

My Harvest Bible Chapel Story

I began attending Harvest Bible Chapel (HBC) in November 1998, after my youngest brother was killed in a car accident, and I was searching for answers to help put my life back together. I confessed Christ as my Lord and Savior in 1999 after attending HBC for several months. I met wife at HBC in 1999 and we were married there in 2000. I started doing ministry as a volunteer at HBC then pursued and completed my MDiv degree at Moody.

I was subsequently hired by HBC and worked there for over twelve years in a variety of roles ranging from Pastor of High School Ministry to Executive Director of Business Operations. I saw and experienced real ministry there and witnessed lives changed through the power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

When I resigned and left the church in April 2017, I was a member of the five-person Executive Leadership Team (XLT) which had oversight of all HBC church matters and was comprised of: Scott Milholland, Luke MacDonald, Fred Adams, Jeff Donaldson and myself (Dean Butters.) I was also a member of the twelve-person “Global” Executive Leadership Team (Global XLT), which had oversight of the entire organization (HBC, HBF, WITW, HCA, Camp Harvest, VCB, and VCF) and was comprised of Scott Milholland, Luke MacDonald, Fred Adams, Jeff Donaldson, myself, Kent Shaw, Bill Molinari, Janine Nelson, Dallas Jenkins, Garrett Higbee, Trei Tatum, and Rick Donald. I spent many hours with James MacDonald at church, in his home, at Camp Harvest, and on other retreats.

I LOVED what I believed that Harvest Bible Chapel was—a vibrant church that existed to bring glory to Jesus Christ. Even during confusion, never-ending drama, attacks and threats, I did my best to give the benefit of the doubt to the leaders over me and believed the best about them, their character, and their motives. During the years of 2015 and 2016, my ability to continue believing the best about these men diminished, and the things I was seeing with my eyes, hearing with my ears, and feeling in my soul became more convincing than the narrative that was continually spun.

I am compelled to speak the truth about my experience now with the hope that it will help to prevent others from being spiritually manipulated and brutalized by James MacDonald and others at Harvest Bible Chapel who carry out his commands.

What follows are some of the most troubling experiences I had in my 12 years on staff at Harvest Bible Chapel.

- **James MacDonald rarely exhibits signs of love for other Christians.** I did not witness consistency in even one of the biblical qualities of love. I did, however, witness James MacDonald harshly and consistently display the polar opposite of every single quality in the biblical description of love from 1 Corinthians 13:

- Patient

- Kind
- Does not envy
- Does not boast
- Is not arrogant
- Is not rude
- Does not insist on its own way
- Is not irritable
- Is not resentful
- Does not rejoice at wrongdoing
- Rejoices with the truth

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another - John 13:35

The way James speaks to/about people is tragic. He mocks, slanders, gossips and cruelly jokes about people continuously. Here are a few examples that stood out to me, there are many, many more:

- James required me to hire his interior decorator for a few church projects. He sat me down (ironically, in the Elder Room in Rolling Meadows) and told me, “You can yell at her as loudly and as often as you need to, she can take it.” This shocked me as he was clearly telling me this from his own experience. I hired her but never yelled at her.
- Over and over again, James relentlessly mocked a former church-planting candidate from the Pastoral Training Center whose face was disfigured by an animal attack when he was a child. James would often joke that after him, one of the requirements for attending the pastoral training center is to have all of your facial features intact.
- He mocked a former HBC worship leader because he accidentally ran over his young daughter’s foot with a lawn mower and cut it off.
- He mocked a well-known Christian woman when she got engaged in her 50s after a lifetime of being single and chaste. He made a video likening her first sexual experience to the Holy Spirit coming upon her (with very graphic and disturbing audio). This video was circulated to James’ pastor friends and he read us comments about it that he claimed were from Jack Graham and Greg Laurie. This video was a favorite of Pastor Rick’s and he regularly asked James to play it, often to the groans and chagrin of the others present.
- He mocked and drew pictures of former elder with a “goiter” on his head, and would sketch out before and after pictures with the after showing the goiter popped with puss oozing out of it.
- After he had veneers put on his teeth, he began mocking the crooked teeth of others. One example of many was him saying, “To me, underbite equals monster” (referring to a person in the church he had recently talked to).

James MacDonald mocks his staff, elders, and congregation regularly and

relentlessly and is rarely at a loss for sharp, hurtful words.

- **James MacDonald is accountable to no one.** James finds a way to get his way. From my perspective, the elder board that James has chosen and assembled is structured so that he can forward his objectives with little or no pushback.

Others have spoken at length about the elder structure at Harvest, but I will add that James and some members of his senior staff show disdain for the elders and don't even pretend to respect them in private.

- James often quipped mockingly, "The hardest thing about the elders is trying to make them feel like they are actually doing something."
- I sat in an XLT meeting where one Executive Pastor expressed angrily, "I hate the elders. They do nothing but make my life miserable." This was in response to an elder giving him some input regarding small groups and small-group curriculum. His expression of hatred went unchallenged and we soon moved on to the next order of business.
- Within several months of being hired, I heard Scott Milholland respond to a question about the elders by saying, "Don't worry about the Elders, they will do what I tell them to do."

Fred Adams would prepare select members of the finance committee for any unusual announcements that were coming in a meeting and have their support scripted to help win group consensus. One time, I attended a finance committee meeting where the topic of extending the debt repayment (AGAIN) was broached. Jeff Smith was leading the conversation and after he was supported by the person Fred briefed, everyone else sat in silence. Jeff attempted to pry opinions from other committee members, but there were none. Finally, he said, "Let's talk about this. I need the meeting minutes to indicate that there was a vigorous discussion." The debt repayment got extended again. By the way, it was never real that it would be repaid by 2020 or 2023 -- simple math shows that. The lie started with James, was shaped through Fred, and was cascaded to the congregation with very few questions.

- **James MacDonald has intentionally created and sustains a culture of fear among HBC staff members.** He quickly shuts down challenges (real or imagined) by embarrassing the challenger in front of his or her peers. He makes challengers look and feel ridiculous with sharp and often cruel words, and over time, the challenges came less and less. James mocks, belittles, yells, screams, demeans and threatens when his ideas are challenged or when things are not done the way he thinks they should have been done.
- On different occasions when I challenged him (this is very embarrassing to admit that I allowed him to talk to me this way), I was told that talking to me was like "talking to a woman" and I was accused of bringing my "daddy

- issues” into the workplace; “needing to get some counseling for that”; and being “self-righteous.” (Because when he asked, I told him that I stopped watching a show that he watched. When he kept pressing as to why I didn’t watch it anymore, I told him it was because I was watching it with my wife and there was an intense sex scene that made us both uncomfortable. He then unleashed on me and let me know how self-righteous I was for saying that.)
- James collects information from Soul Care (counseling), small groups, and conversations with other pastors to use against people. Here is a particularly hurtful example: I was confronting James about something completely unrelated and he blindsided me with a remark that my wife had made on a pastor’s wives retreat. It was the first time she was able to get away after our son was born. He had cried for nearly nine months straight and it was an incredibly difficult time to endure. We decided that she should get away for the weekend and get some R&R at the pastor’s wives retreat at Camp Harvest. She had a great weekend, but apparently mentioned in a small group breakout (which included Kathy MacDonald) how difficult a time we were having with our son and how it had been hard to have me out so many evenings and weekends with church activities. Not only was she offered no help or support when she opened up to these women, but Kathy took it straight to James, and a few months later when he and I were disagreeing about something else, he brought this incident up, let me know that Kathy told him all about it and kept saying, “Where is her HUMILITY? WHERE’S THE HUMILITY????... How can she say that she is having a hard time to KATHY? to KATHY???? Has she ever thought about what KATHY is going through????” This was not isolated, it is a tactic he used often. It is very difficult to respond on the spot when something deeply personal like this is fashioned into a weapon against you; it is a way that he wins arguments and makes people fearful of challenging him. With James, decisions are made on the spot and when he can freeze people, decisions get made without their input.
 - James’ favorite game when the leadership team is together at camp or off-site is “The Name Game.” He makes everyone to put the names of three former HBC employees in a hat, then to go around and draw a name and describe the crappy things the person did until he/she is guessed. Upon reflection, I now realize that this game serves the dual purpose of:
 - Getting everyone to openly mock staff people who leave
 - Reinforce the pillar of loyalty in Harvest Staff culture; those who leave are bad, and you don’t ever want to be one of them.
 - Often, if James or one of his ideas were challenged in a meeting, the challenge would be followed by a private discussion between the challenger and Rick Donald, Scott Milholland, or another senior staff member. It would be explained to the challenger why his or her timing was so poor, how much difficulty James was experiencing, [and/or] stress he was under or pressure that was upon him. (There was NEVER a good time to challenge James or one

of his ideas.) The challenger would be led to the place where he apologized to James, not necessarily because his challenge was wrong, but because his timing was so obviously off and he had not considered all that James was going through at the time.

- **James MacDonald often blames men's wives for displays of "disloyalty" to him.** It is very common to hear, "his wife sucks," "his wife is cranky," or "his wife was never on board," when men (especially Pastors) push back or become disillusioned with James. Many things, big and small, are blamed on wives rather than legitimate stances against behavior unbecoming for a Pastor.
- **James MacDonald uses situational ethics.** He has instilled in his staff that whatever is he thinks is best for the church IS what is best, and ANY means justify those ends. In other words, something is good/right because he said/did it, not because of any moral, rational or logical principal. In the top leadership offices, the mission has seemingly shifted from glorifying God through the fulfillment of the Great Commission to creating loyalty, fame, and revenue for James MacDonald. In the end, I realized that James is a person who says whatever is necessary to forward his objective, even if he has no intention of following through. I was told by someone close to James that "you can't take what James says on a good day to mean that it will actually happen," elaborating that people took advantage of James when he felt good and generous, so it was OK for him to renege on his promises. The communication structure was set up so that almost all important written communication went to James through Scott Milholland or Sharon Kostal. James could then claim that he did not receive information or that he did not receive accurate information and Scott/Sharon would fall on the sword. James has an incredibly selective memory and even a recent face-to-face discussion was often recounted inaccurately or not at all. He made sure that he never responded to important questions in writing, sticking to conversations by phone or in-person, then using a type of gaslighting to make challengers seem unable to recount facts accurately when he was the one intentionally manipulating the facts.
- **James MacDonald is prospering himself at the expense of his congregation.** His lifestyle, many forms of payment from the church and amassed wealth are indefensible. I sat in an elder meeting where he was gently told by Greg Bradshaw that people were leaving the church because James would not reveal his salary. Greg humbly asked him why he wouldn't just disclose it and James yelled back at him saying he would rather see 1000 people leave the church than disclose his salary. He used to say he made all his money from book sales, but that came in to question when he also got in front of the church and pleaded with the congregation to buy his book telling them that he did not take a penny from the sales. Here are some examples of questionable financial dealings that directly benefited James:
 - Demanded that his office be remodeled in 2013 while the entire JLT (joint leadership team, XLT+ their direct reports) had taken a mandatory 10% pay decrease and they removed coffee/water for employees as austerity measures due to low giving. Remodel cost about \$150,000.

- During the same time period as listed above, the fencing for the new deer herd was purchased for over \$40,000.
 - Spent over \$50,000 of HBC money on his camp site in year one of ALM Palooza.
 - Church paid for the moving and storage of items left in his Inverness home. While the items were valued at approximately \$20,000 (pool table, shuffle board, TV's, misc. Furniture, etc.), the moving and heated storage totaled over \$50,000. In addition, he had left his hot tub at the Inverness home filled, and the pipes broke inside. He demanded this be moved and "donated" to Camp Harvest, even though I let him know it cost more to fix than to buy a working hot tub with that was used but had a warranty. I later learned that he took an \$8,000 tax write-off for this donation.
 - Led various hunting trips throughout the U.S. and Africa for his friends and couched them as business expenses. These hunts include the shooting of highly valuable trophy animals.
 - Scraped and dented his truck on one of the columns in the Elgin parking garage, got out and yelled at the security person for "setting the cones up wrong," then demanded that the church pay for the repairs. It is noteworthy that no other vehicles crashed into the column due to this "wrong" configuration.
 - 4 months after the IT upgrade project kicked off and the scope had been presented and agreed upon, James added "Friendship Register" tablets to the scope which added over \$200,000 to the project. James sent Luke to talk to me when the payment came due, and I was told that I could never say in a room full of people that the project went over budget because James added something. Later the same day we had a lunch meeting and James laid into me asking why the project was over budget, if I ever told anyone about it, when I told them, etc. I let him say his piece, and then he offered the solution of WITW paying \$200,000 to HBC to buy a house in Galena that had been donated to HBC. He allowed the blame to rest on me for the cost overrun.
 - He demanded that fiber optic cable be installed at the camp so the internet service would be faster. The cost was \$20,000 per month on a three-year contract.
 - Reported that Camp Harvest lost over \$200,000 in 2016. In reality, it lost about \$29,000. They kept +/- \$170,000 in credit card payment from campers in the general fund and showed it as revenue. This helped to hit the revenue target and qualify for Executive bonuses.
 - I saw James tip a waitress in Hamilton Canada \$400, and I saw him buy over \$500 in cigars with HBC funds. He often had Scott or Fred use their HBC credit card to cover these extravagant purchases.
- **James MacDonald is a very angry man.** His uncontrollable anger often materializes as a violent temper tantrum. He is not held accountable for what is said or done during these irrational fits, no matter how vicious, ridiculous, or harmful they are, because calling him out on bad behavior would invite a penalty far more difficult to endure than allowing him to rant.
 - **The lower level Pastors and other kind/caring volunteers are bait** to lure unsuspecting new souls into the fold. Caring and loving Pastors and staff are continuously bashed and berated by James behind closed doors for being soft, slow, lazy, unproductive etc., but

they are tolerated because their importance is understood - they are the honey and hurting people are attracted to them and stick to them. They care for hurting people then ease them into the Harvest machine. It is unfortunate that these godly people believe they are serving Christ, but are only being used as bait to lure people into loyalists and revenue sources for James MacDonald.

- **Scott Milholland and Fred Adams allowed the worst of James to become reality.** Historically, James had people around him who mitigated his mercurial personality and absurd demands by allowing time to pass and more reasonable options to be presented and executed. In contrast, Scott Milholland and Fred Adams carried out all whims of James without prejudice, analysis, or application of morality. Because James said it, it is right and therefore must be done how and when he said. James' emotional demand to fire Dan Plantz was a crushing example of this. Another was James' continuous overspending of limited church funds on his new ideas. Fred almost never said "no" to James, but instead cut legitimate ministry budgets and/or personnel to fund these compulsive ideas.
- **Those who work most closely with James leave James.** To my knowledge, nobody has retired from HBC, with the exception of Kathy Elliot and Dennis Nelson (who know where many, many, many "bodies are buried"). Some of those who those who work closest with James leave out of disgust and/or exasperation. Others eventually do something "wrong" and are demoted and/or harassed until they can no longer endure. Over the past 2 years, 9 of the 12 Global XLT members have resigned (myself, Bill Molinari, Kent Shaw, Garrett Higbee, Dallas Jenkins, Fred Adams, Janine Nelson, Scott Milholland, and Trei Tatum.) All have left quietly, and some (myself included) even praised James on the way out. I ask for forgiveness and grace for egregiously misleading people by pretending things were OK. I was wrong not to shout the Truth from the rooftops and I regret it every single day. I could have helped others to see through the smokescreen and saved them months or years of manipulation. I am sorry.

I have asked myself why I kept quiet, here are my answers:

- My dream was to spend my life serving Christ at Harvest. Upon the death of this dream I experienced heartbreak, confusion and anger at unprecedented levels and I did not have the ability to fully understand the truth in this emotional state.
- I spent 18 years helping to build Harvest (6 as a volunteer, 12 as a staff member.) I was unable to bring myself to destroy with words what I had spent so long building up as I still held up hope that the Lord would intervene and rescue His church.
- I was afraid of what James might do or say if I spoke up. James has relentlessly harassed and lied about others who have come forth against him. I was defeated, confused, hurt and tired, and I just wanted to get me and my family away without further injury.
- I was pressed hard to write my resignation letter in a certain way and to write personal notes to the other XLT members, saying as many positive things as I was

able. I have subsequently heard that James has photographed the note I gave to him and sent it to others as “proof” that I was OK with him. I was not.

- I did not know who to talk to that could help guide me through the experience. It is frowned upon as a Harvest Pastor to associate with non-Harvest or ex-Harvest people. That being said, almost all of my contacts were on the inside of the church and lacked the ability to give proper perspective to the situation.

These are not excuses. I take responsibility for what I have done and know that I will answer to the Lord for it. I took the time to write these reasons out to help people understand the complex reasons why I (and others) left quietly when we truly had issues with James.

I continue to process all that I have seen, heard, and done at Harvest Bible Chapel. I regret enabling James and helping to build up HBC. My heart is broken over those who have been hurt and whose faith has been disrupted or destroyed at HBC because of something that I helped to create. (I know this pain because my own faith has been destroyed.) I mourn the loss of pastors who have left the ministry after their time at HBC with James. I am weighed down and distracted daily by the embarrassment that I was duped for 18 years and may have wasted the most productive years of my life. I hope and pray that reading this will save someone else the heartbreak that comes from trusting James MacDonald.

Dean Butters, January 29, 2019