

AN OPEN LETTER REGARDING DAVID BRAZIL & SARAH PRITCHARD

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INTRODUCTION

We are a group of people who represent various experiences working with **David Brazil** and **Sarah Pritchard** through a number of volunteer collectives, projects, and ministries from 2015 to 2022. Recognizing patterns of harm among the various spaces they have been part of, we have decided to publish a public account. **We are taking this step only after many attempts to address our concerns directly with Sarah and David have failed. One-on-one approaches have been deflected or disregarded, and they have rejected all community attempts to “call them in,” including invitations to at least two transformative justice processes.**

There are members of (and outside) our group who would still welcome such a transformative process; if Sarah and David are interested in discussing how this might function, initial contact can be established through our collective email address at the top of this letter. We are not asking that people cut ties with Sarah or David, and we do not wish them ill. Instead, we hope that this letter will function as an act of community care: **our primary goal with this account is to do our best to prevent future harm by helping others make an informed decision before working with Sarah and David.**

Each of us has experienced harm in our interactions with David and Sarah; if we had had this information beforehand about what has emerged as a pattern, we would likely either not have engaged or would have engaged differently, and at least some of this harm could have been avoided. We hope that the accounts in this letter will help those who are thinking about organizing with David and Sarah to make their choices with clarity, whether the ultimate decision is not to work with them, or to go into relationship with open eyes about what others’ experiences have been.

Sarah and David have repeatedly started initiatives, caused harm¹ within the same groups, and abandoned their endeavors after calls for discussion and accountability from others. They have raised large sums of money for a project that they then

¹ In a meeting earlier this year, David and Sarah critiqued the language of “harm” in abolitionist discourse, [stating](#) that it’s “important for us as abolitionists to be clear about the difference between harm and pain.” Not everyone involved in this letter is an abolitionist, but we will say that we use the word *harm* throughout this document to encompass how their actions have caused pain **and** negatively impacted the operations of entire organizations and spaces focused on materially or spiritually improving people’s lives.

dropped as they gave the money elsewhere without donors' permission. They have elevated themselves at others' expense. They have repeatedly and unexpectedly severed ties with organizations and people who trusted them, leaving others to pay the price and pick up the pieces.

We recognize the good that has come out of efforts they have organized, and it is not our role to question their intentions—which we can't ultimately know. However, the damage done by their pattern of building power, causing harm, and then abandoning initiatives and severing connections is real and ongoing. The damage is also amplified by the fact that the initiatives they choose to launch are repeatedly centered on highly vulnerable populations, including people who are incarcerated. David and Sarah may have had only the best of intentions, but with this letter we ask them to recognize their painful impact on real people, including those who gave much to them and their work.

In September 2022, David became the [executive director](#) of another nonprofit organization focused on criminal justice, Death Penalty Focus. **This new leadership position of status and authority has increased the urgency of this letter.**²

We do wish to note here that, by our count, David's name is mentioned in isolation in this letter approximately seven times more than Sarah's; this is a reflection of the larger volume of accounts we received speaking about the negative impacts of his actions. We wanted to remark on this discrepancy while also not diminishing the fact that, with the exception of OPPRC, all sections of the timeline below see them in co-leadership roles—acting in concert in multiple co-signed emails, meetings with individuals, and public conversations—and that we did receive accounts of harm done by Sarah.

And lastly, we'd like to acknowledge that because this letter originated with a group of former Abolition Apostles volunteers, it organically came to focus on abolition- and church-centered spaces. Even this limited scope has expanded to 31 pages, and that prohibitive length plus our own capacity meant we could not widen it further. With that said, we have welcomed signatures and endorsements at the end of this

² *Editor's Note, 7/20/23: David's position as Executive Director of Death Penalty Focus ended in December 2022. Because this letter was signed and endorsed by so many individuals, it's infeasible for us to update the language of the letter to reflect this or other changes. It will remain available online as an artifact of how things stood on 11/16/22.*

letter from individuals affiliated with organizations not mentioned throughout. Some of these are groups that David and Sarah came into contact with during their time in New Orleans, while others (such as the poetry community, the Bay Area Public School, and the Omni) are connected to their long organizing history in Oakland prior to the time frame we explicitly discuss. We believe the expanse of these names—including the support of this letter by those who simply knew David or Sarah personally as former friends—both lends credence to the accounts described here and reflects the persistence of this harmful behavior over time and across different spaces.

For nearly a year, we worked together to write this collective letter. We offer a detailed timeline below, followed by a thematic overview outlining recurrent patterns. We have also provided documentation, linked within. We hope this letter can be part of disrupting and transforming an ongoing cycle of harm.

TIMELINE OF HARM

Agape Interfaith Fellowship

Agape Interfaith Fellowship was a house church founded by Sarah and David in 2015, which initially met in David’s living room. The church was a spiritual home for many members, a large number of whom had church trauma in their pasts and were looking for a safe place to rebuild. Agape was an interfaith space. Though Sarah and David were clear that their commitments were Christian, the group studied and discussed the sacred texts of other faiths, such as Buddhist sutras, as well. These sessions were led by members of Agape who were practitioners of those faiths.

Sarah and David used their proximity to several well-respected radical Black queer elders in Oakland to substantiate their pastoral status, though neither David nor Sarah had training or had been credentialed as pastors. It was their relationship to these well-respected elders that drew some members to the church. Agape had no Board or leadership to whom David and Sarah were formally accountable; instead, they claimed that they went to two of these Black elders for counsel, accountability, and decision-making input. After Agape ended, however, deacons and congregants learned that one of those people had not been speaking with David and Sarah, while

the other had been misled by them: this elder only discovered later that David and Sarah's pastoral practices directly contradicted their own core values and their nearly three decades of pastoral work. Neither elder knew about the issues they had supposedly been consulted on.

The structure of the church was contradictory: on the one hand, it was called a community endeavor and leadership was theoretically shared, with three established members eventually named as "deacons." On the other, the church was a top-down structure with Sarah and David as sole discerners of God's unquestionable will. Very little actual decision-making power was ever shared. Oftentimes, comments or feedback on decisions (even minor ones) were met with an assertion of "pastoral authority" and the implication that, because of this authority, to question David and Sarah was to question God.

Agape was also characterized by a lack of transparency. Many decisions were made with little to no input from members, even deacons, who learned about them when they were announced. Money was raised for Black community groups, but only David and Sarah had access to follow the path of these funds. Deacons not only lacked access to track the money, but were also not informed about how it was handled or the process for receiving and distributing it. Additionally, members did not hear back about their contributions (i.e., how they had benefited community groups).

One of the deacons ran the administration of a church parish for work during their time with Agape and was struck by the care taken to make the finances of that parish transparent and accountable. The contrast with Agape was alarming, but the deacon suppressed their concerns because of trust in David and Sarah. Looking back, they regretted not having heeded these red flags.

In an example of the lack of transparency or shared decision-making processes, in March of 2018, David and Sarah announced they had discerned that Agape should move from David's living room to a public-facing space. This occurred without consultation. Members did not have input into where the space would be, when and how the move would take place, or how much rent the group was willing to pay (even though members were contributing the funds).

Shame and guilt-tripping were used to push members to commit more deeply to Agape, financially and otherwise. For instance, members were asked to give money (called “reparations and jubilee”) at their individual discretion, “as they felt led.” But David and Sarah would then say that the work of the Fellowship was to end white supremacy in the present, and that congregants were not giving enough of their money and time—thus meaning they were not committed enough to ending white supremacy.

One deacon stated that the sense from them was always ‘We need more,’ with no clear sense of what would be enough—just reproach of members for not being fully invested. This was at a time when the deacons were doing most of Agape’s hospitality work: making dinner for the entire community each week and setting up and taking down the space.

In the fall of 2018, David and Sarah also decided that the congregation needed to take more concrete steps to achieve racial justice. While the members agreed in principle, having joined Agape for its political commitments, the problem came when David and Sarah assigned deacons areas of focus that the deacons did not consult on or choose. They then assigned members to groups led by the deacons, which the members again had no input into or choice about. The areas assigned were vast (two of them were “hunger and homelessness” and “incarceration and immigration”), and the deacons and their groups weren’t given guidance, tools, or support as to how to tackle them.

Deacons committed themselves to working in their areas, but were again made to feel that they had not done enough and were not good enough. Because there had been no community buy-in in the process of forming the groups, it was difficult to organize or motivate members. According to David and Sarah, this was due to the deacons’ failure and lack of leadership.

While camaraderie was formally encouraged in Agape, shaming occurred behind the scenes. Whether or not this was the intent, the impact of this was to divide members from one another and increase their dependence on David and Sarah. David and Sarah would lament one member’s “unreadiness” to another because a person had had a sobriety relapse, or because a person had not given enough volunteer time in David and Sarah’s eyes. David and Sarah would make remarks such as “This other

person isn't as committed as you are; they aren't mature enough for this work" or "They don't have the spiritual vision to see."

Pastors or spiritual leaders from the Oakland or Bay Area communities would occasionally come to Agape services. If those guests asked questions or pushed back on anything that was said, David and Sarah would be publicly respectful, but then mock these leaders or call them "problem people" behind closed doors.

Sarah and David would also tailor their religious message according to the hearer in a way that ultimately felt manipulative, telling audiences what they wanted to hear. For instance, one of the deacons felt very strongly that they could not subscribe to a Christianity that believed that other faiths were wrong. For this person, David and Sarah softened their language and continued to profess interfaith understandings, but they were all the while preaching the primacy/supremacy of the Christian faith to other members who were more receptive. This deacon wished they had known that David and Sarah were espousing principles that went against the deacon's core beliefs, as they then would likely have left Agape earlier.

David and Sarah would hold fervent prayer circles with the Agape deacons in which they were asked to be forthcoming about obstacles that were holding them back from being more invested in Agape. These sessions were emotionally raw, and very personal material was divulged. Later on, this painful material, revealed in spiritual settings, was used by David and Sarah to critique deacons to one another and to rebuke deacons one-on-one.

Over time, the leadership style of Sarah and David became even more overtly authoritarian. Feedback from members of the church was unpredictably received by David and Sarah and might be met with rebuke, or with language implying that a member was insufficiently radical, political, or Christian.

David and Sarah's increasing authoritarianism also manifested itself as increased control over small matters. Members and visitors were chided for using their phones to read the Bible or take notes on the service. Water was typically handed out to the congregation for hospitality and people would drink water as needed during the service. However, a visitor once spilled water accidentally, and the deacons were told to walk around and take the water away from all congregants for services moving forward, so it would not disrupt the "good order" of the service. (Deacons ensured

that water was not actually taken away and continued to offer water against David and Sarah’s instructions.)

In March of 2018, Agape moved into a public space in Oakland. By the fall of 2018 the content of the church services had noticeably changed to become more overtly Christian. The “interfaith” understandings that had been part of Agape were never formally dropped: Agape Interfaith Fellowship remained the group’s name, and in [an interview David and Sarah did in April 2021](#), David said, “Sarah and I co-founded a church in Oakland, California where we used to live in 2015 – Agape Fellowship – which is an interfaith community church and a very activist church.” However, Sarah and David now taught that only Christianity could offer the nourishment and transformation necessary to fight white supremacy. Many non-Christians left the church, and as they left, the studying of other religious traditions fell away.

At one point, when discussing Exodus, a member asked David why God had killed the firstborn children of the Egyptians, wondering how to reconcile the idea of an all-loving God who would kill the innocent in that way. David forcefully threw the Bible he was holding to the ground, while rebuking the member, telling them that they could either “give up on” the Bible or accept that “this is what God gave us to fight white supremacy”. While David and Sarah continued to maintain that Agape was for “people of all spiritual paths or none,” after the Bible-throwing incident, the only members who remained were either Christians or seekers who were actively considering Christianity.

In February of 2019, Sarah and David took a “pastoral retreat” to Southern California. Shortly after they returned, they announced during service that God had instructed them to close the church immediately. This was without any consideration or collaboration with the community; it was completely sudden and unexpected.

One hour before this service began, David and Sarah told deacons they had discerned that the church needed to close. Two of the deacons were instructed to escort anyone out if they disrupted the “good order” of the service and were even given the names of specific individuals who might “cause problems.” The deacons did not agree to this.

Agape members had made a commitment to be sober in the space together and not to call the police. This agreement to keep one another safe, inherited from Black community self-determination traditions, was supposed to be for the community good. David and Sarah warped abolitionist practice by using it to turn the community against one another. The fact that David and Sarah had asked the deacons to police their fellow congregants did damage to trust between members and left lasting scars even after David and Sarah's departure.

In their final service, David and Sarah blamed the congregation for Agape's closure, saying that the people in the church were not mature, grown, or serious enough, making the church ineffective in fighting white supremacy.

After the last service, Sarah and David ghosted at least one member making attempts to reach out, eschewing any attempts at direct conversation. Another member was able to [reach out to them one-on-one](#) on May 25, 2020, expressing doubts that shutting down the church in this way was pastoral or kind and questioning the structure that would allow the community to collapse at the exit of the two pastors. [David harshly rebuked the member](#), second-guessed their faith, and told them they were questioning God, all while manipulating personal information shared by the member in pastoral care/prayer settings to object to their reactions. (They also sought to undercut the member's concerns by declaring that the member "did not raise these issues" previously despite "hav[ing] spoken three times by phone." This was an inflation of the two phone calls that had actually happened—both of which were initiated by David and kept very short.)

Looking back, the deacons felt that they had been 'collected' by David and Sarah for the appearance that their presence in Agape might give to the outside world and because they had qualities that David and Sarah wanted, such as proximity to radical Black leadership in Oakland, presence at watershed anti-fascist events, and inspiring faith journeys. These qualities of theirs were trotted out for recruitment without their permission, while their human doubts and vulnerabilities were exploited as a means of control.

Sarah and David left Oakland for New Orleans in the spring of 2019, shortly after dissolving Agape. The former deacons took on the work of community care and helping members who were grieving the loss of the church. While one of the members did reach out to David and Sarah 7–8 months after Agape's closure and

received a warm response from them, that type of exchange felt possible only when the conversation did not touch on Agape or question/challenge David and Sarah. David and Sarah never attempted to repair the damage done with former members, and many former congregants didn't hear from them after their departure until they began sending out communications for their new project, Abolition Apostles, in New Orleans.

Arrival in New Orleans and Founding of Abolition Apostles

Sarah and David began Abolition Apostles in New Orleans, LA, in the late summer of 2019 as a national jail and prison ministry to their newly founded church, [Apostles Fellowship \(Abolition Church\)](#)—not long after leaving Oakland. Their project grew rapidly throughout 2020 and beyond, particularly after a viral tweet in the fall of 2021.

Around New Orleans, they presented themselves as pastors and ministers in communities where presenting yourself as a Christian pastor gives you credibility. If not otherwise specified, calling yourself a pastor would typically imply having attended seminary, having a theology degree or M. Div., and applying to become ordained in a denomination. While David and Sarah had pastored the Agape house church in Oakland, had begun a bible study in New Orleans, and eventually founded another house church (Apostles Fellowship), they did not clarify to people they met that they were unordained lay pastors. Many were surprised to learn this information afterward, and felt that it had been withheld by Sarah and David.

Upon arrival, in their first weeks, they quickly began identifying the city's most respected faith and social justice leaders and arranging meetings with them. These included meetings with retired bishops, nationally recognized formerly incarcerated movement leaders, retired movement lawyers, and elder activists. We received multiple accounts from people they met with who were concerned by some aspect of the meeting and/or felt extracted from or used, instead of collaborated with.

Sarah and David also presented themselves as working in prison ministry, in a manner that implied to those who were themselves involved in such work that they were ministering inside the prisons and had developed relationships there. However, when asked who they visited or whose visitation list they were on inside Angola (the Louisiana State Penitentiary), they could name no one.

Angola House of Hospitality

Before Sarah and David's arrival in New Orleans, a local Catholic nun and a criminal legal system-impacted social justice movement lawyer had been working with a team of elders, abolitionists, formerly incarcerated movement leaders, and ministers to create a House of Hospitality near Angola State Penitentiary. The purpose of the house was to provide immediate housing for people being released, support for families, legal support for incarcerated people, movement-building around abolition, free childcare while loved ones visited incarcerated partners or spouses, free spiritual direction, meals, re-entry resources, and other support services. She presented this idea to local respected movement elders, organizers, and spiritual leaders and obtained their support and blessing. Having visited people at Angola for nearly two decades and as a Spiritual Advisor on Louisiana's death row accompanying people facing executions, she had also built meaningful relationships with people in the rural and remote areas of Louisiana near the prison. She began working with a real estate agent over a three-year period to identify an appropriate and affordable property in proximity to the remote prison.

Around January of 2021, David and Sarah decided to start an Abolition Apostles Hospitality House near Angola and immediately began fundraising vigorously for it. As they met with local people to obtain support and funding, several of the most nationally respected movement leaders in the city told them this was the Catholic Sister's project, and they needed to contact and meet with her. Not once did Sarah nor David contact her about their plans for a house. In April of 2021, David and Sarah organized a national concert fundraiser for their house. Between this fundraiser and [their GoFundMe page](#), they raised ([by their own account](#)) at least \$31,000 for it, and in their [promotional video](#) for the campaign, they described and showed images of a property they were fundraising to buy. However, when they left Abolition Apostles, David and Sarah also abandoned the Hospitality House project. Messages from the Catholic Sister to David and Sarah inquiring about their project and funds raised received no responses from them.

As it stands now in October of 2022, though a property was identified for the hospitality house, the vision for such a home that existed prior to David and Sarah's arrival is significantly less likely to succeed; it has been tainted by their abandonment of the project. Funds previously given by people to David and Sarah's fundraiser were given to another organization [without input from the donors](#)

[themselves](#), or any others for that matter. David and Sarah could have supported others who were already committed to the Hospitality House vision and worked in partnership with the community. If they had done so, there would have been a team to carry on the work when they stepped aside. Instead, they decided to take on a project they were not adequately prepared for, then abandon it when they left. In the end, their choice has harmed those most impacted by incarceration.

Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition

David was hired at the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition (OPPRC) as an organizer in April 2021. (The organization posted a listing, which he applied to.) While he did have a friendship with OPPRC's former Executive Director (as detailed in the [Abusive Patterns](#) section), he had been a member of OPPRC since 2019, and he was hired on the strength of his hard work as a member and for his résumé, which described organizing work he had done in Oakland.

After several weeks of paternity leave, David started work as a paid organizer for OPPRC later in the spring. It then became apparent that he did not have some of the organizing experience and skills he had listed in his résumé and was not prepared to create an outreach plan or orientation or to train canvassers. A contractor was hired for the "Help Not Handcuffs" campaign to fill those gaps. Despite the issues with David's skillset, he was working hard at that point in time, and the Executive Director wanted to give him a chance to improve and to learn from working on the campaign.

The person originally hired as a contractor for Help Not Handcuffs was hired as the OPPRC's Deputy Director because of her outstanding performance. The organization at the time had multiple full-time staff people, all of them being Black people (reflective of the community the organization served and represented) except for David. The former Deputy Director of OPPRC, a Black/Indigenous/Queer woman, became David's direct supervisor from July 2021, when she was hired, until his firing in November 2021. She shared with the writers of this letter the harm and discomfort she experienced in working with him—and shared that she contributed an account to this letter because she believes that he is a danger to movement spaces that serve historically underrepresented, systemically non-dominant, or marginalized communities.

Hired in July 2021, the Deputy Director was supposed to take over oversight of all staff supervision. There was an immediate pushback on this from David. This pushback was voiced by David to OPPRC's Executive Director (the direct supervisor of the Deputy Director) regarding his explicit discomfort with the Deputy Director's being queer and a vocally non-Christian-identifying person—that David's values didn't align with the Deputy Director's and that he was therefore uncomfortable working under her supervision. (The former ED shared that David had once referred to the Deputy Director as spiritually "unclean," which was also language he used to describe former congregants of Agape Church.)

OPPRC was not a church or faith-based organization—its former Executive Director describes it as a secular social justice, criminal justice reform organization—so David had no reason at all to expect that other employees would share his religious beliefs. The Deputy Director felt shocked and immediately knew that she was going to have to tread lightly with David, if her very existence made him uncomfortable. She wondered how he could work in social justice spaces with beliefs that did not align with the values he espoused.

The Deputy Director documented multiple awkward and uncomfortable interactions with David, one being at his first supervision check-in with her in the second week of July 2021. At this meeting, he questioned her credentials and ability to supervise him. He expressed negative feelings about having to be supervised by someone younger, and wanted to have a conversation about her résumé and the work she had done prior to her hiring at OPPRC, since, he said, he had been organizing longer than she had "been alive."

As his time at OPPRC went on, the executive leadership of OPPRC documented multiple incidents that were fireable offenses for David. A particularly problematic issue was his consistent advocacy for his own organization, Abolition Apostles, at OPPRC meetings and events, when he was present specifically in his professional capacity to represent OPPRC. The executive leadership specifically met with David before one event at which he was supposed to represent OPPRC, reminding him that this was not a moment to speak about Abolition Apostles. Both OPPRC leaders then saw him give out his pastoral business card for Abolition Apostles in front of them. This issue became so much of a problem that David had to be pulled from attending outward-facing events for OPPRC when the organization received multiple reports from organizational partners that David was not representing OPPRC.

The Executive Director also received complaints from community members that David was trying to force them to call him by the title Pastor, which made some people he interacted with uncomfortable. David's demand was experienced as antagonistic by Black trans people that OPPRC served who had previously had negative experiences with church settings.

After this issue came up, the Executive Director had a conversation with OPPRC's HR. To protect the organization, HR gave the instruction that all organizers should use first and last names with the community, since they had been hired as secular organizers—not in a pastoral capacity—and especially since David was not an ordained pastor; his use of that title could be perceived as misleading. David responded to this instruction with anger: it took three conversations on the topic before he removed the title "Pastor" from his voicemail and email.

The Executive Director also observed David's failure to attend events at which he was supposed to represent OPPRC. One of the expectations in hiring an organizer was that OPPRC would be able to show up for the issues of coalition partners and organize on their behalf. OPPRC was partnering with Black-led groups, trans-led groups, and youth groups who needed every ounce of that support. David would have events on his calendar, but then the Executive Director would hear from partners that he had not attended, which negatively impacted OPPRC's reputation, given OPPRC had promised to send someone.

Hurricane Ida hit on August 29, 2021, the 16th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, making landfall in Louisiana near Grand Isle. Though luckily the levee system in New Orleans held, the power grid was badly damaged, and the city was even more impacted considering the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic filling hospitals and testing the city's emergency response capacity.

New Orleans was out of power for nine days after Ida hit, and New Orleanians were starving, heat-exhausted, and in serious need of resources. The staff of OPPRC (primarily the Deputy Director, a prior communications staff person, and the Executive Director) were all-in committed to the task of allocating and sending over \$67,000 in immediate aid funds to New Orleanians. There was no support from David in this process, which was expected in his work role.

As David's documented performance issues continued, the Executive Leadership realized that every time a new member met with David to learn more about the organization or how to become more deeply involved, they subsequently disappeared. Members who had been previously enthusiastic stopped coming to events and stopped responding to messages from staff members. From the Executive Leadership's perspective, it felt as though David had moved from representing Abolition Apostles instead of OPPRC when on the clock as an OPPRC employee, to actively de-organizing from within.

This concern was borne out in November 2021, when David was fired after continued performance issues of the type described above. At this point, he began relentlessly badmouthing the Executive Leadership of OPPRC (the Executive Director was a personal friend of his who had done a great deal to support him and his family in getting their footing in New Orleans). He felt it appropriate to try to organize against the organization's leadership for giving him feedback about his own well-documented work performance issues, and for ending his employment when he rejected the chance to work collaboratively to correct those issues.

(After this open letter was finalized, we discovered a public account of a similar instance in Oakland in which David orchestrated a power grab within an organization he was part of. With the permission of the author of the account and after having the incidents within it confirmed by several participants, we are [linking it here](#) to show the continuity in David's behavior over time. This Oakland incident occurred over six years earlier.)

David responded to feedback and accountability for his own choices by lashing out—a pattern documented in many of the accounts found in this letter, in which David and Sarah repeatedly respond to calls for accountability either by fleeing or attacking. It is not easy to be critiqued, and some amount of distress is understandable, but in responding to feedback by treating those giving it as enemies, David put anger above his relationships with colleagues and the community, and above the people and mission he purported to serve. (He also misrepresented the cause of his termination to Abolition Apostles coordinators [in a meeting on 2/17/22](#), where he stated he was fired “with no notice as a result of workplace organizing.”)

OPPRC is now defunct. While it faced growing pains, like any rapidly expanding organization, both Directors agree that one of the biggest issues for an organization that did so much important work for incarcerated New Orleanians was David. Without the harm David did and his disregard for the restorative approaches he touted alignment with, the organization would have been in a position to resolve any issues and come out stronger.

One year later, David's current [biography](#) as Executive Director for Death Penalty states, "David was lead organizer for the Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition (OPPRC), coordinating successful efforts to stop jail construction, elect a more progressive sheriff, and develop a non-police crisis response hotline."

David here is not only praising the "successful efforts" of an organization he actively campaigned against, but claiming credit for the work of others. He was one of two organizers hired, but not "lead" organizer—which was not a position at OPPRC. Considering that he was on paternity leave in the beginning of his employment, he worked actively at OPPRC (an organization founded in 2004) for less than six months.

To address the specific elements listed in David's biography:

- "coordinating successful efforts to stop jail construction":
 - OPPRC stopped a jail expansion in 2019 before David was hired, but the jail expansion that he worked on has not been stopped: the jail is being expanded.
- "elect a more progressive sheriff":
 - David was fired before the new sheriff was elected and did not work on the start of the community-education campaign informing New Orleanians of the benefits of electing a more progressive candidate.
- "develop a non-police crisis response hotline":
 - This campaign (for a non-police crisis response team, not a hotline) started in 2020 during the uprisings, when the former Executive Director was the only staff member at OPPRC. The Deputy Director began their work with OPPRC as a contractor for this campaign, Help Not Handcuffs, which had been planned long before their tenure or David's.
 - The Deputy Director built the outreach plan, facilitated the canvassing training for members, and created the protocol documents. As an

organizer helping with community outreach and turnout for the campaign, David supported some of those pieces, but did not play a leadership role.

- Also, the work is still happening: the former Executive Director is co-chair of the task force behind the effort, and the contract is set to be signed now—almost a year since David left New Orleans. He was not involved in the bulk of the work, which took place before he joined and after he left OPPRC.

Abolition Apostles

The formation and development of Abolition Apostles happened as all of the above events occurred with OPPRC, though Abolition Apostles members were not informed about David's actions within that organization. Abolition Apostles grew rapidly, and several working groups formed to manage the workload of matching an ever-growing list of inside incarcerated people with outside volunteers. In November 2021, a couple of working group members found inconsistencies in the Abolition Apostles database and attempted to bring them to David's attention for further guidance to reconcile the information. When they did not receive a response, they followed up, always with considerate and respectful language (see correspondence [here](#)).

In response, Sarah and David sent an email (included in the previous link) to multiple people, though addressed to a single volunteer, asserting sole "pastoral authority," blaming and shaming that volunteer for their work, and forbidding them from volunteering for the next few weeks. (This action of forcing someone out of a project by stating the individual was "overworked" was one they had also done [over six years prior in Oakland](#).) They stated that if any other members did not like the way things were operating, they should leave the ministry. The message had a harsh and disciplinary tone, and since it was castigating a single person while being sent to a group, functioned as a public shaming. Following this, the targeted member shared an [open letter](#) detailing these events, including the contents of the email, with the working group coordinators and the wider community of Abolition Apostles volunteers.

Sarah and David did not address the letter until volunteers requested to speak about it in a [leadership meeting](#) (consisting of working group coordinators) and a [public community meeting](#) in response to the events. The volunteers who had been

targeted in Sarah and David's email were not invited to be part of either conversation. When this was brought up, Sarah and David said that these volunteers had chosen to leave the group and thus excluded themselves. During both meetings, Sarah and David used the time to personally attack the targeted volunteers and defend themselves. They saw the conflict as a distraction from the ministerial work and refused to acknowledge any responsibility they had in escalating things. Their solution to the distress and concern felt by community members was to share a new "[covenant](#)" that volunteers would have to sign, which stated that Sarah and David had final decision-making authority in all matters.

Members who participated in these conversations were surprised at their defensive and hostile tone and found that the meetings raised more questions than they resolved. Some volunteers, including working group coordinators, left in solidarity, and several coordinators organized [a collective letter via email to Sarah and David](#) to invite them into a community accountability process, specifically asking as well for space for volunteers to digest recent events without Sarah and David present. (This would then have been followed by a meeting with Sarah and David.) Instead, David and Sarah responded via email that [they would be stepping down from the leadership of Abolition Apostles effective immediately](#). They offered one [90-minute transition meeting with the coordinators](#) and requested to never be contacted again afterwards.

Prior to these events, Sarah and David had expressed a need to reduce their responsibilities and asked coordinators at a monthly meeting to direct their questions to a new student intern who was serving as national coordinator, noting that they were under stress in their personal lives. They did not notify the national coordinator of their departure before announcing it to others: the national coordinator found out at the same time as other volunteers via Sarah and David's resignation email. In the organizing members' initial calls for discussion and accountability, Sarah and David's stress was acknowledged and members offered a slower timeline to take their stress into consideration.

Instead of negotiating a pace that met their needs, Sarah and David announced their abrupt resignation. Volunteers were left to pick up the pieces without much information and with many of the organizational tools (email, social media, Paypal, Patreon, etc.) still linked to Sarah and David. The alternative was to dissolve the organization, leaving incarcerated people—the people the organization serves—to

suffer the loss of relationships and services they were depending on. While the group recognized the stress Sarah and David were experiencing, patterns of behavior from previous organizing situations suggest this was not an isolated, stress-driven incident, but instead a long-standing pattern of behavior.

Communications with People in Prison

Throughout their time in Abolition Apostles, David and Sarah spoke of personally having a number of incarcerated penpals. They corresponded directly with people inside both through the Abolition Apostles PO Box and JPay account. By abruptly leaving the organization, they chose to give up access to both these forms of communication—and yet the messages addressed to them still came pouring in.

We can't be certain which of these individuals might have had ongoing relationships with David and Sarah (as opposed to smaller-scale communications around commissary requests, penpal sign-ups, etc.), but we do know that a volunteer was left wading through JPay messages in the months that followed, trying to answer questions about where they'd gone while also navigating getting people the assistance they needed. We also know that [David had previously ended a penpal relationship without notice or explanation](#) to the incarcerated individual, which makes this a troubling pattern of behavior.

Although Sarah and David instructed new volunteers in orientations about the importance of communicating clearly with folks inside and declared that the ministry was designed "[in service to those who are incarcerated](#)," they took no steps to clarify to Abolition Apostles' incarcerated membership their decision to withdraw from further contact.

Finances

During the final 90-minute discussion David and Sarah had with the coordinators, several issues arose related to finances and accountability of the group. Sarah and David started a [GoFundMe](#) in January 2021 to raise money for a hospitality house near the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola ([detailed above](#)). During the meeting, they shared that they collected \$31,000 over the course of the fundraiser, including additional funds outside of the GoFundMe. Without any discussion or input from the Abolition Apostles group, Sarah and David elected to donate this money to a different organization, without sharing a receipt that the money had in fact been donated. Former volunteers had to do their own due diligence to [confirm](#)

[the donation was in fact made](#). (Notice the discrepancy between the confirmed donation and the fundraising total shared in the [2/17/22 transition meeting](#), for which we are aware of no explanation.) Several people reached out to Abolition Apostles afterwards, upset that—rather than being returned to them—their contributions had been donated to a separate organization without their consent.

Organizationally, David and Sarah had a habit of mingling their personal funds with organizational funds. For instance, [the group took donations through David's personal Venmo](#), and the Abolition Apostles bank account was in David and Sarah's name, which meant that it had to be closed when they left the organization. Their identification of themselves and their personal channels with the organization made their unilateral withdrawal of participation in Abolition Apostles more destructive than it would have been in a case where personal and organizational finances were not intertwined. In another example of nonstandard financial behavior left unexplained to others in the organization, the Abolition Apostles Gmail account (which David and Sarah had controlled) [was linked to a \\$200 purchase of Bitcoin](#). This was discovered by chance as an Abolition Apostles volunteer went through messages after David and Sarah had left—and the Bitcoin remains unaccounted for.

Sarah and David expected a volunteer to open a new bank account in order to manage the finances of the organization, with no time for discussion or to sort out any of the implications of accepting money for the collective (such as taxes, which remained an ongoing concern). They initially asked for this change to happen in just a matter of days. The entire process was marked by confusion, uncertainty, and stress, and because of the abrupt departure and finances/logistics connected to it, Abolition Apostles was then forced to abandon its national hotline that offered spiritual and emotional support (as well as advocacy) for inside folks. Those coordinating the hotline did their best to mitigate the harm of a quick shutdown, but inside folks who had been regular callers to the hotline inevitably lost this resource quickly—some without any warning at all. This harm is directly attributable to Sarah and David's rushed resignation.

Leadership and Accountability

Sarah and David previously named an Advisory Board for Abolition Apostles of mostly BIPOC organizers and people impacted by incarceration that they claimed they reported to for their own accountability. These individuals were listed on the organization's website and mentioned in meetings, but it came out during their

90-minute transition meeting that Sarah and David had no active relationship or lines of discussion with any of the Advisory Board members. It was later confirmed [at least one member was added to the Advisory Board without their consent or knowledge](#). No Abolition Apostles members or leadership were aware of this use of people's names and images without actual consultation. Throughout their work at Abolition Apostles, Sarah and David repeatedly asserted that the organization, and in particular Abolition Church, was led by queer and BIPOC people. While this initially seemed to be a way to center and acknowledge the work of queer and/or Black and Brown organizers who were part of the organization, it quickly became clear that the voices of these individuals were not being truly valued or centered. Instead, their presence was a veneer, used to gaslight and deflect pushback. When many of these same individuals who Sarah and David had named as leaders expressed their concerns with the conflict and called for transformation and accountability, they were ignored.

Interactions with Other Faith-Based Abolitionist Organizations

Sarah and David, representing Abolition Apostles, reached out to two other faith-based abolitionist organizations in late 2020 about an abolitionist campaign that they were hoping to involve churches in. The three groups collaborated to develop an initiative, which they announced on their websites and social media in January 2021. The day after they each announced the initiative, people with various relationships to Agape Fellowship—some of whom have long-term relationships with leaders of one of the other organizations—reached out to the organizers to let them know about their experiences with Sarah and David. While the organizations had first wanted to end the initiative when they learned of David & Sarah's history of harm, they hoped instead to use this as an opportunity for accountability and transformation. In consultation with impacted folks from Agape, they planned to propose that the collaborative initiative could only continue if Sarah and David would agree to take part in an accountability process with people from Agape who were willing to engage in that process with them, and to agree to some sort of ongoing accountability structure around their new ministry (Abolition Apostles) to avoid similar harm being repeated there. They reached out to David for a call.

When they brought up the subject with Sarah and David, David became accusatory, asking who they had heard information from and then trying to discredit the person that they named (who was one of multiple sources but the only one willing to be named in the conversation). Sarah and David claimed they had been “ambushed” on

the call and did not have time to prepare for the conversation. However, the organizations learned later that Sarah and David were in fact aware of the topic of the conversation in advance: an advocate had already reached out to Sarah and David on behalf of a group of Agape congregants, telling Sarah and David that they would be contacting the organizations.

In this meeting, David and Sarah called the sources who had reached out to the organizations arrogant, self-righteous, liars, and people suffering from “deep spiritual sickness.” They repeatedly claimed that as pastors, they had the spiritual authority to end Agape as they did and refused to engage in any accountability process for the harm that ending Agape in that manner caused. They claimed all restorative and transformative justice models to be “white liberal magic” and insisted they would only respond to individual contacts “following Matthew 18.” (See “[Overview of Abusive Patterns](#)” for more on Matthew 18.) When asked about their mode of accountability at Abolition Apostles, they claimed to be in relationship with Black movement leaders, but would not name them.

The organizational leaders, one of whom was an ordained clergy person, urged David and Sarah to understand that pastoral authority sets up a power dynamic in which individuals may find it difficult to name harm in private one-on-one settings. The leaders left the conversation with deep concerns about how Sarah and David understood pastoral authority as total power and accountability processes other than one-on-one conversations as invalid, as well as how they willingly denigrated people they had pastored and been in relationship with.

Sarah and David took a week to reflect on whether they would engage in an accountability process—even one beginning as a neutral conversation/mediation, which was one option the organizations suggested—and [then sent a long email](#) in which they continued rejecting any process besides Matthew 18. They stated that pastoral authority meant they alone had the power to make decisions about the community; accused members of Agape and other leaders in Oakland of “toxic behavior” and “act[ing] in bad faith”; and used Scripture to suggest that the organizations’ leaders were disrespectful, unloving, and lacking in judgment and discipleship. They were clear that they would not engage in any sort of communal accountability process, but would only engage with Agape community members in one-on-one conversations. They did not address the request for transparency about people and relationships they were accountable to at Abolition Apostles.

At this point, the organizations ended the collaboration with Abolition Apostles, but stayed in touch with each other to problem-solve situations (such as when people asked about joining the Abolition Apostles penpal program) that necessitated them speaking about their experience, while honoring Agape’s request to not go public at that time.

Following these conversations, another individual who had partnered with David and Sarah on various smaller efforts reached out for a conversation with David and Sarah to discuss a number of concerns. These included matters like David and Sarah’s response to the request for conversation and accountability from individuals involved with Agape; their response to the organizations mentioned above; and concerns from these groups that Abolition Apostles—which was fundraising significant money for the Angola Hospitality house and had made significant commitments to incarcerated people—might end as abruptly as previous projects, leaving incarcerated people hung out to dry.

In this conversation, Sarah and David gave assurances that they would never end Abolition Apostles in the same way that they ended Agape, which unfortunately proved to be untrue. David also made a number of concerning comments, including that there are frequently tensions between him and queer women because he is a “man who acts with authority,” and that many movement spaces can only tolerate men who have been “neutered.” Sarah and David also explained their view of pastoral authority requiring a “strong executive,” citing the need for strong executive pastors in Black churches during the era of the Ku Klux Klan.

Lack of Accountability in Outside Partnerships

After [the open letter about alarming communications from David and Sarah](#) was posted on Abolition Apostles’ Slack, an Abolition Apostles volunteer in New Orleans wrote in to share an account of issues with David and Sarah’s communication in the fall of 2021. This volunteer is a college professor and helped facilitate a service learning course at their university that would partner with Abolition Apostles. While the volunteer did not teach the course, she did feel some responsibility for its success since she had put the wheels in motion for it. At the initial meeting in the summer, David was very enthusiastic, and it was agreed that the class could be useful for the incarcerated people that Abolition Apostles serves and provide valuable experience to the students. When the volunteer checked in with the

instructor towards the end of the semester, he said that David and Sarah had vanished, not responding to communications and leaving the students without anything to do. The volunteer was particularly disappointed to hear that a trip to visit incarcerated people in the area never happened due to David and Sarah's email silence. The lack of communication meant that no one was in a position to arrange an alternate plan for the students. The volunteer who had facilitated these connections within her university for Abolition Apostles never heard from David and Sarah herself about this, and she would not even have known that the class project did not happen if she had not reached out to the professor.

Ripple Effect of Harm

One of David's former co-workers from The Promise of Justice Initiative, who had had positive experiences with him there and considered him a friend as well as a colleague, came to him to ask about doing work for Abolition Apostles. An experienced organizer, they were interested in bringing their skillset to more grassroots organizing. David welcomed this involvement and introduced this person to the Abolition Apostles National Coordinator, who helped them integrate into active participation. A few weeks afterwards, messages began to circulate in the Abolition Apostles Slack around [the open letter mentioned previously](#). This new volunteer (David's former co-worker) reached out to David repeatedly via call and text as a friend to better understand his perspective and offer support, but never received any response—not even one simply stating that David and Sarah had left Abolition Apostles.

While it was personally painful for this volunteer to be ghosted by David, it was also detrimental to their organizing with Abolition Apostles. David and Sarah's sudden abandonment of the organizing responsibility they had taken on meant a sudden and dramatic increase of responsibility for others, plus the loss of tools to do the work. This volunteer detailed going to the post office to pick up hundreds of letters from incarcerated individuals seeking assistance, scanning them at their workplace to try to keep up with the pace of them—plus receiving a bill for \$600 for the PO Box that they had no means to pay. They soon realized that they were in an untenable situation: both they and the friends they had recruited to help saw no choice but to withdraw from involvement with Abolition Apostles.

David continues to cite Abolition Apostles and his work there in various online biographies, including [his Executive Director biography for Death Penalty Focus](#), as

of September 2022. What this claim excludes is that, while David and Sarah did found Abolition Apostles, their abrupt departure was destructive to the organization's viability. Other organizations David cites in his biography (OPPRC, the two churches he co-pastored) are also now completely defunct. Abolition Apostles is rebuilding thanks to many volunteers who have been working toward repair—without David and Sarah's support, consultation, or acknowledgement. After abdicating their leadership positions at Abolition Apostles, Sarah and David left New Orleans for New York. Some of the writers of this letter have continued their involvement with the community-led transition of (formerly known as) Abolition Apostles, with the goal of transforming the organization's internal dynamics to reflect the love and justice that they as abolitionists want to see in the world.

Apostles Fellowship (Abolition Church)

Sarah and David began Abolition Apostles as a ministry project of [the Apostles Fellowship community](#) (which was also frequently referred to as Abolition Church). During a sermon, Sarah and David said they had discerned that [the church was to meet on Zoom](#)³ and offer fellowship that was not location-dependent.

When Sarah and David abandoned their leadership at Abolition Apostles in February 2022, they also shut down Apostles Fellowship—again abruptly and without warning. Though Sarah and David left New Orleans, services could have continued, since the church did not meet in a physical space. Sarah and David said they had made an idol of abolition and placed abolition above God, and therefore the church needed to close. There was no recognition of the difficulty or stress placed on members who relied on Sarah and David for counsel, or those who relied on Apostles Fellowship as a source of spiritual community.

One deacon recounted their experience of the above events as confusing, disappointing and hurtful. They had been attending Apostles Fellowship since fall of 2020 and had formed a deep relationship with Sarah and David, relying on them for pastoral counsel. Eventually, they were approached to prayerfully consider becoming a Deacon of Apostles Fellowship. After accepting, they worked closely

³ **Editor's Note, 7/20/23:** *This YouTube video was made private after the publication of our letter at the request of one of its participants, a former member of Abolition Church.*

with Sarah and David in both the ministry work of Abolition Apostles and the Apostles Fellowship church, and they met with Sarah and David weekly.

When this deacon first read the [public-shaming email exchange](#), they gave Sarah and David the benefit of the doubt and had a phone conversation with them. David and Sarah explained what happened but did not express any remorse for their words and did not seem to understand their impact, regardless of their intent. The deacon shared confusion about what “pastoral authority” might mean for Abolition Apostles as a non-religious, non-Christian ministry in which most of the volunteers (including the one in the exchange linked above) had no affiliation with Apostles Fellowship. After the ensuing [coordinator](#) and [community](#) meetings, the deacon then had two follow-up conversations with David and Sarah about this issue—neither of which resulted in clarity or reflection about what could have been done better on David and Sarah’s part, other than making sure volunteers understood the hierarchy more clearly.

After prayer and seeking wise counsel, the deacon decided to approach Sarah and David a final time. They explained directly that they had concerns about what the situation highlighted about David and Sarah’s leadership style, particularly the reluctance to take feedback and consider others’ feelings. Due to such, the deacon was planning to take a step back from duties from the church and ministry for a month to pray and consider their level of involvement. David and Sarah responded politely, saying they would welcome a conversation once that month was up to re-evaluate.

During the week that followed, this individual heard from a fellow deacon that David and Sarah were planning to leave the ministry (meaning Abolition Apostles; this was the language they used for the organization); they subsequently received [a mass email communication](#) from David and Sarah with that news. David and Sarah never reached out to ask the deacon to join them in prayer or consideration. The following week, the deacon also got word (not from the ‘pastors’) that they would also be closing the church. David and Sarah never privately communicated this to the deacon and have not spoken with them since.

OVERVIEW OF ABUSIVE PATTERNS

The Fundamentals of Spiritual Abuse

In their book *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, researchers Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphrey define spiritual abuse as “a systematic pattern of controlling and coercive behavior in a religious context.” We believe that such a pattern has been amply demonstrated by specific examples in our timeline. Mark Sibbe, a victim of spiritual abuse in England in the late 1970s and early 1980s, described how his abuser enforced “a religion of fear and of performance” (*Escaping the Maze*, Foreword). This phrase describes what Agape members came to experience with David and Sarah: religion narrowed to meeting the pastors’ never-satisfied performance expectations, driven by fear and shame.

Oakley and Humphrey list 12 characteristics of spiritual abuse (*Escaping the Maze*, Chapter 3). We will list each with a brief example drawn from the accounts, followed by longer descriptions of David and Sarah’s misuse of pastoral and scriptural authority:

- *Pressuring congregants into service or conformity*: the experience of Agape deacons fits what Oakley and Humphrey describe as “undue pressure” and “feeling unable to say no to increasing demands for time, service, and obedience” (p. 43). This type of spiritual abuse is characterized by judging people’s relationship with God by their acts of service to the church: David and Sarah made such judgments outright, and used them to pit members against each other.
- *Bullying people to conform to a certain doctrine*: Oakley and Humphrey write, “If we pressure people into agreeing with our viewpoint we steer away from the freedom God gives us to choose” (p. 44). Seen when David and Sarah responded to questioning with anger and narrowed the doctrinal focus at Agape, or when David pushed to bring a Christian focus into secular OPPRC work.
- *Forced accountability*: “When people are told that they must share every aspect of their life for scrutiny, this can lead to coercion and pressure” (p. 45). Instances such as the prayer circles at Agape, when deacons were pressured to share personal information that was then used to shame them.

- *Gaslighting*: Whenever someone or a community experienced harm done by David and Sarah, that incident was, as Oakley and Humphrey state, “followed by either a denial of the incident or a retelling or twisting of the story which suggests that the behavior was actually positive” (p. 46).
- *Pressure to Stay Quiet & the Impossibility of Disagreement: Escaping the Maze* discusses how, in cases of spiritual abuse, there is often a ‘honeymoon period’ that ends when there are questions asked: questions and disagreement are met with intense negativity. This came up in David and Sarah’s responses to other Christian abolitionist organizations; with Agape members who raised questions after they closed the church; within Abolition Apostles, when a volunteer’s concerns were met with increasing defensiveness and hostility; and so on.
- *“We Are the Elect”*: David and Sarah preached that their approach was the only way to combat white supremacy and denigrated other faith leaders, organizations, and even their own members or volunteers whom they felt were insufficiently zealous, meeting the criteria described in *Escaping the Maze* of “the tendency for people within spiritually abusive contexts to believe their church/organization is superior with a higher understanding of Scripture... [a] puffed-up view” (p. 49).
- *Fear-Based Rather than Love-Based*: Particularly relevant in the case of Agape, but also found in Abolition Apostles, where people who saw one volunteer publicly shamed and summarily dismissed could fear that others would face the same consequence for disagreement.
- *The Misuse of Scripture*: [Detailed below](#).
- *Claiming Divine Calling*: In spiritually abusive contexts, it is often held that to disobey the pastor is to disobey God; the pastor is anointed in a way that forestalls questions. We cover this topic as relevant to David and Sarah below, under [“Pastoral Authority.”](#)
- *Using the Name of God & Threats of Spiritual Consequences*: Oakley and Humphrey describe how using God’s name and the threat of spiritual inadequacy as a way to coerce others is one of the most harmful aspects of spiritual abuse, as it can “damage personal faith and belief in God” (p. 58). David and Sarah did this directly, accusing members who disagreed with them of being weak in their faith. They also used other goals that were intensely meaningful to their audience (such as “Ending white supremacy” and “Supporting incarcerated people”) as instruments of control, by implying that

disagreement meant betraying these ideals, rather than a different idea about how to achieve them.

Pastoral Authority and Establishing Hierarchy

Many of the harmful patterns perpetrated by Sarah and David throughout our timeline are obvious. A particularly clear pattern in our interactions has been their use of spiritual authority to justify abusive behavior. In multiple instances, they evoked the language of “pastoral authority” to justify their authoritarian decision-making and suggest that others had no right to question anything they were doing. When community members attempted to offer accountability processes, they declared their accountability to God and to no other individuals, relationships, or structures. While they gave lip service to horizontal structures, Sarah and David’s insistence that decision-making was theirs alone became increasingly rigid and a means of justifying harm.

As non-denominational lay pastors, Sarah and David provided pastoral guidance and counseling to many people, without oversight or accountability from a larger church, denomination, active advisory board, or other organizational structure. When community members questioned decisions or suggested alternatives, Sarah and David said they had engaged in “discernment” by praying heavily around the matter and that their approach was thus indisputably correct. They did not appear to consider that the spiritual discernment of others in their community might present a perspective worth considering, too.

As an example, before David and Sarah arrived in New Orleans around May of 2019, they called one local well-respected faith leader and Spiritual Director, telling her that God was calling them to New Orleans and asking to stay in her home. As a Spiritual Director, she inquired about their discernment process, explaining that the city was already over-saturated with people coming in without local experience or knowledge. When she inquired as to why they were coming to New Orleans, they responded that they wanted “to help Black people and Black movements.”

She inquired about the movements they worked with in California and received vague and confusing answers. Reminding them that there are movements they could support where they are from, she specifically discouraged them from coming to New Orleans. Even though they had reached out to a Spiritual Director, they did not consider her advice as part of their discernment process, even to the extent of

taking a step back to get to know and serve the community before stepping into leadership roles.

When David and Sarah arrived in New Orleans, faith leaders there observed that they showed up without invitations to meetings that were not for them (for example, meetings that were for system-impacted people) and would sit in the front, always making themselves seen or known. At press conferences, they would take the microphone while respected Elders and Black native New Orleanian Pastors were waiting on the sidelines. Both in church and organizational settings and in public, they had a habit of putting themselves and their authority first.

Using Scripture to Scapegoat and Avoid Accountability

Sarah and David also have repeatedly refused accountability processes or larger conversations by citing Christian scripture. They repeatedly referenced a call from Ephesians 4:15 “to speak the truth in love” and couched their shaming rhetoric as stern compassion. Those who participated in such conversations with Sarah and David reported feeling gaslit, demeaned, and dismissed without any serious self-reflection or recognition of their own harm. Sarah and David have referenced Matthew 18:15 multiple times, which says, “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother,” stating that speaking one-to-one was the only appropriate process for conflict resolution. Yet they failed to initiate these one-to-one conversations themselves when conflict arose.

When others reached out to them for such conversations, David and Sarah responded defensively: gaslighting, attacking, and deflecting, as described in this letter. Instead of helping David and Sarah understand their impacts on others, one-on-one conversations have been used by David and Sarah to evade responsibility. They are not alone in this tactic: in his book about spiritual abuse, *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse*, Wade Mullen describes abusive pastors and organizations who use Matthew 18 in this way, to isolate and confuse those they have harmed and avoid larger systems of accountability—whether community-based or legal. In one particularly chilling moment, Mullen quotes an abusive pastor using language familiar to those who spoke with Sarah and David: “When did this root of bitterness begin growing in you?” he asked... ‘And why haven’t you followed Matthew 18?’” (*Something's Not Right*, p. 86).

What [those who use Matthew 18 as a silencing tactic](#) leave out is that Matthew 18 goes on to state that if individuals are not heard one-on-one, the next step is to move toward group accountability, first with “two or a few”, and then with the whole church. It was not until a group began meeting to discuss and draft this letter that we learned just how many people had reached out to Sarah and David one-on-one, despite their protests to the contrary, and were met with silence or rebuke. It is well past the point where it’s appropriate for a larger community to speak out.

Misrepresenting Accountability to Black Leaders and Movements

Sarah and David also used proximity to prominent radical Black leadership to bolster their image in ways that were not actually accountable to Black leadership. Furthermore, when those Black leaders called for conversation around particular incidents of harm, rather than listening, Sarah and David instead abruptly left the organizations and communities with no accountability to those they worked with and served. They instead elected to create new organizations where they replicated the same harm.

A specific example is the experience of the former Executive Director of OPPRC, a Black social justice and criminal justice reform leader in New Orleans who came to feel exploited by David and Sarah. She met them through a one-on-one meeting: they had reached out to her because people were telling David and Sarah of her work in the community. She wanted to help them find their feet in New Orleans and befriended them, offering fiscal support, and inviting them to her house for a weekly bible study and to feed them.

After three months of knowing one another, David and Sarah asked the former ED to be the godmother for their first baby; she was the one to throw Sarah’s baby shower. When the former ED was in public with David and Sarah, they were quick to tell people they met, “[The former ED] is our baby’s godmother.” In a city of close-knit communities and multi-generational families like New Orleans, this connection served to increase their legitimacy in Black and movement communities that might otherwise be hesitant to trust a newcomer who had moved to the city to organize.

Looking back, the ED felt, after the events described in the OPPRC section, that David and Sarah had been taking advantage of her: getting close to her when they needed her organizing bona fides and community reputation, then discarding the

relationship when it was no longer useful to them. Other Black organizers who had worked closely with Sarah and David described similar patterns of exploitation.

New Orleans is a predominantly (over 60%) Black city, and 90% of people in New Orleans jails are Black. Christianity has been and continues to be an inspiration for many criminal justice reform organizers, and many in the working group draw on their own Christian faith as a source of strength in their work (including the former ED of OPPRC). However, through their authoritarian behavior and lack of accountability, David and Sarah went into Black organizing spaces and recreated an oppressive white supremacist dynamic seen so often in history, in which Christianity was used to build power for white people at Black people's expense.

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

Rather than actively engaging concerns, Sarah and David turned to many characteristics of white supremacy culture (from Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones' "[White Supremacy Culture](#)" in *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*), including:

- *defensiveness*: for example, they stated that their original intentions and actions were being misconstrued and that they had always been transparent about what power structures were like in their organizations; they had little interest in reflection or learning from challenges, instead assuming that someone else was at fault; they considered disagreements with others to reflect the other person's personal failings, rather than miscommunications or mistakes;
- *power-hoarding*: for example, increasingly turning to "pastoral authority" to dismiss concerns; writing up a volunteer contract that reasserted their sole decision-making authority, further centralizing power in response to volunteers' requests for repair;
- *paternalism*: for example, they implied that volunteers would not be able to find better organizations to volunteer for if they left; they wrote to volunteers, congregants, and other abolitionists or pastors in condescending and dismissive tones;
- *either/or thinking*: for example, they explained how they had seen calls for accountability turn into means of group punishment in the past and therefore no calls for accountability could ever be warranted; as soon as people expressed they would not continue with the organization as is, instead of

pursuing organizational transformation, they elected to abdicate their leadership positions;

- *worship of the written word*: as previously noted, they quoted biblical scripture to justify harsh treatment or shaming, as though the pain their words caused was unimportant because ‘correct’ scripture had been used;
- *quantity over quality*: for example, they claimed the desire to repair conflicts in Abolition Apostles was centering volunteers’ emotions over incarcerated people’s needs, focusing on the number of inside penpals served rather than the integrity of the organization

A FINAL NOTE ON ACCOUNTABILITY

Given that those of us who wrote this letter represent people who have worked on various projects with Sarah and David over several years and have seen the same patterns emerge, it is clear to us they continue to mask and erase their harm while moving across the country, founding new projects as they go, because their behavior has made staying in one place untenable. **The pattern has continued; as of late September, Sarah and David recently moved again, back to Oakland, California, where [David has become executive director](#) of another nonprofit organization centered on criminal justice, Death Penalty Focus.**⁴

As people who participated in these organizations and initiatives, we take responsibility for not understanding, naming, disrupting, and/or transforming these dynamics earlier on. We hope that this letter can be part of our process of taking accountability.

We feel differently about where to go from here: some of us wish to close the chapter with Sarah and David, and others still wish for reconciliation. However, we all agree that this information was important to share in hopes of preventing future harm.

If you have concerns, questions, comments, or your own story to share, we encourage you to reach out to our collective of folks impacted by Sarah and David at DavidAndSarahOpenLetter@gmail.com.

⁴ **Editor’s Note, 7/20/23:** David’s time as DPF ED ended in Dec. 2022. See footnote #2 for more.

With love and solidarity,

Signers

Signers have either directly contributed to this letter or have first-hand experience with David and/or Sarah that supports its conclusions. (There are also several individuals who were not comfortable publicly signing their names or organizations, but who contributed significantly to crafting this letter.)

Elizabeth Ardent

Natasha Baker, former Abolition Apostles volunteer

Vern Baxter, OPPRC member

Hannah Bowman

Olivia Buckley, former deacon of Apostles Fellowship (Abolition Church)

Nicole Deane, former member of Agape Fellowship

Sade Dumas, former Orleans Parish Prison Reform Coalition Executive Director

Rev. Anne Dunlap

Paul Ebenkamp, former Agape member, Bay Area poetry community

Stephanie Espinoza

Kelly Gismondi

Sara Gozalo, former co-worker and former Abolition Apostles volunteer

Carlina Green, former Abolition Apostles' Spanish/Immigration Working Group
Coordinator

Joss Greene, former friend to Sarah

Norris Henderson, Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)

Micah Herskind

Sophie Holdorff

Kelsey Huse, Abolition Apostles volunteer and penpal

Jaden Janak, PhD Candidate in Black Studies and Abolition Apostles volunteer

Grant Kerber, former organizer alongside David and former Agape member

Lauren Levin, Bay Area poetry community

Beck Levy

Alfred Marshall

Hayle Meyerhoff, former co-worker

Sage Michael, Community Activist/ Advocate

Lexi Petersen-Burge, former Deputy Director, OPPRC

Shera Phillips

Bonnie Porter, OPPRC member and Louisiana Books 2 Prisoners organizer
Melian Radu, former Abolition Apostles volunteer
Rev. Katherine C. Rand, PhD, former Abolition Apostles volunteer
Bruce Reilly, Voice of the Experienced (VOTE)
Logan Rimel, former deacon of Agape Fellowship
Brandon Roiger, former Abolition Apostles volunteer
Jacquelyn Stern, OPPRC member
Danielle Stirgus
Rachel Taber, immigrant rights organizer with Union Migrante and former Congress
of Day Laborers Organizer
Yvette Thierry, OPPRC
Jamie Townsend, former Agape member and Bay Area poetry community
Jesse Turner, former deacon of Agape Fellowship
Kelsey Westbrook, Abolition Apostles volunteer
Alison, Social Justice Movement Lawyer, Restorative Justice Facilitator, and Spiritual
Advisor on Louisiana's Death Row

Endorsers

Endorsers have read the letter and wish to support it.

Marvin Arnold
Lucy Blumberg
Michael Cahoon, New Orleans organizer
Micah Christensen, current Abolition Apostles penpal
Michael Cross, Bay Area Poet and Teacher
Karin Dahl, Oakland resident and former friend to David
Olive Demar, former friend of David and Sarah
Katie DiPiero, Abolition Apostle volunteer
Jarrett Martin Drake
Lara Durback, Bay Area poetry community and former friend to David
Marg E.
Joel Gregory, Bay Area poetry community
Elizabeth Gross, New Orleans poetry community
Zack Haber, long-term Oakland resident and former friend to David
Will Harrell, Voice of the Experienced
Fiona Hellerman, Former OPPRC Intern
Further Other Book Works (C.J. Martin & Julia Drescher)

Hope House, Inc.

Katie Hunter-Lowrey (she/they), New Orleans-based organizer of survivors of violence and homicide victims' loved ones in Louisiana

Jean Jeffress, friend and support person to the former Agape community, former churchmate of Sarah, former friend to and person seeking collegiality in ministry with Sarah and David

Jacob Kahn, Bay Area poet and former friend to David

Ellie Keating

Malcolm Lloyd, OPPRC Volunteer

Melissa Mack, Bay Area poetry community and former friend to David

Bob Murrell

Annie Phoenix, community member, New Orleans, LA

mara poliak, Bay Area dance community

Kaid Ni Ray-Tipton, former Abolition Apostles penpal

Ted Rees, former Bay Area poet and former friend to David

Susannah Rosenthal

Rev. Joanna Lawrence Shenk, former participant with Agape Fellowship

Dale Shuger, former Abolition Apostles volunteer

Julie Sootin, Abolition Apostles volunteer

Brooke Terpstra, community organizer, co-founder of Oakland Abolition and Solidarity

Nichola Torbett, participant in Oakland's interfaith community and former friend to both Sarah and David

Karissa Tucker, Abolition Apostles volunteer

Update, 7/20/23: We are no longer accepting new signatures and endorsements for this letter. It remains archived for posterity [at our website](#).