

The unconventional and outspoken preacher took the giant cross down from the wall and replaced it with a light show.

There are no long, boring sermons at the service I attend. Instead there is a PowerPoint presentation with inspiring phrases, photos and quotes.

Images of Williams, Barack Obama and Martin Luther King flash up. The church is decorated with banners proclaiming acceptance, justice, hope and love.

John Lennon is quoted, and Williams also brings in references to popular culture, talking about all “avatars” being equal.

As he speaks, his wife Jan sits in a chair nearby, watching and smiling.

She is not what you would expect the wife of a reverend to look like.

The much younger Asian woman wears bright red lipstick, a high, tight ponytail and a short skirt.

But when she stands to talk, she speaks with wisdom, telling the congregation that before she came to the church 43 years ago, she didn’t have good experiences of love – but that changed.

A blonde woman is sitting near me nursing a beautiful young black girl who has her hair in dozens of tiny plaits with flower clips.

It turns out she is involved in a mentoring program, and is called to the stage to talk about it.

At one point we are all told to hug the people around us, and at other times to hold hands and sing.

“Amen. Hallelujah. Right on,” Williams cries.

The service ends with a performance by a group called Love Everywhere.

Two Asian women, one playing an accordion and another playing a violin, come together on stage and kiss passionately.

It is confronting, and it is not the type of thing you expect to see in church on a Sunday morning, but this is San Francisco – the gay capital of the world – and Williams has been performing gay weddings for decades.

Williams was born in San Angelo, Texas, the grandson of a former slave known as “Papa Jack”.

When he grew up, railway tracks divided blacks and whites, and he wanted to cross those tracks and for everybody else to be able to as well.

Glide also provides 800 meals a day to the needy, of whom there are many in San Francisco.

People flock to the city from all over the US because of the warm Californian climate and comparatively good social services, and the streets seem to be filled with homeless people.

Glide relies on volunteers and a few days later I return to lend a hand.

I am greeted by a short, stocky, heavily tattooed man who locks my belongings in a locker.

Some volunteers serve food, others act as dishpigs and others as “greeters” who hand over the trays.

Lunch is a hot dog with two slices of unbuttered bread, a serving of broccoli, a few potato crisps, a couple of slices of tomato and some gherkins.

A seemingly endless stream of people file through – an elderly grey-haired woman with a leopard-print scarf; a toothless man in a beanie.

Most smile, look into your eyes and say “thank you”; others take the tray without a sideways glance.

Most seem grateful and well-presented. They eat lunch quietly.

When it is all over the boss claps and shakes our hands.

“We couldn’t do it without volunteers,” he says.

The concept of “voluntouring” is booming, particularly in developing countries such as Cambodia and Costa Rica but you don’t have to



BEACON OF HOPE: Glide Memorial Church, at 330 Ellis St, is in the heart of San Francisco.

Pictures: Alain McLaughlin

take months out of your life to do volunteer work overseas.

The hotel where I stayed, appropriately named The Good Hotel, is a philanthropy partner with an organisation called One Brick, which hooks guests up with volunteering opportunities at places such as Glide.

Located in the SoMa (South of Market) district, the Good Hotel is certainly one with a conscience.

The pet-friendly hotel, which has the feel of an upmarket hostel, has light fixtures made from water bottles, bed frames made of reclaimed wood and hybrid cars receive free parking.

There’s even a sink on top of the toilet so you can wash your hands with the water that then flushes through.

Homeless people line the streets outside my window. On my last night I am walking back to the hotel after dinner when I pass a tiny man with no legs in a wheelchair, begging.

As soon as I pass I want to go back and give him \$20, but I don’t. If you gave money to every homeless person in San Francisco, you’d be broke.

But after days of encounters with homeless people, he is the tipping point. As soon as I get back to my room I burst into tears.

I can’t understand why he was born that way while another man is born into a rich family, with good looks and intelligence. It seems so unfair that I am in this basic but comfortable, warm and safe hotel room when there are so many people outside lying underneath a doona in the cold night air.

While it is a beautiful city with so many fantastic offerings, San Francisco affected me in a way I would never have guessed. Much as I loved it, in a way I was relieved to leave.

The writer travelled with assistance from United Airlines and San Francisco Tourism

Wish you were here

Getting there

United Airlines flies direct daily services from Melbourne and Sydney to San Francisco.
See www.unitedairlines.com.au or phone 131 777.

Staying there

Twin share rooms at the Good Hotel range from \$US89-129 (\$95-137) a night. **See www.jdvhotels.com**

Volunteering there

One Brick has volunteering opportunities in San Francisco, Chicago, New York and Washington DC. **See onebrick.org**

When to go

Glide has services every Sunday at 9am and 11 am.
See www.glide.org

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