Celebration Church Investigation Alleges ‘Rampant Spiritual and Emotional Abuse” and Fraud by Former Head Pastor

[Anne Stych](https://ministrywatch.com/author/anne-stych/) May 2, 2022

A scathing investigation of former head megachurch pastor Stovall Weems commissioned by Celebration Church in Jacksonville, Florida, paints a picture of a self-absorbed leader who manipulated employees, fraudulently used the church’s money, and sometimes appeared too mentally unstable to lead.

The investigation, conducted by the Nelson Mullins law firm, said Weems managed the church poorly and conducted a series of unauthorized financial transactions through which he personally benefited, either directly or indirectly, at the expense of the Church.

It also said Weems’s erratic behavior, including “rampant spiritual and emotional abuse, including manipulation, a profound sense of self-importance and selfishness, superiority and entitlement,” as well as a purported personal encounter with Jesus Christ, created “confusion and disarray” and kept the church from carrying out its mission.
Weems refused to cooperate with the investigation, the law firm reported.

Weems was suspended by the Celebration governing board earlier this year and [**resigned from his roles**](https://ministrywatch.com/stovall-weems-resigns-from-celebration-church-amid-legal-battle/) as senior pastor, president and CEO, chairman and member of the board of trustees last week.  The suspension came amid allegations that Weems and his wife Kerri had made unauthorized transactions using church money. The couple is pursuing a lawsuit contending that the suspension was illegal, saying a church trustee fed church leaders “lies and misinformation” about them to deflect attention from his own financial misconduct.

[**The Nelson Mullins report**](https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/21746665/weems-investigation-report.pdf) said Weems breached his fiduciary duties to Celebration, committing fraud and “unjustly enriching himself at the expense of the Church” through a series of deals, including the purchase of cryptocurrency and sale of a parsonage. The conduct brought Celebration “to the brink of insolvency,” the report said, listing the church’s unpaid accounts receivable at more than $3.3 million.

“But for the steadying leadership of Pastor Tim Timberlake and the actions of Celebration’s Board, Celebration would have likely already failed as an institution,” the report said. Timberlake, previously chosen to be Weems’ eventual successor, [**took over the church**](https://ministrywatch.com/florida-megachurch-pastor-says-hes-there-to-stay-despite-lawsuit-disputing-church-leadership/) in March after Weems’ suspension.

The report also said Weems created a culture of fear and intimidation in which it was not safe to disagree with him, and that his behavior towards employees, including placing unreasonable demands on their time, demanding absolute loyalty and compliance, and publicly shaming and humiliating them, was enough to justify “the discipline of the Senior Pastor, up to and including ratifying the removal of his leadership position and termination of his employment.”

It also cited bizarre behavior by Weems, referring to “The Incident,” described as a “pivotal” event in the church.

During a Seder service on Passover in 2018, Weems claimed he had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the report said.  “At the event, Weems became transfixed on a piece of bread he was holding. Weems stared blankly at the bread for a long time and then appeared bewildered, stunned, and speechless as his attention turned back to the events on the stage. Afterward, Weems described that he had seen Jesus on the stage and been transported to the Last Supper the night before Jesus’ crucifixion.

“Weems claimed that he was physically with Jesus Christ and that Jesus spoke with him, directing his attention to the future and what Christ wanted for the Weemses to accomplish on Earth.”

The report said Weems used the event to justify his authority and maintain control of the Church saying God had given him direction through the “encounter.”
“When employees would ask questions or express confusion over Weems’ directions, he would tell them he had only disclosed part of the vision God deposited in him through the Encounter. In that way, Weems exercised control by claiming a secret divine revelation,” it said.

The report concluded that Celebration Church should accept the resignation of Stovall and Kerri Weems as employees effective April 15, 2022, without further compensation or benefits, pursue the permanent removal of the couple from any positions of authority at other church-related entities, require them to “account for and return to the Church all funds misappropriated by them,” and report its findings to law enforcement authorities to determine whether criminal charges should be brought against them.

* Anne Stych (May 2, 2022) Ministry Watch. https://ministrywatch.com/celebration-church-investigation-alleges-rampant-spiritual-and-emotional-abuse-and-fraud-by-former-head-pastor/