

April 28, 2023

The Executive Presbytery
North Texas District of the Assemblies of God
Maypearl, Texas

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Executive Presbytery,

I am writing to you as the elected Presbyter of the South Austin Section to request specific information concerning the scandal surrounding our, currently on leave, District Chi Alpha Director, Eli Stewart. I am writing to fulfill my moral obligation as an officer of this District. I want to remind you of the Constitutional hierarchy of authority in the North Texas District. Article III, Section 7a, of the Bylaws state, *"The District Presbytery shall be empowered to act in all matters which pertain to the proper functioning of divisions and institutions in the district or to delegate such duties to the Executive Presbytery while the District Council is not in session. The decisions of the District Presbytery shall be final unless reversed by the District Council."*

I think it is best to remember that when the District Presbytery is in session, it is the Executive Officers who make reports to us, not the other way around. The actions taken by the Executive Presbytery are submitted for our approval, not the other way around. In the meeting of the District Presbytery held via Zoom on Thursday, April 27, it seemed to me like some present forgot the order of our District authority structure. A visitor might have even inferred that it was the law firm hired by the District that had the final word. Of course we understand this is not the case.

To quickly recap my concern, in late December of 2022, I was approached by a member of my church who had attended Sam Houston Chi Alpha with Eli Stewart. Many of his fellow students had approached him with accusations that for many years Eli had been promoting a convicted and registered sex offender, Daniel Savala, among Chi Alpha students in his role as campus director and ultimately NTD District director. As it happened, I had already arranged a meeting with Eli, and North Austin Presbyter, David McLain, to discuss the state of the Chi Alpha chapter at the University of Texas at Austin which Eli has recently taken over.

That meeting between David, Eli and I took place on Friday, February 10, 2023 in Austin. The portion concerning the allegations only lasted for the last ten minutes. Eli's response was concerning enough to me that I told him I would be reporting my concerns to the District Office, specifically to Kermit Bell, Assistant Superintendent and Missions Director (including Chi Alpha which makes him Eli's direct report). I sent this email to Kermit and copied Eli, at his request, on Monday, February 13, 2023. I received no response from either party.

So the following week on Tuesday, February 21, 2023 at the conclusion of our EP/DP Prayer Retreat, I approached Kermit and said, "Did you get my email?" He said that he had not, but that Eli had contacted him about it. We had recently changed some email servers at our church and his would not be the only email that didn't reach its destination. I do think it was strange that he did not follow up with me about the email once he learned of it, but nevertheless, I made sure that he got a copy of it right there on the spot. He confirmed that he did. I never heard a response to that report.

On Monday, April 24, 2023, I learned that Eli Stewart had the previous day announced at his church that he had been placed on administrative leave from his ministerial duties. I texted Kermit, Gaylan Claunch and Gregg Headley to ask if there was anything that they needed from me in regard to UT Chi Alpha that week. In that text exchange, Gaylan indicated that the team had been working diligently on it "since we learned of it last week." This led me to ask if he was aware of the February 13th email I had sent to Kermit regarding these allegations. He replied that he was just arriving at the office and would "check on that" – which obviously meant he did not. The contents of that report were not one that anyone would casually forget reading. At that time I forwarded a copy of the report - that I had made to Kermit two months earlier – to Gaylan and Gregg. I also spoke that morning by phone to my REP, Elwyn Johnston, who told me he also knew nothing of my report, so I sent him a copy as well.

An hour later I received a text from Kermit apologizing for not replying to my email. To be honest, I've never been upset by the lack of response. I assumed it was passed up the chain and handled. In that text Kermit stated that, "Before your email, the EAC was aware of some concerns and we had taken action to communicate with Eli." Later that night, Gaylan texted me alone to let me know that he and Gregg had not in fact received my email report until I sent it to them that morning. He mentioned some extenuating personal circumstances (which I understand and am sympathetic to) and said, "Normally, emails of importance as your's was are copied between us almost instantly...Your message would have been very helpful in light of current events."

I did not receive any further communication from the District until the invitation to attend the Thursday District Presbytery briefing. What occurred in that meeting is what has led me to send this letter of concern. I prayed about whether or not to bring any of this up in the meeting. I texted David McLain minutes before "If they don't bring up my report, I can't in good conscience let it slide...can I?" He replied, "Don't know how to answer that, would have to see how the call goes."

Let me tell you what I was hoping for. I was hoping for an open and honest explanation of what was going on. I was hoping that the Executive Officers would be the ones to tell us that two of their Presbyters had interviewed Eli two months before and that the report never reached them. I was hoping that Kermit would own his failure to handle such a sensitive report properly and apologize to the District Presbytery. That would have allowed *me* to be the one to come to Kermit's defense and explain my email system problems, his health issues and some version of, "sure, we wish this had been handled different, but we've all made mistakes." Kermit is my friend and I love him.

Unfortunately, what I was hoping for did not happen. The meeting was rushed. Other Presbyters were also concerned that Gaylan was leading us to a time of prayer without a chance for us to ask questions. We were told we could not talk to anyone about this. Again, it seemed like the lawyers were the ultimate authority in the room rather than the gathered District Presbytery. I personally felt like we were being handled, more than honestly communicated with. And so after Pat Herlitz interrupted to ask his question, I followed suit. Even then, I addressed the issue as a third party "Isn't it true that certain Presbyters among us...?, etc." in hopes that the EAC would own this failure of their leadership.

Instead, Kermit became belligerent and defensive. Additionally, his excuses for not sending on this important report to the others were all over the map. Yes, he mentioned his health condition and my email challenges. But at other times, he said that the report wasn't necessary because the information contained was not new. The fact that two of your Presbyters met and interviewed Eli about these allegations was completely new! The red flags that I brought to his attention based on Eli's response were completely new.

At other times, Kermit said he discounted this report because “we had dealt with Eli in October.” Really? Because I can assure you that in February, Eli did not in the slightest act like someone who had been “death with”. He stared at me defiantly and repeatedly referred to Daniel Savala as his “dear friend” who frequently stays at his house. When I asked if he was using his influence to connect Daniel to other Chi Alpha leaders he said, “I work with adults, I can’t tell them who to talk to or not talk to.” When I asked him specifically if the District knew about this, he responded that “the National Office does”. There was no mention in his conversation of any previous action by Kermit or any entity in the NTD.

And then as the conversation between Kermit and I grew more heated, I asked him what Eli had said to him about the email that I had sent them both and Kermit refused to tell me. I will remind you all that the Executive Officers are ultimately accountable to the District Presbyter. I am very concerned that Kermit Bell did more than neglect a Presbyters report of alleged misconduct by a District Official. I am concerned that he knew what was going on and did nothing – potentially because he took Eli’s word over that of two of his Presbyters. Why else would he not share that report with Gaylan, Gregg or any of the Executive Presbyters? That is a question I cannot answer without further information. And that’s what I am asking you for in this letter. I would like answers to the following three questions:

- 1. What did Eli Stewart communicate to Kermit Bell about the email I sent to them both on February 13, 2023?**
- 2. What steps specifically did Kermit Bell take in regards to Eli Stewart in the fall of 2022 when he alleges that the EAC had “taken actions”.**
- 3. Does the Executive Presbytery agree with Kermit Bell’s position that that the report that I sent to him in February did not contain information worthy of being forwarded to District authorities.**

I cannot in good conscience before the God of truth and the Section that elected me to represent them, remain silent about these concerns. Following the Thursday meeting I have had no contact with anyone from the North Texas District. It certainly feels like wagons are being circled, and voices demanding justice are being silenced in the wilderness at the behest of lawyers. Let me conclude with a word about those lawyers.

Legally there is a difference between negligence and gross negligence. Being convicted of the first one is bad for an organization - it’s going to cost you some shekels. Being convicted of “gross negligence” is what makes the jury open the barn door and empty the grain. Here’s a definition of negligence: “careless mistake or act of inattention resulting in an injury to another” That’s what Eli has landed us in.

Now here’s gross negligence: “a reckless or purposeful indifference to the reasonable safety of others.” That is the jackpot that Kermit has created if it is shown that an agent of the District handed him critical information that he chose to ignore. Half of his excuses on Thursday were based on a mistake, but there were plenty in which he admitted the report wasn’t important. In spite of the fact that Gaylan Claunch admits that they were. Can you see how damning that would be on a witness stand?

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Executive Presbytery, this is bigger than friendship. Of course Kermit is my friend. There have been times in our District’s history when friendship – the “good old boys network” – superseded integrity, honor and truth. That is shameful. The good old boys are dead. We must do right, not only for the sake of protecting District assets, but we have something much more valuable at stake, the gospel of Jesus Christ to a watching world.

I can't even begin to mention the Christian organizations that have fallen into disrepute in the last decade. Please understand that my passion and my temerity is motivated by an intense desire that the North Texas District and Chi Alpha Christian Ministries do not join them. "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

I pray for your courage and wisdom in leadership in these troubling times ahead.

Cordially,

Rev/Dr. Anthony Scoma
Presbyter, South Austin Section