

Scott Hagan Speaks Out on Mars Hill Battle

What's in a church name? Apparently, quite a lot if your name is Mars Hill.

Mars Hill Church in Seattle threatened Mars Hill Community in Sacramento with legal action because it has the same name and a similar logo.

After the Seattle megachurch admitted it was a mistake to take that route, the Sacramento church agreed to redesign both its logo and its website. Now, Mars Hill Community senior pastor Scott Hagan is sharing his heart on the matter. Hagan penned the following and offered it to Charisma News:

I want to express my thanks for the several calls, voice mails and texts I received over the weekend from the pastoral leadership team at Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Their words and explanations were both gracious and believable. I hope you will find my words the same as I try to be both detailed and brief.

The issue of the **Cease and Desist Letter** seemed to strike a raw nerve in the broader body of Christ. I will say more about that in a moment. But first, I want to confirm that three staff members from Mars Hill Seattle called and asked forgiveness for any stress and confusion that was caused by the letter we received from the Stokes & Lawrence law firm. That meant a great deal to me and the other pastors involved (Jason Yarbrough of Mars Hill Church in Fairfield and James Seiler of Mars Hill Church in Galt).

Both Chris Pledger and Dave Bruskas were clear and sincere that the proper step should have been to call us first. We accepted their apology and would like the Mars Hill Seattle congregation to know that your leaders took this step (We are

assuming on behalf of pastor Mark Driscoll). They assured us they would not seek any type of legal action, even though they did apply for and were awarded a federal trademark in August of this year for both the name and the logo design. Mars Hill Seattle also posted on their blog late Saturday night a message of clarity and grace. It was greatly appreciated.

Our concern stemmed from a letter we received from *Stokes & Lawrence* asking that we cease all use of our name, domain names and all artwork. The letter stated we had a two-week window for compliance. It was very unsettling knowing that, if enforced by a court (which it appears it could), it would cost our ministry and our two satellite plants thousands of dollars to rebrand, redesign, reprint and re-educate our regions of the changes.

Mars Hill Community Church in Sacramento is part of the Assemblies of God network of churches around the world. We are also a part of the Church Multiplication Network (CMN), a church planting movement within the Assemblies of God that cooperates at events with your own Acts 29 network. I serve on our national CMN leadership team and am deeply involved with national church planting initiatives and strategies.

Plans for our church here in Sacramento began in 2005. At the time we planted this work, I had never heard of Mars Hill Seattle or pastor Mark Driscoll. I was aware of the Michigan Mars Hill Church (I pastored in Grand Rapids from 2001 to 2005) and also the college located in Mars Hill, North Carolina. By choosing that name, I was not out to emulate anyone; I simply thought it to be a great name for a church.

The Mars Hill story in Acts 17 has always been a benchmark for me. Our church, and the satellites we have planted, have a powerful dimension of diversity that stems from the words of Paul on Mars Hill, when he said in Acts 17:26, "One God hath made us of one blood." Our church is very urban and has a powerful mission to the poor and to the streets of Sacramento.

It is truly “a Church that looks like heaven.”

My first knowledge of the Mars Hill Church in Seattle happened sometime in 2007, nearly two years after the planning and launch of our church. Our logo was designed in 2005 by Scott Taylor, the husband of our worship pastor, Darnisha Taylor. He reassured me a few days ago that, when he designed the logo, he also had never heard of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. The design by Scott Taylor is completely coincidental. As a matter of fact, our original design was a square with the shaded circle and “M” inside the square.

In 2009, while preaching in Seattle I drove through downtown near the waterfront and came across a Mars Hill property and saw their logo. I actually thought, until I received the letter from Stokes & Lawrence, that Mars Hill Seattle had used our design. I laughed and called Scott Taylor and told him it was a huge compliment, not competition. That is the origin and context of our history as a church and the design of our logo.

The letter from *Stokes & Lawrence* instructed us to contact their law office (not the church) with a response. I sent an email, on behalf of all three of us as pastors very early on Wednesday morning, Oct. 19, to Leslie Ruiter of Stokes & Lawrence. I asked if she would pass our cell phone numbers on to pastor Mark Driscoll, as we felt this should be a pastor-to-pastor conversation and not something involving a secular lawyer. By noon the same day (Oct. 19) we received an email from Leslie Ruiter:

Dear Pastor Hagan and team: Thank you for your response. I am completely on board with an organization-to-organization conversation, without me (the trademark lawyer) in the middle. Mars Hill's goals, and I assume yours as well, would be to gain an understanding of the situation and reach an amicable resolution that causes no harm to either. I will pass on your information below to Chris Pledger at Mars Hill, and he or one or more of the other pastors will be in contact.

*Best regards,
Leslie C. Ruiter*

By Thursday afternoon we had not heard from the church. With our two week window closing, there was growing concern because of the potential financial ramifications. The same day I received a call from a close pastor friend here in Sacramento, Mike Phillips. He and I, along with a group of about eight others, meet weekly as pastors for relationship and prayer. He is a seasoned leader who pastors Gateway Church here in Sacramento. I had shared with them on Monday what was happening and asked for their guidance, prayer and counsel. These are Baptist, charismatic, non-denominational and reformed guys with various backgrounds. It is a great cross section of friends who are church planters in the area. Mike told me he knew of some people that currently attend Mars Hill Seattle and asked for my permission to contact them to see if they had heard anything about this publicly. He also asked to blog about it to see if any other churches had received the same communication. I gave him my blessing, but I did not read or proof his blog before it was posted. The blog by Mike Phillips on the same day was a plea on behalf of a friend (me) whom he felt was facing a potentially unjust situation.

I was speaking Friday, Oct. 21, in Boston when I finally received a very congenial voicemail from Chris Pledger. By now the social media networks were buzzing with some knowledge about this cease and desist letter. There was zero antagonism in his voice or the message he left. That afternoon we had a conference call between myself, Chris Pledger and Justin Holcomb. Both of them were great and shared they were very sorry for sending a legal letter first.

They communicated that their intent now was simply to remove confusion and to ask if we could alter the logo that they had been using since 1996. I shared our story, including how our design by Scott Taylor in 2005 was totally innocent, and that when our church was planted in 2005 we had no knowledge that a

Mars Hill Church in Seattle existed.

I agreed to start the process of a logo redesign since they now owned the trademark. They assured me that even though the letter from Stokes & Lawrence called for a name change, that was off the table. On Saturday, I received a voicemail from Dave Bruskas reiterating the same information and again reaffirming that the letter should not have been sent as a means of first contact.

I want to thank the Mars Hill Seattle staff for demonstrating a genuine brotherhood and passion for the kingdom of God. It feels like I have made some new leadership friends over the weekend in Dave, Justin and Chris. I also want to say from the bottom of my heart that I am honestly sorry for any part I may have played in fueling the fires of disunity. My emotions ran high, and in hindsight I should have tried to call the church office directly instead of communicating only with the lawyer as I was instructed to in the original letter.

I could have demonstrated more patience as a leader and for that I am sorry. Would the leadership of Mars Hill have ever called me (Remember, I had given them our numbers via the lawyer) had there not been such an intense social media backlash last Thursday? All I can say is that the three guys who did call me sounded more than legit, so I will choose to believe they would have and enjoy living reconciled instead of suspicious. I look forward to meeting with Chris, Dave and Justin someday. Justin even mentioned that he is from an Assemblies of God church.

We all know that social media is a powerful thing, and the plethora of posts, reposts and comments last Thursday proved that once again.

So at the end of the day, like Jacob and Esau in Genesis 33, I am praying first for myself as a pastor—that I will continue to “lose the empire” and rediscover my brotherhood. I believe

there are millions of Christians in this nation who cannot seem to find each other, we are much like the family members of Jacob and Esau who had never met.

Why had they never met?

Because they were caught in the shadow of a leader who was *afraid of his brother*.

Hopefully our story can be different. Hopefully we can find more common ground so we can do more common good for the cause of Christ in the next season. Mars Hill Seattle is positioned for unprecedented influence. I pray its future is bright. So in the end there is no lawsuit ... better yet ... there is no feud.

There is only forgiveness in every direction.

Yes, all is well.