

To Bishop Matthew K. Thompson Sr. of Jubilee Christian Church — Mattapan

Read online with photographs and supporting records

Bishop Thompson,

On March 15, 2025, I entered your church to say goodbye to my ten-year-old daughter. I was not there as a defendant in a divorce, a subject of accusations, or someone seeking anyone's approval. I was there as Bella's father, carrying a grief that no parent should ever have to endure. Whatever you may have heard about me, nothing changed that fact.

I may not remember every word spoken that day. Grief has a way of making moments blur together. But I remember that people gathered for Bella. I remember hearing her name. I remember people crying, praying, and acknowledging that her ten years mattered.

You did not know me personally, but I had attended Jubilee Christian Church in Mattapan many times over the years, including with Shirley, Joshua, and Bella. We came there together as a family. Jubilee was not an unfamiliar place to me. During COVID, Shirley and I also watched your services online together as a family. When our marriage was struggling, Shirley recommended that we come to you for counseling. I declined because earlier experiences had made it difficult for me to trust church people.

Bella herself had also been part of the Jubilee Mattapan church community. She participated in the children's choir. That made returning there for her funeral even more meaningful and painful. This was not simply the church where my daughter's funeral was held. It was also a place our family had attended together and where Bella had once participated, sung, and simply been a child.

Still, at my daughter's funeral, I needed a place where I could mourn her in peace.

The ushers directed me and my family to a designated area, separate from the other people attending. No one else sat there.

Who decided where we would sit, and why were we placed apart from everyone else?

That arrangement made me feel isolated at a time when I was already struggling to bear the loss of my child.

Many people seemed to know who I was, although I had never met them. It felt as though a story about me had reached the church before I did. I felt watched and judged when I had come simply to say goodbye to Bella.

Before the service, I approached Bella's coffin and kissed her goodbye.

I was the father who had found her and performed CPR, desperately trying to save her.

Now I was standing before her coffin, saying my final goodbye to my little girl.

During the service, you praised Shirley as a mother and asked everyone to stand and applaud her. I also remember you coming down after the sermon to hug her.

I did not resent her receiving that recognition or comfort. She was Bella's mother. She loved her, and she had suffered an unimaginable loss. She deserved compassion.

What hurt was that you never acknowledged that Bella also had a father sitting in that church.

Were you told that I was there as Bella's father?

You did not say my name or acknowledge my presence. You never came over to me, shook my hand, or offered your condolences. You did not ask what I had experienced.

I was there, mourning the same little girl, and I felt invisible to you.

I was not asking for praise or applause. I wanted the simple acknowledgment that I was Bella's father and that I, too, had lost my child.

A greeting, a handshake, or a few words of condolence would have mattered. Even a brief prayer with me would have meant a great deal.

Recognizing my grief would not have taken anything away from Shirley's.

If you had heard accusations about me, you could still have acknowledged my loss. Offering compassion would not have required you to investigate what happened, endorse my account, or take either parent's side.

After the service, I walked out of the church with my mother holding my arm. A group of attendees came through a side door and hurried behind us. They shouted profanities at me and asked:

"What have you done to her?"

My mother was frightened, but she stayed beside me, holding my arm.

She had come to say goodbye to her granddaughter. She left hearing people shout accusations at her son.

I heard them, but I was too numb to be afraid. A part of me was still beside Bella's coffin. I had nothing left in me to answer the people shouting behind us.

I do not know whether you saw or heard what happened outside.

Did anyone tell you about it?

I want you to understand what leaving Jubilee Christian Church was like for Bella's father and grandmother that day.

Bishop Thompson, I am disappointed.

I had hoped that, inside a church my family had attended and where Bella herself had participated, my family and I could grieve without having to defend our right to be there. What happened reinforced the mistrust I had already felt about seeking counseling with you.

Bella's funeral belonged to Bella.

It was a time to remember her life and allow the people who loved her to say goodbye.

There were two grieving parents in that church. Both deserved to be acknowledged, regardless of what had happened between them or what anyone believed about either of them.

As the bishop and senior pastor, you had an opportunity to make room for both of us.

I wonder whether you ever considered that the person you had heard accusations about might also have deserved your compassion. Does a pastor's responsibility to care for a grieving parent depend on what someone else has said about that parent? Or should that compassion exist even when difficult questions remain unanswered?

Have Bella's death certificate and autopsy report been shared with you since her funeral? Have you read them for yourself and compared their contents with the accusations you may have heard?

If those accusations influenced how I was received at your church, I ask you to reflect honestly on that.

Looking back, do you feel that I received the compassion and acknowledgment that Bella's father deserved? Can you look at what happened that day and feel that both grieving parents were treated with care and dignity?

Those reports deserve your attention. But my need for compassion existed before any report was completed.

Bishop, I pray that God grants you the wisdom and discernment to listen patiently, ask difficult questions, and examine the evidence before reaching conclusions. Wisdom requires more than hearing an accusation. It requires the humility to recognize that one person's account may not tell the whole story, the patience to seek the truth, and the courage to question even those we know and trust. I hope that whenever someone's character, reputation, or life is at stake, you will remember that distinction.

I am not writing to demand an apology. No apology can bring Bella back or give me another chance to hold her, hear her voice, watch her play basketball, or listen to her call me Babe.

But I am asking you to reflect honestly on the seating arrangement, the absence of any acknowledgment of me, and what my family experienced that day. Consider what could have been handled differently—and how your church will receive the next grieving family that walks through its doors.

When families are divided and accusations have been made, make room for everyone who loved the person who died to grieve with dignity.

Bella was more than the circumstances surrounding her death. She was a ten-year-old girl who had sung in your children's choir, who had a mother and a father who loved her, and whose life deserved to be at the center of that day.

I may never attend your church again. I cannot separate it from the loneliness I felt while saying goodbye to Bella. But I forgive you, because I do not want to carry hatred alongside the grief I already carry.

My name is Dukens.

I am Bella's father.

She called me Babe.

I loved her with all my heart.

And on the day I had to say goodbye to her, I needed compassion, too.

With gratitude for the people who gathered to remember Bella,

Dukens Pierre-Louis

Bella's father ("Babe")