

# Blindsided | WORLD News Group

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by Marvin Olasky Post Date: June 26, 2015 - Issue Date: July 11, 2015



SAN FRANCISCO—Two days after Valentine’s Day in 1997, City Church—an attempt to build a biblically focused congregation in San Francisco—held its first service in a former Army chapel lined with commemorative plaques. Fred Harrell, who had earned his spurs as a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) campus minister, preached on the book of Jonah.

Harrell, a graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary, told the seminary’s magazine that God “has called me to take the Gospel to what many consider to be a modern-day Nineveh. I think God is providentially arranging for the ‘sparing’ of the city of San Francisco through a unique, authentic, and historic Christian witness.” The magazine noted, “Fred can hardly contain his excitement.”

California’s Nineveh seemed an unlikely spot for a Bible-centered church to take root. The city’s Orthodox Presbyterian Church faced years of protests after its pastor in 1978, Chuck McIlhenny, dismissed a gay organist. (McIlhenny tells that story in his memoir, *When the Wicked Seize a City*.) In 1993 gay protesters blocked the doors of another conservative church and pelted a caretaker with eggs. One police official who received a request for protection responded, “You must understand. This is San Francisco.”

San Francisco, though, is also a city where trees grow in unlikely places. An 1853 map of the city labeled the area that Golden Gate Park now occupies the “Great Sand Bank.” Wind erosion made most farming and gardening in western San Francisco impossible. But pioneer William Hall, through trial and error, found that by first planting barley he could stabilize the sand dunes enough to dump manure and top soil. Then other plants grew and homes followed.

During the first few months Harrell’s congregation numbered only 30. By the end of 1997, the church had grown enough to move to the Russian Center closer to downtown, which with its stage, red velvet drapes, and 500 seats looks like a small Broadway theater. Harrell said, “We are not seeker-focused or seeker-driven. We are seeking to be biblical.”

City Church received great initial support from other PCA churches that appreciated bravery. Four of them, including the conservative First Presbyterian in Jackson, Miss., contributed at least \$300,000 for Harrell’s startup. Attenders say his sermons were Bible-focused but not fiery, taking after those of Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church a continent away (but demographically close) in Manhattan.

City Church grew to 1,000 regular attenders at two services plus a satellite venue. By 2005 it was a regular stop for tourists from the East who carried gifts of praise for a wise child performing an apparent miracle: City Church was sticking to its historic Christian witness and attracting young congregants amid a disordered city that worshipped idols for destruction.

On March 13, 2015, though, members were shocked when Harrell and six elders—two resigned—sent out a letter announcing that City Church “will no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation.” The letter made it clear that sexually active gay and lesbian couples in same-sex marriages could become church members.

The change surprised more than 40 pastors who on March 25 sent Harrell a letter proposing “Compassion without Compromise.” They asked Harrell and the remaining elders, “How long did you take to make this decision? ... Were opposing views openly discussed? ... Was there a period of open dialogue where members could give input before the decision was made? Why or why not?”

Harrell’s brief response to those pastors did not answer those questions. I traveled to San Francisco in May and tried to get answers for the benefit of City Church members but also members of churches across the country that may soon face an LGBT juggernaut. What steps can they take to stop church leaders—under pressure from family members, friends, financiers, and fame-seeking—from calling an audible that is not biblical?

## Source security

A word about sources for this article: Our WORLD policy is to accept off-the-record comments only when a person's life or job is in jeopardy. Many City Church members remembered how Mozilla CEO Brendan Eich lost his post by irritating LGBT activists—so most of my interviews had to be off the record. In the 45 years and 3,000-plus stories since my *Boston Globe* professional journalistic debut in 1970, I have never seen anywhere outside of Havana and Beijing such a chilling effect. —*Marvin Olasky*

**IN RETROSPECT, SOME MEMBERS** point to a 2006 decision made after long discussion. That year, City Church decided to ordain women elders. To do so the congregation voted to leave the PCA and join the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Elders promoted that change, but their discussion was not a closely held secret. Drew Yamamoto, then about to become a pastoral intern, said he learned of the plans two months before the official announcement. Harrell said he met 30 or 40 times that year with groups of members: Only a handful voted against leaving the PCA and joining the RCA.

A member of the senior pastoral staff at that time said, "It did not seem like a big deal." The most frequent question at meetings was, "Are we on a slippery slope" that could lead to gays becoming members? Harrell and elders pointed to examples in the Bible of women leaders and said the homosexuality issue was of a different character, since the Bible is so clear about it. In 2008 Harrell was still telling membership classes that City Church was holding and would hold to the historic Christian view of homosexuality.

Over the next several years, though, several disquieting signs appeared. Members say Harrell's preaching became more therapeutic and less exegetical: He would typically mention at the outset the Bible passage just read by a layperson, but then offer anecdotes and quotations from various writers. By 2012 Harrell was telling an RCA synod meeting that leaders at "theologically traditional and pastorally progressive" City Church were "expanding our empathic imagination."

Harrell himself was having tough times. His older son tweeted in 2013, "Hooray, the pope doesn't judge my homosexuality, only my homosexual actions. Now the only barrier between me and Catholicism is my libido." When we talked in May, Harrell said the shutdown of the ex-gay organization Exodus International in 2013 meant "lots of evangelical pastors lost that in their tool kits. ... More and more LGBT Christians who were sons and daughters of the church were emerging. ... Lots of shame, lots of hurt."

Harrell recalled in May that during 2013 his own views were "evolving." In 2014 he suggested that all the elders read Ann Arbor pastor Ken Wilson's *A Letter to my Congregation*. In it Wilson claims that the Apostle Paul and others of his time had no knowledge of innate

homosexual orientations and loving same-sex relationships. Wilson says Paul was criticizing only gay prostitution and exploitation.

That's not true, according to Tim Keller, Harrell's role model. Keller has pointed out that Wilson's conclusion about ancient understandings goes against the findings of "the best historical scholarship since the 1980s—by the full spectrum of secular, liberal, and conservative researchers. ... Paul knew about mutual same-sex relationships, and the ancients knew of homosexual orientation." Keller's conclusion: Paul "categorically condemns all sexual relations between people of the same sex."

When Wilson pushed his Vineyard church to adopt his view, he almost destroyed the congregation. Last year national Vineyard leaders published a position on "Pastoring LGBT Persons" that annihilated Wilson's exegesis. Another pastor at Wilson's church, Donnell Wyche, stood up to him and published an incisive paper on how to strengthen and grow the church without abandoning clear biblical teachings.

**FEW LEADERS AT CITY CHURCH** are in a financial position to stand up to a pastor who can fire them. Prices of cable-car-sized homes in San Francisco climb halfway to the stars: Rent for a one-bedroom apartment two miles south of the Giants ballpark is \$3,000 per month. City Church staffers with families generally receive ample compensation and often take out ample mortgages. Some church leaders not on the payroll have spouses who are.

Seven pastors report to Harrell, with considerable turnover in recent years: Several left after signing non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and receiving financial settlements. Only one left without signing an NDA: He spoke to me initially on the record with great specificity about the negatives he had witnessed, but as our go-to-press date approached he pleaded to have his name removed, citing damage to employment opportunities. This article does not include the information he provided.

From 2012 to 2014, according to a City Church report, the number of households contributing to the church dropped from 807 to 706. Expenses grew as City Church, working with the RCA's Western Theological Seminary, created a training center for future church leaders, the Newbigin House of Studies. City Church was in good financial shape, though: Church members were generous, and some say a gay billionaire who professes faith in Christ, Peter Thiel—he co-founded PayPal and was an early Facebook investor—became a major donor to Newbigin.

Harrell and administrative pastor Jonathan Gundlach would not confirm that, but in 2012 Thiel's home was the venue for a Newbigin dinner. Attendees say Harrell spoke of how he was embarrassed by his earlier theological education and had grown immeasurably since then. This year, on Feb. 4, City Church teaching pastor Scot Sherman interviewed Thiel at a

Newbigin event held at the Century Club, a prestigious venue. There Sherman called Thiel “a great friend and supporter” of Newbigin House, and announced that Thiel had made Alana Ackerson, a 2014 Newbigin Fellow, the CEO of his foundation.

In the course of the interview, Sherman told Thiel, “You understand theology ... better than a lot of theologians do.” He spoke of a “courageous book” Thiel had just written, *Zero to One*, and its “perfect title.” He also said in response to Thiel comments, “That’s a great idea” and “Wow.”

**A MAJORITY OF CITY CHURCH ELDERS** last October agreed to accept the membership application of a gay man without requiring that he would endeavor to be chaste—but the man did not join, and almost all church members remained unaware of the imminent change. At a meeting of elders this January, Harrell pushed to make the October agreement official policy for everyone. Elder Alex Lim said he and the five other elders who were present at the January meeting agreed with Harrell. They discussed ways to communicate the change to the entire congregation.

Two developments that month led some City Church members to think it was time for the church to change. Two big evangelical churches in other cities—GracePointe in Nashville and EastLake in Seattle—announced they would now admit noncelibate gays. An article in *The Guardian* on hip Bay Area churches focused on new entries: Reality, Epic, C3, and The Table. City Church didn’t receive even a mention.

Harrell met on Feb. 9 with the two elders who missed the January meeting. Both opposed the decision. Harrell said he had “ideas to extend the conversation” but a resignation letter from one of the elders on Feb. 27 led him and other elders to suspect that news of the decision might spread before they had a chance to make an official announcement.

On March 13 Harrell and the six elders who supported him emailed their own letter: It declared that City Church’s policy against sexually active gays becoming members “has not led to human flourishing,” so “we will no longer discriminate based on sexual orientation”: The church would treat heterosexual and homosexual marriages equally.

The letter stated that elders “invite you into this discussion in safe settings where all can voice disagreement, concern, push back,” but many City Church members say the letter was deceptive. One member looked forward to an announced Q-and-A session the Sunday after the elders’ letter went out, but was frustrated to find it was only a one-sided presentation, with no questions allowed. “There is no dialogue,” another member said. Members critical of the decision often received admonitions against “disunity,” with unity defined as acquiescence.

**MORE FRUSTRATION EMERGED** on April 19 when Ken Wilson (*A Letter to my Congregation*) preached at City Church's three morning services that day. Another advocate for gay membership, Mercer professor and Sojourners board member David Gushee, spoke that evening. Congregation members could not directly question Gushee, but had to write their questions on index cards: Scot Sherman then chose ones to ask. At another large-group meeting, members viewed slides supporting the church leaders' argument, with only questions about the slides allowed.

Harrell did visit small groups, but members say his answers varied according to the makeup of the group. Asked at one "community group" made up of young and hip members whether he would officiate at same-sex weddings, Harrell reportedly replied, "I absolutely would do them." At another, he said he could not do that now because the RCA does not allow it, but he could see doing them in the future.

Asked about those responses, Harrell saw "no inconsistency in what I've said." He summarized his view as: "(a) I would. (b) The church has not made that decision and we submit to our classis [a group of RCA churches]. Some people hear 'a,' others 'b,' and others both."

Church officials did not schedule large-group meetings at which broad opposition to their change could coalesce. Harrell and the elders explained in a May 15 statement, "We have decided not to facilitate town-hall style congregational meetings, as we are very concerned that such meetings would lead to many in our community feeling hurt or damaged, rather than encouraging productive communication."

Several members set up an online forum at which members could share their views and sorrow: Former intern Yamamoto, who worked three years for Jews for Jesus, equated the forum to the Orthodox Jewish tradition of "sitting shiva," mourning and grieving together. But forum organizers say a church official threatened legal action because they used a church directory to invite potential participants.

Opposition emerged outside the church via critical articles in the journal *First Things* and other publications, and at a March 19 meeting of the classis to which City Church belongs. Other pastors asked Harrell why they were not informed in advance, and Ken Korver, pastor of Emmanuel Reformed Church in Paramount, Calif., said the new City Church position will "harm the church, divide us, and weaken our position." Six days later the 40-plus RCA pastors sent their letter questioning whether the church allowed for "open forums" and "public conversations."

City Church Director of Operations Jonathan Gundlach answers questions of that sort by saying, "Had it not been for those [two dissident] elders, there would have been broader discussion." Elder Alex Lim says, "I have my own fears that this will distract us." The message is uniform: Fall in line; pay attention to more important things. Harrell and the elders put

this more mellifluously in a statement: They plan to “welcome all people into full Christian community, regardless of sexual orientation, in the name of Jesus, while holding the tension of varying theological/scriptural interpretations.”

It does not seem likely that financial pressure will force a change from the pro-gay position. The City Church website lists average monthly general fund expenses at \$385,000. May had five Sundays, and on four of them giving was \$35,000, \$30,000, \$25,000, and \$28,000, respectively, for a total of \$118,000, well below what the budget requires. On May 17, though, contributions totaled \$300,000, suggesting a major funder (or major funders) had come through.

Ninety City Church members on May 20 sent a letter to RCA leaders explaining their concerns and requesting an intervention. On June 13 the denomination’s General Synod (its annual convention) voted 145-73 to form a special council to address “questions of human sexuality as it relates to ordination and marriage” and make recommendations for the General Synod to vote on next year. Many among the two-thirds majority supporting the resolution did so because they want the RCA to oppose homosexual ordination and marriage.

Harrell spoke from the floor against that resolution. He said those favoring it want “uniformity and compliance. ... I spent 16 years in a denomination like that.” Regarding human sexuality, Harrell said, “science tells us that this is an increasingly complex issue. We now know that while we think we encounter a largely gender-binary world, it is not one at all.” He said, “Truth bringing unity is a false premise. Rather, unity brings us truth.”

**ON SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 10, THE 9 A.M.** City Church service at the Russian Center (usually the larger of the two services) had only 150 adults and a smattering of children in attendance. Pastor Julie Van Til preached about how God loves and accepts us. She noted that “Romans is so hard to preach on,” and quoted Paul Tillich and former Franciscan priest Brennan Manning.

At 10:30 two miles away on a concrete floor in what once was the *San Francisco Chronicle* building, 21 souls at the service of a brand-new PCA church, Glory San Francisco, lustily sang “Nothing But the Blood of Jesus.” Pastor Christopher Robins (asked about his name, he says his parents once were hippies) prayed for City Church and asked God to “lead us out of temptation, because I know from experience I will not lead myself.”

‘God with City Church started a fire, and embers are now flying all over the city. We have more church plants now than at any time in the history of San Francisco.’ —*Christopher Robins*

Using a whiteboard, Robins preached on Ezekiel and noted that 16 of the 23 times the Bible cites “rebellion” are in that book. He said, “Many people in San Francisco want to be rebels—but rebels against what?” That led into the Lord’s Supper, with Robins explaining, “This table is for rebels who receive Christ. This is a reverse altar call: If you don’t know God, don’t partake.” The contrast with City Church broadening membership was clear.

Later, Robins mused about his PCA plant and its predecessor: “God with City Church started a fire, and embers are now flying all over the city. We have more church plants now than at any time in the history of San Francisco.” Embers, yes, and also barley. Fred Harrell, like William Hall in the 19th century, planted a new crop in San Francisco. Residents now do not grow barley, but they enjoy hundreds of tree varieties from around the world, including Japanese Yew, Queensland Kauri, and Italian Alder. And, young evangelicals moving to San Francisco now have at least 20 church choices.

Lisbeth Melendez Rivera, a practicing lesbian and Catholic, knows by heart the Bible verses that are specifically about homosexuality. She can rattle off Leviticus 18:22 and tell you where the others are.

That may be because, as director of Latino and Catholic Initiatives for the gay rights group Human Rights Campaign (HRC), she hears them enough from people who object to her behavior. But rather than alter her lifestyle, she decided to revamp her faith and give the verses a nickname: “verses of terror.” She argues that “in the entire Bible, homosexuality is mentioned eight times. Eight verses.”

HRC’s Director of Faith Partnerships and Mobilization MacArthur Flournoy similarly sidesteps the “eight passages” and speaks of “faith-based principles like love, unconditional love, hospitality.” To soften Christian opposition to homosexuality HRC has also developed a heart-tugging PR campaign and used media allies to paint critics as extremists or bigots. And it’s working. Polls show 40 percent of Protestants now favor legalization of same-sex marriage.

Michael Brown, author of *Can You Be Gay and Christian?: Responding With Love and Truth to Questions About Homosexuality*, says he’s saddened but not surprised by HRC’s success. Speaking of polls that show increasing support for LGBT initiatives, Brown said, “Those same polls will show a higher rate of biblical illiteracy.”

Brown said that Christian unpreparedness, combined with progressive theology, has allowed gay rights groups to lambast opponents like himself and effectively silence debate on the issue. Last September, HRC published a report entitled “Export of Hate,” a de facto “hit list” highlighting individuals it says have threatened the gay community’s desire to win global acceptance. Out of the eight profiled, six are Christians.

HRC says its report exposed “a network of American extremists” who “spew venomous rhetoric, outrageous theories, and discredited science.” Turn the page and readers will see each opponent’s expressionless face sketched in high contrast black and white attached to a short description of their purported offenses. It’s hard not to see parallels to police wanted posters.

Peter LaBarbera, president of Americans for Truth about Homosexuality, is on this list. He’s getting fewer phone calls from the media and more irate notes from people asking him why he hates gays. He said, “We can disagree and still have a civil debate about this. But they’re saying, some voices don’t deserve to be heard in the public square, and it’s a very dangerous argument.”

LaBarbera noted one occasion when a magazine invited and later rescinded its invitation to have him speak as the sole representative opposing homosexual practice. The reason: HRC and two other panelists refused to sit at the same table with him. Brown, who also made it onto the list as a “dishonorable mention,” said HRC has worked hard “to demonize the opponents of homosexual practice. ... When I say that traditional marriage is between a man and woman and kids deserve a mom and a dad, there’s nothing hateful there.”

HRC has reached millions of living rooms in the South with emotional stories of stay-at-home moms like Mary Jane Kennedy. One HRC video aired last November brought viewers into Kennedy’s leafy Brandon, Miss., backyard. “I’m a Bible-believing, born again Christian,” she says with an unmistakable Southern drawl. She speaks about her grown sons as the camera shows her flipping through photo albums in her living room. Her voice cracks as she says, “My middle son was about to graduate from college, and he said, ‘Mama, I’m gay.’”

Then she pauses to compose herself, and says, “Nothing in my life had ever prepared me for that. I said, ‘What’s going to happen? This is going to tear our family apart.’” The background piano music intensifies as she offers a wrenching appeal: “One of the main things that I want to happen is to open the arms of Jesus Christ to people that have been pressed out of the church. We’ve closed our doors to the people who need us the most. God called us to love each other.” The episode closes with the words, “We are all God’s children,” and HRC’s familiar yellow and blue equal sign logo embedded in one of the letters.

Melendez Rivera, who has shown such videos at conferences and other gatherings, said emotional testimonies like Kennedy’s are powerful. Many evangelical churches, on the other hand, welcome gays to hear the gospel but do not affirm their lifestyle. Bob Lynn, associate pastor at Knox Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Mich., says his Evangelical Presbyterian congregation understands that Christians should not engage in homosexual practice, but it’s “heartbreaking” that men struggling with same-sex attraction face chaste singleness. “We don’t understand the price they have to pay for faithfulness.”

*Please read my column "Be on guard" in this issue for thoughts on what members of churches can do to make blindsiding less likely.*