

Our Lady of Perpetual Hypocrisy

We embarked on a spiritual journey the summer of 2008 and dipped our toes into organized religion. The rusty Christian and the Jew for Jesus didn't think we were asking too much of a church: we were seeking friends, fellowship, and words of comfort. The church we chose proudly proclaimed it welcomed everyone, no matter what. In the end, sadly, it didn't welcome us.

There were no red flags at the new member luncheon we attended; in fact, quite the opposite. Harvey, the main pastor, is a charismatic, wonderful speaker whose passion and enthusiasm about everything are infectious. Ron, the assistant pastor, is much quieter and reserved but exudes a gentle aura of kindness.

Other seekers present had all been attending services regularly and were now ready to make the big commitment of officially joining the church. The fact that virtually everyone present was gay or bisexual didn't matter. Why would it? I was struck by the fact each told a story of how their own church had let them down, casting them out when they came "out". In *this* church, they all agreed, they had found a home.

Mike and I hadn't even heard one sermon yet, as we (mistakenly) presumed one first attended a meeting, then gained entrée into the Main Room. But no matter. We came away from our introduction liking the people we met, and wanting to experience more. Harvey hugged us both goodbye.

The next weekend we attended our first service. The congregation was very small, and only one morning service was offered. At my request, we sat in the very last pew, close to an exit. I told Mike I was out of practice as a Christian and needed a quick escape in case I had a panic attack. I also thought there was a good chance one or both of us might get smoted.

Harvey's sermon was as lively and enthralling as we had hoped it would be. So many parishioners said hello and smiled at the two strangers. The crowd was a very distinct mix: married couples in their 70s and 80s, who had likely attended this church for decades. And single and/or partnered gay/lesbian/transgendered individuals in their 30s and 40s. The old folks stayed in their own clump, as did the tattooed-and-pierced gay crowd. The demographic into which Mike and I fit was oddly scarce, and you could count the children on one hand. Thankfully, no smoting occurred.

We attended the morning service the next few weeks, liking it more each time, and we made the decision to become members. When we stood in front of the congregation being introduced that hot summer day, Ron likened Mike's musical talent to an answered prayer. The church was about to launch an evening service and a Music Director was needed. Ron was in charge of this new service, and his vision for it sounded lovely: worshippers sitting informally in a circle amid the soft glow of candles;

meditative, chant-like music. It would be a quietly contemplative service similar to those of Scotland's Iona Community. It sounded organic and peaceful and truly unique - and wonderful. Mike was excited at the thought of doing something so unusual, and he happily agreed to serve as Music Director.

Be careful what you wish for . . . The original vision for the Sunday evening service quickly morphed into something completely different. The idea of chant-like music was quickly shot down by one of the various church committees. (Mike would learn that no decision about ANYTHING could be made without one or more meetings of at least one committee). The contemplative service was apparently too edgy, too different, too threatening. So Ron's new vision, while still incorporating candlelight, would be more traditional, while geared to the young adult. A guest artist would be featured each week, and the pick-up choir would sing more modern songs, and show tunes. (One particularly excruciating example of the latter was *Seasons Of Love* from Rent. "525,600 minutes, 525,000 moments so dear . . ." Talk about an earworm that gets in your brain. And not an easy tune for people, who don't already know it, to sing well).

As he grasped everything for which he was responsible in fulfilling Ron's vision (such as auditioning and hiring a different guest artist/group each week and rehearsing a choir the members of which were never the same two weeks in a row), Mike realized he was in over his head. When he and Ron met for the first time to discuss the particulars, Mike told him honestly that he wasn't the right person for the job.

One of Ron's greatest strengths is his ability to calm. He assured Mike there was no pressure, it would all work out; Mike could not only handle it, he'd do a fine job. His words gave Mike complete confidence, and he re-committed to assist the service.

Mike would come to find out that his initial instincts had been right: he wasn't the right person for the job, but he was the *only* person willing to try it. There was no other musically-inclined individual at the church interested in being Music Director at evening worship.

The new service launched in September and the first one was wonderful. Subsequent services . . . not so much. On a good night, eight people would come early to participate in the pick-up choir, but more often it was five to six. Mike and I arrived over two hours before everyone else so that we could set the music equipment up. He provided his own microphones and at least one mic stand, but he had to endure a horribly antiquated sound system. Ron repeatedly promised a new one, but it never materialized. Initially, I also assisted with food, which was its own nightmare as that necessitated multiple trips to Costco and other stores on Sunday mornings, all before we could head over (early) to the church to do all the set-up. What was an enjoyable church service to attendees was a five to seven hour ordeal for us.

Like a cold glass of water in the face, Ron initiated a meeting with Mike that would only make matters worse. Stan, another parishioner, had relayed to both pastors that his

niece was a friend of Mike's on Facebook. Because the niece was underage, Stan felt there was something inappropriate occurring between the two.

Mike was dumbfounded. Each of us had only signed up for Facebook to join the church group, and neither Mike nor I even knew the niece. She was simply someone connected to the Facebook group and had either made Mike a friend, or another church member in the group had suggested her as a friend. Insulting, too, were Stan's other comments: that he knew we'd made a significant monetary contribution to the church, which is why Mike had been elevated so quickly to his position of power. This raised the specter of, as Woody Allen phrased it, "your typical Jew-hater" which was almost as offensive to Mike as Stan's hints that he was a pedophile.

We had only had minimal yet civil interactions with Stan and his wife. That there were any bad feelings on their part toward us came as a total shock. Ron tried to soothe Mike by dismissing Stan as well as his ridiculous remarks. We had come to discover that Ron is a rather vindictive gossip who shared information about others that he shouldn't, especially being a pastor. Stan, revealed Ron, had been sexually abused as a youngster and had apparently never sought therapy or if he had, he hadn't had any success with it. He was gay, yet had married Patty and the marriage was not harmonious, which was obvious to everyone. Patty is morbidly obese and practically glows with misery. They both appear to be unhappy, but Stan doesn't want to leave her for fear she'll follow through on her threats to hurt herself if he tries it.

Both have attended the church for years but, as Ron went on to confide, the drama they continually create make people around them unhappy. They had been involved in at least one ministry they were asked to leave, as other parishioners had actually complained about them.

Regardless of the emotional baggage that had prompted Stan to lash out at someone he didn't even know, Mike left the meeting feeling violated.

The evening service continued with Mike dreading it more each week. Finding all of the pieces of the ancient sound system every Sunday, as well as music stands and chairs, was like a scavenger hunt. Ron seldom mentioned what went well on a given night but focused more on what he hadn't liked. The service always ran too long. Mike was missing his beloved Sunday football.

I had transitioned from schlepping the food to preparing and running the PowerPoint each week, stressed now myself as Ron often wasn't done with his sermon until Sunday afternoon. The laptop (which we had to furnish) was barely functional and I had a scavenger hunt of my own trying to locate the projector cords each week. The words of comfort we had sought when we first began attending the church didn't even register: because Mike and I were part of the "show" now, we were too focused on our next cues to even listen. After a few weeks, I asked Ron to hand PowerPoint off to someone else and, unfortunately, that someone was Patty. Assisted by Stan, the two Drama Queens

were now part of the show with Mike. The weirdness created by Stan came to head one Sunday evening when I didn't go to the service.

Mike had arrived early and, as usual, set up the music stands and chairs for the choir. He set a chair up for himself and, as he always did, placed a chair next to his to hold the decrepit PA. Once everything was in place, he decided to head into the choir room to set up there before rehearsal. It was a good time to leave, as Stan and Patty had come in and had begun setting up the PowerPoint equipment.

When Mike returned to the hall, his chair had been moved to another part of the stage. He was moving it back to where he'd originally placed it and upon doing so, was chastised by Stan.

"Hey, don't move that," he called to Mike.

"But it's my chair, I set it up," Mike explained as he returned it to where he'd positioned it 90 minutes earlier.

"That's for *my wife*," Stan huffed. "I refuse to have *my wife* sit on the floor!"

Completely taken aback by the venom in Stan's tone, Mike calmly explained, "But it's part of the choir. I was here at 3 o'clock setting all this up. If you come early, perhaps you can set up your area, too."

"You know, we do a lot for this church too," Stan raged. "Probably more than you do."

Ever the professor, Mike imperiously countered with, "I'm not accustomed to being spoken to this way."

Stan stubbornly repeated, "I refuse to have *my wife* sit on the floor."

On the heels of this heated vitriol, the church service commenced. True to their Drama Queen reputations, Stan and Patty sat behind the grand piano that night, as far away from Mike as their PowerPoint cord would allow. Patty cried throughout the service.

The scene with Stan disturbed Mike. After he described it to me, we were both confused as to why these two miserable people were allowed to perpetually poison the world around them, especially in church. Shouldn't the spiritual leaders show some leadership? Shouldn't somebody do something?

Mike requested a meeting with Harvey, which proved a complete waste of time. While the pastor acknowledged Stan's insinuation that Mike was a pedophile (on top of being a Dirty Jew) was "out of line", he didn't understand Mike's outrage. As for a resolution, his only suggestion was that the two men should meet, shake hands and apologize. Harvey couldn't comprehend that Mike had nothing for which to apologize, nor could he grasp how repellant Mike found the thought of facing Stan. Harvey explained that Patty

and Stan had been churchgoers for many years, and no counsel or censure would be visited upon them. Everyone is welcome, just as they are, no matter what. So they create unhappiness wherever they go; oh well. Harvey didn't get that Mike was the wounded party, and he dismissed Mike's indignation as all being "because of a chair."

A subsequent conversation with Ron was just as useless. While he admitted to hating Stan and Patty (yes, the pastor said he HATED these members of his flock), Ron repeated the line that everyone is welcome. But Ron did have a small consolation to share with Mike: because of the recent histrionics, where Patty sobbed behind the piano, the couple would be asked to keep away from the evening service for one year. This request would be made, however, after an upcoming fundraiser. Ron explained that the couple had pledged a goodly amount for a church cause, so Ron needed to time his discussion with them so that it wouldn't jeopardize their generosity.

It came down to dollars and cents? Not giving succor to someone unfairly hurt. Not spiritually counseling - or suggesting professional counseling to - a couple with serious emotional problems. The agenda of the pastors we'd come to consider friends seemed to be the bottom line. That men of the cloth could be so obtuse and unempathetic was truly stunning.

We had entered into church life with an immediate dedication. We donated water to the water drive, and school supplies to the back to school drive. We provided cookies after church, and consistently brought our empty medicine bottles requested for the Homeless Ministry. We even provided lunch for a New Member Meeting, where we spoke in glowing terms to the prospective members, despite our treatment. Although we were new members, we had responded without hesitation to the concept of giving our "talent and treasure", and *this* was how church elders supported us?

Mike and I were discussing the tawdry turn of events one disheartening evening with Patrick, another parishioner. I expressed amazement that for a church that says it doesn't judge, Stan and Patty had certainly passed judgment on us, and I said I thought that hypocritical. Without hesitation, Patrick happily said, "Oh there's hypocrisy in every church." I was not comforted.

November came and went, then December was upon us. Although we didn't need to worry any more about Stan and Patty attending the evening service, we didn't feel the same. Not about the service, the congregation or, sadly, about Harvey and Ron.

The first December service was going to be special. Mike's brother was visiting, and he and I were going to sing in the pick-up choir. We were planning to enjoy a special meal with everyone following the service, as Harvey's partner had made what was rumored to be amazing chili. Those parishioners who so desired would be caroling afterward. In spite of past unpleasantness, it was going to be a fun evening.

Then Stan and Patty appeared.

Although they had specifically been asked not to come to the evening service, here Stan sauntered in with Patty waddling not far behind. They had come for the caroling (and the chili, no doubt) and had obviously decided to attend the service, too. Everyone is welcome, after all. While many people wore colorful shirts and festive sweaters befitting the season, they were the only two individuals wearing gag reindeer antlers. And though it was a church service, held in the name of God, they kept the antlers on.

The happy evening we had anticipated ended with their appearance, and we three packed up Mike's equipment in record time and left immediately after the service. We'll never taste the homemade chili.

After four months, Mike ended his stint as Musical Director for the evening service. In the Main Room each Sunday morning, at The Church That Doesn't Judge, Stan and Kim sing in the choir now. Gazing down at the parishioners from their lofty perch alongside the pastors, they smugly sing of God's love, acceptance and tolerance. We have relinquished our membership in the church and now spend our Sundays on a new spiritual journey. We are being much more selective this time.

At the very first meeting we attended, I had been moved by those who shared sad stories of being damaged by the church. Ironically, we have now been damaged by the very church those same people cling to. The pastors we loved so much failed us. They're only human, after all, but we had foolishly believed when the unthinkable happened - hatred directed at us in a church - they would somehow make it right. They didn't. They didn't even try.

Perhaps John Lennon expressed it best:

"Jesus was alright, but his disciples were thick and ordinary."

That certainly holds true for the Christians we met the summer of 2008.