

The Florida Times-Union

Monday
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Human Rights Ordinance

'Promising' chance bill to pass

Fragile majority of council backs bill despite challenges

By Christopher Hong & Nate Monroe
The Times-Union

Gay rights advocates may be closer than ever to enacting LGBT discrimination protections in Jacksonville and earning a hard-fought victory in a battle that's loomed over

the city for a half-decade.

The legislation earned support from 10 council members last week during committee reviews of the legislation — the minimum majority it needs to pass — leaving supporters cautiously optimistic the bill will pass when it comes to a final vote Tuesday.

Still, there's no certainty the fragile majority that emerged last week will remain when it's time for council members to vote Tuesday.

Case in point: A similar gay rights bill failed in 2012 by a 9 to 10 vote after former Councilman Johnny Gaffney, who supported it during a committee review, later switched sides and cast the deciding no vote.

It's even less certain whether the legislation will pass with a 13-vote majori-

ty that shield it from a mayoral veto — and more important, what Mayor Lenny Curry, who has said in the past he thinks the legislation isn't necessary, would do if it arrived on his desk without one.

The legislation triggered a groundswell of interest from the public, as it did when similar legislation was introduced last year and in 2012.

More than 1,000 people

HRO continues on A-4

26.2 with Donna Marathon

GOING THE DISTANCE



Marathon runner Christian Jurs of Jacksonville Beach slaps hands with spectators as he comes down the final stretch of 26.2 with Donna Marathon on Sunday morning. Jurs finished in 3 hours, 22 minutes, 18 seconds. More than 850 marathoners finished and more than 10,000 runners participated in races that were part of the weekend. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

Life in White House a solitary existence for new president

Trump uses phone, watches cable news; family still lives in N.Y.

By Julie Pace & Jonathan Lemire
Associated Press

WASHINGTON | Around 6:30 each evening, Secret Service agents gather in the dim hallways of the West Wing to escort Donald Trump home.

For some presidents, the short walk between the Oval Office and the White House residence upstairs is a lifeline to family and a semblance of normal life. Others have used the grand residence for late night entertaining and deal-making with lawmakers.

For Trump, life in the White House residence is so far a largely solitary existence. With his wife and youngest son living in New York, and his grown children busy with their young families, Trump's first evenings have been spent largely alone, tethered to the outside world only by his phone and his

television. The dramatic change of scenery has left the 70-year-old president, a known creature of habit, a little adrift in the evenings, according to one person who spoke with him recently.

Another regular contact described the president as still adjusting to this new digs and his somewhat more confined schedule. His advisers initially said they expected him to spend his evenings holding working dinners, like one scheduled Thursday with Republican mega-donor Sheldon Adelson.

While Trump has marveled at the history and beauty of his new home, "it's still government housing," said Christopher Ruddy, the CEO of Newsmax and a friend of the president's.

A half-dozen other friends, advisers and associates of the president spoke about his first weeks in the White House on the condition of anonymity in order to detail private conversations.

TRUMP continues on A-4



President Donald Trump, speaking with German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently in the Oval Office, often spends his nights on the phone with friends or lawmakers. (Andrew Harnik/Associated Press)



Anne Dabecco from Columbus, Ohio, gets in a little political jab as she cheers on runners near the finish line of Sunday's race. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)



Marathon hand crank racer Scott Brown takes breaks through one of the giant soap bubbles created at the Beaches Town Center water station. Sunday was the 10th annual 26.2 with Donna, the marathon to finish breast cancer. (Bob Mack/Florida Times-Union)

IN SPORTS

Winners: Who had the best times in each category. C-1

ONLINE

See more from the Donna Marathon on jacksonville.com

Unlikely merger of churches a 'racial integration'

Urban Shiloh joins suburban Ridgewood, and 2 disparate congregations become 1

By Julie Zauzmer
The Washington Post

The topic of the public lecture at the seminary was "The Bible and Race," and the discussion had turned to "racial reconciliation," buzzwords used for new efforts to heal old rifts.

What would it look like, one pastor wanted to know, for a church to ever actually become "racially

reconciled"? Was it even possible?

Cynthia Latham had been sitting silently in the back. Now she stood up.

"I am a member of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church," she said slowly and proudly. "And we are a reconciled congregation."

In 2015, the church that Latham boasted of was two congregations, not one. There was the

booming black church in the heart of the inner city, led by a charismatic preacher in the staunch tradition of black Baptists. And there was the quiet white church, nestled in the suburbs half an hour to the south, holding onto a tightknit community of Southern Baptist believers.

And then the black church and the white church merged. The resulting congregation at Shiloh — black and white, urban and suburban — ap-

CHURCH continues on A-4



Pastor Michael Clifford (left) and Elder Dwight Brinkley baptizing Corey Bradford at the beginning of the morning service at Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Orange Park. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

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TRUMP

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The interviews underscore the relatively large circle of people who have spoken with the new president, despite the busy schedule and enormous pressures of the job. Trump has been spending his nights making and taking calls to an expanding network of old friends, lawmakers and others.

Calls often come in to Trump's personal cellphone, which he fought staff and his security team to keep. Rather than hold lengthy conversations on the unsecured line, Trump often calls people back on other lines, sometimes going through the White House switchboard.

The president, who says he's sleeping four or five hours a night, is dialing up associates late at night and early in the morning, before he returns to the West Wing. He recently reached House Speaker Paul Ryan while the Wisconsin Republican was in the middle of an early morning workout.

Ryan has become a more frequent point of contact for the president, who has been touting his improved relationship with the speaker in conversations with advisers and associates. Their discussions are said to largely focus on policy.

Trump has privately conceded some early missteps after a turbulent start to his term, including the flawed rollout of his controversial refugee and immigration plan and a lack of clear lanes for his top advisers. But despite public opinion polls showing less than 50 percent of Americans approve of his presidency thus far, Trump has sounded confident about his standing.

During one late night discussion, Trump was already talking about seeking a second term. When an associate suggested he was weakening Democrats by usurping some of the party's best policy ideas, the president readily agreed.

When he isn't talking about his early presidency, Trump — who is sometimes joined by his long-time security chief, Keith Schiller — is often watching others talk.

The president's advisers have tried to curb his cable news consumption during the workday. But there are no limits when the president returns to the residence. During another recent telephone conversation, Trump briefly put down the phone so he could turn up the volume on a CNN report. When he returned to the call, he was complaining about "fake news."

In some ways, his new lifestyle in the White House resembles the routines he created during decades living atop Trump Tower. He long has preferred the comforts of home, eschewing much of Manhattan's social scene in favor of evenings in his penthouse with close friends, family and his television.

First lady Melania Trump and the couple's 10-year-old son, Barron, are staying in New York at least until the end of the school year. Mrs. Trump hasn't been seen in Washington since the week-end of the president's inauguration, and Trump has yet to return to New York.

Trump's daughter Ivanka and her husband, White House senior adviser Jared Kushner, made the move to Washington, but have focused on getting their young family settled into life in a new city. The couple also spend some evenings dining with business and political contacts.

Still, Trump's advisers say he has taken to the White House. He's told associates it feels like a movie set and has spent time making sure it looks up to his standards, according to one person who has been in contact with him. The Trumps have hired Tham Kannalikhham, a low-profile interior designer, to help put their touch on the White House residence.

During a recent interview with Fox News, Trump said he was walking into the main entrance of the White House one day and said to himself, "This is sort of amazing."

"It's like a surreal experience, in a certain way," Trump said. "But you have to get over it."

HRO

Continued from A-1

attended a public hearing on the legislation last month, and council members received thousands more emails.

The arguments haven't changed.

Supporters say it's time for Jacksonville to follow the lead of other major cities and extend civil rights to its gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender residents. Opponents say they fear the legislation would infringe on their religious belief that homosexuality is a sin or open a floodgate of litigation on small businesses.

This year, however, saw a deeper and more organized lobbying campaign to pass the bill than in the past.

Supporters of the bill include leaders of the city's top businesses, including Jaguars owner Shad Khan, as well as faith leaders and key political donors.

Councilman Bill Gulliford, a leading opponent of the legislation, said he thinks that effort made the difference.

"That gets attention from people who will be running for re-election and higher office in the future," Gulliford said.

CHURCH

Continued from A-1

appears to be the only intentional joint church of its kind in the United States.

Fifty-four years after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously pronounced that Sunday morning is "the most segregated hour in this nation," Shiloh Baptist embarked on a journey to address whether that centuries-old divide can be changed.

Now, two years later, even after some congregants left rather than change their traditions and the election of Donald Trump as president ratcheted up some tensions, many members at Shiloh say their ambitious effort at racial reconciliation is working.

"I have never felt so much love in a church in my life. ... This church made me realize there is no color, none," said Sue Rogers, 67, who is white. "I would do anything for anyone in this church, and they would do anything for me."

Latham, who is black, said, "You get in there, you get fed. I don't care how you walk in there, you don't walk out the same."

The merger, at first, was rooted in practical goals. Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist, the black church downtown, had survived a horrible chapter in its 142-year history. In 2008, its then-pastor was charged with sex crimes against a teenage girl and then sued by a woman who said he had sexually assaulted and impregnated her.

That year, the church hired Pastor H.B. Charles, 43. He came from a Los Angeles congregation that he had led since he was 17 and his father died, leaving Charles to take over his pulpit.

Six years later, Charles had righted the ship at Shiloh. The church was booming with more than 7,000 members, and leaders began to mull planting a second church, preferably in the suburb of Orange Park. They would get the new church on its feet, then spin it off as an entirely separate congregation.

They took their proposal to the Jacksonville Baptist Association. But Rick Wheeler, who leads the association, had another idea.

Wheeler knew about another church, very different from Shiloh. Ridgewood Baptist Church was suburban and white. And while Shiloh was thriving, Ridgewood was losing members and in debt since the senior pastor's death from cancer.

Instead of starting a new church, Wheeler asked, would Shiloh like to merge with Ridgewood?

Gradually, over months of meetings and prayer in both churches, the idea of a merger went from laughably unlikely, to a sound business decision, to a higher calling.

Charles considered the

"There's no doubt in my mind."

CLOSING IN ON 10

The legislation emerged from three committee reviews last week with support from 10 council members. It also survived hostile attempts to settle the issue through a voter referendum and exempt more small businesses from the bill's ban on employment discrimination.

"We do believe it's very promising. We certainly hope it translates into votes on Tuesday," said Darnell Smith, the chairman of the Jax Chamber board of directors and a leading advocate of the bill. "We don't want to make any guesses on where folks are on their vote."

Indeed, counting votes on the issue is a difficult endeavor, at least based on council members' public comments.

Aside from the legislation's three sponsors, Councilmen Jim Love, Aaron Bowman and Tommy Hazouri, few council members spoke in favor of the legislation — or said much of anything at all — during last week's committee debates.

The Times-Union has spoken with eight council members who say they

thrust of King's observation, which was about as true in 2014 as it was in 1963. According to the Pew Research Center's latest report on the subject, 80 percent of U.S. churchgoers still attend a church where at least 80 percent of the people in the pews are of only one race or ethnicity.

The pastor decided that was not what Jesus intended.

"The Bible says that from the church, God is making a tribe of every nation, people and tongue. I feel like the church should look like that," he said.

And the only way to make a tribe of all peoples, Charles said, was to actually join existing churches.

After the two churches merged into one church with two campuses, Shiloh agreed to be a dues-paying member of the Southern Baptist Convention — the nation's largest evangelical denomination, which has sometimes struggled in moving past its racist history — and the National Baptist Convention, the largest traditionally black denomination.

When the first joint service convened in January 2015, the media crowed about a "new hope" and a "powerful statement" in Jacksonville.

And Peggy Kovacic, who candidly admitted that she had never had a black friend in her 72 years, showed up at Shiloh.

At first, many white members of Ridgewood left rather than remain in the new merged church.

Ashlyn Barreira, 24, said she and her family tried attending Shiloh but were angered early on when they found Shiloh members sitting in their ordinary pew in Orange Park.

"I will be honest, yeah, it was kind of a racial thing. We're not racist," she said. "It's almost like black people are like, 'Haha, we are taking over something y'all once owned, because white people failed or whatever.'" She quickly quit the integrated church. "It just wasn't my thing. I didn't feel God there."

The merger of the two churches — each more than 100 years old — involved compromises. The music proved an especially tough adjustment for many people, accustomed to either the vibrant gospel in downtown Jacksonville or the traditional hymns in Orange Park.

Dan Beckwith, one of 11 pastors on the staff, said the leadership did not want to let people pick and choose by offering a contemporary service at one time of day and a traditional service at another time, lest the congregation resegregate. So on one Sunday, all the music at both locations has a gospel flavor. The next, a more sedate tone.

At one of his first meetings with the Ridgewood congregation to discuss the merger, an older white man asked Charles: "Will we still have Beast Feast?"

will or likely will vote for the legislation this week. Seven of those council members supported the legislation in committee.

Six council members have voted against the legislation or said they don't support it.

The remaining five members haven't publicly stated their positions.

Council members Garrett Dennis and Joyce Morgan, who voted for the legislation in committee and said they supported discrimination protections for LGBT people during the 2015 campaign, refused to say if they'd vote for it.

Council President Lori Boyer also refused to say whether she supported the legislation. She said she wants to remain neutral to avoid the perception she used her position to influence an outcome.

A cellphone for Councilwoman Katrina Brown was disconnected, and she couldn't be reached for comment. Brown voted for the legislation in committee last week and said in her campaign that she supported expanding discrimination rights for LGBT people.

Councilman Reginald Brown didn't return a voicemail seeking comment. Brown voted against

similar legislation in 2012, although he told the Times-Union during his re-election campaign he'd support expanding discrimination protections for LGBT people.

MAYOR'S MOVE UNCERTAIN

If the bill passes with less than 13 votes, its fate will lie with the mayor.

Curry can sign the bill, allow it to become law without his signature or veto it. If it's vetoed, the council could vote to override that decision with a 13-vote majority.

Curry remains a bit of an enigma on the issue.

Advocates interpreted his move last year expanding City Hall's anti-discrimination policy to protect LGBT employees as signaling an openness to future progress on the issue. And the city's mostly right-leaning business and civic leadership class — which backs the bill — have supported Curry's political efforts financially.

Yet the mayor, the former chairman of the Republican Party of Florida, would make an unusual champion for the issue. Pressure from the city's donor class is unlikely to be the decisive factor in whatever decision he

makes.

Curry has been reluctant to discuss the human-rights ordinance since he announced last year he didn't believe a change in the law would be "prudent."

He did, however, direct City Hall to adopt anti-discrimination policies in line with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission — which specifically protect LGBT employees. The city also requires its vendors to follow the regulation.

He campaigned for mayor in 2015 saying he wasn't convinced a change in the law was necessary, though he pledged to hold town hall meetings to hear people out.

Curry said during a Times-Union editorial board meeting in November that his position in the time since had not changed. He also promised he would not try to tip the scales if the council revived the issue and would review any legislation that comes to his desk.

Curry's office did not respond to a request to interview the mayor.

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Children in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten Bible study fellowship class re-enact the story of Joshua leading the Israelite army around the fortress of Jericho, causing its walls to fall. (Bob Self/Florida Times-Union)

The man explained: Each year, the men of Ridgewood went hunting together, then cooked and ate what they caught.

"Every year, Pastor, someone has trusted Christ at this Beast Feast," the man told Charles. "I'm sure that you would agree with me that if one redneck comes to Jesus, it's worth it."

Charles was taken by the man's conviction. "That was an initial thing that God really used to calm me down and remind me that this was going to be OK," he said.

But after one year, it turned out that the integrated congregation was not much interested in hunting together. There is no more Beast Feast.

The music, however, has been a success. It swelled one recent Sunday in the gymnasium at the Orange Park church, where members white and black wrapped their arms around each other to sway to its beat.

Charles made his weekly entreaty, calling anyone wishing to commit to Jesus on this day to come to the altar. Over the strains of the music's crescendo, he boomed, "This is good ground to plant your faith."

And after a silent breathless moment, tentative feet stepped into the aisle.

Danny Smith grew up in a black church, where his father was the pastor. It was the kind of church African-Americans have belonged to for centuries, a safe haven for sharing common concerns and banding together for social justice.

When he moved to Jacksonville three years ago, Smith joined another black church. And then Shiloh joined with Ridgewood, and Smith heard his new pastor calling for volunteers to go from the downtown church to the suburban location, just for the first year, to help smooth the transition.

Charles asked for 150 volunteers, and 250, including Smith, signed up. At the end of that first year, not a single one went back to the downtown campus.

Smith, who became a deacon, loved the multi-racial campus in Orange Park: "You can tell the real truth of Christianity comes out in Shiloh. ... We're all the same color in the eyes of Jesus Christ."

Shiloh feels different, though, than the black

church of his childhood. And the amiable barbecues he enjoys now with his fellow deacons, black and white, are not the same as his gatherings with black friends.

"When I get together with friends, yeah, I can talk about Black Lives Matter and how I feel about that. And yeah, I can talk about the courts, and how it's allowing these white officers to get off scot-free," Smith said.

Gathered round for barbecue with the deacons, those subjects don't come up.

"I'm glad it doesn't," Smith said. "That would cause racial tension. And that's not needed in the body of Christ."

That such conversations do not take place often at Shiloh is a result not just of the recent integration, but also of the long-standing ethos of the congregation, guided by Charles.

"Pastor Charles is just a teacher of the word. He's not a teacher of the culture," said Sebrina Wesley, a lifelong Shiloh member who works for the church.

In the privacy of his office, surrounded by walls of books, Charles acknowledges that his ministry is far more calculated than that.

"As a pastor, as a black man, there are things I have seen this year that anger and trouble me," he said. But he rarely expresses that anger.

Yes, he wants to keep his integrated congregation happy, he said. In the first year after the merger, more than a thousand new members joined — including interracial couples who felt they had finally found a church where they belonged.

But Charles said he also sees the long game in growing his diverse flock.

"I think the power of the gospel is subversive. It undermines the way of the world in subtle fashion," he said. "One of the primary ways Jesus spoke of his mission and his kingdom is by the planting of a seed. Seeds don't grow overnight. Over time, I am teaching and leading in such a way that fruit will grow."

On a Tuesday afternoon in January, Kovacic attended her Bible study group, made up mostly of older retired women, black and white.

"They talk about things they dealt with — being

treated differently because they were black — that I didn't encounter," she said. "I think blacks in this country probably deal with more than most. I guess it's given me a little more understanding."

And with that dawning understanding came love. "I get just as many hugs at Shiloh as I used to get at Ridgewood," she said.

After Bible study, Kovacic stepped outside into the Florida sunshine and leaned her head amiably on the shoulder of her friend Laverne Gordon, 65, in the parking lot.

A friendship has grown between the two women, one that extends beyond the church walls. When Gordon was sick, Kovacic delivered her special "anti-inflammatory" chicken, then brought more of the spice mix to church for her.

"Want to get lunch?" Kovacic asked Gordon.

Gordon said she was broke. But Kovacic shrugged, saying she would pay for Gordon's meal if Gordon would do the driving. Within moments they were on their way to Panera Bread, chatting about how teenagers keep their eyes glued to their cellphones and what a Christian woman should say to an old friend who has ditched church in favor of meditation.

Over soup and sandwiches, the women swapped stories of their lifetimes in the Baptist church — the traditional black Watch Nights that Gordon grew up observing, compared with the candlelight Christmas Eve services that Kovacic loved.

Then the conversation turned to Trump.

"When somebody has been legally elected, I don't understand why you wouldn't just pray for him," Kovacic said.

"What I don't understand," Gordon retorted, "is how [Trump] behaved the way he did and he still got elected."

Gordon voted for Hillary Clinton, and although Kovacic won't share who she voted for — she just says she picked "the lesser of two evils" — Gordon said later that she is sure her friend voted for Trump.

At the lunch table, Kovacic said nobody protested when Barack Obama was elected. Gordon objected, reminding Kovacic of ways the Obama family faced tremendous disrespect, often motivated by racism, during his presidency.

And Kovacic conceded that point. "I'm not a Democrat, and I don't agree with him politically. And he has accomplished a lot of positive things as a black president," she said. "Black people don't get the recognition they deserve. I acknowledge that he's had a positive impact in a lot of ways."

Gordon nodded. They both praised Panera's green tea, then starting talking about one of the lessons of their Bible study: the importance of loving people, even more so across divides.