

LOCAL

Celebration Church court fight continues with new defamation lawsuit by church founders



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Celebration Church on R.G. Skinner Parkway is show in this photo from March, soon after a dispute with church founders Pastor Stovall Weems and Kerri Weems became public.. [Corey Perrine/Florida Times-Union] *Corey Perrine/Florida Times-Union*

The founders of Jacksonville's [Celebration Church](#) have renewed a defamation lawsuit that claims leaders of the far-flung church spread lies and hurtful information about former Pastor Stovall Weems and his wife, Kerri.

“This case represents an egregious example of what happens when a group of people decide to weaponize false information to inflict harm on others,” argues an [amended suit](#) the couple filed last week against the church, its trustees and a lawyer.

The lawsuit centers on a report asserting fraud and financial improprieties that the church posted on its website after Stovall Weems resigned following his suspension as leader of the church he'd opened 24 years before.

An earlier version of the lawsuit was dismissed last month after Circuit Judge Marianne Aho concluded a court doctrine barred her from getting involved in a dispute about church operations.



Celebration Church has flourished by connecting with members at a main church dubbed the arena as well as satellite churches and audiences watching online. This photo was taken at a 2008 service marking the church's tenth anniversary. *Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union*

The new complaint tries to skirt that concern by only referencing claims made after Weems resigned from the church in April, days ahead of the report's release.

Although Aho had approved a motion by the church to dismiss the Weemses' lawsuit, she had allowed 20 days for the couple to re-file, and the new complaint fell inside that timeframe.

The suit seems to entirely deny the report prepared in the name of church attorneys Kristin Ahr and Lee Wedekind III, reciting passages that it says are simply false and hurtful.

The complaint says the report “falsely states that ‘Stovall Weems violated the law by breaching his fiduciary duties to Celebration Church, committing fraud, unjustly enriching himself at the expense of the church and failing to meet the fiduciary duties and standards of care required by his office’ and ‘brought Celebration to the brink of insolvency’.”

Wedekind was the only attorney named as a defendant, and the lawsuit says he drafted the report.

The new court filing doesn’t dissect the basis of the church report’s claims, saying instead that people involved with it tried to “advance their personal and economic agendas ... and deceive the public into believing salacious lies are true.”

It argues that the “defendants were all well aware of facts refuting the claims published in the defamatory report,” and that “each of the defendants entertained serious doubts as to the truth of the false and defamatory statements.”

The new complaint contains 12 counts, which besides defamation include conspiracy to defame, invasion of privacy, infliction of emotional distress and others, some tied to assertions that Kerri Weems’ private communications and records from counseling sessions had been scoured for details.



Celebration Church founder and pastor Stovall Weems speaks to the congregation during a 2008 service that celebrated the 10th anniversary of the church. *Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union*

It is the third amended complaint by the Weemses, who first sued in February to challenge the church's decision to suspend Stovall Weems, later reformatting the case as a defamation fight.