

# They Came From Mars (Seattle, actually.)

Mega-church's arrival stirs LGBTQ community  
BY AARON SPENCER

Earlier this month, a right-wing extremist and anti-gay church charged into Southeast Portland, guns a blazin', to convert the heathen masses of Portland to conservative Christianity.

At least that's what one would be led to believe by some of the headlines.

The pastor for Mars Hill Portland, a new location for the mega-church based in Seattle, says he was blindsided by negative media coverage and ensuing backlash from the community months before the new church was set to open. All the while, some LGBTQ leaders underscored a need for dialogue and tolerance—not belligerence and hysterics.

*The Portland Mercury* broke the story August 31 with the headline "Anti-Gay Megachurch Moving to SE Portland." *The Oregonian* ran a story online September 1 with the word "anti-gay" in the headline (though it was later replaced with "conservative"). *Just Out* also ran a story, using the word "anti-gay."

"I don't feel like that word describes us," says the pastor of Mars Hill Portland, the Rev. Tim Smith. "To me, 'anti-gay' crosses over to attacking specific people and making people not feel safe."

Smith says the word and the media coverage in general depicted the church as extremist, like the Westboro Baptist Church, which protests at military funerals with signs that read "God hates fags."

"That's absolutely not the way we handle ourselves at Mars Hill Church," Smith says.

To be sure, Mars Hill is controversial, even among conservative Christians. Its Seattle pastor, Mark Driscoll, has been criticized for comments he made about male pastors behaving too effeminately.

The church also believes homosexuality is a sin, though so do several churches in Portland, even some in the Sunnyside neighborhood, where the new Mars Hill branch is located. Mars Hill also raised eyebrows with a video posted on its website about the new Portland church, which shows images of rainbow flags and a strip club while Smith says, "[Portland] values sexual freedom as an end in itself with a thriving sex industry that goes back for more than a century."

But Smith says his priority is not to fight homosexuality. He says his goal is to help people learn about Jesus.



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-REV. TIM SMITH, MARS HILL

"[Homosexuality] is not something that comes up in every sermon," he says.

In the aftermath of the media blitz, Smith contacted Q Center spokesman Logan Lynn, who in the *Oregonian* story had extended an invite to Smith to see the community hub. Smith took Lynn up on the offer.

"Logan was very kind and fair in his comments about us," Smith says. "That was intriguing to me."

Lynn explains his side: "I didn't particularly view the whole thing as the fight I know some people in the queer community did."

Lynn gave Smith a tour of Q Center and told Smith about concerns in the LGBTQ

community, including recent incidents of violence against LGBTQ people. They decided to in the future gather a group of individuals from

the LGBTQ community and evangelical Christians to further discuss these issues.

"Too many times LGBT communities and religious communities are satisfied with extreme caricatures of one another," Smith says. "The point of this dialogue is to hear more stories and learn what things we have in common. We want to know what's going on in the community."

Some LGBTQ religious leaders echo this sentiment. The Rev. Tara Wilkins, executive director of the nonprofit Community of Welcoming Congregations, says she thinks progressive communities should have a dialogue with Mars Hill.

The Rev. Nathan Meckley of the LGBTQ-welcoming Metropolitan Community Church of Portland says he isn't comfortable with Mars Hill's message about homosexuality, but that the church should be free to express its views.

The Rev. Chuck Currie, United Church of Christ minister, posted an open letter August 31 to Mars Hill and Driscoll on his blog, in which he wrote that he hopes "Mars Hill would find Portland a welcoming community."

But he went on to write, "If you're coming here to save the sinners of Portland, don't bother."

Smith seems to be in agreement with that idea. "We're not going to shove our message down their throat," he says.

*Mars Hill Portland plans to start regular services in January at 3210 SE Taylor Street.*

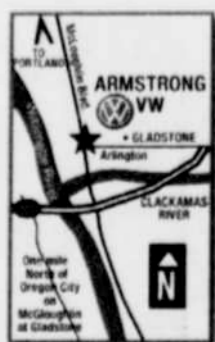


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