

Inside Miles McPherson's Rock Church

What's driving Point Loma's unstoppable Rock Church? Pastor Miles McPherson says it's not politics or social issues – it's service.

Dean Nelson | Photography by Justin L'Heureux



The Rock Church in Point Loma



City Councilman Carl DeMaio is not a face you'd expect to see at the Rock Church, the local evangelical Christian powerhouse led by former San Diego Charger Miles McPherson.

DeMaio, who is a San Diego mayoral candidate, is also openly gay and in a

relationship. Despite the Rock's public stance against gay marriage, the local politician says he received a "warm reception" at a recent Sunday service.

"The church wants to have a positive influence, and government needs to do a better job partnering with faith-based organizations," he says. "I'm usually hitting them up for help."

This partnership and the call to service are part of the church's mission, according to McPherson. Occasionally he enters into larger social debates, such as race or gay marriage, but mostly his focus is local. His sermons are currently driven by the theme "Love Your City."

"Miles and the Rock show the rest of the city how to do community involvement. They do it better than anyone else."

San Diego Police Chief William Lansdowne

The pastor has a sizable platform to speak from, both literally and figuratively. He's a former defensive back and former cocaine user who is as comfortable in front of crowds as he is dealing with individuals on the street. The Rock is one of the area's largest churches, and one of the fastest-growing churches in the country.

This spring, the Rock announced it was expanding. It already holds five services each Sunday at its Liberty Station facility, attracting more than 12,000 per week. More than 30,000 recently attended its 16 Easter weekend services. It also has a facility in San Marcos, where approximately 800 attend and watch McPherson's sermon on a big screen. Over the next five years, the Rock plans to add another church campus per year throughout San Diego County. It's calling the expansion campaign "Pervasive Hope."

The church started in 2000 in Montezuma Hall at SDSU, then moved to its current state-of-the-art facility in 2007. An adjacent K-12 Rock Academy school has more than 400 students.

All ages and races attend the church—wealthy, poor, elderly, young, famous, infamous, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Anglos, devout, and simply curious—most of whom hold up Bibles and yell "Word!" when McPherson opens his own on stage. Adrian Gonzalez, the former San Diego Padre, attends when he can. Tim Tebow was there not long ago.

On a recent Sunday, McPherson sent a text message, "Are you in church?" to one of his friends who attends when possible. "Can't," came the quick reply. "Playing the Lakers today."

Sunday services are precise, fast-moving productions of music, prayer, and sermon, using high-def cameras, 60 moving lights, and state-of-the-art sound equipment.

McPherson's style is casual, funny, and direct. Lillian Palmer, a 93-year-old former schoolteacher who was raised going to more traditional-style churches, says she likes attending because of the congregation's diversity.

BY THE NUMBERS

- »More than 12,000 attend each Sunday.
- »More than 30,000 attended over Easter weekend.
- »More than 130 volunteer-led ministries for virtually any person with a particular interest or need, including gang members, cancer survivors, strippers, prisoners, musicians, comedians, artists, athletes, writers, and orphans.
- »\$20 million budget, which includes revenue from tithes, offerings, tuition from Rock Academy, camps, and conferences. (For comparison, First United Methodist Church of Mission Valley's annual budget is \$3.2 million. Many other churches declined to report their numbers.)

"People like to go there because they know they aren't going to get criticized for how they look," she says. "They get to feel normal."

But as anyone associated with the Rock Church will attest, what happens on Sundays isn't really the point. McPherson provides a weekly reminder that the way to love God is to serve others.

"The Rock is the finest representative of an externally focused church," says Ken Blanchard, head of The Ken Blanchard Companies, and one of McPherson's advisers. "They are constantly moving their people outside of their walls. Too many churches are just social clubs."

The city of San Diego has received plenty from the church. How much?

"Easily more than \$4 million worth of service in recent years," says Tony Young, president of the San Diego City Council. Nearly 1,000 Rock volunteers donated more than 100,000 hours to clean up Balboa Park in 2010, where they also repaired and painted all 4,000 seats at the Starlight Bowl. This past March, hundreds of volunteers transformed the Jackie Robinson Family YMCA in southeast San Diego. Volunteers rebuilt the playground, repaired buildings, cleaned the surrounding area, played with children, and provided makeover and counseling services.



“In my entire life I have never seen the creek behind YMCA as clean as it is today,” Young says. The facility is in Young’s city council district. “There is no more powerful statement a church can make than to serve its community.”

Young and other City Council members, including DeMaio, as well as county supervisors, are regular guests at the Rock Church, where McPherson introduces them to the congregation, chats with them Oprah-style about their responsibilities and challenges, asks them how the Rock can serve those constituencies, and prays for them. Soon after Young appeared at the Rock, coaches for Little League and Pop Warner teams in his district showed up, and former gang members volunteered to mentor those wanting to get out of gangs.

Julie Dillon attends the church and, as a volunteer, coordinates the Rock’s efforts to work with city officials.

“In these economic times, the city leaders are thrilled,” she says. “We’re all San Diegans, and we need to help each other.”

A new break room at the San Diego Police Department is another volunteer project courtesy of the Rock, which also made its church available for events such as funerals for police officers killed in action.

“They came to us and offered their facility at no cost to the city,” Police Chief William Lansdowne says. “And Miles is so good at speaking directly to families who are distraught.” Police officers also carry vouchers to give the homeless, good for items at the Rock’s thrift store.

One might wonder if all this civic involvement is McPherson’s way of getting on the city’s good side so he can open more churches.

“What’s wrong with trying to get on a politician’s good side?” McPherson says. “We’re trying to improve the quality of life in their neighborhoods.”

And even though McPherson and the Rock campaigned for Proposition 8 to outlaw gay marriage in California in 2008, DeMaio didn’t feel condemned when he participated in a Rock Church service.

“I was there to speak about the needs of the community, not religion,” the city councilman says. “The church wants to volunteer and tackle problems of the needy.”

“They are constantly moving their people outside of their walls. Too many churches are just social clubs.”

Ken Blanchard, head of The Ken Blanchard Companies

The church’s public stance against gay marriage was a mistake, according to Rev. Canon Albert Ogle, one of the priests at St. Paul’s Cathedral, an Episcopal and Anglican Church in Bankers Hill. Ogle campaigns worldwide for the rights of those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The Rock, he says, is also in error with its attempts to help gay people go straight.

“The theology of the Rock and other churches like them teaches that gay people are straight people who have gone evil,” Ogle says. “That kind of ministry is actually harmful. Their ex-gay therapy is a lie.”

McPherson’s support of Carrie Prejean, the former Miss California who spoke against gay marriage in the 2009 Miss USA competition, put him in the awkward position of supporting Prejean’s stance on the issue, while distancing himself from the racy photos and videos that became public at about the same time.

“I couldn’t not do something, because I was her pastor,” he says. “But that blew up on us.”

Ogle agrees, “He backed the wrong horse on that one.”

But unlike some churches, the Rock has been able to avoid letting social issues like race and homosexuality define what it is. That is partly due to McPherson's gregarious nature, and his focus on what his church is about, which is serving others. Instead of the "Don't Do Something" mantra heard from his religious counterparts, McPherson's theme is "Do Something."

Michael Bruner, executive director of the Jackie Robinson YMCA, says the service component of the church is much bigger than the conservative stances it takes. The constant drumbeat the congregation hears from McPherson every Sunday is not politics – it's service.

"Miles is one of our city's greatest natural resources," Bruner says. "He has his congregation spending their heaven by doing good on earth."

McPherson came to San Diego as a Charger in the 1980s after growing up in Long Island, New York, and playing football for the University of New Haven. He became a born-again Christian in 1984, and, after leaving the NFL in 1985, joined the staff of Horizon Christian Fellowship as a youth pastor. He then started a youth evangelism organization called Miles Ahead, which still goes to slum areas and prisons in U.S. cities and beyond.

Inquisitive by nature, McPherson loves to think about how things work. Even as a coke user, he was curious. He sat in a cramped bathroom one night, surrounded by scales and chemicals, two feet away from an emaciated dealer who looked like he hadn't slept, bathed, eaten, or changed clothes in days.

"I remember watching the guy, asking him questions, and thinking to myself, 'Wow, this guy is jacked up,'" McPherson says. "Then I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and felt God say to me, 'What about you? You're only two feet away from him. How long do you think it will take you to move two feet?'"

As an athlete, the pastor remembers hearing locker-room conversations about ACLs, MCLs, Achilles tendons, and other body parts. His curiosity piqued, he took an anatomy class at SDSU during the off-season.

"I got an A in the class," he says. "I'd do coke and study all night."

He's tireless today, organizing, leading, never sitting still, but with renewed motivation. His book, *Do Something*, is a call to be a giver, not a taker, describing Christianity as more than just a theological stance – that it must be accompanied by serving others. He has also been on the national stage, speaking at the Republican National Convention and appearing on Glenn Beck's show. He seems mystified when people criticize him for appearing to associate with either the political right or left.

"I'd go to a KKK meeting if they'd let me talk about the Gospel," McPherson says.

Perhaps the most frequent criticism he hears, though, isn't about race, homosexuality, or politics. The number one concern people have about the Rock Church is the traffic.

On Sunday, Rosecrans Street, the main route in and out of Point Loma, is typically jammed with cars.

"That church should have been built where there was better access," says Dominic Carnevale, a member of the Peninsula Community Planning Board, a citizens group that advises the city on land use. "It took me an hour to get out of Point Loma during one of the police officer's funerals."

But the Rock can't be blamed for all the bad traffic in Point Loma, says Peter Nystrom, chair of the planning board's traffic committee. High Tech High School and Middle School are also at Liberty Station, creating traffic problems at least twice a day; a Navy base is at the end of Point Loma; and Lindbergh Field is within two miles.

Local resident Tim Jachlewski agrees, "For all the good they do in the city, and when you look at the other end of Rosecrans, which is full of strip clubs and bars, I'm grateful the Rock is in our neighborhood."

Between services on a recent Sunday, while discussing the Trayvon Martin shooting in Florida, McPherson receives an email inviting him to the White House for a prayer breakfast on the Wednesday before Easter. Although many of his views on social issues run counter to those of President Obama, he accepts the invitation.

"Why wouldn't I go? I've never met a president before."

Later, McPherson glances at a television monitor on the wall across from his desk in the auditorium's green room. He sees the worship band wrapping up and the house lights coming down. McPherson stands quickly and looks over his notes once more for a sermon he's already given four times that day.

"I'm a simple guy," he says, smiling broadly, buttoning his shirt, leaving it untucked over his jeans. "I was blind, but now I see. All I want to do is tell people where they can receive their sight."