

An Open Letter  
to the  
Eight Jesus People USA Leaders  
by  
Former Members  
March 18, 2002

Whatever else we experienced at Jesus People USA (JPUSA), all of us shared some profoundly wonderful times in ministry and Christian community. It is for this very reason, out of concern, love, and a sense of obligation, that we write this Open Letter to the eight leaders there: Dawn Herrin-Mortimer, Johnny Herrin, Victor Williams, Neil Taylor, Tom Cameron, Ron Brown, Denny Cadieux, and Glenn Kaiser.

As you yourselves have often said to us, there is no perfect church, no perfect business, no perfect family, and no perfect community. While true, the issues we bring before you are not perfection, but health. There are elements of your leadership structure that are unhealthy—and even damaging—to JPUSA members.

It is our hope and prayer that this letter will someday be used as a pathway—a kind of map—towards a healthy community and a mature polity. For this reason, you will find concerns as well as solutions expressed in the Open Letter below.

It was our experience that community members cannot speak honestly to you without fear. Disagreement with you always meant risking our community status and reputation, ministry, work, our call to minister at JPUSA, our church, community membership, friend and family ties, and even our home.

Your announcement and implementation of the JPUSA Leaders' Individual Term Commitment policy on February 16, 2000, made it impossible to discuss needed reforms from the inside. With this policy, you have effectively stifled positive member discussion about polity by giving yourselves the absolute power to continue or terminate any member (or family's) membership. When we lived at JPUSA, it was difficult enough to question your authority. It is astonishing to us that you have made it even more difficult for JPUSA members to have a voice in their own community.

It is our prayer and hope that our experience, wisdom, and convictions, as former JPUSA members, will gradually bring about healthy change. Although long-overdue, we believe these changes will ensure that JPUSA will continue in its calling to preach the Gospel and care for the poor in the context of a vibrant healthy intentional Christian community that takes care of—and listens to—its many members. Countless times over the decades members have questioned you, or questioned the immature JPUSA polity in an attempt to “grow” it into a healthier one. In each case, your solution was that the member (and the member's family) leave. Out of fear, you forbade members from discussing these issues amongst themselves.

These are not accusations, but statements of fact from your own Bylaws, JPUSA Covenant, Term Commitment, or longstanding policies. This letter is Open, and it has been publicly discussed and revised over the past year. *It is the issues that need to be discussed, not the people bringing them up.* None of these issues are new. You have heard them many times before over the decades.

It is our hope that you will begin discussing this Open Letter with your denominational leaders. Despite a healthy move to join a congregational denomination in 1989, you resisted any change that would give members a voice in the affairs of their own community. Not only have you held an awesome amount of power over the decades, you have increased that power you have over members with your Individual Term

Commitment policy. And now, your unhealthy polity is in danger of being perpetuated into another generation.

It is with the investment of decades of, service, prayer, and concern that many former members affirm the following:

**Part 1 of 10 "The JPUSA Community"**

1. For over two decades, Jesus People USA Full-Gospel Ministries has been a community of several hundred members who live together in Uptown, Chicago, who share a common purse and work together in several community ministries and businesses.
2. JPUSA is a discipleship program which takes in people who are hurting and helps them rebuild their lives as Christians.
3. JPUSA is also a community of people engaged in life and ministry together.
4. JPUSA is also an outreach ministry that has reached out with the Gospel in word and deed to multitudes of people that are disadvantaged spiritually, economically, and emotionally.
5. The strength of the JPUSA community is in its members modeling family life, single-parent life, singleness in the context of Christian community to hurting and broken people that pass through or move in, welcoming hurting and broken people with Christ's love.
6. JPUSA's racial diversity has been a visible sign of racial reconciliation.
7. JPUSA has been salt and light in its neighborhood, standing in the gap as a community on many issues of social justice.

**Part 2 of 10 "The JPUSA Polity (Boards, Councils and the many 'hats' worn by leaders)"**

8. The current eight leaders of the Jesus People community were self-appointed over two decades ago, began their service as peer "elders," and are now known corporately a "pastoral board" or the "Council."
9. Four of the eight leaders are related by blood or marriage.
10. These leaders serve as CEO/Board of Directors for the businesses.
11. The eight leaders singly or together serve as the final authority in decisions affecting several hundreds of community members and children.
12. These leaders serve as pastors, spiritual advisors, and marriage counselors for members of the community.
13. These leaders also serve as landlord to all the members.
14. Members find they have little or no voice in their own community's affairs.
15. Members find it difficult to know which "hat" a leader is wearing at a particular time since the polity makes their many hats indistinguishable.
16. This polity results in numerous complex dual relationships between leaders and members.
17. The leaders' concentration of power has significantly compromised pastoral relationships and damaged confidentiality.

**Part 3 of 10: "JPUSA's History and 1989 Bylaws and Constitution"**

18. In 1989 Jesus People USA became a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church, a congregational denomination.
19. A JPUSA Bylaws and Constitution was drafted by the JPUSA leaders in 1989 as a requirement for joining the denomination.
20. The JPUSA leaders were given a healthy denominational Model Bylaws and Constitution of the Evangelical Covenant Church.
21. The JPUSA leaders altered this document to concentrate power in their own hands, and crossed out all of the normal accountabilities and checks and balances.
22. The JPUSA leaders drafted the Bylaws and Constitution to allow themselves perpetual terms of office.
23. The leaders crossed out the provision for congregational meetings of members.
24. The leaders crossed out the provision for member voting and elections.

25. The leaders crossed out the provision for a financial officer that keeps records and makes regular reports to the Council and members.
26. Although there are many other types of healthy models of polity, the leaders' resulting polity gave members no voice and no representation.
27. The community members were not involved in the drafting of their own Bylaws and Constitution.
28. After the JPUSA Bylaws and Constitution were drafted, the document was not made public to the members of the community even though it significantly affected each member's life.
29. While several community documents are posted on the official JPUSA website, the Bylaws are not posted.

**Part 4 of 10: "Finances, Financial Accountabilities & Reports"**

30. The BYLAWS give the eight leaders all fiduciary (financial) responsibilities.
31. JPUSA leaders also sit on all the boards or councils or executive cabinets and hold the responsibilities as sole pastors for the JPUSA Covenant Church (an IRS 501 (c) (3)), the sole Board of Directors for the JPUSA-FGM community and businesses (an IRS 501 (d)), and Board members for Cornerstone Community Outreach (CCO) (an IRS 501 (c) (3)).
32. Members who earn money for the community purse have no idea of how money is budgeted or spent, and have no voice on how it is budgeted or spent.
33. The statements for credit cards held by the leaders (used for both the leaders' expenses and loaned out for occasional member expenses) are not made public to members.

**Part 5 of 10: "Leaders' Power, Authority & Influence"**

34. The eight leaders give the nod to all romance (dating, engagement, giving engaged couples their wedding dates, and deciding how long they would be engaged).
35. This "power of romance" invested in the eight leaders (and some of their spouses) is a significant inducement for singles to submit to all areas of leaders' authority.
36. For nearly two decades all married couples were required all to first "submit" a request to the JPUSA leaders to seek permission before starting a family (conceiving children).
37. The POLITY provides no mechanism for members to safely ask questions or express disagreement with the eight leaders who possess so much power over so many areas of community life.
38. The POLITY has no grievance system to manage conflict between a leader and a member.
39. A member is at a great disadvantage to bring up concerns without consequences to his/her employment, ministry, church standing, various perks (such as spending money or vacations), membership, friendships, daycare schooling for children, and ultimately family (if he/she has a spouse or children), and home.
40. This POLITY allows leaders to make community, ministry, church, and business decisions at any time without input from members and without members' knowledge.
41. The eight JPUSA leaders have publicly stated they "never agree to disagree" in their Council meetings (i.e. The leaders have adopted a policy of unanimous consent for every decision).
42. This policy of unanimous consent has been in effect for over two decades.

**Part 6 of 10: "Social Security, Retirement, Workman's Comp., Tax & Pension System"**

43. All members (that are citizens of the United States) are required to sign over employment payments that would have been paid into Social Security & Workman's Comp when that member signs the "JPUSA Covenant" [<http://jpusa.org/jpusa/documents/covenant.htm>] which states that no matter the duration of employment at JPUSA (1 month or 30 years) no monies will be paid into Social Security or Workman's Compensation.
44. Once a member signs the JPUSA Covenant and waives Social Security payments, that JPUSA member is never updated by having the growing consequences of that decision spelled out in detail each year.

45. Members that sign the JPUSA Covenant do not make an informed decision and will never know (nor will they be told) when they reach the “point of no return” when there is no possibility of Medicare, Retirement or Disability Social Security benefits.
46. The JPUSA Covenant was drafted in 1986, put into effect, redrafted in 1989, and again put into effect by the leadership with no discussion or consent of the members [it was “announced” to members at a body meeting and members were allowed to ask questions about provisions they did not understand].
47. New (often young and idealistic) members sign the JPUSA “Covenant” giving little or no thought to catastrophic financial and health insurance consequences years (or decades) later.
48. This decision is made in the security of a group but the consequences years later become the members’ alone if he or she (along with his or her dependents and spouse) moves out.
49. It is unethical for a pastor to ask a member to waive Social Security payments as a condition of community and church membership.
50. Countless members have left the community only to have the reality sink in that after 10 or 25 years of JPUSA ministry they have no Social Security retirement, no Disability benefits for them or their family, and no Medicare.
51. Many former members have come to the realization that the “Covenant” they signed redirected all monies—that would have been paid toward their own Social Security—into the JPUSA common purse, and the “pursestrings” are entirely held by the eight leaders.
52. The result of this Council policy is that scores of middle-age families, having spent their most productive years serving Christ in the JPUSA ministry, leave and realize they have no provision for retirement or disability or health care.
53. There is no pension, no severance pay, or “package” that follows an exiting member, no matter how many decades they served, and exiting members are usually not even given a vehicle.
54. Members who work for many years (even decades) and lack a pension, severance pay, and payments into Social Security (including Disability, and Medicare) find that this situation becomes a powerful inducement to stay in the JPUSA community (since to leave would mean near-certain poverty in retirement years).
55. Members have been told by the 8 leaders that they must “trust God” for their provision in their old age.
56. The lack of any benefits (retirement or pension) for long-members contributes to an unhealthy dependency upon JP leaders, and also contributes to an unhealthy submission to JP leaders.

**Part 7 of 10: “Health Insurance, Property, Community ‘Pursestrings,’ and Medicaid”**

57. The eight leaders have decided that health care coverage will not be provided to members of the JPUSA community by the community, church, or by its businesses.
58. Members have little or no standing to question leadership’s policy to have no private community health coverage.
59. The leadership alone controls the “pursestrings” and has stated there is “no money” for member health coverage.
60. With loans and the sale of other properties, five large properties were purchased since the mid-1980s which are now worth tens of millions of dollars (Leland, Chelsea, Clifton Shelter, Lakefront, Bushnell, Eastwood, the new CCO building).
61. Space in the Lakefront Roofing Supply/Creative Wood Design building is profitably subleased to outside businesses.
62. Many JPUSA properties enjoy reduced property tax or even tax exempt status.
63. Members that work full time for JPUSA are encouraged to rely upon state Medicaid programs (which only cover parents with children) and city/county hospitals and clinics, which were designed to provide for the poor.
64. Most JPUSA members (with no children) have no health insurance.
65. Many members would feel more comfortable having a private community health policy, rather than relying upon state welfare (which covers only parents & children) or city clinics for the poor.
66. Almost all children that were born into the community and grew up to adulthood there relied upon the State of Illinois Medicaid for 18 years of health coverage.

67. The situation of working for a JPUSA company like Lakefront Roofing, grossing over a million dollars some months, yet having no health insurance (or having Medicaid) is uncomfortable to many members.

#### **Part 8 of 10: "IRS Forms & Filing"**

68. Until 1998, members did not even fill out their own IRS tax forms (but only signed them).
69. Now members fill out their own IRS tax forms, using the assigned income figure from the leadership (arrived at by dividing up the income of the businesses among all full-time members).
70. Members "trust" leadership to arrive at this figure for them and do not question it because they have no standing, questions are discouraged, and the questioner would be met with suspicion.
71. Because there are no periodic financial reports on the community's 'one purse' finances, there is no mechanism of leadership accountability to members.
72. Preaching the Gospel in word and deed, biblical repentance, commitment and holiness, mission, discipleship should not be done without healthy financial checks and balances and accountabilities.

#### **Part 9 of 10: "The JPUSA Leaders' Individual Term Commitment Policy"**

73. The JPUSA leaders have moved further away from their denomination's congregational polity by the drafting and implementation of the Individual Term Commitment policy [[http://jpusa.org/jpusa/documents/term\\_commitments.htm](http://jpusa.org/jpusa/documents/term_commitments.htm)].
74. The recent JPUSA Individual Term Commitment document significantly changes the paradigm of leader-member relationships within the community.
75. The Term Commitment document states: "We [the leaders] are convinced that God intends that most of the people who join the JPUSA community are called to stay for a finite period" and that the leaders solely determine that period of time.
76. The leaders state in the Term Commitment document that a central reality of JPUSA is that "we [the leaders] adopted a multiple elder/pastor form of government believing it to be supported by Scripture. This has not changed. Therefore major decisions are not made by a vote of the membership but by a consensus of the elders/pastors" [emphasis added].
77. In fact, no decisions are made by a vote of the membership.
78. The Term Commitment document publicly professes the leadership's resolve not to move toward a polity with member representation or a polity that gives members any voice in their community.
79. The Term Commitment document further increases JPUSA pastoral authority over members (putting members at a greater disadvantage), adding to an already unhealthy concentration of power.
80. Some members have served the JPUSA leaders faithfully for nearly 30 years and still have no voice.
81. The Term Commitment document was drafted by leadership.
82. The Term Commitment document affects members' status but does not apply to leaders.
83. The Term Commitment document was drafted without input from members.
84. The Term Commitment document was implemented without the consent of members.
85. The Term Commitment document echoes the JPUSA Covenant, "The final decision on membership is committed to the discretion of the council," meaning that the leaders solely determine who can stay and who must go.
86. This unhealthy policy discourages members from bringing up concerns or questioning leaders, since leaders may then decide that member's Term Commitment will not be renewed (thereby simultaneously terminating the member's job and home).
87. The Term Commitment document memorializes the fact that the eight JPUSA leaders are solely invested with the power to review a member's membership (tenure and future service), as well as the power to ask that member to leave, consecutively terminating tenancy, ministry, employment, and community and church membership.
88. The recent JPUSA Term Commitment document fosters intimidation, has the effect of stifling discussion of concerns, and completely disenfranchises members (no matter how long members have served).
89. Because JPUSA is an intentional community (and not simply a church), there is even more need for checks and balances and accountabilities upon leadership.

90. This JPUSA POLITY is unhealthy and has resulted in a decades long steady stream of wounded members leaving the community.
91. The meetings in 1993 with denominational leaders Superintendent Herb Freedholm and President Paul Larson, and moderator Speed Lees to arbitrate between former members and the JPUSA leaders ended when the JPUSA leaders refused to post minutes of the meeting for JPUSA members to see.
92. A multiplicity of 8 leaders is not enough of a check and balance for an intentional Christian community of hundreds with properties, outreach ministries, and businesses worth multi-millions of dollars.
93. In the past 26 years because of the evolving dominance over every member's personal life by the same 8 leaders (however benevolent their purpose), they have unintentionally become oppressive and arbitrary.
94. Not all former JPUSA members have had the same experiences or will have first-hand knowledge or agreement regarding each of these above statements, but most do agree that they need to be publicly discussed.

**Part 10 of 10: "Resolution"**

Therefore, let it be resolved that

1. The administrative and pastoral functions in the JPUSA community be separated so that all JPUSA pastors do not also have administrative duties and powers as members of the Council.
2. All Council members should have terms of office (the length to be determined by the members), and then step down for a certain number of years.
3. Three of the current eight Council members (of the group that is related by blood or marriage) should resign immediately to allow a community election of three new members to sit on the community Council.
4. A secretary be appointed to take Council meeting minutes and post them for JPUSA members.
5. Quarterly congregational meetings and elections for all administrative offices in the community be instituted.
6. JPUSA FGM should abide by numbers 2-7 of the ECFA's (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability) "Seven Standards of Responsible Stewardship" [<http://www.ecfa.org/7standards.asp>].
7. The JPUSA community should be allowed to vote upon the possibility of setting up a pension system (possibly established under the auspices of Covenant Board of Benevolence) to provide for retirement and disability of all JPUSA members serving more than six months, or a system similar to the system that serves Covenant missionaries abroad.
8. JPUSA leaders will immediately institute a procedure to pay all members an equal fixed wage (which goes into the community purse) so that Social Security deductions can be made.
9. A Financial Officer be appointed by the Council to keep records and make regular reports on the "one purse" to the community and the Council.
10. Credit card statements be made available for members of the community to see.
11. Independently audited financial reports that determine a JPUSA member's annual income (reported to the IRS) be made available to all members annually.
12. The Term Commitment Agreement either be immediately rescinded or amended to include the leaders so that members can determine the leadership's terms of commitment.
13. A Transition Allowance fund be established to provide for members that leave, with amounts to be determined by a vote of all the members.
14. A system of severance pay based upon years of service be established to provide for members that leave.
15. Members that decide to leave will be reimbursed in a timely manner for any inheritances over \$10,000 that were signed over to the leadership.
16. All JPUSA members be allowed to see their own Bylaws and Constitution.
17. The full body of JPUSA members be allowed to amend their own Bylaws and Constitution to reflect the changes above and/or other changes which seem warranted.
18. If the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination ordains the leaders (or spouses), it should also license the long term members (as other Covenant missionaries are licensed) and make provisions for JPUSA to pay into a members' pension fund.

