

# OUTSPOKEN PASTOR A SPIRITUAL BULLDOZER?

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Pastor Ken Hutcherson is a man who makes the most of his controversial sound bites.

Take the reasoning behind his threat to organize a national boycott of Microsoft products if the company didn't withdraw its support of state legislation banning discrimination against gays and lesbians: "They tried to make their policy my policy," he said. "(I told them) that gave me the right to step out of my world into theirs and they wouldn't like it."

Or, last year, on his plans to organize a national rally against gay marriage in Washington, D.C., shortly before the November elections: "My idea here is to drop a spiritual bomb on D.C., like Spain, where they had the terrorist bomb," he said, referring to the March 2004 Madrid train bombing that killed 191.

Or this, on why he got into football, before becoming a Christian: "It was the only sport where I could hurt white guys legally."

It's this outspokenness that has some lauding Hutcherson as a speaker of clear truths in a murky world, and others calling him an intolerant bully.

In the past year, Hutcherson, head of the 3,500-member Antioch Bible Church, has gained media coverage for organizing massive local and national rallies against gay marriage. But this last month brought him the most attention, as he claimed to have made Microsoft change its stance on the gay anti-discrimination bill, from support in past years to neutral this

year.

Microsoft denies that, saying it decided to be neutral before the legislative session started — a statement both Hutcherson, and Rep. Ed Murray, D-Seattle, the bill's sponsor, question.

Murray, who's never met Hutcherson individually, said the pastor "came across in the (legislative) hearings as a bully."

The bill failed by one vote in the Senate.

### **Labeled "egotistical"**

Seattle gay-rights activist Bill Dubay, who was on a panel with Hutcherson last year, said the pastor interrupted him when he was introducing himself.

"He's an egotistical bully," Dubay said. "He talks about not having a personal agenda but he's personalized the Bible to his liking. ... He wants his religious beliefs to be followed by everybody else. That's not the government's role."

Dubay takes issue with Hutcherson's stance of hating the sin of gay sex but not the sinner.

"I compare that to saying, 'I love Christians but hate Christianity.' Or: 'I hate women, but love my wife.' That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard in my life."

Hutcherson acknowledges that some think he's egotistical.

"There's a fine line between being so confident in God and being totally egotistical," he says. "Those who don't know me think I'm so egotistical. Those who know me know I love God and just want to do his will."

For years, Hutcherson has condemned many sins, saying churches weren't doing enough to combat them. In his own church, he calls forward members for public reprimand if they are repeatedly recalcitrant in repenting of sins such as divorcing for frivolous reasons, having sex outside of marriage or having gay sex.

Hutcherson's supporters say those practices are simply making clear the rules of Scripture.

"It's easy for churches to get wishy-washy," said Adair Kreft, 35, a stay-at-home mom. She likes that Hutcherson is "standing on the truth and not backing down."

It's that certainty — the church motto is "black and white in a gray world" — that attracts many to Antioch, which holds Sunday services at a rented gymnasium at Kirkland's Lake Washington High School.

They say Hutcherson is a funny and happy person — remaining jovial even through prostate cancer — and has been mischaracterized as a hate-filled preacher. What about the church's free adoption service, or the low-income housing it supports, they ask.

"He's not a pastor of hate," said Dan Kreft, 32, Adair's husband and a software engineer. "He preaches the word of God."

That there are others with different interpretations of God's word — for instance, a coalition of religious leaders led more than a thousand people in support of the gay-rights bill in Olympia earlier this year — is of little import to Hutcherson.

"I don't give a rip what other people's interpretations of the Bible are," he said. "God is my coach. The Bible is my playbook. I play for my coach, what I think his playbook says."

### **Outspoken since childhood**

Hutcherson, 52, has been strong-willed — and vocal about it — since his childhood, growing up an illegitimate child in a poor home in Alabama.

He grew up experiencing racial prejudice, riding in the back of the bus and drinking from separate water fountains. In hospitals, for instance, he said black people would wait for days to see doctors, while white people got in ahead of them.

He is outraged by those who equate the racial civil-rights struggle with the fight for gay rights, saying the one is immutable, while the other is a choice.

"I've never run into an ex-black" although, he says, several ex-gays attend his church.

His hatred of white people dissolved, he said, after he became a Christian during a high-school assembly where a speaker was talking about God. Hutcherson, who says his life had been feeling empty, said he told God then, "OK, I'm yours."

After college at Livingston University in Alabama, he went on to play pro football in Dallas and San Diego before playing linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks in 1976-'77. A knee injury ended his football career, and he eventually started Antioch, which grew out of a small Bible study group.

Today, he pastors a multiracial, but predominantly white, church and is married to a white woman of German descent. His wife, Pat, who is a stay-at-home mom, worked at Microsoft as a technical writer before they had their four children, whom Hutcherson refers to with a laugh as "German chocolate kids."

Hutcherson has made waves for years, whether it be with huge billboards telling Christians to shape up or calling for a ban on the practice of adoption agencies charging more for prospective parents to adopt white children than those of other races.

### **Tactics raise questions**

While his tactics and sound bites have garnered him press, even those who agree with his views wonder if it's the best way to achieve shared long-term goals, especially in this state.

Cedar Park Assembly of God Pastor Joseph Fuiten, who also heads a statewide evangelical lobbying group, said he used to think Hutcherson was "just a flame thrower" but has come to respect his integrity and character and believes he has an attention-grabbing role to play in getting their message across.

Still, "in the evangelical community, I don't know many people who would say they would approach this the same way as Ken," Fuiten said. "There are people who say they wish he would tone it down."

Especially in Washington state, which has one of the lowest church-going rates in the country, "you can only influence by cooperation, by working with people," Fuiten said. "You can't alienate people; you have to bring them on board."

Hutcherson isn't convinced.

"If God's down there," he said, pointing toward the distance, "I'm going to go. Join in or get run over by me."