

# 'To do church, but do it differently'

*The Rev. Adam Phillips will give a TEDx talk on inclusion, the foundation of his evangelical practice*

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

Pastor Adam Phillips began his sermon on white supremacy with a personal anecdote about walking through a slum in Ghana before arriving at a "door of no return" — one of many passageways Africans were forced through on their way to slavery in the Americas.

It was the last Sunday in August, and for two weeks, Phillips had been preaching on dismantling white supremacy following the neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Va.

"I feel dubious at best, addressing white supremacy. I am a white, cisgendered, privileged male," he told his congregation. "I fear I might whiteness or mansplain these things. I'm embarrassed at my privilege in this conversation."

But he persisted, calling on his fellowship at Christ Church in downtown Portland to confront racism.

"It's not just about marches and protests. It's about simple everyday moments to dismantle this generation upon generation upon generation sin that so infects our lives even to this moment," he said.

Phillips' choice of sermon topic that Sunday was not likely to surprise his congregants. While he was ordained through the Evangelical Covenant Church, one of the fastest-growing evangelical denominations in the world, his views on feminism, LGBTQ inclusion and climate change have set him apart.

While in some ways, Phillips, 37, still considers himself an evangelical Christian, he said he's not a good poster child for the religion.

"We've gotten in trouble for things we believe in," he said during a recent interview in the tidy living room of his modest home in North Portland's Kenton neighborhood.

Phillips explained his approach to faith while nearby his wife of 15 years, Sarah Phillips, tended to their child, a 2-month-old boy named Desmond (for Desmond Tutu). Behind the leather-bound chair where Phillips sat hung an abstract painting of a brown-skinned Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Next to him, a well-stocked bar, complete with muddler, cocktail shaker and plenty of bourbon.

About two and a half years ago, Phillips made national headlines when he lost his job, his church and his funding because he openly welcomed the LGBTQ community into his house of worship.

He had opened the church's doors just nine months earlier.

Not long before losing nearly everything, Phillips was considered an up-and-coming pastor within the Evangelical Covenant Church. He had already made a name for himself and held a promising future as one of the denomination's leaders.

"It was really shocking to me in some ways because I guess I was pretty naive," he said. "We had rules that we weren't allowed to do gay marriage and so on and so forth, but I was always encouraged to be very inclusive in my theology."

He said in recent years, lines were drawn between who could and could not be a "real Christian," and changes in the church's regional leadership led to a reversal of its commitment to support his values of inclusion.

"We started getting the most harassing phone calls and emails — from our religious leaders," he said. They wanted him to take down signs he had hung that read: Everyone's welcome. Yes, everyone.

But Phillips refused, and when the church leadership asked if he would allow "them" — meaning LGBTQ congregants — to participate in the children's ministry, in the church's leadership and in the band, he said, "Of course."

Apparently that was not the answer they were looking for.

But losing his church may have been a blessing in disguise, as he's now free to practice his faith as he interprets it.

Phillips and his supporters launched a crowd-funding campaign that helped him raise enough money to start over with a new church, and most of his small congregation came with him.

Elsa Johnson, 33, had been a lifelong member of the Evangelical Covenant Church, but she, along with her husband and two young children, followed Phillips when he left.

Johnson had grown up near the denomination's headquarters in Chicago, and her family's history is closely intertwined with the origins of the denomination, with many of her relatives and friends still practicing.

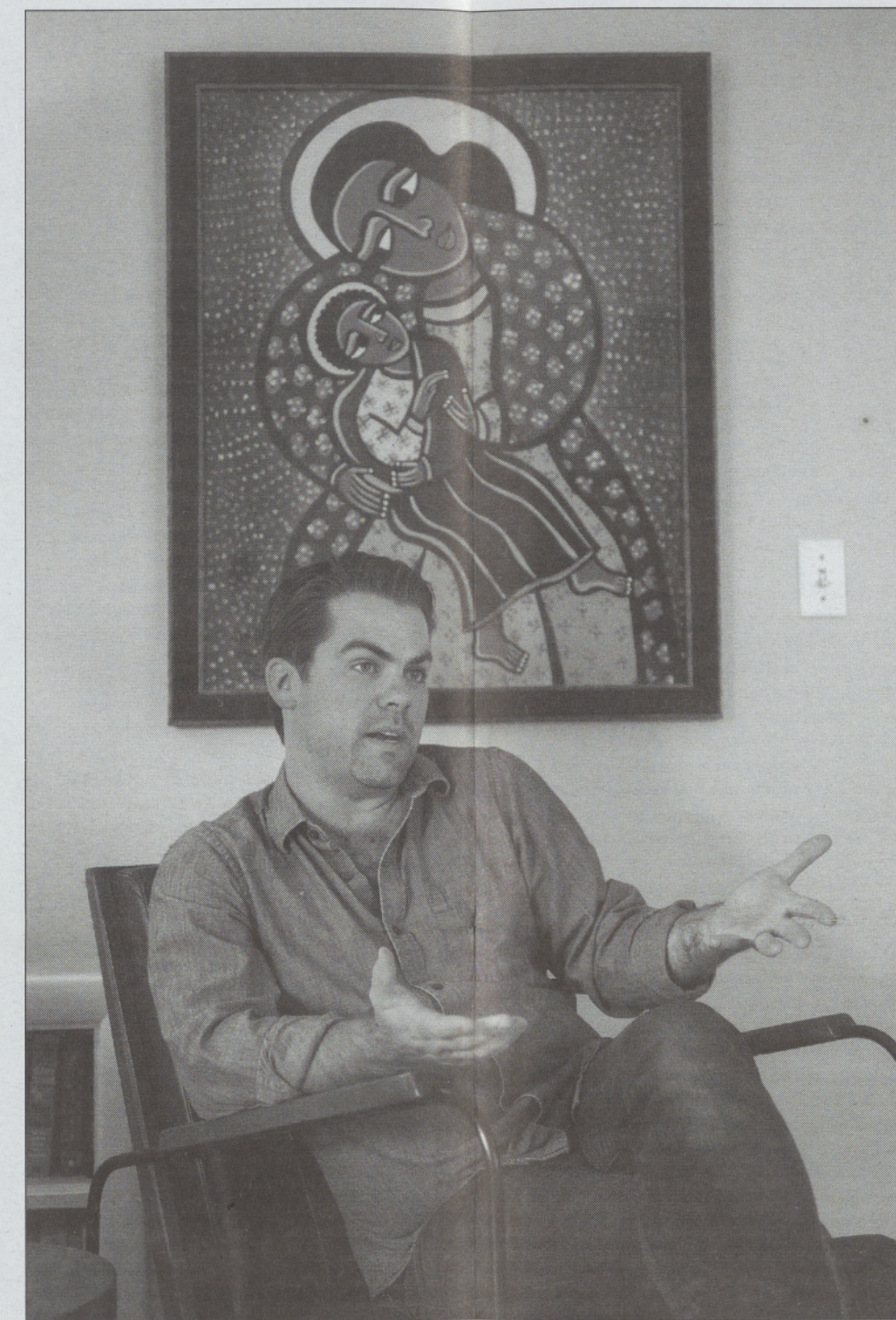
"It wasn't hard to decide to go with Christ Church, with Adam, but it was hard to realize that they were not standing with our church and our values," she said of her former denomination. "It's a continual hope that they will one day also value inclusiveness for all people at all levels of leadership with that church."

On Oct. 7, Phillips will give a TEDx talk on inclusion at TEDxMtHood, held at Roosevelt High School in North Portland. His "idea worth sharing," to put it in TED Talks terms, he said, is that inclusion is actually an ancient idea.

Today, Phillips' church has grown to 150 members. He attends marches and rallies with his congregation and incorporates calls for social justice action into his weekly sermons. He's also working on a book about spiritual practices and reflections around resistance.

This summer, he began a public Bible study at 6:30 p.m. the first Monday of every month at Century Bar in Southeast Portland. He calls it "Public Theology," where religion and progressive politics are discussed over vegan nachos and beer.

Phillips said he was drawn to religion from a young age. While his family didn't attend church when he was growing up, he sought out any and every opportunity to attend with friends. He went to Pentecostal and evangelical youth groups and attended Catholic Mass. But it was at a neighborhood Evangelical Covenant Church in Hudson, Ohio, he said, where he found his faith community when he was in high school. At the time, he had no idea it was part of a denomination with hundreds of churches in the



The Rev. Adam Phillips speaks to Street Roots at his family's home in Portland's Kenton neighborhood. PHOTO BY ALAN BORRUD

U.S. and ministries on every continent.

When Phillips attended Ohio State University in Columbus, he joined a campus ministry group. As an international-relations major, he said he was becoming aware of all needs for social justice in the world.

"My campus ministry group just did not know how to deal with that," he said. "We were kind of being trained to go around and convert people to get a ticket to heaven, and that didn't make sense to me."

He began to question what it really meant to love your neighbor as yourself and follow the teachings of Jesus. He said he was discovering that being a Christian wasn't just about getting "fire insurance" to escape hell, but about addressing the real needs of people.

"That's when I started to feel that maybe my call was to do church, but do it differently," he said.

After graduating from college, he received his pastoral training at North Park Theological

## Faith & Justice

*A series highlighting the role of religious leaders and groups in Portland's resistance movement*

that God is a God of love and a force of embrace and light and justice in our world that is so good."

He said being evangelical used to mean being involved in the community and living out a disciplined life for the common good. But his perceptions of the denomination have changed — first when he lost his church, and then confirmed with the popularity of President Donald Trump among its followers.

"I think you have to talk about Donald Trump when you're talking about evangelicals in 2017, because 81 percent, according to Pew, of evangelical voters voted for Donald Trump. And that is a real referendum, I think, on what it actually means to be evangelical," he said.

"Now you see a scenario where evangelical means voting for a president that is literally today threatening to wipe out North Korea and 25 million people, or having what they call 'locker room talk' during the campaign, and these are people who voted for him and they, so far, don't seem to be upset with this."

An ABC News/Washington Post telephone survey in early July found 61 percent of white Evangelical Protestants still approved of Trump's performance. Another poll, conducted by Pew Research Center a month earlier found 74 percent of non-Hispanic white Evangelical Protestants approved of the president.

"For me, over the years," Phillips said, "I've realized that call and that commitment is quite different than the way we were told to be, in terms of evangelicals, whether it was Christian radio or the books we were told to read. It's actually a much bigger and more inclusive and better story than we were ever allowed to believe."

Phillips said he's not alone among evangelical Christians in coming to these conclusions.

"I think we're seeing a major move amongst millennials," he said, "waking up to the reality that our faith is not just about going to heaven when we die."

He said this faction of believers, which he has noticed evolving over the past 10 years, is one that "still takes the Bible very seriously, that still believes that God is active in the world, but is turning away from the culture wars and the fights that we used to have in the world and trying to be about change."

Shortly after losing his church, Phillips walked in the Portland Pride Parade holding a sign that read in bold lettering: "As a Christian, I am sorry for the narrow-minded, judgmental, deceptive, manipulative actions of those who denied rights and equality to so many in the name of God."

The response was overwhelming.

"I had no idea what that sign would do," he said, looking back. "It opened up so many amazing conversations and people on the parade route coming and hugging me and crying. Some of those people joined our church."

"It was a huge eye opener," he said. "I was thinking that we were just going to quietly embrace LGBTQ folks, and it became really clear to me that you couldn't just be quiet; you had to be public about it. You had to be evangelical about it! Because it *was* good news, and the good news was that you could be gay or lesbian, bi or trans

and keep going, and that God loved you, and God embraces you, and you didn't need to change."

Today Phillips openly performs gay marriages, with the next one planned for Halloween. He has also included members of the LGBTQ community in his church's leadership team, and his congregation has placed a special emphasis on being supportive of trans rights and its trans members.

Damien Geter said Phillips' church is not the first Christian church where he felt welcome as a gay black man. However, it is the first church he's ever attended where the preacher talked about racial justice from the pulpit.

"I remember sitting in the pew and thinking there is no other church, maybe in this country, that is having this discussion right now," he said. "Not in an after-church meeting or a before-church social, but *in* the church — that's what the sermon was about."

Geter added, "It's great, because for me, faith is so personal, and being black is so personal, that it's just another conduit to help make a change."

Phillips said he's trying to open his congregation's eyes to Portland's and Oregon's history of racial exclusion because even today, it's more deeply ingrained than many liberals may realize.

"We meet at this church downtown, and two of the stained glass windows have slave owners in them," Phillips said.

But racial justice is just one of four areas of mission his congregation has committed to this year. They continue to focus on LGBTQ inclusion, and also the housing crisis and homelessness and refugees and immigrants.

Phillips said the church is connecting with groups already working in those areas and offering their assistance. They've made welcome kits to help refugees settle into their new homes and hygiene kits for people living on the streets. They also support immigrants rights groups and have engaged in some work around sanctuary.

"For me," Phillips said, "this is what this is about: It's integrating prayerful, meditative, spiritual thoughts but being embodied and active in the world. So whether it's doing something — serving at the overnight shelter when it gets cold outside or packing bags for schools or Thanksgiving meals, or marching in the streets to resist white supremacy or homophobia — that's what it means to be active in our world. Social justice is just living out the fruits of our faith."

Geter encourages others who may be looking for an inclusive Christian community to visit Christ Church.

"Adam is doing real things," Geter said. "When I talk to him, I can hear it in his heart that this is something that really means something to him, and he is really trying to make a difference. He's made a difference in the LGBTQ community in having a safe space for us, and he's trying to do the same thing with race, and I think he can do it. And I think that he can do it in one of the whitest cities in the country."

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THE REV. ADAM PHILLIPS,  
ON WHITE SUPREMACY

### If you go

**What:** TEDxMtHood 2017 (speakers include the Rev. Adam Phillips)

**When:** Saturday, Oct. 7

**Where:** Roosevelt High School Theatre, 6941 Central St., Portland

**Tickets:** \$37-77; visit [tedxmt Hood.com](http://tedxmt Hood.com) for more information

### Online

Rabbi Ariel Stone, who convened the Portland Interfaith Clergy Resistance, leads her congregation in the fight for social justice. Read this previous installment of Street Roots' Faith & Justice series at [news.streetroots.org/faithandjustice](http://news.streetroots.org/faithandjustice)