

Harvest Bible Chapel pastor MacDonald taking sabbatical; elders to begin 'peacemaking'

Susan Sarkauskas



Updated

1/17/2019 10:31 AM



Harvest Bible Chapel Senior Pastor James MacDonald is

taking a sabbatical from the church's Chicago-area operations. *courtesy of Harvest Bible Chapel*

The founder and senior pastor of the Harvest Bible Chapel is taking a sabbatical from church operations in the Chicago area, the board of elders announced Wednesday, a week after the church dropped a defamation lawsuit against several critics.

The Rev. James MacDonald will take "an indefinite sabbatical from all preaching and leadership" locally, but he might continue to preach over the winter at the church in Naples, Florida, [the elders' letter said](#).

At the same time, the elders said, the church is embarking upon "a peacemaking process that seeks both reconciliation and change where needed."

In a statement in which he said he is leaving the church "in capable hands," MacDonald wrote: "For a long time I have felt unequal to all but the preaching task at Harvest. I have battled cycles of injustice, hurt, anger, and fear which have wounded others without cause. I have carried great shame about this pattern in certain relationships that can only be called sin. 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. I blame only myself for this and want to devote my entire energy to understanding and addressing these recurring patterns."

MacDonald founded Harvest Bible in 1988 in Rolling Meadows. It has grown to include churches in Aurora, Chicago, Crystal Lake, Elgin, Highland Park and Niles. The church says that about 12,000 people worship at its campuses every week.

It also led a campaign to found more than 100 other Harvest churches worldwide, mostly in the United States, through Harvest Bible Fellowship. The church's spokesman could not be reached for comment late Wednesday afternoon.

MacDonald's sabbatical comes as he and the church are the focus of criticism by former members and other Christians writing on various internet sites. They accuse MacDonald of wielding too much power in church governance, of lashing out at people, of being paid what they see as too much, of theological impropriety and more.

The church has come under fire for how it handled reports that a youth minister was sending sexual text messages to minors and for how leaders have handled finances, including how much money the church has borrowed.

In October, the church sued three of those critics, charging they had defamed Harvest Bible and MacDonald and were interfering in the business of the church.

The church announced a week ago it was dropping the lawsuit after a Cook County judge ruled against the church's request to keep some documents private. The church had sued Julie Roys of Carol Stream, Ryan and Melinda Mahoney of Wheaton, and Scott and Sarah Bryant of Geneva in October.

Ryan Mahoney and Scott Bryant write TheElephantsDebt.com website and Roys is a freelance writer on Christianity, a blogger and a former radio show host.

Harvest Bible also dropped a lawsuit against a California credit union that holds the mortgages on several church properties. The church had accused the credit union of deceptive practice, saying it reneged on a commitment to lower the interest rates on the loans. The credit union said it never committed to doing so

And the church accused a former employee in October of stealing \$275,000 from it. Elgin police are investigating. No charges have been brought. Church elders said the reconciliation process will include developing a team of "conciliators" to help guide a process of reaching out to people who have left the church or have complaints against its leaders and "asking God to enable us to confess our sins and make needed changes in our leadership."

On Wednesday, Ryan Mahoney and Scott Bryant questioned who will pay for the mediators and why MacDonald might preach in Naples but not at the Chicago-area campuses.

"How are the victims that MacDonald has 'wounded without cause' ever to believe that this will be a fair process when the mediators have been selected by and presumably paid for by MacDonald and/or Harvest?" they wrote. Of MacDonald's statement, they wrote, "It is difficult to read this as anything but yet another attempt to spin a story."

The elders pledged to examine the church's financial management and leadership and make "whatever changes are necessary to ensure that every area is being managed according to professional best practices and in a way that honors God."

MacDonald asked for prayers and echoed that his process of change will last "as long as it takes."