

Just What Does Kim Davis Mean When She Calls Herself an ‘Apostolic’ Christian?

The low-slung, white building that houses Morehead, Kentucky’s Solid Rock Apostolic Church is small enough that a visitor could easily drive past without noticing.

But over the past four years the church and its version of Apostolic Christianity has come to play a big role in the life of Kim Davis. It helped the thrice-divorced Rowan County Clerk escape what her lawyer described as a life in the “devil’s playground” and lead her to face jail in opposition to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling upholding same-sex marriage that she said violated her religious beliefs.

No one answered the door at the church on Friday, and its pastor, Daniel Carter, did not respond to a request for an interview.

The label Apostolic Christianity can refer to one of several U.S. Christian denominations, including the Pentecostal Apostolic Church and the Apostolic Christian Church, both of which are known for strict interpretation of the Bible, religious experts said.

Signs outside the church did not make clear which version of Apostolic Christianity it follows. A white van parked outside the church was emblazoned with the words “Acts 2:38,” a reference to a Bible verse.

In the King James version of the text most commonly used by fundamentalists, that verse reads “Then Peter said unto them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Davis, 49, has said she converted to Apostolic Christianity at the request of her dying mother-in-law. She tearfully recalled her conversion on Thursday before a U.S. District Court judge ordered her jailed for contempt of court for her two-month refusal to allow her office to issue any marriage licenses in protest of gay marriage.

While the branches of Apostolic Christianity have deep-rooted differences, including whether to regard God as a trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit or as one being who manifests in three forms, both oppose allowing same-sex couples to wed.

“It tends to be a conservative Christian body and the focus is on piety, on devotion to Christ,” said Terrence Reynolds, a professor of religion at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. “They are people who are very serious about their faith and who are very committed to what God requires.”

Rapidly Changing Landscape

U.S. law on gay marriage has changed rapidly since 2004, when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex nuptials. Another 35 states went on to legalize it and 13 had bans in place before the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in June that the U.S. Constitution guarantees same-sex couples the right to wed.

The public remains closely divided as well, with just 49.2 percent of respondents to a Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll this week saying they supported same-sex marriage and 36.5 percent opposing it. The poll had a credibility interval of 2.6 percent.

Many opponents, including Davis, cite religious grounds as justifying their opposition.

Activists on both sides of the issue in Kentucky, where nearly one of every two residents identifies as a member of an evangelical Protestant church, according to a recent Pew poll,

cited religion as backing their views.

April Miller, a member of one of the same-sex couples whose lawsuit led to Davis' jailing, noted in court testimony on Thursday that pro- and anti-same-sex marriage activists had joined together in singing the hymn "Amazing Grace" outside Davis' office.

Davis recalled on Thursday finding Jesus Christ when she began attending church after her mother-in-law's death in January 2011.

"I promised to love Him with my whole heart and soul," she testified. "You can't be separated from something that's in your heart and in your soul."

Davis' life took many turns before she found Solid Rock. The native of Breathitt County, deep in Appalachia, has been married four times and divorced three times. Two of her marriages have been to the same man, her current husband Joe Davis. Two of her four children were born out of wedlock in 1994.

Her attorney, Mat Staver, told reporters on Friday after meeting with Davis that she believed that "she played in the Devil's playground for a long time and her life has been radically changed since then."

"Like other Biblical literalists, she recognizes that divorce is stringently prohibited in the Bible," said Candida Moss, a professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of Notre Dame. "This is where fundamentalists and historians agree. The saying of Jesus that one should not divorce is, historically speaking, one of the most historically reliable sayings of Jesus."

Davis' most recent marriage occurred about two years before her conversion to Apostolic Christianity, a faith that emphasizes forgiveness.

“Repentance, baptism and forgiveness are huge components of Pentecostalism in general. Baptism is rebirth,” Moss said. “There is a lot of criticism of Davis for being thrice-divorced. But as those took place before her baptism, she is no longer tarnished by those sins.”

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