herein are solely our own. There is no attorney-client relationship between Guidepost and VUSA who engaged us.

DEFINITIONS

A baseline understanding of leadership misconduct and spiritual abuse is critical to understanding our findings and analysis below. While much has been written on toxic leadership and spiritual abuse, we utilized the following definitions for the purposes of our investigation and this report.

Spiritual abuse is a broad category and can generally be used to define many types of abuse. The offending behavior may be classified as spiritual abuse because of the context in which it occurs, who commits the abuse, and/or because of the use of faith beliefs and theology to perpetrate the abuse. More specifically, spiritual abuse is the:

...coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context... This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision-making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behavior, requirement of obedience to the abuser,

⁶ <https://vineyardusa.org/update-regarding-duluth-vineyard/>

⁷ No information was provided relative to Michael regarding the source of any allegation and most examples were based on aggregated reporting to protect the identities of any one reporter.

⁸ On May 21, 2024, prior to the start of the investigation, Guidepost spoke to Michael Gatlin to describe our investigative process and our desire to interview him as part of our review. During the call, Michael agreed to participate in the investigation. Brenda did not participate in the call.

the suggestion that the abuser has a 'divine' position, and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.⁹

Spiritual leaders often perpetrate spiritual abuse to maintain control and advance their agenda. Dr. Michael Kruger, a leading Biblical scholar, writes that:

...spiritual abuse is when a spiritual leader – such as a pastor, elder, or head of a Christian organization – wields his [or her] position of spiritual authority in such a way that he [or she] manipulates, domineers, bullies, and intimidates those under him [or her] as a means of maintaining his [or her] own power and control, even if he [or she] is convinced he [or she] is seeking biblical and kingdom-related goals.¹⁰

Because the alleged behaviors occurred under authority relationships, it is also helpful to consider the definition of toxic leadership to classify the behaviors we observed in this investigation. **Toxic leadership**, like spiritual abuse, is a pattern of self-serving behavior that can be defined as:

the intentional or unintentional series of acts that undermine and discourage those followers who genuinely seek to carry out the mission and vision of the organization, who then become stifled in the process of achievement by self-serving leaders who put missional or personal gain above the needs of followers, creating a demoralized state that deteriorates organizations from the inside out.¹¹

Toxic leadership may include some of the following behaviors: authoritarianism, micro-managing, exaggeration, threats, excessive control, use of fear, extreme scrutiny, and refusal to receive constructive criticism.¹²

SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP MISCONDUCT ALLEGATIONS

The goal of this investigation was to determine if Brenda and Michael demonstrated toxic leadership behaviors and/or spiritual abuse, and to assess whether their conduct constituted isolated incidences or reflective of broader organizational issues. Within this report, we do not walk through every story or personal encounter shared with us. Instead, where possible, we discuss overarching themes. Interviewees provided both positive and negative reviews of Brenda and Michael's leadership within the Vineyard movement, though we note we received more accounts of Michael's leadership.

A. Background

The Gatlins served as longstanding pastors at Duluth for the past two decades until their resignations in February 2023. In addition to their roles as pastors at Duluth, Brenda and Michael served in a variety of translocal leadership positions with VUSA. Michael served as the Multiply Director and a VUSA Board Trustee. Brenda served as an Area Leader, Regional Leader, and Super Regional Leader ("SRL"). In early February 2023, both Michael and Brenda were placed on leave from Duluth and VUSA respectively, pending an investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct by their son, Jackson, who was also on staff at Duluth. On February 20, 2023, Michael resigned as Duluth's senior pastor and Brenda's limited joint employment at Duluth was terminated. On February 24, 2023, Brenda resigned from her Super Regional Leader position with VUSA. Neither Brenda nor Michael currently holds any formal leadership position within the Vineyard movement.

Brenda and Michael were respected and revered by ministry staff at Duluth and within the context of their VUSA positions.

⁹ Oakley, L., and Kinmond, K. *Breaking the Silence on Spiritual Abuse*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 21.

¹⁰ Kruger, Michael J., *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022, 24.

¹¹ <https://www.ciam.edu/toxic-leadership-behaviors-characteristics-and-consequences>

¹² Identifying Toxic Leaders And How To Handle Them (forbes.com)

They were dedicated and driven leaders of Duluth who pursued excellence in their work. They were seen as incredibly successful in their ministries as their church grew exponentially, and staff and volunteers were engaged and excited about contributing to the mission. Some described them as “gifted” leaders, who complemented each other with their leadership strengths. They were both acclaimed and well-known in the broader circles of the Vineyard movement, and they had many friendships with leading Vineyard pastors and senior staff including former and current national directors.

Interviewees described Brenda as personable and empathic, with high emotional intelligence. She was gifted in leading and reconciling groups with her charisma and strong communication skills. She was open to sharing her own personal vulnerabilities with others, effectively disarming them. Michael was described as engaging to those he respected, fiercely committed, relentless towards mission, and able to accomplish and move visions forward. Michael was self-aware of some of his leadership weaknesses, and at times appeared to mature in his leadership. Many reporters noted that he improved his interpersonal skills over the years.

B. Toxic Leadership/Spiritual Abuse

Despite the positive praises of their leadership, spiritual giftings and their ministry at Duluth, Guidepost found that there were credible accounts of their behaviors demonstrating patterns of toxic leadership and spiritual abuse. For all their ministry success, we repeatedly heard from both translocal and Duluth staff/leadership that Brenda and Michael’s behavior created a fear-based culture at Duluth and in their translocal ministries, where people were consumed with pleasing the Gatlins and fearful when they did not meet their expectations. Common descriptions of these less positive behaviors included: controlling, demanding, authoritarian, narcissistic, bullying, critical, intimidating, emotional, volatile, abusive, and demeaning. While we heard these negative reports from various interviews, we provide some broader context and examples of how the behavior by Brenda and Michael could be seen as toxic or spiritually abusive.

1. Bullying Behavior by Michael and Brenda

Witnesses shared numerous stories relative to Michael’s confrontational style. One of the most frequent themes mentioned was Michael’s denigrating interactions with former and current staff during Duluth staff meetings. Michael used these meetings to publicly critique staff’s ministry performance. In these meetings, witnesses told us about fellow staff members being treated poorly, and it was not unusual for staff members to cry as a result. One former staffer told us that “crying and being afraid was part of the everyday.” Michael’s behavior in his interactions with staff was described by some as that of an “alcoholic father” or a “mad dad tyrant.” Staff members shared that after these harsh moments, Michael would often follow up with the person, and one staffer said he would remind them that they were “working for the kingdom.” A staffer described this turn in his behavior as making them “feel loved” again.

Michael’s anger was sometimes even directed towards his wife Brenda in these staff meetings. This resulted in her crying on occasion. Witnesses shared that Michael would brag about getting someone to cry, and other witnesses relayed Michael coming to them and saying he just wanted to see if the person would stand up to him. According to interviews, Michael and Brenda valued and categorized people based on their personal assessments of their strength, intelligence, capability, and “gifting.” Those who appeared to be bolder or more self-assured were treated better and avoided the bullying and harsh treatment. Others who were young, less confident, or were viewed by Michael and Brenda as less competent (or worthy) were easy targets for bullying, harsh criticism, and rants.

Very few Duluth or Multiply staff were brave enough to confront Michael about his behavior. A few senior Duluth staff approached Michael after some of these harsh interactions, calling his actions into questions and urging him to treat people better. In one instance, Michael justified this behavior by saying the individual that he singled out “screwed up in public and should be reprimanded in public.” In other instances, Michael was responsive and even repentant. We repeatedly heard from staff that they thought Michael was “getting better.” For the most part, however, staff told us that they did not feel comfortable complaining about the treatment by Michael or Brenda. There was an expectation that as staff they were to be strong and endure scrutiny. One staff told us, “amazing what we put up with if we think it is part of the mission and purpose.” In addition to staff meetings, we heard about other confrontational encounters with Michael and Brenda, where they would threaten someone’s job security or future ministry opportunities, telling individuals if you cannot do this then we can find someone else who can.

Specific to Brenda, witnesses stated that she could be very demanding and controlling relative to work. Witnesses provided examples of Brenda getting angry and berating Duluth staff and others related to translocal ministry events. When things did not go precisely according to her plans or specific logistics were not in place, she could become angry and impatient and blame individuals personally even when matters were outside anyone’s control. She expected excellence for the conferences, “and there was no room for mercy.” A few translocal leaders shared that they witnessed Brenda’s disrespect and mistreatment of Duluth staff, so they stepped in to support and protect the staff as needed.

In her role as SRL, Brenda’s behavior became more visible to VUSA leadership. Within months of her being named SRL, she exhibited several emotional outbursts characterized as manipulation, name calling, and defensiveness. VUSA leadership was preparing to implement a performance improvement plan, but the allegations related to Jackson became public in December 2022 before leadership implemented the plan. During this time, Brenda’s behaviors continued, and she began trying to leverage her position with VUSA to influence the investigation process at Duluth resulting in being placed on leave and then suspended by VUSA.

Multiple translocal and Duluth staff also reported “blacklisting” or being “boxed out” by both Michael and Brenda. In relationships where there was conflict, differences of opinions, disapproval of ministry actions, or employment or ministry departure, the Gatlins would begin to exclude the individual from the community and speak negatively about them. In one example offered, Michael had a conflict with a staff member and enlisted others to participate in the process of shutting the person out. Michael asked them to contact associates of the staff member to warn them not to have anything to do with the person. In certain circumstances, the Gatlins developed a narrative about a situation sometimes using information they gleaned from personal/private conversations to discredit an individual and paint him/her in a negative light. When staff/volunteers did leave Duluth or a church plant, Brenda and Michael would often describe them as “not loyal” or unable to “make it” within the culture. Some told us that they were fearful to leave or speak in opposition of them because Brenda and Michael routinely spoke poorly of those who did.

Staff at both Duluth and VUSA told us they did not feel comfortable questioning Michael or Brenda’s bullying behavior. Even when staff did share concerns about Brenda and Michael with each other, they would build in excuses for their behavior. Staff would sometimes minimize or excuse any mistreatment by Brenda or Michael and some even put the blame on themselves or deemed it to be a result of their lack of experience and necessary for their personal growth.

Response to Allegations by Michael

Michael responded that he was “deeply saddened” and said it was “not my recollection” when he was provided with examples of bullying behavior. Michael did not remember raising his voice nor yelling, but he did describe his interactions in staff meetings as “talking intensely.” He said he wanted to create a culture where there could be strong disagreements but that

there could still be discussion. Michael reflected on the 2014 allegations discussed in the Report in Appendix A. When these allegations were sent to the Duluth board, Michael recalled that he asked the Duluth staff and board if they saw that alleged behavior in him and both responded that they did not. Based on the Duluth staff and board's responses to him, Michael felt reassured that he was not in the wrong.

When Michael was nominated and vetted for the National Director position in 2021, he noted that many people wrote glowing reports of his character and leadership. He felt that some of those same individuals were now claiming misconduct on his part. When there was crying in staff meetings, Michael described it as "passion." He admitted to criticizing people publicly and when confronted by others about this behavior, he would make efforts to apologize to them. Michael spoke of his personal relationship with his wife Brenda, stating that they often disagreed about mission for the ministry, but they continued to want to work together. He admitted that seeing some of their conflict during staff interactions may have been hard on some people.

Michael described himself as someone who wanted to address conflict and did not want "to sweep anything under the rug." He admitted that individuals had to have a strong personality to be willing to push back against him. He did offer that one senior Duluth staff member pursued him regularly about his behavior, and he made efforts to improve. He denied having any significant turnover of staff members because of his leadership. Instead, he offered that many staff and church planters were young and faced numerous pressures which led them to leave the ministry. When people did leave, Michael stated that he would sometimes find that they left unresolved issues behind at Duluth. In these cases, Michael would tell others about the issues, "publicly stating his frustrations."

According to Michael, he addressed performance issues by directly calling them out. He felt that he was clear about expectations and when people did not adhere to his expectations, he would say so. He stated, "I would be direct but not incredibly intense." He admitted that others may have heard it differently. Michael said he tried to adjust his intensity and that "[he] hoped [he] grew and changed a lot over time."

Statement by Brenda Gatlin – February 2023

While Brenda did not choose to be interviewed, she did send a letter to VUSA leadership dated February 24, 2023.¹³ As part of her response, she wrote the following:

"Additionally, in all our years of ministry, we have never covered up or hidden any allegations of misconduct, but rather brought up each complaint to a wider group of leaders or mentors for counsel. We know we have not been the perfect pastors, and that in over twenty-five years of pastoral ministry in this local church there have obviously been people who have not agreed with our decisions and actions. As leaders we are often challenging people to grow in their faith and practice, to become healthier spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. I, Brenda, have personally been accused of spiritual abuse due to disagreement about decisions I've made. In that case, and in any other cases where our integrity has been challenged, we have always sought to include a thorough examination of the accusations by bringing staff, senior leaders, other Vineyard pastors, and our mentors and overseers into the process to help guide our responses and bring correction to us where needed. We've always sought to be transparent about all accusations regardless of their substance or content."

¹³ Letter dated February 24, 2023 was in response to questions posed by VUSA of the Gatlins' knowledge of the allegations against Jackson. Brenda added the above paragraph in defense of allegations against the Gatlins.

2. Unreasonable Demands of Time and Expectations of Staff and Volunteers

Brenda and Michael were both hard workers and demanded an intense level of loyalty and dedication from those who worked for and with them at Duluth and translocally. Former Duluth staff told us they were expected to work 60-70 hours a week. This included their 40-hour work week as employees of the church, plus an additional expectation that they would volunteer another 10-20 hours a week in support of the church. Church planters and interns also reported pressure to work long hours to the detriment of their physical and mental health. Staff reported not receiving fair compensation for work.

The Gatlins often recruited young and inexperienced staff. Many of these young adults saw Brenda and Michael as models and examples of successful ministry leaders and were committed to working long hours to accomplish the goals of the Gatlins. In hindsight, many of these individuals expressed the belief that as young adults and, in some cases, new Christians, they were easier to manipulate and control. They spoke about the Gatlins and the pressure of their unattainable standards and perfectionism in executing ministry events. The prevailing sentiment was that the expectations of the Gatlins could not be met which produced fear, rejection, and lack of confidence in those who worked for them.

The intensity and relentless pace at Duluth and Multiply led some to burn out. There was frequent staff turnover at Duluth and at Multiply as a result. One intern at the time, told us that he was constantly taking large quantities of ibuprofen because of stress headaches. Others, some of whom affectionately described Michael, told us that there were many who routinely “feared” him. Because Michael valued excellence and results, some church planters felt that they could never do enough or work hard enough to meet his expectations.

Response to Allegations by Michael:

Michael responded that he had high expectations of his staff, specifically as it related to their time. Michael expected his staff to contribute volunteer time at the church in addition to their contracted church staff time. Michael explained that he had heard this rationale from another ministry person that we expect lay church volunteers who have full-time jobs to volunteer many hours of their time to church and thus the same expectations should be expected of church staff. These expectations were passed along by Michael to his staff as well, with him expecting an additional “10, 12, at most 15 hours” a week of volunteer time. Michael told us his work ethic was strong and his time committed to his employment and the church was consistent with what he asked from staff. He estimated his own work week to have been around 55-60 hours.

As to criticism of staff, Michael offered that “criticism” was one of his “love languages.” He added that he feels loved when others challenge or critique him because he knows that they expect and want more for him. He felt that some less experienced staff may have been challenged by his expectations around time and his criticisms based on a lack of experience in the workforce.

3. Use of Spiritual Language to Manipulate and Control

According to witnesses, it was common for Michael and Brenda to use spiritual language to sidestep questions and concerns about their confrontations or to excuse their behaviors. One witness shared that Michael justified his harsh behavior by saying he was just pushing people for the benefit of the Kingdom of God. It was also reported that Michael would say “if Jesus wanted him to step down, he would step down tomorrow,” conveying being spiritually attuned with God. Others reported that the Gatlins would veil their harsh criticism and treatment of others as “speaking the truth in love.” If someone voiced their concerns about work demands, Brenda and Michael would say it was because the person was not going to God to let the spirit lead. They also confronted constructive criticism or pushback with “that is not what God wants.” Michael would explain staff departures in a negative spiritual light and referred to one departing staff as a “broken person.”

Response to Allegations by Michael:

When asked about his spiritual language which some felt to be manipulative, Michael told us he was saddened by it and said it was not something he tried to do. He told us that he is cautious about using “God talk” in that it can seem to be controlling. He denied trying to manipulate others through his speech, but he also added that some spiritual talk is hard to avoid in the context of ministry.

4. Boundary Issues/ Intermingling of Personal and Professional Lives

While it is not uncommon in ministry settings to have cross over between personal and professional lives, Brenda and Michael drove a culture that many individuals believed exploited these dual relationships. Many of the staff at Duluth and VUSA who worked under the Gatlin’s leadership felt that their whole lives were focused on ministry and that there was little room left for anything else. With the significant amount of time expected from both staff and volunteers, the intermingling of personal and professional lives was somewhat unavoidable and led to Brenda and Michael reportedly crossing professional boundaries in cases such as approving a staff member’s spouse or dating partner; referring to themselves as parents of the staff; and using personal information shared with them in confidence against others.

Specifically, Brenda would sometimes blur the lines between work and personal relationships. In her effort to counsel and manage others, Brenda would offer time to meet one on one. In these meetings, Brenda would speak freely about the challenges in her own life. These interactions provided others a sense of disarming vulnerability so that people felt comfortable sharing more personal details about themselves with her. However, there were times when this information, sometimes very specific and personal, was shared by Brenda with others in public. Several translocal leaders, for example, noted that Brenda publicly pointed out personal weaknesses they had shared with her in confidence. These revelations of personal information even without attribution alarmed individuals who shared their stories. Some described Brenda as untrustworthy and as a “gossip” because she would share personal details from one person with others, and they feared she could weaponize their personal information.

Response to Allegation by Michael:

Michael denied being overly involved in the personal lives of staff, but he did provide examples where he provided counsel to some male staff members about dating and relationships. He denied approving or disapproving of relationships and stated that he desired staff to be involved in only healthy relationships. He added that church staff marriages were on display due to the public nature of ministry leaders, and this heightened the scrutiny of these relationships by many.

5. Duplicity

The Gatlins guarded their professional reputations fiercely. According to several interviewees who saw them in both their positions at Duluth and VUSA, Brenda and Michael acted or presented themselves differently at the translocal and national level compared to how they appeared before the Duluth staff. For example, Duluth staff shared their perspective about a conference that was hosted at Duluth. The Gatlins were warm, friendly, and inviting towards VUSA leaders and other attendees, but behind the scenes, Duluth staff members were “chewed out” for not meeting the Gatlins’ expectations or for anything that could make the Gatlins look bad.

Within senior VUSA leadership circles, some saw Brenda and Michael as more humble and less confrontational. They were also viewed as tightly aligned and friendly with senior VUSA leaders. Many individuals who spoke with us questioned the

ability of VUSA to provide unbiased oversight of them relative to any allegations.

Response to Allegations by Michael:

Michael said that he was always the same person regardless of if he was at Duluth or at VUSA events. He added, "I tried to be the leader the group needed." He stated that while he presented himself as the same person, he did lead differently depending on the dynamics.

LEADERSHIP'S KNOWLEDGE AND RESPONSE TO ALLEGATIONS

Guidepost found that both Duluth and VUSA leadership were aware of and in some cases personally witnessed alleged spiritual abuse and toxic leadership by both Brenda and Michael. These behaviors were noticed as early as 2007 and related to interactions at Duluth, church planting roles (including Multiply) and VUSA. While the Gatlins' behaviors were known to many in current or past Duluth and VUSA leadership positions, little was done to address any of their leadership issues.

Current Senior Leader of VUSA Raised Concerns as a Young Pastor in 2007

Jay Pathak ("Pathak") who currently serves as National Director of VUSA told us that he heard as early as 2007 that Michael was raising his voice at Duluth staff meetings and some staff felt like Duluth was not a safe environment. Pathak was a young fellow pastor at the time and not in a leadership position, but he did advise a more senior VUSA leader of staff concerns about Michael. Pathak did not know if there was any follow up by leadership about the raised concerns. In our interview, Pathak recalled that at the time he did not understand the significance of the allegations nor how to assess their credibility. Also, he noted that Vineyard churches were autonomous and surmised that any inaction by VUSA was likely due to the limitations of Vineyard's structure. In addition to Pathak, another VUSA staff shared with us that at the time, there was "murmuring" that Michael was "hard to work with" but he did not know of any significant action to address this.

Approximately eight to ten years ago, Pathak having heard of staff concerns relative to Michael's leadership at Duluth approached both Brenda and Michael. Both Pathak and Michael were serving as part of the executive team at VUSA and Pathak approached the Gatlins as a peer pastor. Pathak encouraged Brenda and Michael to seek out specific personal development tools to help them with their leadership at Duluth.¹⁴ According to Pathak, the Gatlins were responsive to the suggestion which included training and coaching, and Pathak noticed changes in how they led.

During our investigation, many staff told us that they observed problematic behavior dating back decades; however, we found no one who made a formal report, requested an investigation, until 2014.

First Formal Allegation Against Gatlins Was Made to VUSA in 2014

We found that the first formal allegation of toxic leadership against the Gatlins made to the VUSA board was dated back to 2014 and was the subject of our 2023 review. As we have previously reported, in 2013, an individual did confront Michael and Brenda specifically with how he and others were being treated. In December of 2013, after numerous attempts to speak directly to Michael to address the issue, he sent an email to the then VUSA National Director requesting assistance

¹⁴ Faith Walking was one of the tools used by JP at Mile High Church in Denver, CO. <https://faithwalking.com/>

to resolve the issue. In this email and subsequent emails, the individual described Michael and Brenda's leadership as "subtly controlling" and that he has "regularly seen them manipulate other people." Additionally, he wrote "[p]eople feel they cannot speak their honest opinion, especially with Michael, for fear of being excluded (if they disagree with him or see an issue a different way) or not being listened to." Among staff and leaders, "one has to really tow the line or they will be reprimanded or marginalized."

Michael was included on the email to the National Director but he continued to refuse to meet with the individual to address his concerns and instead responded via email saying, "the most helpful thing you could do at this point is to quit emailing myself, [the National Director] and whoever else about this, and just wait [for God's timing]."

With no action by the National Director, the individual sent a subsequent 2014 letter to additional VUSA leadership and executive team members. In this letter, he alleged that Michael engaged in bullying, intimidation, manipulation, and slander from several people that served under Michael's leadership. He stated that "bringing this to [their] attention is necessary, especially to avoid this type of treatment to others in the future...that [they] will take this information and look into the matter further."

In our 2023 review, we found that both VUSA leadership and Duluth leadership, including its church board, were aware of the specifics of the allegations of Brenda and Michael's spiritual abuse and toxic leadership. Despite the serious nature of the allegations, neither entity engaged directly with the individual who reported the allegations nor sufficiently investigated the claims. Duluth conducted a limited investigation into the allegations that included a meeting with Duluth staff without Michael present. In this meeting, staff members were asked to speak up if they felt the allegations were true. No staff spoke up despite some telling us that as soon as the meeting was over, staff confided in each other that they believed the allegations were in fact an accurate description of Michael's behavior.

Separately and as part of our review in 2023, VUSA leadership also admitted to knowing of the individual's allegations. However, instead of taking the claims seriously at the time they were reported, VUSA leadership said they did not respond to the allegations as they did not rise to a concern of national importance despite the high-ranking positions of both Michael and Brenda within the Vineyard movement. Recently, both Duluth and VUSA have admitted to not addressing the allegations appropriately. Thus, their inaction in 2014 allowed Brenda and Michael to remain in their positions at Duluth and continue in prominence and influence translocally and nationally within the movement. Duluth has since admitted to conducting an inadequate investigation of these allegations, but until recently, they had not spoken with the individual.

While this one person did come forward with allegations regarding the Gatlins' behavior to Duluth and VUSA leadership in 2014, others were fearful and feared retaliation and repercussions if they made such claims. Still, some Duluth senior staff did confront Michael specifically about his leadership style. When approached, Michael was sometimes reflective and repentant relative to his personal behavior. Senior staff acknowledged that in seeing Michael's growth in leadership maturity over the years, they told other staff members that his behavior had "gotten better" and he used to be worse. Michael's periodic introspection and his gradual "getting better" was enough for staff to minimize and tolerate his behavior over the many years at Duluth, thereby silencing those subjected to his leadership misconduct.

Duluth Staff Reported Concerns about Michael in Exit Interviews and a 360° Assessment of Him

Staff feelings about Michael's leadership were found in Duluth staff exit interviews and surveys. Upon departing Duluth, staff were provided an opportunity to comment on their work experiences via a written exit interview. Written comments from exit interviews in 2014 and documented from in-person reviews in 2022 included the following:

"The last few years have not been a positive experience working under MG and BG."

"Need performance reviews for Sr. Pastors. More staff input."

"Too controlling."

"Constant fear of MG."

"Pace seems very demanding. Written procedures and processes would be very helpful."

"People need to be prepared for Michael's very driven style."

"Never knew what mood he would be in. Constant fear about him searching out someone to belittle or criticize or find something wrong with someone."

"MG would talk poorly about other staff in front of group. I did not want to hear that."

Despite these exit interview comments which were accessible to Duluth senior leaders, no action was taken to formally address the behavior of the Gatlins.

Additional documentation regarding Michael's behavior was found in a 360° assessment conducted in 2021 as part of the due diligence process when he was being considered as the National Director of the Vineyard. Staff that worked closely with Michael were given an opportunity to comment on his leadership. Within the 360° comments, Michael was praised by both former and current Duluth and VUSA leadership staff including several individuals we interviewed. In addition to the positive support, however, these individuals shared comments identified as "weaknesses" in the reviews. The comments concerning Michael included:

"Will micromanage certain aspects of a plan or project."

"Can be critical or judgmental of others and their decisions in times of stress."

"Loses himself in an unhealthy way of competition."

"Can be a perfectionist."

"Unrealistic expectations of others" and "Can be insensitive." "I want to explain the list of weakness, because Micheal sets such high expectations for himself, he also sets them for others, but not everyone can meet those high levels of expectations and that can be a source of frustration for Michael and the other person [sic]. Michael is a big picture person, not detail oriented but knows he needs detail orientated people around him and he listens to their input. Michael can come across as being insensitive, in truth he is very sensitive. But especially when his mind is on something else, he doesn't always 'see' people. This can cause hurt feelings and people can perceive him as being insensitive."

It should be noted that no leader makes it through a 360° review without getting some negative feedback. In this case, despite the above comments, no one who participated in the review raised any formal concerns or opposition to Michael becoming National Director.

As part of the comments collected in the 360° review process, Michael provided his own comments about what he identified as his own weaknesses:

"My intensity can come across overly aggressive, and some team members have felt overwhelmed or intimidated."

"In my excitement, I can sometimes overlook clear communication to the entire team, thereby causing unnecessary hurt to team members."

"...and sometimes I might enjoy conflict a little too much. I've been know [sic] to not back away from difficult conversations when perhaps I should."

Ultimately, Michael was not named National Director, but he remained part of the VUSA board and returned to Duluth as senior pastor. We have no information that Michael demonstrated inappropriate behavior in his role as a VUSA board member including when he was not named National Director.

VUSA Leadership's Knowledge of Brenda's Behavior

As described earlier in *Bullying Behavior by Michael and Brenda*, VUSA leadership became more aware of Brenda's behavior when she began serving in her role as SRL. In this role, Brenda was described by VUSA leadership as confrontational and manipulative. Her outbursts made her difficult to work with and manage, and VUSA began working toward a performance plan for her in efforts to help her improve her leadership. VUSA observed an escalation of Brenda's concerning behaviors in December 2022 when she was made aware of the allegations regarding her son, Jackson. Interviewees told us that during this time, Brenda became emotional and used her position as SRL to attempt to influence Duluth and VUSA leadership's decisions regarding the investigation of Jackson. As a result of Brenda's behaviors and communications, VUSA leadership encouraged Brenda to apologize to those she lashed out against and others that were aware of the interaction. She emailed apologies to those individuals in February 2023.

VUSA's and Duluth's Response Related to the Gatlins Amid the Jackson Allegations

When VUSA learned of the allegations related to Jackson, they made multiple visits to Duluth. In the early stages, VUSA Managing Director Robb Morgan ("Morgan") encouraged Duluth leadership to include Michael in the process and communication relative to the investigation due to his senior pastor status.¹⁵ In an interview, Morgan explained that initially he supported Michael's involvement with certain decisions relative to the investigation. Morgan thought that while the Gatlins should not be decision-makers, he thought Michael should be allowed to provide "direction" based upon his leadership experience. In an email to Duluth, he wrote:

"While we know that it is complicated, I do think that any decision that requires ongoing leadership and pastoral care will need to include Michael - he will have to lead from the front even though the relationships make it quite complicated. I do think it's wise to remove Michael and Brenda from the oversight of the investigation and pastoral care of Jackson. I do however, believe Michael will have the most wisdom to be offered as it relates to how you move forward as a church."

In our interview of Morgan, he acknowledged a possible bias due to personal friendships and added that he should have "encouraged a stronger recusal right off the bat." Despite the initial support of some VUSA leaders for the Gatlins, additional information became available and on February 1, 2023, Brenda was placed on a leave of absence from her position as SRL. On February 10, she was suspended by VUSA based on her unwillingness to participate in the investigation into the allegations against Jackson.¹⁶ She later resigned as SRL on February 24, 2023.

Duluth placed the Gatlins under church discipline in May 2023 and they immediately resigned their membership at Duluth. After resigning their membership, the Gatlins relocated to Arvada, Colorado. They then began attending Mile High Vineyard, Arvada campus where a relative was also serving on staff. Pathak is the founding pastor of Mile High Vineyard and told us that he was surprised to see them at Arvada, having not been consulted prior to their arrival at the church. Because of

¹⁵ Morgan was designated as SRL following the dismissal of Brenda from the role.

¹⁶ Duluth placed Michael on leave on February 2, 2023, and he resigned as senior pastor on February 20, 2023. Brenda's employment was terminated by Duluth on February 20, 2023.

his close relationship with the Gatlins, Pathak decided to recuse himself from decisions relative to the Gatlins' attendance at Mile High. In our interview with Michael, he described the environment at Mile High to be welcoming and where they were well received and "loved on."

Reporters contacted Guidepost through the Hotline with concerns about the Gatlins being seen at Arvada. Some of those we interviewed, were concerned with the appearance that VUSA and Pathak were supporting the Gatlins, which given the allegations against Jackson seemed inappropriate. Duluth and VUSA initially worked together to develop and implement the May 2023 Church Discipline plan. However, as work continued, it appears disagreements and unclear expectations eroded the trust and communications between Duluth and VUSA. While we did not fully investigate the issues regarding church discipline and the Gatlins' role at Arvada, in the end, VUSA asked the Gatlins to no longer attend any Vineyard church based on what was seen as them acting outside the boundaries of the Duluth church discipline. As of the writing of this report, the Gatlins no longer attend a Vineyard church.

STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL WEAKNESSES WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO A LACK OF ACTION ADDRESSING THE GATLIN'S BEHAVIOR

A. Lack of Effective Reporting Mechanisms of Process

For years, VUSA and its churches did not have a formal process or reporting mechanism to receive allegations of inappropriate conduct by staff/volunteers. However, following the Guidepost report, *Organizational Assessment Vineyard USA*¹⁷ dated June 20, 2023, VUSA now has an anonymous reporting email vineyard@guidepostsolutions.com which is operated by Guidepost. Since its initiation, this reporting email has received six allegations relative to Brenda and Michael and interviews were conducted with the reporters who were willing to speak about their experiences. Information relative to the reported allegations were provided to VUSA.

Additionally, Duluth has also initiated a reporting mechanism through an independent organization, which is available via a phone number as well as online. The availability of this confidential resource to report any actions or behaviors of concern related to Duluth can be accessed via its home page at <https://duluthvineyard.org/>. Their online tool details how to report and what to expect in response <https://duluthvineyard.org/report/>.

In addition to having had a lack of a formal reporting mechanism, the fear-based culture Brenda and Michael created within Duluth discouraged reporting. As we have repeatedly said, the Gatlins were very successful in growing their church to be prominent in their region and admired within the Vineyard movement. Many we spoke to questioned if they had been brave enough to report their concerns whether anyone would have cared or taken any action in the end. The inability or unwillingness among concerned individuals to report or act on allegations leads us to a larger and more prolific cultural issue throughout the Vineyard – Senior Pastor Authority and Lack of Accountability.

B. Senior Pastor Authority and Lack of Accountability

Guidepost found that the Vineyard culture, which existed at both the national level and within Duluth, allowed for an

¹⁷ *Organizational Assessment Vineyard USA*, June 20, 2023. <https://d1h8uvf6sd4tvp.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/20230628111927/Guidepost-Vineyard-Organizational-Assessment-Report.pdf?guidepost>

unbridled authority of both Brenda and Michael. Consistent with our previous report to VUSA, Guidepost determined that this investigation serves as another example of the risk posed by unchecked authority of senior pastors and the insufficient oversight by church boards or VUSA. As reported within our 2023 *Organizational Assessment*, neither Vineyard churches nor VUSA sufficiently addressed performance or behavioral issues of senior pastors, preserving their power if their ministry skills and giftedness produced results of success. Traditionally, success within Vineyard was reflected by growth of church membership and church plants, well-executed regional retreats and conferences, and active engagement by ministry staff under leadership. While all these are productive metrics, in certain circumstances including the Gatlins, personal and professional behavior was overlooked in pursuit of the Vineyard definition of success and complemented by relational allegiances.

Additionally, there was a lack of oversight over the Gatlins. While the Duluth and VUSA board were aware of allegations of misconduct, neither stepped in to question or hold them accountable. Even when allegations about Jackson came to light and following the church discipline of the Gatlins by Duluth, the Gatlins were unquestionably supported by some leaders across the movement. In the early stages of the investigation of Jackson, VUSA continued to support the Gatlins which caused great concern by many at Duluth and elsewhere.

Until systems are in place to create accountability for personal and professional character and behavior based on the Vineyard's core values, the risk of misconduct and abuse may continue. As we have previously reported in our *Organizational Assessment*, having accountability for pastors creates a healthier church. Until a change of structure to address this accountability gap occurs, Vineyard will continue to struggle with leaders who go unchecked and may inflict harm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Though Duluth and VUSA have taken some steps to address the allegations of leadership misconduct and spiritual abuse by Brenda and Michael Gatlin, both groups should acknowledge certain past leadership failures in responding to those hurt by the Gatlins and should continue to make reforms to positively impact Duluth and VUSA's culture. Much of this is already happening, as VUSA has continued its work in implementing the recommendations Guidepost provided in the 2023 *Organizational Assessment* report.¹⁸

Below we highlight recommendations from the 2023 *Organizational Assessment* report that specifically relate to this investigation:

1. Trauma-informed approach – safety and personhood – culture changes

24-hour Reporting Email: Vineyard USA should continue to make available the Reporting Email to receive reports of concerns of leadership misconduct. These concerns can be received anonymously or in true name.

Process for Responding to Allegations of Misconduct in Churches: Vineyard USA should document a consistent reporting, investigation, adjudication, and resolution process. The process should include policies on confidentiality, conflicts of interest, non-retaliation, record keeping, and whistleblower protections.

¹⁸ *Organizational Assessment Vineyard USA*, June 20, 2023. <https://d1h8uvf6sd4tvp.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/20230628111927/Guidepost-Vineyard-Organizational-Assessment-Report.pdf?guidepost>

2. Leadership accountability

Pastoral Code of Conduct: Working with local Vineyard churches and pastors, Vineyard USA should document a pastoral Code of Conduct that identifies standards expected of all Vineyard pastors around personal and ministerial behavior, integrity, stewardship, character, and accountability.

Oversight Process: Vineyard USA should document a process to investigate, discipline, and/or terminate a pastor for misconduct.

3. Training

Continue to Enhance Training and Programming for Leadership, Staff, and Volunteers: Vineyard USA should create and provide training programs to support any newly created policies or processes.

CONCLUSION

While we spoke to over 35 individuals relative to allegations of toxic leadership and spiritual abuse by the Gatlins, only a few provided strictly negative comments about them. The vast majority of those we interviewed were conflicted in their opinions of the Gatlins. They saw both good and bad in their interactions with both Brenda and Michael, and many stated they experienced spiritual growth under their leadership. However, despite that growth, several stated that in retrospect, they now see the harm of not speaking up sooner about their experiences under the Gatlins' toxic leadership.

While many senior leaders at both Duluth and VUSA personally witnessed the Gatlins' behavior, they took no formal action to investigate concerns. Due to the structure of the Vineyard movement, VUSA leadership deferred to Duluth to address their own church issues, while Duluth wanted VUSA's support as soon as the allegations became more public on the heels of the investigation into the allegations regarding Jackson Gatlin. We also heard that despite the swirl of talk of abusive behaviors that spanned decades, the leadership allowed the voices of the majority who spoke highly of the Gatlins to overshadow the few who questioned their behavior. In the end, because the Gatlins were well respected, revered and seen to be "getting better," they were repeatedly given the benefit of the doubt at least until it was too much for either Duluth or VUSA to bear.

VUSA has identified five Core Values that guide its movement and mission.¹⁹ It is important for the movement to assess how these Core Values align with the conduct of Vineyard USA's leaders when it comes to leadership approach, power dynamics, and spiritual abuse. While this can be seen as a failure of the Gatlins' leadership, it is more so a failure of something greater. It is a failure of a culture which allowed unchecked behavior because of success and relational familiarity, and it is a failure of many who were in position to do something, but ultimately did nothing.

¹⁹ The Core Values include the following: partner with the Holy Spirit; experience and worship God; reconcile people with God and all creation; engage in compassionate ministry; and pursue culturally relevant mission in the world. <https://vineyardusa.org/Vineyard-Core-Values-Beliefs.pdf>

APPENDIX

Review of Response by Vineyard USA to Allegations of Toxic Leadership by Michael and Brenda Gatlin

Date: July 26, 2023
To: Vineyard USA
From: Stephanie Douglas, Guidepost Solutions

BACKGROUND

In March 2023, Vineyard USA engaged Guidepost Solutions to monitor and respond to a confidential reporting tool (VineyardUSA@guidepostsolutions.com) for Vineyard USA church attenders and staff to report allegations of sexual misconduct or pastoral abuse. In early May 2023, Guidepost received an allegation relative to abuse of power and toxic leadership by Michael and Brenda Gatlin of Duluth Vineyard dating back to 2012. Additionally, the Reporter alleged that his concerns were made known to senior leaders within Vineyard USA, specifically Phil Strout among others as early as 2013 with no active engagement, assistance, or response.

SCOPE

The nature of this review was extremely specific and limited. At the time the report was received by Guidepost (May 2023), both Michael and Brenda Gatlin were already under scrutiny on a separate matter which involved alleged criminal behavior by the Gatlins' son, Jackson, who had also been on staff at Duluth Vineyard. Up until Jackson's alleged criminal behavior surfaced, Michael was serving as Senior Pastor of Duluth Vineyard and Brenda Gatlin was also serving as a paid Super Regional Leader of Vineyard USA. The Gatlins have since resigned their positions. Both an independent investigation as well as a criminal investigation was underway at Duluth Vineyard relative to actions of Jackson Gatlin.

Additionally, in March 2023, after hearing of the issues regarding the Gatlins at Duluth Vineyard, the Reporter contacted Vineyard USA's Managing Director Robb Morgan ("Morgan") relative to his unresolved concerns about the Gatlin's leadership. As a result, Morgan participated in numerous pastoral discussions with other former Duluth staff members who also shared specific and similar concerns relative to allegations of abuse of power and toxic leadership by the Gatlins.

Given the swirl of ongoing investigations and pastoral discussions, Guidepost focused its review on the knowledge and response of Vineyard USA leadership to this Reporter's historic allegations.

METHODOLOGY

As part of our review, Guidepost did the following:

- Reviewed available emails between the Reporter, Michael Gatlin, Vineyard Duluth leadership and Vineyard USA staff and leadership
- Interviewed the Reporter and a limited number of relevant Vineyard USA leaders¹

¹ Guidepost did not interview either Michael or Brenda Gatlin given the limited scope of the review and its focus on the actions by Vineyard USA.

- Reviewed other relevant documents and notes as provided by Morgan and others relative to the allegations

SUMMARY OF ALLEGATIONS

According to the Reporter, Michael Gatlin, who split his time then as Senior Pastor of Vineyard Duluth and Vineyard USA's Church Planting Director and Brenda Gatlin, co-pastor of Vineyard Duluth and the Regional Leader (RL) of the Midwest North Region² abused their power and maligned and slandered the Reporter and his wife during the Reporter's transition as pastor of a Vineyard church. The Reporter's concerns dated back to 2012 when he and his wife decided to leave the Vineyard movement based on a difference of opinion over what they perceived as the movement's lack of inclusiveness of the LGBTQ community. During this time, Vineyard USA was discussing its theological stance of LGBTQ matters and there was some conflict across the movement on specific items to include gay marriage. The Gatlins and other Vineyard leaders had differing opinions on the topic than the Reporter and his wife.

Between 2012 and 2013, while working to transition the church, the Reporter alleged that both Michael and Brenda Gatlin lied about them and described the couple as having a "spirit of control" and being unwilling to submit to authority. According to the Reporter, Brenda Gatlin shared intimate information about them with others in the church and would use personal information that was shared in confidence against them. The Gatlins questioned the couple's integrity and said they were "off on their own" and "not listening to the Holy Spirit" and maligned them to others.

As a result of the conflicts, the Reporter sought a chance to discuss and resolve the issues with Michael Gatlin. Michael Gatlin refused the Reporter's multiple requests to have a conversation to resolve the issues. We reviewed a series of emails between the Reporter, Michael Gatlin, Vineyard Duluth leadership and Vineyard USA's then National Director Phil Strout between December 2013 and December 2014. In summary, the Reporter's emails were charged and accusatory but also sought an opportunity for discussion to resolve the conflicts. Emails showed that Strout was made aware of the rift between the Reporter and Michael Gatlin but made no attempt to intervene in the discussions or investigate the Reporter's concerns. In February 2014, Michael Gatlin reported his communications with the Reporter to Duluth Vineyard leadership who then forwarded them to the church council. From a review of emails, it appears further discussions were had by the council and they supported Michael Gatlin. The responses from Michael Gatlin to the Reporter appeared to show him avoiding further discussion and being unwilling to meet or engage with the Reporter, a decision which was supported by Vineyard Duluth leadership and Strout.

In 2014, the Reporter made his concerns more known to others at the national level of Vineyard USA including its board. In our interviews and a review of documents between 2013 to 2014, it appears that while the Reporter's concerns about the Gatlins were significant to the Reporter, they did not rise to the level of national concern. As a result, Vineyard USA did not respond to the Reporter's repeated reports of concern.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on the limited scope of our review, Guidepost found the following:

Vineyard USA did not take any significant efforts to respond to or to resolve the conflict between the Reporter and the Gatlins.

Vineyard USA did not demonstrate concern or investigate the Reporter's initial allegations in 2013.

As a result, the lack of interest by Vineyard USA was perceived by the Reporter to be dismissive of concerns and unsupportive to those who report allegations of misconduct and abuse of prominent Vineyard USA leaders.

² Brenda Gatlin served as the Area Leader of Duluth Vineyard at the time of the Reporter's transition out of the Vineyard but was in the process of taking on the Regional Leader position so served in dual roles.