



# How a miracle-obsessed megachurch conquered a California city

Max Whittaker & Eric Ting, SFGATE

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It's hard not to get drawn into the sermons of Bill Johnson. With his soft-spoken voice and frequent quips, Johnson, senior leader of the nondenominational megachurch Bethel Church in Redding, California, is so charismatic he can make stories about God sending "glory clouds" to rain gold dust on Bethel worshipers sound folksy, even reasonable.

"I did just stand there in awe," Johnson said, discussing supposedly miraculous gold dust with the matter-of-fact tone you'd use to recall your favorite moment from a concert. "I remember standing there, talking to a friend ... just seeing these pieces float by."

Whether he's regrowing missing body parts with prayer while leaning casually on a pulpit or responding "just call me Bill" when asked if he's a prophetic apostle, his tone is always soothing — perfect for helping reaffirm your faith in a world that seems hellbent on shaking it.



Something else sets Johnson apart from the fire-and-brimstone televangelists of yore: His insistence that his followers build God's kingdom here on Earth right now rather than passively waiting around for the end times. This philosophy, sometimes known as dominionism, is increasingly common among American evangelicals — particularly in "apostolic" churches like Bethel, meaning church leaders call themselves apostles or prophets and claim they can hear God speaking to them. Although few of these churches are directly affiliated with one another, many observers

believe they share enough unique traits to represent a new sect of Christianity, dubbed the New Apostolic Reformation.

Johnson has preached and written extensively about how his followers can bring godly influence to the seven major pillars, or “mountains,” of society, identified by Johnson as business; education; the church; family; arts and entertainment; science and medicine; and government. The argument is laid out most clearly in the 2013 book “Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate,” in which Johnson and his co-author use downright warlike language to describe Christians taking over ... well, everything.

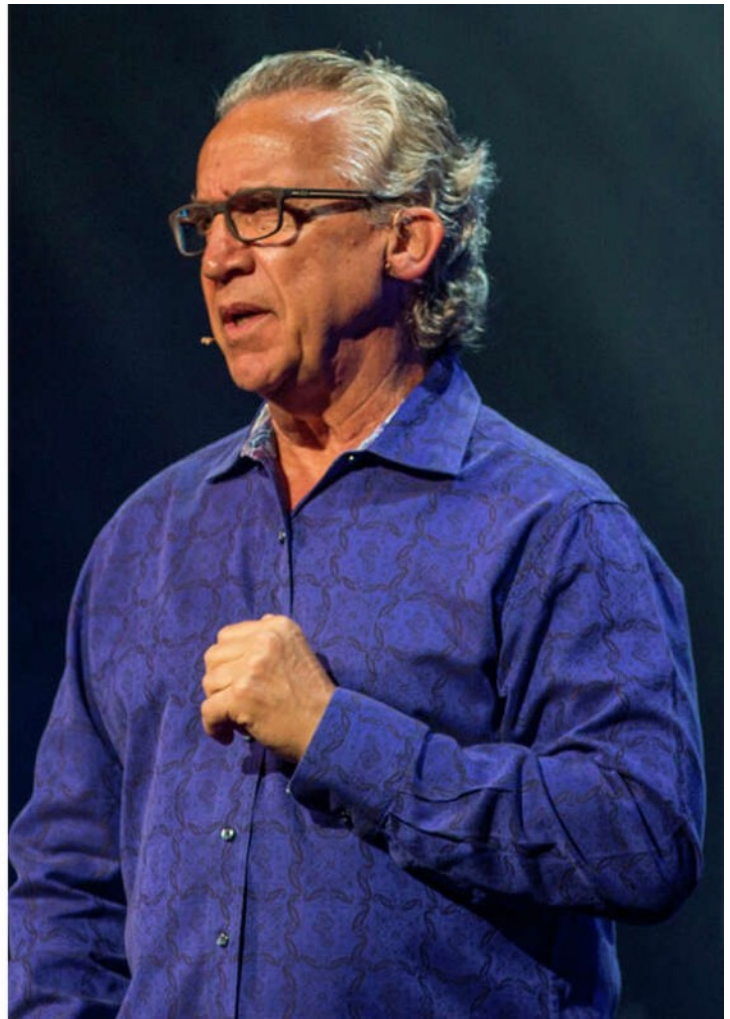
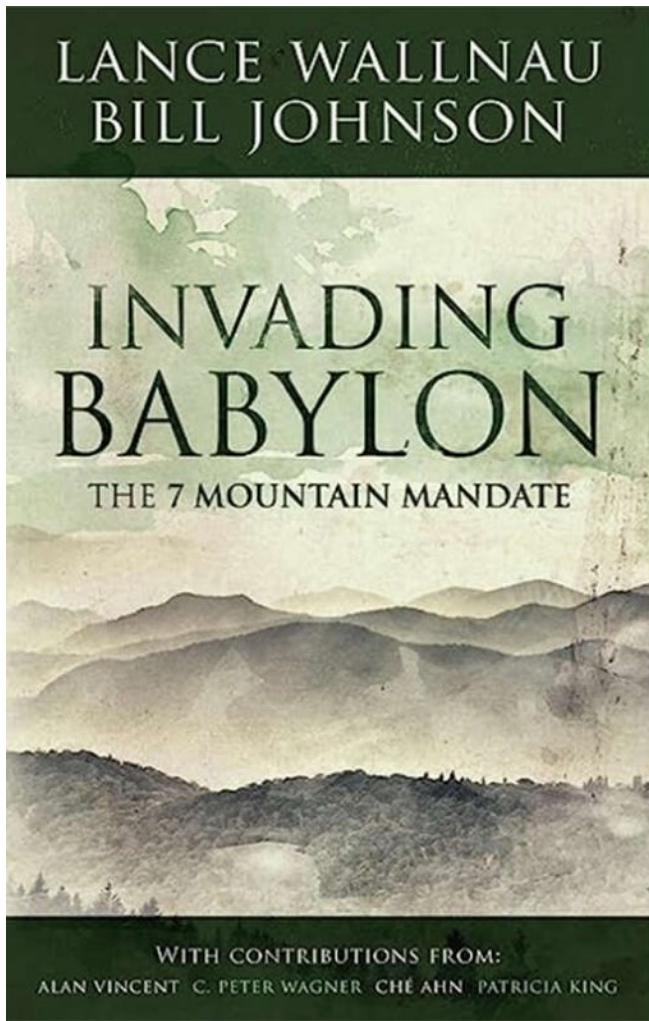
“Leaders around the world are discovering that lasting cultural transformation only occurs when the Gospel infiltrates every aspect of society,” according to the book’s introduction. “God is pouring out specific strategies to invade our culture, so that we can see complete cultural transformation.”

From humble beginnings, Johnson has turned Bethel into a major cultural force, largely through the successes of highly profitable subsidiaries. Hundreds of thousands of people watch the church’s sermons online, as produced by Bethel’s televangelism business, Bethel TV. The church also owns the highly influential record label Bethel Music, as well as several local schools, most famously the School of Supernatural Ministry, described as the “Christian Hogwarts” by BuzzFeed News.

But many residents of Redding fear that the church is using their hometown, specifically, as a Seven Mountain Mandate testing ground. Certainly, the church’s influence in the city is undeniable. Under Johnson, the church has grown to 11,000 congregants in a



city of just over 90,000 residents; in 2020, the church was the fifth-biggest employer in all of Shasta County, where Redding is located.



*Bill Johnson is the senior leader of the nondenominational megachurch Bethel Church in Redding, Calif., as well as the author of "Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate."*

Students and other worshippers often leave the church campus to practice “prayer healing” in the city streets, which entails the placing of hands on passersby who appear to be sickly or otherwise in need of a miracle, according to residents. (The church’s belief in the power of prayer has resulted in a number of public controversies, including a social media campaign soliciting prayers to raise a 2-year-old child from the dead, and a lawsuit alleging students at one

of Bethel's schools left a friend for dead after he fell off a cliff and their prayers failed to heal him. No charges were ever brought, and the lawyer for one of the students told SFGATE that "the matter has been resolved.")

*Second-year Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry students during a worship service at Bethel Church in Redding, California, September 13, 2017. Max Whittaker*



The church has amassed significant political influence, too, including partially funding the local police force. And as of last November, Bethel members hold a majority of seats on the Redding City Council. The new council has faced two votes connected to the church's interests so far; both have gone the Bethel bloc's way.

"The sentiment used to be, 'They go to this church and do weird stuff, ha ha,' just as an offhand joke," said resident Rachel Strickland, who started a Facebook group dedicated to keeping track of the church's influence in town. "Now it's something else."

## **The evolution of Bethel Church**

Bethel Church was first established in the 1950s as an affiliate of the Assemblies of God, a denomination of the Pentecostal sect of evangelical Christianity. Pentecostals, unlike many other evangelical sects, believe in practices such as speaking in tongues and prayer healing. Bill Johnson's father, Earl Johnson, served as

the church's senior pastor from 1968 until 1984. To journalist Doni Chamberlain, who grew up in Redding and whose foster parents brought her into the Bethel fold in 1969, Earl was the "Real McCoy of Christianity." She



recalled the first time she met the elder Johnson, before she ever attended the church: The senior pastor ran into her mother, who struggled with alcoholism, in town during a snowstorm. He drove her home, then stuck around to pray for her.

"Here was this guy with a Bible sitting at my dining room table, preaching the Gospel to my mom in a gentle way," Chamberlain told SFGATE. "I look at Earl and [his wife] Darlene as the Real McCoy of Christianity. They lived like they were followers of Jesus."

Later, after Chamberlain's mother died, she moved into foster care with a family who attended Bethel. She has less fond memories of those times, including an attempted exorcism, during which men from the church "tried to drive the demons out of me and my sister," she said. (She and her sister were later diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder that causes involuntary muscle movements, according to Chamberlain.)

*The exterior of a large building on the campus of Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry in Redding, Calif. Luis Sinco*

As an adult, Chamberlain stopped attending the church. She eventually began local news site A News Cafe, where she and her team have spent the better part of two decades chronicling Bethel's rise under Bill Johnson.

Earl's son, Bill Johnson, became senior leader in 1996, bringing with him "a one-word mission statement: revival," according to his website. What is a revival? According to Johnson, revivals are moments of God-driven societal change, which begin when the Holy Spirit enters an individual in such a profound way that it "would affect a church, that would affect a city, that would impact a nation. God's intention in every revival is to truly bring about a reformation where culture itself is changed."

Johnson's vision for Bethel's role in members' lives would grow to become far more encompassing than previous iterations, with tendrils stretching into every sphere, or "mountain," of daily life. The transformation into a megachurch really began in earnest when Kris Vallotton joined the church as a senior associate pastor. Vallotton, who says he found religion after Jesus Christ spoke to him personally when he was a teenager, quickly became a major influence in the church community, including co-founding the School of Supernatural Ministry with Johnson in 1998.

Now one of the church's biggest businesses, the school is an unaccredited ministerial training program where students "learn how to read, understand, and 'do' the Bible, how to practice His presence, to witness, heal the sick, prophesy, preach, pray, cast out demons and much more," according to the school's website. (Both Johnson and Vallotton — a popular author, podcaster and blogger,



as well as Johnson's righthand man — declined to respond to detailed questions provided by SFGATE.)

Doni Chamberlin is a former newspaper reporter who produces a community blog in Redding that frequently focuses on Bethel Church and its affiliated School of Supernatural Ministry. Luis Sinco



“When the School of Supernatural Ministry came on the scene, that became a huge moneymaker for them,” Chamberlain said. “That’s when we first noticed a shift in Shasta County.”

Today, the school claims to have more than 13,000 graduates and 1,800 current students from around the world, who take core classes on subjects like “the supernatural nature of the Gospel” and choose from electives like “God and Government,” taught by Tenessa Audette, one of two Bethel members elected to the Redding City Council last year.

Since its first foray into education — one of the seven mountains, according to Johnson — the church has launched four other schools in town in addition to the School of Supernatural Ministry. Residents say Bethel students are a regular fixture in the city streets, both practicing prayer healing and participating in “treasure



hunts,” which the church describes as “seek[ing] out treasures (people) within our community to pray for.”

“Bethel students would pray together and someone in the group would say, ‘God says we’re looking for a person in a plaid shirt,’” Chamberlain said of the treasure hunts. “And then if you were wearing a plaid shirt, they’d stalk you. Oh and God forbid you walk with a limp. They’ll come up and approach you and ask to heal it.”

## **‘Invading Babylon’**

Miracles — healing limping strangers, gold dust from the heavens, babies coming back from the dead — have been central to Johnson’s vision since he first came to Bethel. In 2016, Bill Johnson told Charisma Magazine that he was able to heal multiple cases of cancer within months of taking up the reins.

Such claims may or may not be true; a recent three-year project by a religious research organization was unable to find conclusive medical proof for any of the claimed healings. Nevertheless, dozens of people proclaiming that they’ve been spontaneously healed is surely an effective way to build up the kind of ecstatic energy needed for the revival Johnson is aiming for.

That focus on spiritual revival goes hand in hand with the Seven Mountain Mandate, also called 7M. The mandate first came to Earth in the 1970s, when three evangelical preachers claimed that God had given them simultaneous guides to taking over the seven pillars of modern life, with the goal of creating God’s kingdom on Earth. The mandate was mostly forgotten until the 2000s, when one of its progenitors explained it to Lance Wallnau, a business consultant from Dallas who claims prophetic abilities. Wallnau



began spreading the good word; the concept struck a chord with Bill Johnson, and the two went on to co-author “Invading Babylon” in 2013, helping launch 7M into mainstream evangelical discourse.

Johnson writes in the first chapter of “Invading Babylon,” “Kingdom-oriented people must invade these mountains of influence in order for the transformation of society to take place.” Audette, the Bethel School of Supernatural School of Ministry teacher who won a seat on the Redding City Council, told SFGATE she views the mandate less as a demand to take over society and more a rebuke of other sects that focus more on Christ’s return than on present circumstances.

*Members of Bethel Church, which promotes what it calls supernatural signs and wonders, in Redding, Calif., on March 4,*



*2012. Jim Wilson/NYT*

“For a very long time, Christians believed that Jesus is coming back and you’ll get raptured and leave, so why invest time into anything for any length of time when you’re getting raptured,” Audette said. “That’s an escapist perspective. Your job is to bring hope to all areas of society. Any time I hear seven mountains, it’s that if you invade, you invade with hope, and invade with light.”

While Bethel Church did not directly respond to questions from SFGATE regarding the Seven Mountain Mandate or its role in the city of Redding, a spokesperson did send a link to a YouTube video from a series called “Rediscover Bethel,” in which church leaders



address “common questions and misconceptions” about the church.

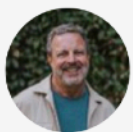
In the clip, Kris Vallotton discusses the meaning of the Seven Mountain Mandate with Dann Farrelly, dean of the School of Supernatural Ministry.


“[It’s] very easy for Bethel to be seen everywhere, because [we’re] 10% of the population. And then people are like, ‘They’re taking over, and they’re trying to conquer Redding,’” Vallotton says in the video. “Well, I can honestly see how you’d think that. But we really see ourselves as more like Daniels and Josephs, who are seeding ourselves into community for the benefit of the community.” (In the Old Testament, both Daniel and Joseph become slaves to non-Jewish kings, then rise to political prominence while maintaining their Jewish faith.)



(Video: <https://youtu.be/azZBURmeCvY>)

Toward the end of the clip, though, Vallotton mentions “a little bit of an exception,” referring to the time in 2018 when Vallotton asked church members to call their legislators and oppose three California bills related to LGBTQ people, including one that would have banned the sale of “sexual orientation change efforts.” The bill was targeted at conversion therapy, a loose term that usually refers to programs or activities intended to change a person’s sexuality. (Vallotton is founder of the religious activist group Moral Revolution, which offers, among other services, support from “men and women who’ve come out of homosexuality.”)



**Kris Vallotton**   
@kvministries · [Follow](#)



If you have come out of homosexuality & live in California it's incredibly important that you send an email or call the legislatures outlining your path out of homosexuality. It's important for them to hear from people that needed the counseling they are trying to prohibit.

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A spokesperson for Bethel did not answer an SFGATE question about conversion therapy directly, instead linking to an FAQ that says the church “deeply regret[s]” historical “injustices against those who identify as LGBTQ,” and, “Wherever we can be faithful to our convictions and still find common ground, that is our desire.”

But 2018 was neither the first nor last time the church — or Vallotton — promoted services to help people change their sexuality or gender. As of today, the Bethel website is selling a book titled “CHANGED #Oncegay Stories,” “a compilation of inspirational stories of men and women who have come out of homosexuality.” The authors — a Bethel pastor and a School of Supernatural Ministry teacher — operate an organization called the Changed Movement out of offices on the Bethel campus.

In an email to SFGATE, a spokesperson for the organization wrote, “CHANGED believes that ‘LGBTQ identity’ is a socio-political status that conflicts with the teaching of the Bible.” When asked to respond to allegations that Changed’s practices amount to conversion therapy, the spokesperson wrote, “CHANGED is comprised of thousands of people who have benefited from the freedom to make their own choices in counseling, faith, and conscience. We reject as ineffective and harmful all practices that include forms of physical violence, force, manipulation, shame, or humiliation to coerce an individual to renounce LGBTQ identity or change sexuality or gender experiences. CHANGED advocates for accessible, self-motivated approaches that affirm one’s dignity and empower personal choice, desired sexual ethic, and individual life goals.”

‘Much more than just silly weirdos on a hill’

Resident Rachel Strickland says that church members’ open advocacy for helping people change their sexual orientation (which is banned for minors in the state of California) is a major reason residents are on high alert for all things Bethel.





*Traffic streams through Redding, a conservative stronghold and home to the Bethel Church and its affiliated School of Supernatural Ministry. Luis Sinco*

That widespread community worry has helped Strickland launch and grow a private Facebook group called “Bethel Affiliated Businesses,” in which she and others identify businesses in the city that are managed by church members or otherwise associated with Bethel. She told SFGATE she started the group in May 2018 in response to resident allegations that some businesses were attempting to proselytize to customers or had a preference for hiring Bethel Supernatural School of Ministry students as employees.

The Facebook group’s intent, Strickland says, is not to encourage a boycott of Bethel-affiliated businesses, but to provide customers with as much information as possible in their shopping choices. She

says the group has 1,900 members, and they have labeled approximately 145 businesses as Bethel-affiliated.

“I was stunned at how fast the group grew,” she said. “I think people are concerned that this is much more than just silly weirdos on a hill, and people don’t want to knowingly support businesses with Bethel ties. Some people even want to compile an opposite list to keep true local businesses going.”

## **Commerce isn’t the only area where Bethel exerts influence in a way that troubles locals.**

Another mountain mentioned by Bill Johnson is arts and entertainment, and when Redding resident Zoie Griffin heard the Bethel Music smash hit “Reckless Love” at her nondenominational, non-Bethel-affiliated church, she found the lyrics troubling and put them into Google. “That was the song that made me start looking things up,” she told SFGATE. What she found was so troubling she actually left her church.

Bethel Music, founded as a modest group for church music in the 2000s, has since become a juggernaut of Christian music; Justin Bieber even covered “Reckless Love” in 2018.

But Bethel Music is associated with other, perhaps less savory stars of the Christian music scene. That includes Sean Feucht, who produced music under the Bethel Music label as recently as 2018. In December 2019, he visited Trump in the Oval Office, along with Bill Johnson’s son — the president of Bethel Music — and several other church leaders.

Feucht, who did not respond to an SFGATE request for comment, is famous around Redding for many reasons, including holding large worship rallies in defiance of pandemic-era COVID-19 rules. Earlier this year, he gave a sermon in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in which he embraced the label of “Christian nationalists” and asked for “God to come on over and take the government.”



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Christian worship leader/right-wing political activist Sean Feucht proudly admits to being a Christian nationalist: “We want God to be in control of everything. We want believers to be the ones writing the laws. Yes. Guilty as charged.”

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Strickland says that residents can't help but be alarmed by church figures' activity across so many spheres of society.

"There's a huge concern because people are really looking at the Seven Mountain Mandate," Strickland said. "One is business, another is government. People are more worried about the second at this point because the businesses have so much money it doesn't matter whether we support a coffee shop or not. But when they have a majority on the city council, and all of a sudden it seems everything Bethel wants goes through easily? People are pretty upset about that, as they should be."

## **'The appearance of impropriety'**

Julie Winter, a church elder, became the first of the Bethel-attending majority to join the Redding City Council when she was elected in 2016. She served as mayor in 2019; Redding, like other California cities, rotates the mayor and vice mayor roles among the five council members each year.

Winter gained two Bethel compatriots last winter: School of Supernatural Ministry teacher Tenessa Audette and church attendee Jack Munns. That gave them a 3-2 majority on the five-person council.

Winter and Munns did not respond to multiple SFGATE requests for comment, but Audette made herself available for several phone calls, during which she said that her religious beliefs had no bearing on her decision to run for city council, that she has never discussed upcoming votes with senior church members, and that she was not otherwise politically influenced by Bethel members.



*The five members of the Redding City Council, with the three Bethel-attending members (clockwise, Tenessa Audette, Julie Winter and Jack Munns) on the left, and the two non-Bethel members (Mark Mezzano and Michael Dacquisto) on the right.*

So far, the council members have faced two votes that touched on church business, either perceived or real. The first was a vote to take the first steps in renewing a rodeo's lease for the grounds on which they've operated for decades. The Bethel bloc voted against this move, which some members of the public believed was part of a long-term plan to build more housing for Bethel students.

As it is throughout California, housing is a hot-button issue in this small town. Many residents blame Bethel for a housing crunch that's driven up prices in the last few years.

“There are a lot of Bethel members who own property that are bought to be rentals, and they’ll pack in these students like cordwood,” Chamberlain said. “You’ll see multiple students in bunk beds, and anywhere between eight and 12 people in one house. You can do the math on how much more money landlords get from renting to Bethel students, so on the housing market, they will scoop up what they can.”

**That, in turn, drives up prices in the region.**



*A church member worshipping at Bethel in Redding, Calif., on March 4, 2012. Jim Wilson/NYT*

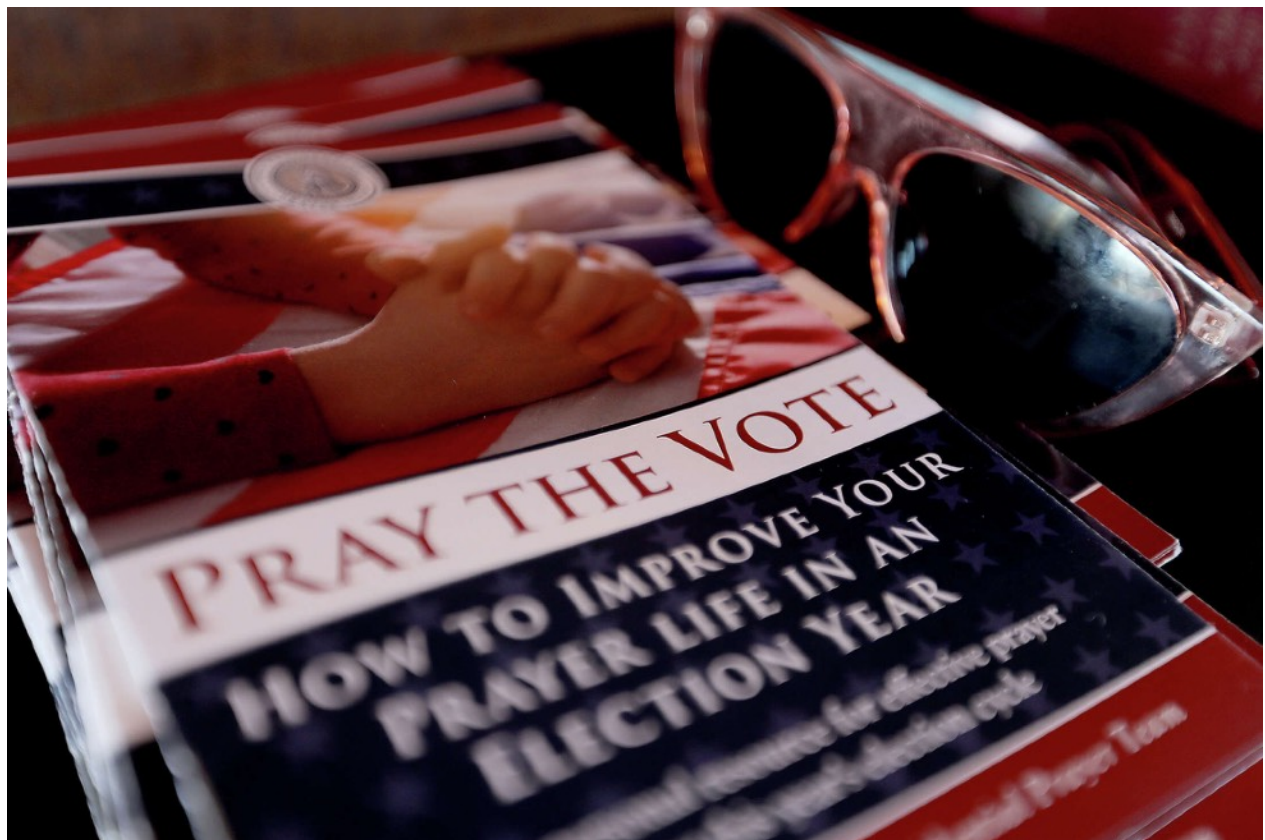
“There are cases of young people sleeping in cars because there is no place to rent,” Chamberlain said. “Seniors are also having a hard time finding housing because people who want to rent to Bethel students gobble everything up.”



Mayor Michael Dacquisto, one of the two non-Bethel members on the council, agrees with Chamberlain.

“Rentals have taken over,” Dacquisto told SFGATE. “If I had a family and lived in a neighborhood where people were renting their house out to six Bethel students, I don’t know if I would be too happy with that.”

Housing problems exist throughout California, of course. But in a conversation with SFGATE and during a March 21 city council meeting, Audette acknowledged that the school she teaches at has “strained” housing in the community. Still, she argued, the situation is improving now that approximately a third of the 1,800 current students are in the online program.



*Political literature sits on a table in the foyer of a chapel at the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry in Redding. Luis Sinco*

In March this year, the council faced another contentious vote: Residents were appealing the planning committee's approval of an amended expansion plan for the Bethel campus off of Collyer Drive.

The expansion was first approved by the city in 2017, over an unsuccessful appeal from residents. In 2022, Bethel asked the city to approve a new plan expanding the size of the project by approximately 20%. The planning committee said yes; residents once again appealed to the city council. (Both Audette and Dacquisto said that to their knowledge, no members of the planning commission attend Bethel.)

Those opposed to the project made the relatively straightforward argument that increasing square footage will increase the number of Bethel students enrolled, who will then seek housing in a city already facing a housing crunch. The planning commission had ruled that the updated plan would not impact local housing, a finding Dacquisto and others disagreed with.

When the council heard the appeal on March 21, Winter recused herself, citing her position as a church elder. Audette and Munns did not, prompting anger from residents who spoke during the meeting's public comment period.

"I want you to analyze — as a city council member, not as a charismatic evangelical Christian — whether this is a good choice for the city," one resident told Audette and Munns. "Because there are countless people, not just here but in all of Redding, that are adamant that Bethel is the main cause, or at least the major contribution, to our housing crisis here."



*The sun sets behind the Sundial Bridge in Redding A K Potts*

Audette and Munns eventually voted to deny the appeal. With Winter recused and the council deadlocked 2-2, the expansion plan moved forward. In conversations with local TV and SFGATE, Dacquisto tore into Audette for not recusing herself given her role as a Bethel instructor.

“There’s the issue of the appearance of impropriety, or appearance of conflict,” Dacquisto said. “I would say she should have used that standard.”

Audette said that because she’s not a member of church leadership, she did not need to recuse. She said of Dacquisto, “He’s a lawyer, so would that mean if we ever had a law case he would have to recuse because he’s in that industry?”

A handful of other votes this year have been 3-2 with the Bethel members in the majority. Does Dacquisto believe that the breakdowns are a coincidence, or are there things he and the public aren't seeing?

"I would like to think the votes are made not because the three are members of Bethel, but because the three think it's what was best for Redding," Dacquisto told SFGATE. "But it's unrealistic to say their Bethel involvement hasn't influenced how they view the world."

Regardless, Dacquisto is "frustrated being on the losing end of 3-2 votes."

'Dance through the minefield of public opinion'

Even through his frustration, Dacquisto conceded that Bethel members make positive economic contributions to the city.

"They've done well for the city with the businesses members have started and the sales tax revenue," he said. "It's a double-edged sword."

One common refrain SFGATE heard from residents is that city politicians who attend Bethel are preferable to the county-level politicians who have drawn national attention for outlawing Dominion voting machines on account of voter fraud conspiracy theories, firing the county health officer over COVID-19 restrictions, and presiding over downright chaotic public meetings.

But it's not always that easy to disentangle the two groups.





*Shasta County residents are photographed with others during the Pledge of Allegiance inside the Board Chambers during the Shasta County Board of Supervisors regular meeting in Redding. Residents addressed the supervisors during the public comment period to address their concerns of voter fraud. Mel Melcon*

Bill Johnson said in January 2021 he's "100% confident" President Joe Biden's victory "was done by fraud," and invoked the "mark of the beast" when discussing COVID-19 vaccines, adding, "I'm not opposing the vaccines, I'm just saying this is an interesting dress rehearsal for a future issue," and, "Some of the things you buy into today will cost you tomorrow." (To many Christians, the "mark of the beast" signifies one's worship of the Antichrist, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, some preachers likened the COVID-19 vaccine to the mark.)

Furthermore, Kris Vallotton temporarily walked back an apology for incorrectly prophesying that Donald Trump would win in 2020, citing "discrepancy" in the electoral process.

Even Audette left plenty of distance between herself and the most controversial aspects of the church when speaking to SFGATE. “One of the things that’s talked about often in the culture of Bethel is that we don’t have to agree to get along,” she said. When asked about Sean Feucht’s rallies during the height of the COVID pandemic, she responded, “That’s not a Bethel thing, that’s a Sean thing.”



*Christian musician Sean Feucht sings to the crowd during a rally at the National Mall in D.C. (10/25/20). Jose Luis Magana/AP*

On the issue of the 2020 presidential election, however, Audette declined to comment on whether she believes Biden won legitimately. Her non-answer may be attributable to her recently announced plans to run for state Assembly in 2024; in a region where many people believe the 2020 election was stolen, saying otherwise could be a form of political suicide.

Audette's decision to run for state Assembly leaves the future of the Redding City Council murky after 2024. One of her council colleagues, non-Bethel member Mark Mezzano, is also running for that Assembly seat, and they'll have competition from other non-Redding candidates. The two city council seats up for election in 2024 belong to Mezzano and Winter, and Winter has yet to say whether she will seek reelection.

But this current council (June 2023)— the Bethel bloc, plus Mezzano and Dacquisto — will remain intact for the next year and a half, and will undoubtedly take more votes connected to church business that prompt resident backlash. And should Audette win her Assembly race and wade into intense debates over several LGBTQ-related bills, you can bet that her Bethel ties will be made into an issue. If that happens, Bill Johnson offered advice to those invading the "Government" mountain in "Invading Babylon."

"Government usually lives in a crippled state because of the fear of voters," he writes. "Noble people enter that world and end up losing their dreams on the altar of intimidation. The leaven of Herod poisons many (see Mark 8:15). But there is a new breed being groomed for this hour who fears only God and lives with a wisdom that enables one to dance through the minefield of public opinion. Such is the price of working effectively in government."

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