

An Unofficial Guide to Mars Hill

Life changes convincingly: I spent last summer preparing for a return to the city proper, lazing repeatedly in any body of water I could find, amassing stamps in my imaginary happy hour passport, and nurturing a fledgling friendship that would turn into one of my life's most important. This year, consumed by lost life and love, my toes have touched only my bathtub's water, that aforementioned friend is bound for San Francisco—but fortunately my happy hour routine hasn't changed. A hint of normalcy.

I also reread Joan Didion's *The White Album* and found a passage I'd probably seen a dozen times before but never noticed. Facing an unraveling marriage, she wrote, "Quite often during the past several years I have felt myself a sleepwalker, moving through the world unconscious of the moment's high issues, oblivious to its data, alert only to the stuff of bad dreams." While I (hope I) haven't been sleepwalking for years, I related to her fixations. And while indulging in more than my fair share of melancholy, I wondered what might reanimate me. Then evangelical mega-church Mars Hill set its sights on Portland.

This chain of churches, gobbling up real estate like Starbucks, has been covered exhaustively by most media outlets. Many have aptly pointed out a 700-member super-church is a mere drop in the bucket in a much bigger, better-financed culture war; and people, regardless



lady about town

BY DANIEL BORGEN

of their misguided beliefs, have a right to them—as we do ours. But religious beliefs, much to the chagrin of many, aren't off limits. While I don't worry the Hill people will become a hazardous blight on our city's landscape, their ambush warrants an examination of some of their core concepts. (I know a little about evangelicals; I spent over a decade with them.)

Churches like Mars Hill actively advocate the so-called "Great Commission"—a doctrine best described as a hyper-intrusive sales quota, a compulsion to convert every living person on the planet (or as many as they can collect) to specific teachings. Said teachings, as they (mis)interpret them, unequivocally state that queers are bound to burn for all eternity in a lake of fire (hell). This is a *real* belief evangelicals heartily embrace—and leaders proudly display. While we queers don't demand much from them, relocation to the Midwest aside, they do, in their heart of hearts, long (and pray) for us to renounce the gay and turn to their version of Jesus. It is their paramount hope; no amount of breaking bread or exchanging pleasantries with them will alter that irrefutable certainty.

Churches of this ilk are getting clever with their hateful rhetoric, burying it in vague gener-

alizations. Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill pastor, said, "I will never say homosexuality is okay because it's not. I will likewise never say that it is the only sin or it's a sin that rises above the other sins and that the gay guy who comes to Mars Hill and sits next to the couple that is dating and sleeping together is any less or more righteous." So "not okay" is the new euphemism for "abomination" and "deviant." See how clever that is? You're welcome to come to church, you're still going to hell, but you're not going to a *worse* hell than the straight sluts sitting next to you.

After the folks at Mars Hill announced their Portland site, my friend Logan Lynn, Q Center's public relations manager, graciously and optimistically extended an olive branch to the Hill people. (Let me be clear: I support Q Center, I've spent years volunteering there.) Per Logan, conversations were positive and civil, and both sides left with a "better understanding of the other perspective." I don't doubt staff at Q felt that way, and I don't doubt the Hill people felt they did the Lord's work by meeting with some homos. (Their website response implied as much.) Bonus: Maybe a meet and greet could improve their standing with local media.

Nothing we say or do can convince evangeli-

cals we're not degenerates—if we love, we automatically are. Nor can we stop them from raising countless closet cases and self-loathing queer kids. It's not like we're talking to some reasonable Catholic who's sort of on the fence about gay marriage. To avoid hell, we must renounce our sin, our *being*. Sharing our sad stories about rough queer upbringings won't alter the hate woven into the fabric of their beloved belief system. And hate as euphemism is still hate.

I do find some hope in (sporadic) tales of friends and family members recovering from evangelical fever. That, though, usually involves said members *leaving* their respective congregations. While anything is possible, that's the exception, not the rule. I don't anticipate an exodus from Mars. Theirs is a committed, well-funded machine, intent on altering the world's social and political landscape.

Part of me wishes I could simply live in the places hope resides, the split-second lull when you glimpse possibility. I want Logan's optimism. But I've lived and seen too much fundamentalism with all its entanglements to let my guard down now—to me, the movement is the stuff of Didion's bad dreams, intent on wrecking the world to fit egregious views. Time seems better spent tending to the reasonable and rational, letting the Hill people flail in the margins, preaching extremes. In the interim, we'll just *be*—and perhaps stage a protest or two. ☐

Soon I'll further cement my big gay sin in San Francisco—at Folsom. Email daniel@justout.com.

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