

Rob Bell says goodbye to Michigan megachurch

by [Heidi Fenton](#)

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GRANDVILLE, Mich. (RNS) For years, Rob Bell closed his Sunday teachings at Mars Hill Bible Church with a simple statement: "Grace and peace be with you."

Thousands would respond in unison: "And also with you."

On Sunday (Jan. 8), on Bell's last day at the megachurch he founded 12 years ago, only one voice sounded out across the sanctuary housed in a renovated shopping center: Bell's.

"And also with you," he replied, looking out over the congregation as he accepted their wish of peace.

With that, the man who has garnered national attention in recent months for his controversial book on hell, "Love Wins," left Mars Hill for the last time as lead pastor.

Sunday's services wrapped months of transition for the church following Bell's September resignation and subsequent move to the Los Angeles area to create an ABC television drama with "Lost" producer Carlton Cuse, loosely based on Bell's life.

In November, he began touring the U.S. and Canada on an eight-date "Fit to Smash Ice" speaking tour. Bell also has said he has "at least three" more books he plans to write.

"I feel like I'm just getting started, like I'm a rookie, a freshman, a newb," he told a gathering of several thousand in his final sermon on Dec. 18. "I feel like the world is big and wide and open."

On Sunday, former Mars Hill Worship Leader Kent Dobson encouraged Bell to be bold as he steps into the future: "The spiritual life is not such a safe thing. Go for it -- don't be afraid to fail. Take a risk. Try something new."