

Harvest Bible Chapel pastor James MacDonald fired: 'A hard but necessary day for our church'

James MacDonald, pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel, delivers a sermon about financial responsibility at Harvest Bible Chapel in Rolling Meadows, on March 31, 2013. (Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune)

By **Patrick M. O'Connell and Morgan Greene**

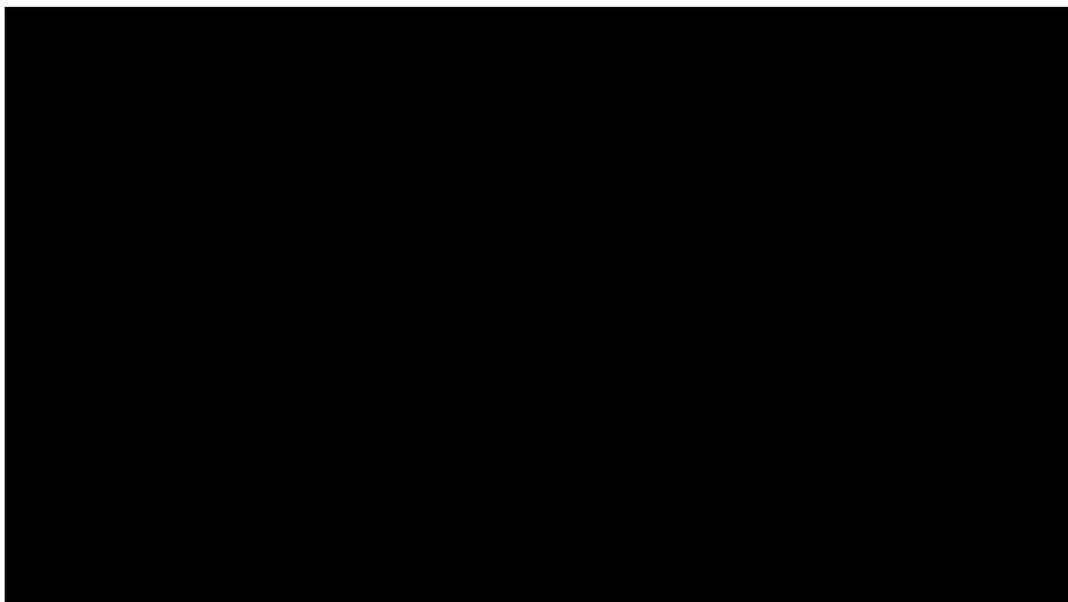
Chicago Tribune

FEBRUARY 14, 2019, 5:55 AM

James MacDonald, the senior pastor and founding member of Harvest Bible Chapel, has been fired, the church announced early Wednesday morning. The announcement comes nearly one month after church elders said MacDonald, a popular preacher who attracted thousands of worshippers to his network of churches in Chicago and the suburbs each weekend, was taking an “indefinite sabbatical.”

A statement posted by church elders cited “conduct that the Elders believe is contrary and harmful to the best interests of the church” as the reason for MacDonald’s immediate termination, effective Tuesday.

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The decision to remove MacDonald as senior pastor of one of the Chicago area's most prominent evangelical Christian churches "accelerated" on Tuesday, elders said, when "highly inappropriate recorded comments made by Pastor MacDonald were given to the media and reported." They also cited "other conduct under consideration."

The move was made with "heavy hearts," the statement said.

MacDonald's leadership has been under scrutiny for weeks. Since the pastor stepped away from his everyday church duties on Jan. 16, a series of text messages and audio recordings have been released, including those broadcast on Erich "Mancow" Muller's morning radio show on WLS-AM 890. Muller joined Harvest and once was friends with MacDonald, but their relationship had soured in recent months.

Audio recordings aired on Muller's show Tuesday morning, in which MacDonald appears to disparage his critics, may have been the last straw for church leadership, which in recent weeks had been determining the

best path forward for Harvest and attempting to determine MacDonald's role in its future.

Muller said Wednesday afternoon that MacDonald is “a carnival barker actor” who was running the church as “essentially a giant Ponzi scheme.”

“This is a guy who is a good salesman and a good peddler for Jesus Christ, and for those of us who were looking for more of Christ in our lives, we became gullible victims in his scheme,” said Muller, who on his show Wednesday morning spoke of his sadness about how the situation deteriorated. “What happens is, he manipulates people to make money.”

“This has been a real spiritual sucker-punch,” Muller told the Tribune. He declined to specify how he obtained the recordings.

Harvest's spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment, and MacDonald could not be reached.

Florida fallout

In the January message to church members announcing that MacDonald was temporarily stepping aside, the pastor himself described actions that “can only be called sin” as the primary reason why he was taking leave.

The church was embroiled in a lawsuit during the fall, when it sued two former church members, their wives and a journalist, alleging defamation and deceptive trade practices.

The church decided to drop the lawsuit after a judge ruled that church documents and messages were subject to discovery and could not be sealed from the public, according to a Jan. 7 post on Harvest's website from the Executive Committee of Elders.

While MacDonald was not supposed to preach in Chicago during the sabbatical, the January announcement indicated he may work at Harvest's newest location in Naples, Fla., where he had preached during the first two Sundays in January.

Blindsided by the announcement, the campus pastor in Naples spoke out against the arrangement. Two days later, he said, he was fired.

John Secrest, whose church joined the MacDonald network of Harvest churches last summer, said he was stunned by the turn of events and the announcement that MacDonald would be stepping aside but perhaps still preaching at the Naples location.

During a recent interview with the Tribune, Secrest said he did not think MacDonald should be able to work in Naples until the internal matters were cleared up. He even indicated that perhaps the best path forward was to sever the formal partnership between the Florida campus and the Illinois churches. Secrest, who

described a scenario in which church leaders and ordinary members in Naples were kept in the dark regarding developments, said his requests and suggestions were rebuffed.

After Secrest outlined his concerns about the MacDonald situation in an emailed letter to his flock in Florida, he was fired for insubordination.

“We didn’t sign up for all of this drama that has nothing to do with us,” Secrest said. “I told them this is just unconscionable, please don’t do this. ... We got sucked into something that on the surface seemed attractive, but under the surface was very toxic.”

After Secrest was dismissed, Harvest posted a statement on its website updating church members. The letter stated that MacDonald “agrees it is wise for him to remain out of all leadership involvement of Harvest Bible Chapel, including preaching on any campus” during his sabbatical. The elders’ letter also stated that recent events, including “the termination of the Lead Pastor of the Naples Campus” had church leadership reviewing its structure and decision-making process.

“As we strongly desire to make wise, God-honoring decisions, we will be building a team of people to review our current structure,” stated the letter posted on the Harvest website. “It is our hope that this team of Elders, staff, church members and experienced outside counsel will help us move forward in a healthy way.”

In announcing MacDonald’s sabbatical, church elders had said Harvest Bible was embarking on a thorough examination of the church’s financial, organizational, leadership and management policies with the help of two outside ministries that “specialize in helping churches resolve issues in God-honoring ways.”

Although the exact nature of MacDonald’s “sin” was not specified in the pastor’s online statement, or in a series of social media posts he has made since New Year’s, Harvest has been the target of a barrage of criticism from a few vocal former members who have accused church leadership of financial mismanagement and dishonest operations.

“I have carried great shame about this pattern in certain relationships that can only be called sin,” MacDonald said in a statement posted on the church’s website. “I am grieved that people I love have been hurt by me in ways they felt they could not express to me directly and have not been able to resolve.”

A sudden partnership

Secrest said he was taken aback when he received a phone call over the summer from MacDonald and the leadership team at Harvest Bible Chapel. The Harvest leaders proposed a merger and formal partnership between MacDonald’s Chicago network and Secrest’s small church in Naples.

Secrest, a pastor with three decades of experience, had opened the church in 2015 after attending training

sessions at Harvest. The Florida church was considered an independent church, loosely affiliated with MacDonald's Chicago-area campuses but operating on its own, first out of the Greater Naples YMCA, then later at its own building.

Secrest said he was hesitant to create the partnership. He said he enjoyed the autonomy of operating his own church and worried about the ramifications of becoming part of a larger network of Illinois-based churches. But MacDonald's call had certain appeal, he said, especially to elders at his church who welcomed the celebrity of MacDonald, and the possibilities for growth and attention that may come with it.

"It was kind of intimidating, frankly," Secrest said.

After three years as an independent church, Naples signed a formal ministry agreement with Harvest Bible Chapel, becoming another campus in the MacDonald-led network. Secrest said he was assured of local control and minimal meddling from Harvest, but that the executive leadership team in Chicago was officially in charge. Instead, according to Secrest, the agreement amounted to what he called "a takeover."

"One of the things I'm learning is, I should have known better," said Secrest, 54, who attended Trinity International University in Deerfield and has worked at several churches, including what is now called The Orchard Evangelical Free Church in Arlington Heights, before starting the Naples church. "It's a painful place to be. But in my conscience, I feel I did the right thing."

A charismatic preacher

MacDonald started the conservative evangelical church when he was 27, and members first met in 1988 at Rolling Meadows High School. Seven years later, in 1995, the congregation moved into a former warehouse that remains its flagship along Illinois Highway 53 in Rolling Meadows.

Since then, MacDonald developed a reputation as a talented and charismatic preacher, drawing thousands of parishioners to his sermons, which are presented live at churches, on simulcasts, satellite radio and social media. He has more than 1 million followers on Facebook and was a member of Donald Trump's spiritual advisory team during the presidential campaign. MacDonald stepped down when a video of Trump speaking in vulgar terms about women surfaced.

MacDonald's sons, Landon and Luke, are on Harvest's leadership team as lead pastors. Landon MacDonald is executive pastor of student ministries, and Luke MacDonald is executive ministry pastor, according to Harvest's website.

The lawsuit Harvest filed against the bloggers and others laid bare some of the issues Harvest has been grappling with for years.

In the early 2000s, Harvest embarked on an ambitious expansion plan, aiming to form “10 churches in 10 years.” Since then the church has opened locations in Elgin, Highland Park, Niles, Crystal Lake, Aurora, Chicago and Naples, Fla. In 2006, the Harvest church in Crystal Lake defaulted on a \$6 million mortgage, according to the defamation lawsuit. And from 2005 to 2007, “rapid growth and construction overruns (resulted) in Harvest’s implementation of an extensive revision of its financial system and controls, including Harvest’s establishment of an audit committee, a finance committee, and a compensation committee,” according to the church’s filing in court. In 2017, Harvest Bible Chapel split from another network of churches, the Harvest Bible Fellowship.

The two former members of Harvest who were sued, Ryan Mahoney and Scott Bryant, have been some of the most vocal critics of MacDonald, publishing a series of online critiques of MacDonald and church management in a blog they started in 2012. They detailed what they assert are questionable financial dealings, infighting among elders and a general toxic administrative culture.

Mahoney and his wife, Melinda; Bryant and his wife, Sarah; as well as writer and radio contributor Julie Roys all were sued in the fall by Harvest leadership over the online postings and comments about the church. According to the suit, Melinda Mahoney and Sarah Bryant were named as defendants because they provide “material support” and “funds for computer(s) that are used to create, edit, host and maintain” the bloggers’ website, [The Elephant’s Debt](#).

After learning of MacDonald’s termination, Mahoney and Bryant released a statement to the Tribune saying, “We recognize that many people at Harvest Bible Chapel are hurting today. We are hoping and praying for better days ahead for your community.”

Church leaders have announced they have started a process of reconciliation with “individuals who have left our fellowship or have complaints against us” and “asking God to enable us to confess our sins and make needed changes in our leadership.”

In their statement Wednesday morning regarding MacDonald’s termination, former church members Mahoney and Bryant said many of the stories they have been hearing about Harvest and MacDonald have recently come to light.

“Seven years ago, we began to publicly air just a few of the stories that former elders and pastors had begun to share with us in private,” the two wrote. “While they did not allow us to share many of these stories, we published accounts and documents about finances, power and control as a means of pointing to the much deeper issues that were swirling around MacDonald and Harvest. As of the end of 2017, we felt that we had said all that we could to warn the people of Harvest about this toxic scenario.”

Church members react

There was no mention of MacDonald at Sunday's 9 a.m. service at the campus in Rolling Meadows. A packed house sang along to the live band and lifted up their hands as the stage lights pulsed. The sermon came via video feed from visiting pastor Robby Gallaty of Tennessee and involved the story of the blind beggar Bartimaeus, who threw off his cloak — the one thing his livelihood depended on — and walked toward Jesus. Gallaty shared his own story of overcoming addiction and asked the crowd about the cloak keeping them from going all-in for God.

After the service, a number of attendees gathered at the coffee bar said they were praying for MacDonald and for the church. Others said they were following the rumors on Twitter and hoped more than one side of the story would surface.

“There's a lot of good that comes out of here,” said Jorge Cotto, 49, of Franklin Park. “When someone has an agenda and all they want to do is focus on someone's mistakes instead of focusing on the whole person, then you're not doing anyone justice but yourself. This isn't a social club. This is a church. ... You can't lose hope in people. You can't lose faith in people.”

Jen Thorman, 34, of Arlington Heights, said she has been a member of the church for years.

“We love this church very, very much,” she said after Sunday's service. “This is a rough season for our church. However, we remain very hopeful because the Bible says the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. And the church is not one person. ... We know that the church will prevail and whatever is in darkness will come to light. It seems to be a purification for our church.”

After MacDonald's departure was announced, Thorman said she felt a mixture of sadness and relief.

“This is a hard but necessary day for our church,” Thorman said in a text. “James and Harvest are not synonymous though. Harvest is the thousands of people that fill it who are loving, kind and gracious. We will keep pressing on for God's glory. By His grace, better days are ahead for us.”

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