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Handbook of Megachurches

EDITED BY

Stephen Hunt

BRILL

Handbook of Megachurches

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Foreword

This handbook is the third in a series of handbooks edited by Stephen Hunt tracking broad developments in Christianity. The first two, *Handbook of Global Christianity* (Brill 2015) and *Handbook of Contemporary Christianity: Movements, Institutions and Allegiance* (Brill 2016) pursue broad agendas. The present volume narrows its focus to a relatively recent, important development in church organisation, the megachurch. This focus narrowing is pragmatic but now confronts an explosion in the number and diversity of megachurches. No single volume can any longer capture empirically and theoretically the megachurch phenomenon, but a handbook is a good place to start. In these circumstances, handbooks like this one, which present incipient theory and case studies, represent guideposts introducing and serving as the foundations for the next stage of theory and research.

Megachurches offer a new and unique form of religious organisation. Once developed, however, the various constituent elements of the form can be re-configured to fit alternative sociocultural environments. What this means, of course, is that a single, general theory of megachurches is problematic. And so the interim solution to area-of-study development is precisely what this volume delivers, a mix of original case studies and theoretical proposals even as the form itself continues to spread and diversify. Even if a larger and more encompassing theory is pursued, I would argue that a theoretical understanding of the rise in the site of origination, at least, is achievable. Let me offer a brief outline of one additional perspective to those offered in this volume.

The emergence of the megachurch form in the U.S began during an historical period with specific sociocultural characteristics. Religion, along with the family, had moved to the private sphere. The religious landscape was dominated by a very large number of very small congregational units. Their median membership size was under 100, which means that half were smaller than that. These congregational units were largely determined organisationally by their geographic and denominational affiliation. Membership in the mainline churches had begun what continues to be a steep membership decline. Those denominations began to relinquish moral authority in favour of a service orientation. The distinctiveness and importance of denominational identity waned, and there were even a few mergers of historically related denominations. Conservative and sectarian church growth exploded as mainline church members and the unaffiliated experimented with what Dean Kelly called “strict religion”. Simultaneously, the public sphere institutional area also was transformed. Science became its knowledge base, technological innovation

and penetration of everyday life continued to gather momentum. Higher (predominantly secular) educational credentialing became more pervasive and imperative; the national population both urbanised and suburbanised. The mass media became both medium and message. The foregoing list of structural changes could be lengthened, shortened, or debated, but the overall social and cultural restructuring of the birthplace of the megachurch, and religion in particular, is beyond debate. This transformation offered both the imperative and opportunity for a discovery of new organisational forms of religion.

Sociologist Robert Merton has offered a convincing and influential theory of social stability/instability. He asserts that a social order consists of two broad dimensions: cultural and social. The culture consists of symbolically constructed values and goals; the social dimension consists of the socially constructed institutional means for achieving them. Social orders are stable when the goals are accepted as legitimate and the means as effective. When that stability breaks down, there is pressure on both. Sometimes there are challenges to the cultural goals; in the case of Christian religion, sectarian, diasporic, and new religious groups exemplify this. If the goals are culturally foundational, as a Christian worldview and values have been, there is an impetus to adjust the means. Merton identifies several of these (innovation, retreatism, ritualism, and rebellion) of which innovation is most pertinent here. If affiliation with, loyalty to, and engagement in existing Christian churches is diminishing and larger secularising trends undermine their historic role, innovative forms are likely. Megachurches are classic innovations in the Mertonian sense that they most often seek to preserve the theological core of conservative Christianity but eschew “brand loyalty” in favour of new means of achieving traditional ends. The social and cultural transformation that occurred in American society provided the impetus and the opportunity for the innovation that has taken place.

This much of the story of the rise of megachurches seems consistent with established social theory. What comes next is not. The rise of megachurches may have begun in America, but it is no longer simply an American phenomenon. The form has taken on a life of its own and transplanted, with various modifications, to a wide array of sociocultural environments. And so this handbook offers exactly what is needed at this moment. It offers a review of where research and theory stand in the study of megachurches, chronicles their continuing expansion and diversification, and offers a guidepost for interpreting the next stage of megachurch development.

David J. Bromley

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Introduction: The Megachurch Phenomenon

Stephen Hunt

The growth of the megachurch is undoubtedly one of the most exceptional religious trends of recent times, certainly within the Christian sphere. Generally, the term ‘mega’ is translated as ‘extra-large’. Thus, the designation ‘megachurch’ would seem to imply both an architectural and congregational formation of considerable proportion and thereby drawing scholarly attention. Indeed, for their part, most informed academic studies, despite the varying perspectives adopted, appear to focus on the size of the congregation, that is, congregations with a weekly attendance (adults and children included) somewhere between 1,800 to 2,000 attendees (and that definition is mostly accepted in subsequent chapters of this volume).

The relevant studies, largely restricted to those megachurches found within the Protestant tradition,¹ invariably seek explanations for this development and those proffered are fairly straightforward. What is commonly termed the ‘Megachurch Movement’ (subsequently MCM) is not only frequently understood as a reaction to the shortcomings of the declining conventional Church, but amounts to a purposeful endeavour to render the Christian gospel message relevant to the contemporary setting or, as often preferred, the post-Christian Western society. In turn, the megachurch phenomenon is generally recognised as constituting the reflection of the prevailing cultural environment and, moreover, economic trends that have over-spilled into the sphere of religion. And, as a form of congregational life, the MCM has clearly spanned out beyond the United States from where it first emerged to diverse parts of the world Christianity has taken root and would appear to fulfil particular localised needs.

Drawing academic attention has been the fact that the total number of megachurches in the USA at the close of the twentieth century had increased considerably (from 350 in 1990 to over 600 in 2000, then, in the early twenty-first

1 This is not to say that large-scale churches cannot be found throughout Christian history as the early chapters of this volume suggests, especially when the faith was of greater cultural and political significance than it is today. It might even be said that the earliest church in Jerusalem described in the New Testament (Acts 2: 42–47) formed the first ‘megachurch’. Some Roman Catholic parishes currently number in excess of 2,000, but are normally not considered part of the MCM for largely structural, cultural and theological reasons – 3,000 individual parishes (churches) have 2,000 or more attendants for an average Sunday Mass (‘Megachurch Definition’, Hartford Institute of Religious Research database).

century from 1,200 in 2012 to currently somewhere in the region of 1,600, according to Hartford Institute for Religion Research data). In fact, the growth began to occur earlier from the mid-twentieth century: 25 percent of megachurches were founded in 1949 or earlier; 22 percent between 1950–69; 1970 to 1989 27 percent; and 26 percent after 2011 (Bird and Thumma 2011).² Given the timing of the growth, it is possible to tentatively evoke the notion that this has been part of a wider development whereby large structures and sizeable crowds in venues accommodating sporting or musical events, even shopping malls, have become a familiar part of the cultural landscape.

In simple terms then, it might be said that megachurches have come to reflect major current forms of organisational arrangements with the straightforward function of catering for the requirements, and not just spiritual requirements, of a considerable number of people. But there is more to the picture. The contemporary megachurch has evolved to allow for the needs of small groups of believers and accompanying dynamics, the use of modern technology, professional and commercial strategies, and not to mention what has come to be recognised as the ‘religious entrepreneur’ (for example, Greibel et al. 2011) – innovative charismatic pastors who not uncommonly initially established and sponsored the megachurch and are posited at the head of a hierarchical, mostly male dominated structure. It is the complexity of these organisational forms, which provide coherence to the MCM. Furthermore, as already noted, the adaptation to wider cultural shifts and changes in demographics has ensured that the megachurch can now be found throughout the industrialised, urban and suburban areas of the world where Christianity had long enjoyed a presence, while in numerous instances, the megachurch provides the basis by which the faith expands into fresh global fields.

1 Megachurches in the USA: Demographics

The USA is often viewed as the birthplace of the megachurch and in this national context clear developments can be discerned with the academic gaze focusing on several main concerns including the demographic features of church attenders/members, exploring the typical organisational structures of such churches, the factors behind their growth, and how megachurches have

² According to the Leadership Network, the Crystal Cathedral in Southern California is frequently cited as the first megachurch in the USA. However, it did not exceed the 2,000 membership mark until 15 years after it was founded in 1955.

subsequently manifested themselves in various parts of the world – sometimes conforming to the standard ‘model’, sometimes making significant departure from it.

As part of the prolific growth of megachurches in the 1970s in the USA there has discernibly been a consistent shift of members and attendees from smaller churches to larger churches, especially churches of a ‘mega’ scale (Rainer 2012). Further statistical evidence offered by Warren Bird (Leadership Network) and Scott Thumma (Hartford Institute for Religion Research), who have conducted several research surveys on the subject, provides key data on the number and scale of such churches. That of 2011 (the fourth such survey in a decade included 336 churches of 1,800 and upwards in attendance) estimated that while megachurches still accounted for less than one-half of one percent of all churches in the USA, more than ten percent of church attendance was concentrated in these churches on the average weekend or, as otherwise put, nearly 6 million worshippers were part of congregations that each drew 2,000 or more in total attendance. Moreover, if this group of churches were a Protestant denomination, it would amount to the nation’s second largest such constituency, catering for around 33 percent of all who worship in Christian churches on any given Sunday.

Megachurches have tended to grow to their considerable size within a very short period of time, usually in less than ten years, and under the tenure of a single senior male pastor, growing faster than many denominational churches. Bird and Thumma’s 2011 survey notes that despite occasional news reports that large churches are a Baby Boomer generation manifestation and subsequently on the decline, a steady growth pattern remains evident, with these churches averaging 8 percent growth per year for the previous five years. Thus, the stated average attendance for these churches grew from 2,604 in 2005 to 3,597 in 2010.

A number of these large churches occupy prominent land tracts of 50 to 100 acres near major traffic thoroughfares. The Hartford Institute’s database lists more than 1,300 such Protestant churches in the USA. The top five USA churches being: 1. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas (25,060); 2. World Changers, College Park, Georgia (23,093); 3. Saddleback Community Church, Lake Forrest, California (20,100); 4. The Potters House, Dallas (18,500) and; 5. Fellowship Church, Grapevine, Texas (18,129). The 2011 survey confirmed that while megachurches could be found throughout the USA, they remain concentrated in certain geographical territories, with the southern and far west regions dominating. In these regions the majority of megachurches (over 70 percent) are located in the southern Sunbelt – with California, Texas, Florida and Georgia having the highest concentrations, located in suburban areas of rapidly growing sprawl cities such as Los Angeles, Dallas, Atlanta, Houston, Orlando,

Phoenix and Seattle, and the reason why relates to a range of demographic variables and economic factors connected to population density and wealth in various proximities, and localised religious histories (Karnes et al. 2007).

Racially, megachurches are seemingly predominantly white with 82 percent having a majority of Caucasian participants. Megachurches are underrepresented among other racial groups compared to national race distributions, although this appears to be gradually changing as the demographic profile of the USA changes (Bird and Thumma 2011). The racial background of senior leaders varies rather from the majority race of the churches surveyed in Bird and Thumma's 2011 findings. Four percent of megachurches in the study reported having no racial majority in the church, while 10 percent were predominantly African American, 2 percent Asian, 1 percent Hispanic.

People attracted to the average megachurch are apparently younger individuals, family oriented and solidly middle class. According to the Hartford Institute many megachurches draw a sizeable percentage of young adults. The average age range was found to be in the 30s to 40s and a full 70 percent are under the age of 50. This means that megachurches are not merely appealing to adults but contain vast numbers of children and teenagers as well. As with nearly every church of any size, there were more women than men in the megachurch, but unlike most churches the balance between genders was relatively even (55 percent women to 45 percent men). Just over half of participants, so the 2011 survey found, had college degrees (52 percent) and, although most megachurches had a regional allurements, 60 percent of attenders lived within 15 minutes' drive of their church.

2 Distinguishing Features

Numerous chapters in this volume will discuss further distinguishing features of the megachurch in some detail, some accounts providing extensive analysis in relation to different global cultural and geographical contexts. Little more than a precursory outline and overview of allegiances, organisational structures, and changing dynamics is intended here, with the focus once again largely being on the MCM homeland of the USA, although some global variations will be briefly considered.

2.1 *Theology and Denominational Allegiance*

Despite forming organisational typologies in their own right (as discussed below), megachurches can be subdivided according to various criteria. The

Hartford Institute of Religious Research (Megachurch 'Defined') suggests that there are distinct types which relate to affiliations, leading to much variety within the MCM:

(1) 'Old' or programmed-based megachurches (30 percent of total), represented by some traditional Protestant denominational congregations that exceed 2,000. A large number are nondenominational (54 percent) but the majority are affiliated with established denominations. These account for 80 percent of all megachurches: Southern Baptist 16 percent; Baptist (unspecified) 7 percent; Assemblies of God 6 percent; Christian 5 percent; Calvary Chapel 4 percent; United Methodist 2 percent. Perhaps the intentional migration out of denominations and wish for greater autonomy underlies this shift that is indicated by the fact approximately 33 percent of the current non-denominational churches claim they were once part of a denomination. For those who are non-denominational, approximately one-third say they were previously under the remit of a denomination according to the Hartford Institute of Religious Research database. This development suggests the broader trend for the emergence of independent churches as part of post-denominational tendency.

The Hartford Institute found that almost all Protestant denominations have at least one megachurch including Southern Baptists, United Methodists, and Evangelical Lutherans. Smaller denominations like Foursquare, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Nazarene have also established mega congregations. Moreover, most denominational megachurches seemingly hold their denominational affiliation rather superficially as evidenced by churches such as Saddleback which is Southern Baptist, and LifeChurch.tv that is Evangelical Covenant. It is also clear that many megachurches are nondenominational, including Lakewood, Willow Creek, North Point and The Potter's House. These tend to constitute the following further categories: also identified by the Hartford Institute:

- (2) 'Seeker' churches (30 percent of total), megachurches focusing on 'seeker services' and bringing in the 'unchurched';
- (3) Charismatic, pastor-focused churches (25 percent), having been built up largely on the charisma of the founding pastor;
- (4) and New Wave/Re-envisioned churches (15 percent) of an innovating and experimental nature geared to cultural and organisational change.

Virtually all these megachurches display what is generally accepted as components of a conservative theology, even those within mainline denominations. Like their non-denominational counterparts, the denominational churches are to be found within the main evangelical stream. In terms of theology of the congregation, the label that megachurches, surveyed by the Hartford Institute selected to best fit their membership's orientation were as follows: Evangelical 71 percent; Moderate 7 percent; Missional 6 percent; Charismatic 5 percent; Pentecostal 5 percent; Seeker 5 percent; Fundamentalist 1 percent; Liberal 0.5 percent; Other 1 percent.

And, new-wave or re-envisioned megachurches, an emergent set of churches attempting to reach a younger demographic.

Furthermore, megachurches, particularly those of a 'New Wave/Re-envisioned' persuasion because of their missiological and contextualisation process, construct what may be termed as 'local theologies', adaptable to local environments and congregations. This would seem to amount to a component of a wider 'experimental theology' (Beck 2011) in which an on-going 'dialogue' takes place between the teachings and revelations of scriptural text and the complexion and needs of the neighbourhood environment.

Despite conservative theological leanings, barely 1 percent chose labels at the two theological extremes – whether 'fundamentalist' or 'liberal'. In addition, the 2011 Bird and Thumma's survey also found that megachurches embraced "a high view of their own spiritual vitality". An overwhelming 98 percent agreed that their congregations are "spiritually alive and vital". In addition, 98 percent said they had strong beliefs and values, 95 percent that they had a clear mission. 2011, which for the most part is about winning converts and church members. Much in this respect would seem to be exemplified by Rick Warren's best-selling in-house book *The Purpose Driven Church* (1996) which is suitably sub-titled *Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*.

In more of an academic vein, Donald Miller's ground-breaking work *Reinventing American Protestantism* (1999) found an additional source of affiliation in the megachurches of Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Christian Fellowship and Hope Chapel in particular. Megachurches among those which he designates 'New Paradigm Churches' perceived their own existence as part of the 'apostolic network' as reflected through their understanding of the teaching found in the Acts of the Apostles as related in the Christian New Testament. This conviction looks towards reconnecting with first century Christianity via restoring the importance of the spiritual leadership of Apostles, while using the medium of twenty-first century American culture as the vehicle of promoting

the gospel message. As a result, as Miller contends, the nation is experiencing a 'Second Reformation' through the MCM. That reformation is drastically changing the way these new paradigm churches challenge church structure and radicalise worship attitudes by reinventing the ways by which people can meaningfully worship, so as to be reconnected with that which is understood to be the sacred.

2.2 *Leadership/Structure*

The 2011 Bird and Thumma survey indicates that the younger-led megachurches (clergy who are on average 51 years old, male and have post-graduate degrees, and slightly younger and better educated than smaller church counterparts) tend to differ in the sense they have less emphasis on the best of possible facilities, are less formal, and place a greater eagerness to be an actively participant in their local communities (the 406 megachurches surveyed in 2005 averaged 20 full time paid ministerial staff persons, and 22 full time paid programme staff persons). Supporting these senior pastors are teams of between 5 to 25 associate ministers, and not infrequently hundreds of full-time employed staff.

In the 2011 survey – one finding which would seem to run counter to the observation above – indicates that people may be attracted to large auditoriums and events, and while megachurches have very large attendance figures, they often do not necessarily own massive sanctuaries. The average seating capacity of the largest sanctuary of a church in the survey was 1,778, with a median of 1,500. As found in previous surveys, it is apparent that megachurches make extensive use of multiple services to maximise their capacity, and many also are multi-site (one church in two or more locations). While virtually all had multiple Sunday morning services, 48 percent organised one or more Saturday night services, and 41 percent arranged one or more Sunday night services. Megachurches held on average 5.5 services from Friday through Sunday. Even given the multiple services and locations, many megachurches would wish to have larger spaces for services and other events. The 2011 survey found that multi-site megachurches are growing faster (95 percent growth rate) than single site ones (70 percent) over the previous five years; however, those churches were considering becoming multi-site in fact have the fastest average growth rate (133 percent). In addition, so the survey suggests, megachurch leaders display a concern with groups as the church mechanism for assimilation, evangelism, fellowship, ministry, and more in-depth teaching. Groups have different names: small (cell) groups, Sunday school, life groups, home groups, etc.

3 Growth of Megachurches

Returning to the question of the popularity and impressive growth of the megachurches, there is the perhaps obvious appeal of their very size. The *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*³ submit the view that when such churches reach a certain size, then the process of growth is self-generating, although the assumption that size is advanced by the leadership of such churches as a 'selling point' appears to be something of a 'myth' (Thumma and Travis 2007).

The megachurch is concerned with people's various needs; representing a new experience of church and of the Christian community. Donald Miller (1999) pointed out that the large new paradigm churches design worship services which appeal to non-church goers, and in doing so significantly depart from conventional views on worship. The concept of 'seeker friendly' worship services are geared to creating a non-threatening atmosphere. Indeed, the emphasis on being seeker friendly has led to many churches, despite their allegiances, to try to avoid being classified as 'Charismatic', 'Evangelical', 'Fundamentalist' or 'Pentecostal'. In their attempt to reach the 'unchurched' Sunday assemblies may be designed entirely around groups of 'seekers', endeavouring to be as inclusive and inoffensive as possible, wishing to avoid controversial subjects such as abortion and homosexuality and seeking to attract a wide range of people with an equally wide range of beliefs and cultural background.

Wellman et al. (2012) have highlighted further attractions. Megachurches, which rarely refer to heaven or hell, are worlds away from the sober, judgmental puritan churches of previous times. Rather, all megachurch services share one further factor in common: they are entertaining. Most use varying degrees of video, contemporary music and drama in their services, giving a sense of being at a concert that attempts to create an emotion sense of well-being. Megachurches use stagecraft, sensory pageantry, charismatic leadership and an upbeat, unchallenging vision of Christianity to provide their congregants with a powerful emotional religious experience: a 'multisensory mélange' of visuals and other elements to stimulate the senses, as well as small-group participation and a shared focus on the message from a charismatic pastor.

There is also the matter of cultural accommodation. Alan Wolfe (2005), describes the megachurch phenomenon in his volume *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith as where* American faith

3 "Not Who You Think They Are'. A Profile of the People Who Attend America's Megachurches", Hartford Institute of Religious Research.

has engaged with American culture with the latter triumphing through an indulgent individualism. The atmosphere and ethos of megachurches is one of optimism, vitality and purpose. These giant social complexes have other distinctive trademarks such as gymnasiums, schools, divorce centres, aerobics studios, computer centres, shopping arcades, banquet halls (including in one case, a McDonald's restaurant). Virtually all aspects of life are catered to at megachurches; they are not just Sunday 'religious' experiences.

Further, these congregations have embraced the latest technologies which can be regarded as powerful signals to younger adults that these congregations are relevant and in touch with contemporary reality. The 2011 Bird and Thumma survey found 88 percent of the churches revealed that the church/pastoral leadership used Facebook or other social media on a regular basis, nearly three-fourths constructed podcasts, 56 percent blog and over a third utilised other Internet technologies such as streaming, Twitter, texting and online church services.

These developments would seem to give credence to conceptions of the religious 'supplier'/'consumer', 'religious marketplace' model. Hence, in the context of the USA Joseph Daniels and Marc Von der Ruhr (2012) suggests that megachurches are thriving in religious markets at a time when Americans are asserting their ability as consumers of religious products to engage in religious switching. The apparent success of megachurches, which often provide a low cost and low commitment path by which religious 'refugees' may join the church, seemingly challenges Iannoccone's theory (1994) that high commitment churches will thrive while low commitment churches will atrophy. Daniels and von der Ruhr indicate a match between what the church produces and what the religious 'refugee' wishes to consume in an effort to increase their membership. The model illustrates that megachurches expect little in regard to financial or time commitment of new attendees. However, once the attendees perceive a good fit with the church, these researchers suggest, the megachurch increases its expectation of commitment.

While the megachurch is now an important part of the USA religious landscape, they are not without its detractors with the most vehement voices appearing to focus on the very factors which would seem to make the MCM successful. For instance, MacNair (2009), a Christian and social scientist, has expressed concern of the movement on the grounds of its radical departure from tradition, lacking a sense of continuity with previous generations, and moreover, that it undermines conventional and meaningful forms of worship. To this he adds the business ethos of megachurches where money and success as measured in terms of members and church attendance replaces an emphasis on true spirituality. MacNair argues that none of these developments bode

well for the future of Christianity should the MCM come to dominate expressions of the faith since it sends the wrong message to followers and ‘seekers’ alike. To this list of complaints, more traditionally minded Christians also point to the tendency of megachurches to indulge in ‘sheep stealing’. In other words, taking church members from other churches, since people are attracted to successful larger churches.⁴

4 Global Manifestations

The data included in Bird and Thumma’s 2011 survey indicates the vast majority of megachurches are still located in the USA (estimating that there are about three times as many megachurches as those collectively found across the world). While there are broadly 230 to 500 such churches elsewhere in the world, these researchers found that of the cities with most megachurches 7 out of the top 10 were in the USA. In terms of attendance only 2 of the highest attendance of megachurches were in the nation. The reality is that globally, megachurches are a significant development in Protestant Christianity. In diverse parts of the world megachurches churches have adopted or at least adapted the familiar USA model, but in several cases such churches dwarf them in terms of congregational numbers.

No exact number of megachurches throughout the world, by using the standard criteria, have been ascertained. Nonetheless, Rick Noack and Lazaro Gamio (2015) in their survey of megachurches in Korea, Brazil, and several African countries indicate that they are often much larger than the North American counterparts (averaging 60,000 in attendance). The world’s largest churches are: Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea (253,000); Works and Mission Baptists Church, Abidjan, Ivory Coast (150,000); Yotabeche Methodist Church, Santiago, Chile (150,000); Mision Carismatica Internacional, Bogotá, Colombia (150,000); Deeper Life Bible Church, Lagos, Nigeria (120,000); Elim Church, San Salvador, El Salvador (117,000); Nambu Full Gospel, Seoul, Korea (110,000); Assemblies of God Grace and Truth, Kyanggi-do, Korea (105,000); Kum Ran Methodist, Seoul, Korea (80,000); Vision de Futuro, Santa Fe, Argentina (70,000). In 2007, five of the ten largest Protestant churches were in South Korea, with currently largest megachurch in the world believed to be Yoido Full

4 There has, however, been a reaction to the MCC in the form of the Emerging Church movement which constitutes communities that practise a form of informal Christianity outside of the established denominations and with a particular dislike for megachurches and their culture (see Packard 2016).

Gospel Church, a Pentecostal Assemblies of God church, with more than 830,000 members as of 2007. They are experiencing varied fortunes with churches which had an attendance of 300,000 at some point, such as Ondas del Luz y Amor in Buenos Aires, have declined to about 70,000.

In some parts of the world the spread of Christianity and the number of new converts partly explain the growth of megachurches. Given current trends it is possible that in the future it will be the non-Western world which will provide the fertile ground for the greatest growth of megachurches. Much has been illuminated by Philip Jenkins' insightful work, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2007) which explores the remarkable expansion of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere – broadly Africa, Asia and Latin America as the centre of gravity moves from the North, and that this trend is probably irreversible. For example, in 1900, there were an estimated one hundred million Christians in Africa, representing 10 percent of the entire population. Today, as Jenkin points out, there are some three hundred and sixty million, amounting to just under half the population of the continent and the population continues to expand.

In sum, two-thirds of the world's anticipated 2.6 billion Christians will be found in the global South, in countries mostly 'developing' (Barrett et al. 2008). As Jenkins points out, the regions where Christianity is advancing and mutating are also those contexts where the population levels are rapidly proliferating and the faith attracts the poor and marginalised. David Martin (2002) picks up this point by suggesting that large Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches in particular provide communities of support in the context of fast developing economics and social change. A few examples may be mooted.

The influence of the charismatic churches of Ghana and Nigeria are typical of megachurches in heavily populated urban areas. They provide a source of affiliation which seemingly transcends that of political parties or ethnic loyalties; providing their own sources of national socio-economic and political networks. Nonetheless, these churches may have a global reach. Benita Abenaa and Nyarko Uttenthal (2013) have traced how the head pastor of one such church, Matthew Ashimolowo in 1992, embarked on a 'reverse mission' to bring the gospel from Africa to the West. Ashimolowo founded Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC), now the fastest growing church organisation in western Europe. KICC was established to serve the socio-economic and spiritual needs of multi-cultural (Christian) communities but in reality serve a largely black Nigerian community (Hunt 2002). On the church's homepage, viewers can listen to podcasts, experience live streaming of sermons, engage with blogs, and make purchases in the online shop. In this way, the

megachurches can be viewed as good examples of the instrumentalisation of media and communication technology that is truly global (Lievrouw 2011, 6).

Young-Gi Hong (2016) has considered the case of South Korea, a very different context. The dynamism of Korean Christianity today has become a significant element in Korean society. Korean Protestant Christianity can be characterised by rapid church growth and the emergence of megachurches. The Protestant population increased enormously from 623,072 in 1960 to 6,489,282 in 1985, and to 8,760,000 in 1995. In 1995, with Korean Protestants (19.7 percent) and Catholics (6.6 percent) combined, Korean Christians represented about 26 percent of the total population. Most megachurches have many other sanctuaries where people can attend services by closed-circuit television, and have five to seven services on Sundays. Megachurches in China are, again, to be found in a very different environment and of a different structure. One of the smaller house church networks in southern China has an attendance of 400,000, larger networks number several million and constitute a form of underground Christianity – and these are networks rather than large church buildings. Most if not all such large regional house church networks exist in nations which persecute or repress Christians.

Using original research data, Terence Chong (2015) outlines three characteristics which have contributed to the rapid rise of independent Pentecostal megachurches in Singapore. It is evident that some explanations are universal and are in common to those in the USA, other explanations are more localised. Firstly, megachurches appeal to upwardly mobile people from working and lower middle class backgrounds, especially younger individuals, making them a converging point for class-transcending individuals who have a strong sense of agency.

Secondly, megachurches are shown to be more likely to combine spirituality with market logic as a 'seeker church'. These attitudes enable them to better engage with the contemporary marketplace as well as to appeal to young economically mobile Singaporeans generally. Thirdly, as part of the broader international evangelical movements, Singapore megachurches have learned to minister to the needy and disadvantaged in ways that avoid conflict with the state and thus are perceived as offering a useful social role. Yip and Ainsworth (2015), also through a study of Singapore, suggests that religion and business are often seen as inhabiting separate social spheres, yet megachurches combine them in ways which reflect their context. Citing the example of New Creation and City Harvest churches Yip and Ainsworth show how they use the discourse and techniques of marketing managerialism to promote growth, including through significant building projects justified in terms of their religious mission.

5 Current Developments

While megachurches continue to experience significant growth, the question to emerge is how are they adapting as the culture changes and the megachurch movement matures? While an ‘insiders’ account, Robert Crosby’s overview (2013) of recent developments in megachurches and scrutiny of various sources of relevant literature, at least in the USA, is constructive in throwing light on their continued growth but also seem to be developing agendas for the future which global churches may or may not adopt, some of which have already noted above:

1. *Age of Pastors* – the average age of lead pastors in megachurches is reducing (as noted above) and that this is conducive in attracting younger people;
2. *A Spiritual Formation Reformation* – a felt need for megachurches to be more spiritual and find fresh ways of nurturing spirituality;
3. *The Growing Ethnic Church* – includes the growth of the Latino megachurch as this sector of the USA population grows;
4. *A Team Culture* – developing teaming cultures with the large ministerial teams of megachurches comprised of smaller teams. Against a culture of economic austerity, they attempt to accomplish more with less by utilising volunteer teams;
5. *Celebrity Pastor or Celebrating the Faithful?* – many megachurch pastors, perhaps because of criticism, are moving the spotlight away from themselves and onto their church’s individual members;
6. *Leveraging Church Resources for Social Transformation* – an emphasis on a social gospel congruent with the social justice awareness of the young;
7. *The Quest for Better Metrics* – to put less emphasis on numbers attending, buildings and money, and more making changes in the community and to spiritually transform neighbourhoods;
8. *The Big Church Search for Small Church Intimacy* – identifiable needs to develop many smaller ‘churches’ within it for ‘spiritual formation strategies’ which includes restructuring smaller church experiences within the context of strengthening the large. And this is why more churches are becoming multisite;
9. *The New Collaborations* – more megachurches are moving away from established denominations to other networks which may be national, even global for strategic thinking, and;
10. *The Shifting Shape of the Virtual Church* – innovative use of technology, for example, LifeChurch.tv has thousands of churches in many different languages applying church online, and some 4,000 churches have signed up to use its free Church Online Platform to host their services.

6 Future Possibilities/Research Questions

Such current observable trends in the megachurches provide a number of clues as to how they will develop in the future. In turn, this provides some grounding for the most significant questions that will drive future research. A number of the contributions to this volume engaged with such prospects. However, it might be worth outlining a few in brief:

- Will the megachurch continue to expand and become the dominant model for Christian church life or will it be challenged by other ‘models’ and what will these ‘models’ look like?
- Will future megachurches conform to a single typology in terms of organisational factors or will localised culture, economics and demographics ensure that there will invariably be notable variations?
- What are the factors which could undermine the increasing dominance of the megachurch? For instance, critics have suggested that its place in the ‘spiritual marketplace’ will ensure that they are unstable forms of organisations, especially as they cannot guarantee the inter-generational allegiances that have conventionally been the basis of the traditional Christian denominations?
- Will the major megachurches be increasingly linked in global networks or will they be divided by such considerations as theological differences?
- Will aspects of social engagement encourage megachurches to become more politicised, especially in North America where politics are seemingly becoming more politics?

7 Overview of This Volume

The brief overview of the MCM above has focused on some important organisational features, alongside relevant demographics, explanations for extraordinary growth, and global reach, while providing scope for a consideration of future prospects. The chapters to come in this volume will add considerably more flesh to these bones and, indeed break into further areas of analysis. Their authors come from various perspectives including Sociology, Religious Studies, Church History and Theology, and their contributions come from both established and emerging scholars. Collectively, they provide a rounded and detailed analysis of the megachurch phenomenon. There are three sections to the volume each of which bring together a number of common themes: chapters considering the historical and contemporary relevance of megachurches; chapters examining the nature and dynamics of megachurches; and those chapters which explore megachurches in differing global environments.

The first cluster of chapters put megachurches in historical and cultural perspective. In the opening chapter Charity Rakestraw draws attention to the fact that megachurches are located in a long Christian history, and simply did not emerge in the 1970s. She points out that Protestants in Europe were long inspired to build large churches since the sixteenth century and came from the conviction to win endless converts. This endeavour continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and influenced the building of church structures, and into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through such developments as the Institutional Church Movement. Rakeshaw acknowledges that in these later centuries megachurches were always part of a marketing ploy appealing especially to the American middle classes, a ploy enhanced through movements of revivalism.

In Chapter two David Eagle comes to similar conclusions and commences with the observation that the dominant view of megachurches claims they represent a new religious form, born in the United States in the 1970s and bursting into the American consciousness in the 1980s. Contrary to this position, he is able to show that research demonstrates megachurches enjoy a long history with roots in the Protestantism Reformation, beginning in Europe. The megachurch scene also shifted to the United States through various movements of religious 'awakenings' and revivalism. The demographic shifts that occurred following WWII led to the proliferation of such churches in the USA. Eagle furthermore suggests that pastors and other leaders, capitalising on the appeal of innovation, reinforce the view that megachurches are something new. Eagle's research offers an important and timely corrective which helps situate megachurches in their proper historical context.

In the next chapter Gordon Melton strives to established typologies of a whole range of megachurches. In a survey of contemporary megachurches, while also acknowledging historical developments, he explores several features which allow the identification of typologies, providing impressive examples of specific classifications. Melton identifies four important factors which he explores at length. These are: denominational affiliation of churches, focusing on such phenomena as church-sect developments and non-denominational affiliation; their size, including comparisons with Roman Catholic megachurches; their location relative to the nearest urban complex, noting a tendency for them to be located in suburban areas; and their contrasting theological perspectives.

In Chapter four Simon Coleman and Saliha Chattoo explore the importance of popular culture to the development of megachurches, concentrating in particular on the advancement of such churches in this context. The authors utilise the concept of 'performance' which denotes the sense of both producing growth and expressing it via a variety of media. This illuminates how the

popular culture engendered by megachurches is typically marked by a creative if sometimes tension-filled negotiation between two models or ethical approaches to performing the mega: the 'enclaving' and 'encroaching'. Enclaving is directed towards fellow believers, inspiring them to recognise how apparently separated areas of their life can come under church influence, ranging from worship to leisure to family and even work. Enclaving constructs a moral boundary *around* different practices while re-establishing articulations *among* them, so that for example prayerful and pleasurable activities come to be juxtaposed ethically, socially, and spatially.

In the final chapter of the opening section Martyn Percy offers a sociological account of megachurch, alongside a theological critique of the theology they embrace. Contemporary culture appears to be obsessed with measuring everything by size, equating success by numbers attending. Calling on the theology of Barth and Newbigin, Percy suggests that the 'good church' – one rooted in a virtue ecclesiology rather than a size-related paradigm – does not count success in the same way the secular world does. This means that the very vehicle and content of Christian communication is under scrutiny in this respect. The church growth and megachurch advocates present a brand of Christianity rhetorically, and in largely functional terms. It is useful for meeting individuals or groups in need, averting anxieties or crises, overcoming personal limitations, or other problems. Percy concludes that this is largely a pathological approach to the centrality of Christian mission.

In the first chapter of the second section of this volume, which focuses on the nature and dynamics of megachurches, Marc Von der Ruhr takes up the theme of the 'religious marketplace' in the USA, documenting the fluid nature of church membership resulting from a consumer driven approach to choosing a church, and in doing so provides some significant insights into the structure and leadership of these churches. He calls on literature drawn primarily from economics and sociology explaining how and why churches succeed or fail. Megachurches have been strategic in approaching the religious marketplace, emphasising flexibility in their offerings in religious products and allowing for a customised spiritual experience to attendees, from the physical nature and décor of churches, to the styles of services, to integrating members. Von der Ruhr ends by examining the challenge that the newer megachurches will invariably face: that of managing pastoral succession.

In Chapter seven James Wellman, Jr. and his colleagues address the questions: what is so compelling about megachurches? Why are they able to operate successfully as total environments? They argue that rather like a 'drug', these churches emit emotional energy which stimulates intense loyalty and visceral desire to return repeatedly for a recharge and facilitates a total environment. Megachurches have perfected ways to produce and mark human

experience so that it is reproduced and creates a positive and life-sustaining energy. The authors attempt to show how Durkheim's notion of *homo duplex* is addressed through megachurch rituals. Wellman et al. present their own theory for how people are drawn to participate and invest in these rituals; *embodied choice theory*, supporting their theory with qualitative data from interviews with megachurch attendees and pastors.

In Chapter eight Mark Cartledge considers megachurches as educational institutions for a particular sector of contemporary Christianity. This sector is largely, if not exclusively, represented by Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, although there are clearly conventional Evangelical examples as well. For the purposes of his discussion Cartledge focuses on this sector within the Christian tradition, which is mostly represented by independent churches. He elucidates the significant features of these churches which lend themselves to religious socialising processes and to reflect on them in the light of the relevant literature in order to offer some evaluation and suggestions for future possible trajectories.

In the following chapter Stephen Hunt explores in detail what would seem to be the reciprocal relationship between megachurches and revivalism, especially given that megachurches have frequently grown accompanied by the imperative of constant growth; 'big is beautiful', 'big is good' and that revival can be the instrument for this endeavour. The connection is however problematic. First, it depends on precisely what is meant by revival; secondly, that some features of the megachurch would seem to mitigate against the cause of revival. Nonetheless, the fact that the Pentecostal/Charismatic form of Christianity forges the basis of many megachurches would seem to confirm such a connection. This chapter explores the historical relationship between revivalism and megachurches with an emphasis on the present day.

Andrew Davies, in Chapter ten, considers the role of megachurches in the area of outreach and social engagement. His focus, albeit not exclusively, is upon those of a Pentecostal and Charismatic persuasion, noting that social engagement came later in their history. Davies is particularly interested in the question of not so much what the megachurches actually do, but how and why they do it. What sets the megachurches apart is the diversity and the scale of their activities and the sheer numbers they can engage with. It is such churches which have the considerable resources and personnel to accommodate these endeavours. Davies however acknowledges that the megachurches frequently encounter challenges in aligning ministry and professional commitments.

The opening chapter of Section three, which focuses on global environments and globalised aspect of megachurches, Richard Burgess examines the increasing development of 'reverse mission' as it relates to megachurches of

Nigerian provenance, especially those of Pentecostal forms. Nigeria has given rise to some of the largest megachurches in the world with multiple branches nationwide as well as in other African countries, North America and Europe. This development adds to the growing recognition that megachurches are a global religious phenomenon exerting significant social influence in urban contexts around the world. Burgess examines the phenomenon of reverse mission as it relates to megachurches in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora in Britain. He explores the actual achievements of Nigerian Pentecostals against the background of European secularism, considering whether the growth of Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain supports the idea that in certain European contexts religion may be gaining rather than losing strength in modern times.

In Chapter twelve Michael Wilkinson and Peter Schuurman overview the megachurch phenomenon in Canada, with special reference to religious change in the country. Such change includes the decline of traditional Christianity as measured by way of mainstream church attendance. Secondly, immigration into Canada, especially the significance of Christians arriving from Asia, Africa and Latin America. These changes are explored with reference to the Canadian Large Church Study, the first of its kind in the nation. The authors note the megachurches themselves talk about church growth in terms of these recognised changes. Wilkinson and Schuurman suggests that even if research continues to show megachurches benefit from transfer growth, the conversion of new immigrants and the non-religious also serve as powerful tropes.

In the following chapter Torsten Löfstedt offers a reminder of the very different context of Russia and a number of ex-Soviet countries that megachurches emerge against different religious cultures and history including relationships with the state, very different to the North American context from which they occurred. The religious situation in these areas is unique. The vast majority of the population in Russia and after World War II were largely unchurched as a result of Communist rule. While many in these populations, should they embrace a religiosity, have returned to the traditional loyalties of Roman Catholicism and varieties of the Orthodox Church and Protestants still form a small minority of the population. As elsewhere, Protestants have found a home in megachurches and this has consequences for their relationship to the state and thus their ability to build worship centres and develop ministries.

In the penultimate chapter Jonathan James examines Calvary Temple in Andhra Pradesh, India which is primarily known for building a gigantic church in 52 days. Built in 2011 to seat 18,000 people, it now has a membership of over 100,000. James describes how Calvary Temple was created, how it operates organisationally, and how the church undertakes its ministry in a nation that is

not traditionally favourably disposed to Christianity. He also contemplates whether the church is navigating a new path, perhaps as a 'trailblazer' for the future of the Christian community in India.

In the final chapter Asonzeh Ukah commences his contribution by acknowledging that over the last 150 years, no continent has been transformed so rapidly and in so short a time as Africa. Moreover, that religious transformation can be seen as accounting for much of the speed and spread of social change in Africa. Echoing the work of Philip Jenkins, Ukha notes moreover that sub-Saharan Africa will have profound for the outward spread of both Christianity to other parts of the world, especially Europe. This spread will be of particular significance because of increasing African migration to the continent. It is the megachurch which constitutes the primary organised form of church in both Africa and Africans in diaspora.

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PART 1

Megachurches in Perspective



Seeking Souls, Selling Salvation: A History of the Modern Megachurch

Charity Rakestraw

1 Introduction

A fake shark – bathed in neon purples and blues – menaces the stage as pastor Ed Young, Jr., steps out to the standing ovation of his thousands of congregants. Church has started. Young, in his fifties with youthfully coiffed hair and tidy in a slick-grey suit, begins with a viral toddler song. He leads his audience in a call-and-response: “baby shark, bum bum bum bum bum, teenage shark, bum bum bum bum bum....” (Young 2011). As he shakes his hips and moves his arms in a chomping motion, Young draws them in. The camera pans to the audience, all wiggling their hips and clapping their arms to follow. Young is an entertainer. He is also a social media personality, a rap-music satirist, and a man of God. The lead pastor of one of the largest megachurches in Dallas, Young has many fans. His primary congregation at Fellowship Church in Grapevine has an estimated Sunday attendance of 20,000, a figure that does not include the thousands of other members and visitors who frequent the seven satellite campuses or watch his sermon feeds on the “Fellowship Live” internet broadcast each week.¹ On this particular Sunday in August of 2011, Young unveiled a sermon series called “Shark Weak”. A puny reference to the Discovery Channel predator fish programme, the series spins popular television into spiritual self-help lessons so that congregants might navigate metaphorical ‘sharks’ in their lives. This up-beat preaching style, complete with familiar popular culture reference and a therapeutic message, reflects just some of the major trends that define modern megachurches. The novelty shark notwithstanding, this entire spectacle is rooted within the historical narrative of the megachurch and is a product of centuries of evangelical evolution.

Megachurches like Ed Young, Jr.’s, did not simply materialise. They did not spring up in shopping centres and off of interstates without precursor or precedent. Megachurches are modern manifestations of eighteenth and nineteenth century revivalism, early-twentieth century innovations in religious

¹ Internet site, <https://fellowshipchurch.com>. Accessed 7/1/2018.

mass-media, mid-twentieth century church marketing techniques, and the rise of seeker-sensitive models in the late-twentieth century. The 1830s theatrics of Charles Grandison Finney, the 1930s innovations of Aimee Semple McPherson, the 1950s and 1960s televangelism work of Robert Schuller, and the 1970s seeker-sensitive model of Bill Hybels all contributed to the corporatisation and commodification of religion in recent decades.² At the turn of the twentieth century, as a result of the culmination of renewed revivalism, significant technological advances, and the market-driven church growth movement, pastors like Young built mammoth suburban and exurban churches that bring in tens of thousands of congregants – or consumers, as noted in some megachurch materials (Sargeant 2000: 42–43). These churches often look more like theme parks or shopping centres than traditional chapels, including attractions like go-kart rinks and food courts. Fellowship Church is just one example of the now thousands of American megachurches that have exported their brand of worship to national and international audiences. They are typically characterised by rapid church growth, an integration of technology and entertainment into their services, and a charismatic pastor who is central to the image of the congregation.

“Megachurches are not an entirely new phenomenon”, Scott Thumma and David Travis (2007: 6) insist in *Beyond Megachurch Myths*. In this defining work for seminarians and pastors seeking to understand (and perhaps replicate) current trends, the authors place megachurches within the more recent history of the late-twentieth century. For several decades, congregations have experimented with the use of small groups, marketing, and personality-driven pastoring, all characteristics that have contributed to the rise of enormous congregations. This type of large church with a weekend attendance of over 2,000 has become increasingly popular since the 1970s, as many Protestants gravitated towards sensational services and a church-growth mindset.

Many of these churches have broken traditional moulds to provide upbeat music instead of sober hymns, pop-culture preaching instead of fire-and-brimstone sermonising, engaging children’s and youth ministries, food courts, gift shops, and even car bays for oil changes. All of these features have expanded membership and viewership for services that are televised and streamed on the internet. Since 1970, the number of US megachurches has expanded from an estimated 150 to over 1500 (Thumma and Travis 2007: 7).³ These churches

2 Democratization of religion also played a large role in establishing and expanding the religious marketplace in the nineteenth century. For additional information on the relationship between democratization and religious movements in the United States, see Hatch (1989).

3 Internet site, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megastoday_profile.html. Accessed 8/28/2018.

sprouted on fertile soil, borrowing from a longer history of evangelical preaching, revival spirit, and Protestant adaptations to contemporary shifts in culture and the religious marketplace.

2 Early History

While there is agreement that megachurches are moored in a longer Christian history, scholars continue to debate their origins and antecedents. Some trace them back significantly earlier than Thumma and Travis (2007: 6), who focus more on “the rapid proliferation of these churches since the 1970s” as “a distinctive social phenomenon”. Sociologist David Eagle (2015: 590) contends that Protestants have had the ‘impulse’ to build large churches since the sixteenth century and the Edict of Nantes, which granted Protestants in France rights and allowed them to construct their own buildings. Architects then began drafting plans for structures that could hold thousands of congregants. In the seventeenth century, these plans influenced the building of church structures like the Temple de Charenton near Paris. Eagle directly connects that the Institutional Church Movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the direction of Protestantism that resulted in these most recent large congregations. Ultimately, he argues, they are “nothing new”, but rather the ‘newness’ they project is more a marketing ploy. Eagle asserts that “[n]ewness and innovation have long possessed an enduring sense of appeal to middle and upper middle class Americans – the group to which these [megachurch] pastors wished to appeal” (Eagle 2015: 590–591).

Other scholars describe megachurches as more distant relatives of earlier American religious groups who did not share their scale. In their architectural history of evangelical churches, Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler (2003: 5) argue that the Puritan meetinghouse, devised in the Massachusetts Bay colony after the sect’s arrival in 1630, is “[t]he earliest American antecedent of the late-twentieth-century evangelical megachurches”. The relationship between meetinghouses and megachurches is not size (meetinghouse attendance did not number in the thousands) but, instead, rests on the rejection of orthodoxy. Puritans denounced Anglican architectural and liturgical styles in order to focus their attention on the functional needs of the community and congregants. In other words, like modern-day megachurches, their structures responded to the “purposes, beliefs, and activities of the people who used them” (Benes 2012; Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 5). Unlike typical megachurches, however, the Puritan sites were plain, without ornamentation, and remained mostly functional and not recreational.

3 Roots in Revivalism

Earlier temples and meetinghouses portended the spacious, multi-purpose churches of the twentieth and twenty-first century in various ways, but the ‘Second Reformation’ of today’s Christian experience has its most clear and discernible origins in revivalism. It was not until revivalism took hold in the eighteenth century that religious leaders began to intentionally construct spaces for the masses that would allow for more emotionally charged and theatrical teachings and worship. The path-breaking evangelist George Whitefield, for instance, spearheaded revivalism and developed preaching techniques that upended traditional teachings. During the 1740s and 1750s, Whitefield transformed Protestantism by rejecting the trappings of Anglicanism, advertising his open-air meetings to the masses, and developing his own tabernacle design – all styles that the British minister introduced to America during the Great Awakening. The architecture of these structures underscored the importance of the preacher, with “lantern-shaped” roofs that would allow for additional levels of pews with views of the pulpit and for louder acoustics (Eagle 2015: 592–594). In his tabernacles and outdoor meetings, Whitefield also engineered a successful formula for emotional, personality-driven preaching. Megachurch scholars Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (2009: 14) argue that, for this reason, he was “America’s first religious celebrity and superstar” as he “introduced a stimulating brand of Christianity that captured the New World’s attention like never before and set the template for successive revivalists”. His ability to not only instruct and inspire but also to entertain set Whitefield apart from his contemporaries and led to immense popularity and mass attendance. The “divine dramatist” cultivated an affected style of oratory that more resembled acting and theatrical performance than the traditional, recycled rituals and monotone messages of other clergymen (Stout 1991). This flair put the preacher at the centre of church culture, a tactic that his successors adopted and adapted to their own success (Lambert 2008: 56–57, 89–91, 128–129).⁴ This form of religious marketing fed future trends of preaching as performance in order to attract large crowds.

Religious theatre became characteristic of revivalism and the religious marketplace of nineteenth-century America, fuelling the development of sizeable church structures with larger-than-life preachers.⁵ Camp meetings served as

4 Lambert draws a line from Whitefield to Charles Grandison Finney, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham.

5 In his study of the religious marketplace in the United States, Moore (1995: 6) describes the tension between religious leaders and the “marketplace of culture”, as they both combatted

the first sites of revivals in the early-nineteenth century, where thousands of Americans would gather to hear the booming voices of Protestant ministers who urged them to feel the call of the spirit and accept salvation. Many of these preachers initially eschewed the idea that they engaged in ‘stage techniques’ because of the stigma of the of the sinful secular theatre. The lively Methodist itinerants Lorenzo Dow and Peter Cartwright, for instance, “aroused crowds” because they “used common speech; they told stories and sang songs; they prayed on their knees” (Moore 1995: 39). Eventually, ministers admitted to cultivating a stage-craft in order to captivate their audiences and obtain their conversion and some published “practical guides” on effective preaching techniques (Moore 1995: 50). Much like today’s megachurch pastors who entertain and inspire their congregations with animated performances, revival preachers riveted spectators with stories, songs, and direct exhortations.

The most famous of these revival preachers, Charles Grandison Finney abandoned his career as a lawyer in the 1820s to become a full-time minister, combining the dramatic style of predecessors like Whitefield with an unapologetic penchant for the stage.⁶ While he abhorred the secular theatre itself (referring to it as “one of Satan’s ‘haunts’”), Finney recognised that, to appeal to the unsaved, he must replicate what entertained and enticed them (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 27). The church was in competition with what he deemed the vulgar diversions of the theatre, the sullied sphere of politics, and other worldly distractions. In order to draw audiences away from the secular and back to the spiritual, Finney met would-be believers where they were – using acting techniques and dynamic rhetoric to relate to their cultural sensibilities (Moore 1995: 50). A physical representation of this approach, in 1832 the fiery preacher held his first service at Chatham Street Chapel, a theatre repurposed into a church in the heart of New York City. Because of its original design, Chatham Street could seat a larger audience, had quality acoustics, and allowed the preacher more freedom of movement than a standard, confined pulpit (Hardman 1987: 252; Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 28). In 1835, Finney moved into the Broadway Tabernacle, a new construction based on his own designs and where he could preach without obstructions. In his estimation, Broadway Tabernacle was an “admirable place for preaching the Gospel, where such

certain consumerism but then also “entered their own inventive contributions into the market”. These contributions included print materials, reform activities to rival entertainment culture, and event advertising strategies. Moore notes, “America’s boom market in religion operated most effectively at the popular end of the market in cultural commodities”.

6 Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (2005: 88–93) compare the tactics of these two ministers, even though they were generations apart, because both relied on revivalism and entertainment to attract converts.

crowds were gathered within the sound of my voice” (Moore 1995: 314).⁷ The structure could seat twenty-five hundred (or accommodate four thousand including standing room), had an impressive skylight, a gas-lit chandelier, and was built in the round so as to ensure the crowds could see and hear Finney as he gesticulated and roared (Moore 1995: 314). This auditorium church served as a template for later constructions. Its influence can be seen in current megachurches, especially its domed ceiling, circular sanctuary with semi-circular pews, inclined seating, and ample room for choirs and other musicians (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 38–39).⁸ Broadway Tabernacle changed the standards for church architecture by catering to the comfort of the congregants and ensuring the visibility and centrality of the preacher. Auditorium styles became increasingly popular with evangelical denominations and, by the turn of the nineteenth century, church architects touted the style as ‘revolutionary’ and ‘modern’ (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 44).

Sanctuary designs were not the only element of church architecture and culture that shifted in the nineteenth century. Some congregations so fully accepted entertainment and social life as evangelising necessities that they set aside intentional spaces in the church for Sunday Schools and child care, gymnasiums, kitchens, and even bowling alleys. Mid-nineteenth century reform efforts of churches and their intentional outreach to urban populations resulted in the “multipurpose church” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 66–67). These structures linked leisure activities with congregational life to entice city dwellers to join the church community and engage with other believers in a social setting. Dedicated in 1891, the Baptist Temple in Philadelphia became a leading example of this marriage of spiritual and social space. With pastor Russell H. Conwell at the helm, the thirty-five-hundred seat church offered more than the standard religious services; it scheduled youth programmes, concerts, debates, and literary readings for the public. Instead of pews, parishioners sat in opera seats. Below the sanctuary, the church provided ‘social rooms’, a kitchen, and a dining hall for men, women, and children to fellowship and be entertained (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 70–79). Additions to programmes and the creation of intentional social spaces at churches like that of Baptist Temple contributed to new directions in church architecture and amenities. Many of these elements can be seen in current megachurches, with some expanding on the

7 The use of the term ‘tabernacle’ to describe the new church relates back to Whitefield’s influence on revivalism and church development.

8 This circular style can be seen in many of the larger, more popular megachurches, such as Lakewood Church, Fellowship Church, Willow Creek Community Church, and Saddleback Church, which are discussed later in the essay.

multi-purpose design to have buildings detached from the sanctuary and devoted entirely to socialising and entertainment.

4 Mass-Media and Marketing

At the turn of the nineteenth century, evangelicals became increasingly comfortable with marketing their mission and began to accept the value of entertainment in spurring church membership. “Evangelists believed deeply in the continued relevance of the old-time gospel to the modern world”, historian Josh McMullen (2015: 163) notes, “but were keenly aware of these newer impulses of entertainment culture. For this reason, they simultaneously derided and borrowed from the entertainment industry”. This entertainment component drew thousands to big-tent revivals in the 1910s and 1920s as preachers like Billy Sunday at once rejected amusements such as card playing, dancing, and theatre while at the same time employed similar enticements as the secular market. A former professional baseball star, Sunday converted in the 1886, quit the big league in 1892, travelled as a poor Midwestern itinerant revivalist for years, and became a household name by 1910 (Dorsett 1991). Sunday captivated audiences with his sensational and impassioned performances, in which he used pronounced gestures and, at times, a rough vernacular to relate to and interest viewers (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 87). Other big tent revivalists used similar antics, but Billy Sunday became a star, with throngs of believers and non-believers flocking to his events. The spectacle of his performance drew them in, as “[e]ntertainment-starved communities turned out in large numbers to hear Billy Sunday if for no other reason than that his meetings offered something entertaining” (Dorsett 1991: 147). From 1908 to 1920, he travelled from city to city in a revival crusade, preaching to at least a million people, and collecting substantial donations in the process (Dorsett 1991: 93). By catering to the average American and intentionally amusing his audiences, Sunday developed a successful formula – a formula that is similar to the seeker-sensitive models of later megachurches.

While Sunday drew thousands under his revival tents, one of his contemporaries used the airwaves to enter the homes and movie theatres of millions more. A Canadian transplant who became wildly popular as a Hollywood religious superstar, Aimee Semple McPherson was the “first religious celebrity of the mass media era”, according to historian Matthew Avery Sutton. In his biography of the spiritual starlet, Sutton (2007: 3–4) contends that McPherson’s “integration of the latest media tools with a conservative creed established precedents for the twentieth century’s most popular ministers, from Billy

Graham to Oral Roberts to Pat Robertson". While many Americans believed evangelicalism to be on the decline, McPherson saw an opportunity to resuscitate 'old-time religion' through 'show biz', using modern advances in technology, such as radio and film, and patriotism to bolster her cause.⁹ Her pathbreaking proselytising methods laid the groundwork for future Christian radio and televangelism stars who were (and still are) piped into homes from their megachurch pulpits.

In 1923, McPherson merged mass-media and old-time religion in the form of Angelus Temple in Echo Park, Los Angeles, in the heart of the entertainment capital of the United States. Current versions of megachurches – with their light shows, prop-filled mini-dramas, electrified worship music, internet or television audience following from home – owe a degree of their design to the technological savvy, sensationalism, self-promotion, and publicising prowess of Sister Aimee at Angelus. The temple was the central showpiece in McPherson's spiritual empire and where she invested in the innovations that would drive the expansion of her ministry.

Advertising as a faith healer who could pray over the sick and cure their ailments, McPherson engaged in a revival tour and raised enough funds to erect the lavish structure just miles from downtown Hollywood. Seating fifty-three hundred, the church "looked and felt like a theater", with velvet curtains and a stream that flowed into the baptismal font (Sutton 2007: 19–21).¹⁰ Overhead, clouds crowned the domed sanctuary. The stage housed a choir loft, massive organ, and included enough space for Sister Aimee's 'illustrated sermons', which the audience viewed from lush, upholstered opera chairs. These sermons used props and actors to bring scripture and social lessons to life, unabashedly fusing fundamentalism, preaching, and scripted skits. On one occasion, for example, Sister Aimee appeared as a prosecutor, putting a generic college educator on trial in "Trial of the Modern Liberalist College Professor versus the Lord Jesus Christ". As evidence of the professor's guilt, the skit referenced passages from the Bible and quotes from George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to counter his atheist, socialist claims. The sketch mixed patriotism with Christian belief, a recipe that became a staple of conservative evangelicalism in the twentieth century (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 101;

9 McPherson's theology did not fall neatly into a denominational category, a characteristic that also aligns her with more recent megachurch pastors. The cornerstone of Angelus Temple reads "Dedicated to the cause of inter-denominational and worldwide evangelism", which proved prescient of the megachurch movement to which her church contributed.

10 Lakewood Church, in Houston Texas, home to the megachurch pastors Joel and Victoria Osteen, has a similar altar, with two streams flowing to frame the choir.

Sutton 2007: 1–3; Sutton 2014: 105–106).¹¹ McPherson set a precedent for later pastors, like Ed Young, Jr., to explore cultural references and to even incorporate some hoke and make-believe to engross their audiences.

Sister Aimee did not confine her message to the grand halls of her Hollywood temple but projected it out to the rest of the nation on the airwaves and silver screen. She wielded new technology like a cudgel to combat secularisation and declension. Some Christians did not welcome this technology for, as Sutton so eloquently explains, they “feared that in dubbing Satan the prince of power of the air, the apostle Paul had foreseen the new medium” (Sutton 2007: 78).¹² But McPherson was not afraid. While the secular radio and film industries were mass-marketing sinfulness, she mass-marketed conservative morality.¹³ She raised more money and set up the “Kall Four Square Gospel” (KFSG) station, with the towers standing atop the Angelus Temple dome like spires. Proclaiming the new medium to be a gift from God, she set out to revolutionise America with programming that included Angelus sermons and choir music, children’s services, and speeches condemning dance halls, blasting LA politicians, and praising Prohibition (Sutton 2007: 78–81). Other preachers, especially Chicago’s Paul Rader, contributed to this trend and established a national following (Abrams 2001: 37). Radio became the primary means of projecting the evangelical message and winning converts, and by 1925 Christian radio blanketed with United States with 63 of the 600 stations owned by churches and additional stations operated by independent fundamentalists (Abrams 2001: 99).

Many preachers experimented with radio but rejected film because it seemed too titillating to be of benefit to believers. “Concerned Christians”, Sutton explains, “organized a sustained fight to censor questionable material, tried to ban Sunday Showing, railed against film’s influence on audiences, and lamented young people’s unseemly behavior in dark theaters” (Sutton 2007: 154). But McPherson rejected these warnings and became the darling of the

11 Many megachurches today use similar plays to illustrate the main points of the sermon. There are also modernised examples of dramatisations of spiritual points or social concerns as megachurches produce films that are projected on overhead screens to entertain and instruct parishioners.

12 LA pastor and Bible Institute of Los Angeles superintendent T.C. Horton was a critique of radio and made one such allusion (Abrams 2001: 36).

13 Sutton (2014: 120) describes the reaction of Christians, particularly fundamentalists, to the film industry. “In the 1920s”, he notes, “tens of millions of Americans enchanted by the silver screen attended movies every week.... For fundamentalists tawdry film represented much more than cheap amusement. It too was a sign of the moral depravity that Jesus prophesied for the last days”.

motion picture industry, even founding her own Angelus Productions company.¹⁴ Channelling her natural showmanship, the celebrity preacher appeared in shorts in the 1930s, donning impressive white robes and decrying the evils of society in her characteristic singsong voice (Sutton 2007: 154–158). The media presence of stars like Sister Aimee and her contemporaries, including Paul Rader and Bob Jones (who both produced their own silent films in the 1920s), paved the way for modern Christian radio and televangelism, which, in turn, promoted larger and more diverse church audiences (Sutton 2014: 122). The celebrity pastors of the 1950s benefitted from the techniques of this previous generation and gained more access to American households with the advent of Christian television. The sharp sermonising of conservative preachers like Kathryn Kuhlman, Oral Roberts, and Rex Humbard filled the living rooms of more and more Americans as they sat around sets with their TV trays at night (Alexander 1994: 59).

The most famous pastor on television in the 1950s, Billy Graham became the face of the “revival of revivalism”, joining with other conservative forces to hold massive youth rallies and promote multi-city crusades (Carpenter 1999: 212). One of these early revival tours covered sacred evangelical ground. His four-week big tent revival in 1949 drew in celebrity admirers in Los Angeles, home of Aimee Semple McPherson’s Angelus Temple. Later that year Graham appeared in Charles Grandison Finney’s “burned-over district” of New York and in summer of 1950 his campaign “reached a climax” on Boston Common, where George Whitefield had spread the revival spirit in 1740 (Carpenter 1999: 225–229). Quickly becoming the most popular evangelical preacher in the world, Graham honed his preaching skills by listening to and learning from radio announcers, “merging their timing and timeliness with his own passion to save lost souls” (Carpenter 1999: 212). His continued national success resulted from his ability to translate traditional evangelical teachings for a television audience. Leading the way for fellow revivalists, Graham served as a “role model” for the shift to television broadcasting when, in 1950, he organised a revival in a “specially constructed tabernacle” in Portland, Oregon, with equipment to film his sermons and documentary films (Frankl 1987: 73–74). This decision set a precedent for revivalists and megachurch pastors and also ensured Graham’s celebrity.

14 McPherson’s allure was also derived from the celebrity that the press afforded her after she was kidnapped in 1926 and rumours swirled that she was actually having an affair, despite the lack of evidence to support this theory. She would not be the last megachurch pastor whose career was both mired in (and surreptitiously benefited from) scandal (Sutton 2007).

5 'Large Church' and 'Church Growth' Movements

From Whitefield's revivalism, McPherson's sensationalism, to Graham's mass meetings and televangelism, modern megachurches have borrowed heavily from their antecedents. Although scholars can trace the lineage of these various megachurch elements to earlier periods, it was not until the 1970s that calculated 'church growth' and 'large church' models directed these elements into the stadium and amphitheatre churches that characterise the current movement. Taking advantage of technological advances, seminary professors and ministers found new formats for evangelising and created an intentional, researched movement for megachurch development. In the same decade that dedicated televangelism networks emerged (Christian Broadcasting, Trinity Broadcasting, and the ill-fated Praise the Lord), Liberty University's Jerry Falwell and Elmer Towns touted the benefits of "large churches" (Bowler 2013: 104–110; Flake 1984: 131–148; Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 114).¹⁵ One impetus for the 'large church' argument was the success of the post-war 'new revivalism' as represented by organisations like Youth for Christ and the Billy Graham crusades. Thousands attended events in stadiums, auditoriums, concert halls, and under big tents, spaces that revivalists had to use because most churches did not have the capacity to hold the numbers they hoped to attract. Falwell and Towns's theory was simple: if churches could hold thousands, they could minister to thousands. If churches had more sanctuary space and were better appointed, included facilities for other services like schools, counselling, and recreation, they would attract more souls. Reminiscent of multipurpose churches like Comwell's Baptist Temple, the vision for these churches was to meet the needs of the community but on a much larger scale than before (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 114–115).

If built to these standards, churches could certainly hold more attendees, but ministers and their staff also had to entice and retain them. From the 1970s to the 1990s, seminary professors and pastors articulated 'church growth strategies' that would encourage higher turnout by church branding and marketing churches to a new generation of potential believers. Dean and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission, Donald A. McGavran introduced his concepts of church growth in the 1960s to fellow evangelicals, who expanded on his designs in subsequent decades (McGavran 1970;

15 It is important to note that megachurches are not all fundamentalist or conservative, mainline or dissenting, denominational or non-denominational. The trends of mass media messaging/marketing, large church, and church growth have been used by churches across the evangelical spectrum.

McIntosh 2005). A former missionary to India, McGavran developed his perspective while testing and observing what strategies worked in the mission field. Other professors at Fuller, including C. Peter Wagner, followed suit and conducted their own studies, generating publications, seminars, and conferences to promote the rapid expansion of church congregations (Bowler 2013: 101–102; Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 115–117).¹⁶

The methods that church-growth experts promoted mirrored previous evangelical efforts to make faith relevant to the average American (Moore 1995; Scalen, Jr. 2008; Twitchell 2007). They did not want churches to look backwards, however, and return to an ‘old-time religion’, but to use technology and marketing research to create an ‘innovative’ church experience. These innovations were aimed at the unchurched – Americans who had no church home or denominational devotion and nonbelievers. Pulling the curtain back and directly addressing the capitalist, commercial nature of the religious marketplace, church growth experts spoke openly about their place in consumer culture. Comparing churches to shopping malls, they argued that Americans are more likely to drive to giant gallerias that have food courts and other services than to boutique shops or strip malls that have fewer options. Larger churches with more amenities are what potential parishioners are seeking and what evangelical leaders need to provide if they hope to sell the church and save the soul. Innovative churches are thus ‘market-driven’, with “target audiences” whose “lifestyle, needs, and desires” are discovered through “demographic and market research” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 117–118).

Taking his cues not from drive-in theatres and shopping malls, Robert H. Schuller developed one of the earliest examples of a market-oriented, advertising-focused ministry. Ordained by the Reformed Church in America, Schuller broke away from typical church-planting strategies and performed his own market research in Orange County, California, to determine what his church could offer to attract attendees. The young pastor went from door to door in local neighbourhoods to ask why residents did not attend church. Applying what he learned from this canvassing, Schuller tested his marketing strategies in 1955 when he set up services at a drive-in movie theatre, boasting that anyone could come “as you are in your family car!” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 117–120). His approach was successful and, by 1961, his efforts brought in enough funds to construct the three-million-dollar Garden Grove Community

16 Church growth experts at Fuller included C. Peter Wagner, Carl F. George, and John Wimber. Elmer Towns of the ‘large church’ movement also gravitated to church growth models, as did pastor Robert H. Schuller (Crystal Cathedral), Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church), and Rick Warren (Saddleback Church).

Church that could be seen from the nearby freeway. The unique layout allowed him to preach to congregants inside and, by shifting a glass wall and amplifying the sound, additional attendees in their cars in the parking lot. Combining recreational drive-in culture with radio evangelism, Schuller broadcast his sermon so that cars in the farther reaches of the lot could tune in while they watched him on stage (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 119). In 1974, Schuller published a church growth manual, *Your Church Has Real Possibilities!*, detailing to other pastors how they could find similar success. He argued that evangelicals should build churches that appeal to people who did not grow up going to Sunday services – people who might have never set foot in a sanctuary. This formula worked and in 1980, Schuller's ministry completed construction on the famous Crystal Cathedral, a physical testimony to his church-growth mindset. He described it as a “22-acre shopping center for Jesus Christ” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 153). Made for TV, its impressive, modern design conveyed affluence, incorporated few religious symbols, and was intended to ‘relax’ the audience (both in person and watching from home). It, too, had space for the ‘drive-in’ gimmick that defined Schuller's brand and was equipped with a state-of-the-art system for the widely viewed *The Hour of Power* television broadcast (Bowler 2013: 103–104; Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 153–154).

Eager to learn how to grow his own congregation, in 1976 a young Bill Hybels found himself on a top floor of Schuller's Tower of Prayer at the Garden Grove Church, face to face with the famous minister. In what Hybels deemed a “divinely staged encounter”, Schuller advised the upstart pastor to think big. The more land he can buy and the larger the building he can erect, the more opportunity Hybels would provide God to bless the church with congregants. “If God chooses to do a miracle”, he insisted, “you'd better be ready for it” (Hybels and Hybels 1995: 69). At that time, Hybels, his wife, and his staff were looking for a location to plant Willow Creek Community Church, which had no permanent home at the time but met in various locales including a rented theatre. But Schuller encouraged them to build something for God to fill – to anticipate the miracle (Hybels and Hybels 1995: 67–70). Hybels did just that. In 1981, the co-founder of the giant Son City youth group applied the lessons he learned from that ministry and the advice from Schuller to begin preaching ‘seeker’ services in a seven-thousand seat auditorium (Hybels and Hybels 1995; Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 121–122). Unlike the opulent, awe-inspiring Crystal Cathedral with its 10,900 window panes, Willow Creek looked more like a clean sterile corporate complex. This architectural style was the neutral, contemporary look is meant to reflect the ‘values’ of middle and upper middle class suburbanites familiar with “Disney World and first-class hotels” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 123, 153). Adapting church-growth models to the unchurched

market in South Barrington, Illinois, Willow Creek experimented with (and then trained others in) a 'seeker-sensitive' approach to worship and church management. Casual, rocking, and culturally relevant, these services sought to transform the evangelical experience for skeptics. "The music was loud", Lynn Hybels remembered, "the drama was raucous (sometimes crossing the line of acceptability), and Bill walked onto the stage with no notes, no pulpit" (Hybels and Hybels 1995: 62). This worship format influenced other churches who were searching for a way to relate to similar local constituents and to potentially bring in thousands of new followers (Sargeant 2000: 9).

6 'Seeker-Sensitive' Churches

With dynamic skits that pulled in popular culture, an electrified band to lead worship music, and a jean-clad pastor who rejected formal sermons, Willow Creek reached the unchurched in an unconventional and highly effective way. By 1990, the church boasted a record 15,200 in weekend attendance (Hybels and Hybels 1995: 107).¹⁷ By 1992, with other church leaders clamouring for 'seeker-sensitive' training, the church established the Willow Creek Association (WCA) to hold conferences, distribute resources, and offer consulting for megachurches and mega-wannabes. The WCA represented a shift in American Protestant organisation away from a focus on structured denominationalism and towards a non- and inter-denominational conference network (Sargeant 2000: 137–148). While some megachurches still associate with denominations, most conceal overt symbols and, instead, opt for the more corporate branding that worked for seeker churches like Willow Creek.¹⁸ By 2000, WCA had more than five thousand members, connected not by doctrinal or institutional ties but by marketing and methodology (Sargeant 2000: 134–162).

By the time he took the stage at the 1997 WCA 'Leadership Summit', pastor Rick Warren had already made his mark on the seeker-sensitive model. A graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, Warren adopted Hybels's seeker sensibilities, researched the Orange County market, and built a church there that resembled a theme park more than a temple or tabernacle (Sargeant 2000: 4–5). In the 1980s, this innovative 'pastorpreneur' established the 'Saddleback Strategy', that "targeted unchurched, well-educated, professional Baby Boomers who felt uncomfortable in the 'traditional church'" (Loveland and Wheeler

17 For an excellent study of rock 'n' roll precursors to seeker worship music, see Stephens (2018).

18 Internet site, <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>. Accessed 9/8/2018.

2003: 150). In 1979, he scrapped his Baptist seminary-style sermons and canvassed neighbourhoods (as Schuller had done about two decades prior) to discover what would draw unbelievers and jaded believers to his church. Responding to feedback that potential churchgoers preferred anything *but* traditional denominational form and ritual and restrictions, Warren established Saddleback Valley Community Church, which met in a high school gymnasium (Wilford 2012: 9). Relying on the survey data, he decided to conceal the church's Baptist associations and to focus instead on more neutral, positive, self-help sermons (Ellingson 2007: 212n25). Within three years, he had an active church membership and, by 1989, the church had raised enough money to move into a tent that seated 2,300 (Lee and Sinitiere 2009: 140–141).

Warren continued to develop his version of seeker sensitive at Saddleback, and it continued to pay off. More shorts and t-shirt wearing parishioners poured in each year to hear the relatable preacher share common-sense spiritual lessons and words of encouragement. Saddleback hit its stride in the 1990s by offering “therapeutic and easily accessible sermons, producing high-quality and cutting-edge worship services, and promoting and maintaining small groups” (Wilford 2012: 10). By dividing the thousands of members into smaller study and support groups, Warren and his team found a way to provide structure to retain and grow seekers that other large churches would begin to emulate. With its friendly atmosphere and affirming messages, Saddleback discovered a winning formula. In 1995, the congregation moved to its current location on a hilltop with 120-acres of land on which they constructed a sprawling church campus that attracts over 22,000 attendees each weekend (Hartford Institute for Religion Research; Lee and Sinitiere 2009: 142).¹⁹ Designed by theme-park specialists, the complex includes separate buildings for different group meetings and activities: an auditorium for worship, two baptism pools, cafes, a children's building and a nursery, and multiple ministry office buildings.²⁰ A newer addition for youth called ‘The Refinery’ features a volleyball court, pizza parlor, basketball court, performance space, televisions, pool tables, and video games (Jelden 2009).

Like other church-growth experts, Warren embraced consumerism and entertainment as the logical way to reach potential church customers. “People will drive past all kinds of little shopping centers to go to a major mall”, he reasoned, “where there are lots of services and where they meet their needs. The same is true in churches today in that people drive past dozens of little

19 Internet site, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/cgi-bin/mega/db.pl?db=default&uid=default&view_records=1&ID=*%&sb=1. Accessed 9/10/2018. This figure was last updated in 2010.

20 Internet site, <https://saddlebackworship.com/map/>. Accessed 9/10/2018.

churches to go to a larger church which offers more services and special programs” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 117). Like the various areas of theme parks like Disney World, Saddleback includes ten venues that have services with different flavours – jazz, reggae, punk rock – to cater to attendees’ preferences (Lee and Sinitiere 2009: 143). Like Schuller’s drive-ins but with modern, hi-tech speakers and video, Warren’s voice is amplified throughout the complex and his image projected onto screens in each of the worship tents and pavilions. To further engage worshippers, the sermons piped into the worship centres are patterned after the “emotional beat chart” used by the film industry to help drive the narrative and illicit audience response (Lee and Sinitiere 2009: 142–144).

The most influential seeker-sensitive pastors, Hybels and Warren cast the mould for suburban/exurban megachurch planning and marketing. The same year that Saddleback moved to the hilltop, Warren released *The Purpose Driven Church* (part of his highly successful ‘purpose-driven’ series), to help guide other congregations to megachurch status. Referencing McGavran’s original church-growth argument, Warren pronounced what could be the megachurch credo: “God wants his church to grow; he wants his lost sheep found!” (Ellingson 2007: 69–70; Warren 1995). More pastors and church organisations internalised this message and adopted the seeker-sensitive approach, rejecting denominational trappings and tapping popular entertainment culture to fill their pews (or theater seating) with suburban and exurban flocks. As a result, the 1990s saw a boom in seeker churches that advertised themselves as “not your typical church” in an attempt to distance themselves from “traditional” denominational churches with staid sermons and hymns (Thumma and Travis 2007: 39–40, 58). These churches reflect a ‘new paradigm’ in Protestant church development that signals a move away from established religion in a “revolution” that “is transforming American Protestantism” (Miller 1997: 1–2). Seeker congregations are just one format (generally the largest one) for these new paradigm churches that are “appropriating contemporary cultural forms.... restructuring the organizational structure of institutional religion.... ” and are “democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers” (Miller 1997: 1). With an entertainment-driven approach to worship, preaching, and church-building, these churches counter a decline in church attendance by appealing to prospective members through “polished music, multimedia, and sermons referencing popular culture and other familiar themes” (Branough 2008).²¹ They replaced organs with electric

21 In 2007, Willow Creek released its *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Hawkins and Parkinson) study that provided information from surveys of the congregation. Many newer churchgoers

guitars and drum booths. They encouraged casual clothing over suits and skirts (Watson and Scalen 2008). And at least one suspends a giant fake shark behind its pastor for one week a year.

7 Conclusion

While some seeker-sensitive churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback focused on the church brand to market the faith and expand their ranks, other congregations grew rapidly because of their promotion of celebrity pastors. Some pastors like Hybels and Warren did not desire television fame and did not pursue broadcasts or personal recognition (Thumma and Travis 2007: 58). But others openly and directly connect their personal image to the prosperity of their churches, leading to one of the most visible megachurch phenomena: the personality-driven growth model. Since the 1990s and especially in the new millennium, Americans have witnessed a proliferation of celebrity pastors who hawk self-help books, tweet inspirational insights, stream internet broadcasts, and soak up prime Christian television spots. This contingent of famous mega-personalities has helped define the rise of massive churches and has contributed to their depiction in American popular culture (Flake 1984; Twitchell 2007). Like predecessors such as Aimee Semple McPherson, these popular preachers carefully craft their images and project them to a broad audience through mass media. Modern megachurch entrepreneurs, however, have seemingly unlimited platforms for reaching millions via social media and international evangelical programming. These churches are ‘pastor-focused’, according to Thumma and Travis (2007: 57), as “[m]uch of the identity of these congregations is formed around the vision and passion of this founding minister, and few have undergone pastoral transitions”. Prominent examples of these late-twentieth and early-twenty first century include Paula White at New Destiny Christian Center in Apopka, Florida; Creflo Dollar of World Changers Ministries in College Park, Georgia; T.D. Jakes of the Potter’s House in Dallas, Texas; and, the smiling face of the largest megachurch in the United States, Joel Osteen at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas.

Ed Young, Jr., is one of these celebrity pastors. His predecessors likely never envisioned the kind of innovations that Fellowship Church and megachurches

expressed little spiritual growth with the format of the seeker services and Willow Creek revamped its approach to offer more instruction and depth. Branaugh explains this shift at Willow Creek in his article for *Christianity Today*.

like it experiment with each week. His 'Shark Week' series, rap videos, or sensational 'Sextember' sermons preached from a bed to encourage married couples to renew their passion, would have startled previous pastors like Whitefield, Finney, and Graham. But the foundation that these earlier revivalists and evangelists laid served as a firm base for the construction of Fellowship Church and other massive, arena-style churches around the world. These earlier examples of tabernacles, amphitheatre churches, and multi-purpose temples illustrate the pioneering and market-oriented spirit of evangelicalism that has ultimately led to explosion of high-tech megachurches that define the contours of Protestantism today (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 178–179). Modern megachurches represent a new form of corporate, technologically driven, and consumer-directed religion that borrowed from these past forms and evolved through the use of mass-media and church-growth strategies. They have embraced innovation and secular, cultural influences to rapidly expand their numbers and the reach of their messages. These corporate churches with millions of followers could not have achieved such substantial success without a firm foundation laid by pioneer pastors before them who experimented with preaching styles, adapted to cultural trends, and revolutionised evangelical religion.

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The Growth of the Megachurch

David E. Eagle

1 Introduction¹

The dominant view of megachurches claims they represent a new religious form, born in the United States in the 1970s and 80s. Contrary to this position, I argue megachurches enjoy a long history in Protestantism. An important example from the sixteenth century Huguenot architect Jacques Perret reveals an early Protestant vision for a large, multi-functional worship space. Soon after, this vision became realised in bricks and mortar. Revivalism and the Institutional Church Movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide further connections between present-day megachurches and the past. Revivalism provided the motivation for Protestants to go out and reach the masses, and the Institutional Church Movement provided the infrastructure to attract, convert, and nurture them. The demographic shifts that occurred following WWII led to the proliferation of churches in post-war America. This meant that large churches became increasingly visible, but journalists and social commentators mistook their increase in prevalence for lack of historical precedent. Pastors and other leaders, capitalising on the appeal of innovation, reinforced this view. I offer an important corrective that helps situate megachurches in the United States in their proper context.

2 The 'Emergence' of the Megachurch?

The megachurch burst into the American consciousness in the 1980s. Megachurches differed from their predecessors by offering their participants a single organisation to meet their spiritual, emotional, educational, and recreational

¹ This chapter is adapted from the article Eagle, D.E. 2015. "Historicizing the Megachurch." *Journal of Social History*. 48:3, 589–604. The author extends deepest thanks to Mark Chaves, who provided the original impetus behind this research. Thanks are also due to Grant Wacker for his help and support to a sociologist posing as an historian, to Soon-Cha Rha for his helpful comments, and to Glenda LaCoste of Document Delivery Services for assistance tracking down primary source documents.

needs. In 1989, the vanguard of the megachurch movement, 37 year-old Bill Hybels, said, "We're on the verge of making kingdom history.... doing things a new way for a whole new generation" (Chandler 1989). A 33 year-old Rick Warren, pastor of the then 5,000 member (now 20,000+ member) Saddleback Community Church echoed similar sentiments:

There's a trend all across America moving away from the small neighborhood churches to larger regional-type churches. It's the same phenomenon with malls replacing the mom and pop stores on the corner. People will drive past all kinds of little shopping centers to go to a major mall, where there are lots of services and where they meet their needs. The same is true in churches today in that people drive past dozens of little churches to go to a larger church which offers more services and special programs.

CHANDLER 1989

Writing in *Christianity Today*, Lyle Schaller, a prominent evangelical spokesman for the megachurch movement, proclaimed, "The emergence of the 'megachurch' is the most important development of modern Christian history. You can be sentimental about the small congregation, like the small corner grocery store or small drugstore, but they simply can't meet the expectations that people carry with them today" (Schaller 1990). This echoes the well-known marketing consultant Peter Drucker's claim that megachurches "are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years" (quoted in Thumma and Travis 2007: 1).

Several historians agree that megachurches lack precedent. Take Patrick Allitt. He sees them as an innovation of post-WWII America. "America's new megachurches", he argues "....were designed to provide an entire way of life, including schools, gymnasiums, dining halls, study groups settings, therapy sessions, aerobics classes, bowling alleys, and sometimes even Christian-themed shopping" (Allitt 2003: 227). "Megachurch," Martin Marty says simply, "is.... an invention of the Age of Greed" (Marty 1990: 919).

Critics of the megachurch followed a similar line. Gustav Niebuhr, grandson of the famous theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, and long-time religion writer for the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, summarises their emergence as follows, "A shift of power and influence is slowly, but profoundly, changing the way many of the nation's 80 million Protestants worship. Since the 1980s, megachurches have gathered tens of thousands of worshipers into their folds and millions of dollars into their collection plates, becoming in the process

new centers of Protestant influence” (Niebuhr 1995). In her biting 1984 critique of fundamentalist culture Carol Flake writes, “By the beginning of the eighties, the Lord’s business had become big business.... The phantom congregations of the nation’s TV preachers had become rooted in elaborate institutions and ordinary churches had grown into Super Churches” (Flake 1984: 49). With a similar axe to grind, William MacNair states:

In the panorama of religious events in the United States, the mega-church is something new. Nothing quite like it has appear before. True enough, it did have precursors.... But.... these very large mega-churches are a ‘new kid on the block’ among religious organizations in the United States.

MCNAIR 2009

In this article, I demonstrate that it is wrong to consider megachurches a new organisational form that emerged in the 1970s. Even though arguments in support of the novelty of the modern megachurch receive near-universal endorsement, a careful analysis reveals that megachurches are nothing new. The modern megachurch has emerged through a long process of evolution. The megachurch movement of the 1970s and 1980s has roots that tap deep into the soil of Protestant religion – especially, but not exclusively, in revivalism and the Institutional Church Movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chaves 2006; Kilde 2002; Towns 1969; Vaughan 1985). But their history, largely forgotten, goes back much farther. Among Protestants, the impulse to build what today we term megachurches stretches back to the sixteenth century.

A number of inter-related forces created historical amnesia about the predecessors of the modern megachurch. First and foremost, megachurch promoters lived with a sense of manifest destiny – to them, their churches did represent something new, innovative and unprecedented. Newness and innovation have long-possessed an enduring sense of appeal to middle and upper-middle class Americans – the group to which these pastors wished to appeal (cf. the argument advanced by Schmidt 1995). Additionally, by marketing themselves as a ‘new social phenomenon’, megachurches received a great deal of media attention. Even though much of the publicity took on a negative tenor, bad publicity is still publicity. The media took the proclamations about the unprecedented nature of megachurches at face value. This stemmed partially from ignorance about religion on the part of the reporter (Buddenbaum 1998); but more importantly, journalism has long obscured historical precedent in favor of novelty (Phillips 1976).

3 Defining Megachurch

Megachurches are big. While some attach a threshold to the number of attenders a megachurch contains – 1,500 regular attenders is a popular threshold – it is sufficient to say that these are the very largest of the large (Thumma 1996). According to research analysing the National Congregations Study, the largest 1 percent of Protestant congregations in the United States attracts 1,000 or more attenders (Chaves 2006). But beyond simply being big, megachurches share other characteristics. They come out of the Protestant tradition, they offer a multitude of programmes tailored to people's needs, and they frequently aim to achieve broader cultural importance. While most megachurches in America today espouse a conservative theology, this reflects the fact that the dominant form of Christianity today is evangelical in orientation, rather than an essential connection between conservative theology and very large churches.

Even though megachurches in everything but name have a long history in America, the media did not brand them as a distinctive form of religious organisation until the 1980s. A collective awakening in the media to the presence of large Protestant congregations occurred in and around 1980. During this time the so-called 'church growth' movement began gaining prominence, due in large part to the establishment of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth at Fuller Seminary in 1980. This movement promoted marketing-based approaches to church organisation and heralded several signature churches (Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church, included) as purveyors of a new kind of church for a new age. Elmer Towns at Liberty University; Stephen Vaughan at Southwestern Baptist Seminary; and C. Peter Wagner and Carl George at Fuller Seminary all occupied central roles in this movement. While causality is difficult to establish, the emphasis on church growth, along with favourable demographic trends, seem to have driven began at similar time of other major shifts happening in Protestant churches. As Mark Chaves points out, since the 1970s and across Protestant denominations people are increasingly found in the largest 1 percent of a denominations' congregations (Chaves 2006). Likewise, Thumma and Travis document a steady increase in very large churches. They estimate in 1970, there were 50 churches with an attendance of more than 1,500 people in the United States; but by 2005, that number had grown to more than 1,200. In Thumma and Travis's words, "while megachurches are not an entirely new phenomenon.... the rapid proliferation of these churches since the 1970s.... is a distinctive social phenomenon" (Thumma 1996: 6). However, we should not confuse increasing prevalence with newness. While megachurches increasingly dot the

religious landscape in America, we find evidence of similar ecclesiastical forms throughout Protestant history.

4 Early Precedents for the Megachurch

The early Protestant reformers criticised established forms of ecclesial organisation that emphasised the church building as the primary locus of spiritual activity and contact. John Calvin criticised the Roman Catholic Church for spending large sums of money on opulent buildings, but ignoring the poor. He advocated for two main functions of the church building: as a place for people to come and hear the Word proclaimed, and as a place to receive the Sacraments, rightly administered (Calvin and Beveridge 1989: Preface). The former of these, preaching, became a central concern in Protestant architecture. Writing in 1577, the Protestant reformer Martin Bucer argues,

From the plans of the most ancient temples, and from the writings of the holy fathers, it is well known that among the ancients the position of the clergy was in the middle of the temples, which were usually round; and from that position divine service was so presented to the people that the things recited could be clearly heard and understood by all who were present.

cited in SPICER 2007: 12

Bucer's sentiments had a clear influence both on how many early Protestants constructed their worship spaces, and on how they conceived of the church. With the Protestant Reformation there was a clear shift towards the importance of individual salvation over and against the Church as the vehicle for salvation. Protestant conceptions of the church building quickly took on a more functional turn – building became places to deliver sermons and sacraments to as many individual believers as possible. More than 400 years later, concerns about seating capacity and sound systems continue to dominate the conversations about Protestant church architecture.

Driven by the sentiments echoed by Bucer and a desire for cultural influence, it did not take long for Protestants to begin imagining what we would later call the megachurch. The earliest example comes from France. The edict of Nantes (1598) granted Protestants in France the right to legally build and organise churches. Already by 1601, Protestants began dreaming big. The Huguenot architect Jacques Perret provides a dramatic example (Perret and de Bry (engr.) 1602). In his 1601 book, *Des fortifications et artifices, architecture et*

perspective, he draws up plans for an idealised Protestant Temple, shown in Figure 2.1. It was envisioned to hold nearly 10,000 people on its main floor and included two additional balconies. The preacher stood close to the centre of the nearly square building to maximise the ability of worshippers to hear the sermon. Three levels of ancillary spaces to accommodate secular and religious purposes surrounded the temple. The roof had the characteristic lantern shape of many Protestant Temples, which amplified the speaker's voice (cf. Guichard 2000; Thomson 1995; Westphal 2006).

But Perret's vision encompassed more than a large building. He notes that the auditorium could easily be modified to accommodate town assembly meetings. Roman Catholics, who held sacramental views regarding buildings intended for worship, would have balked at the melding of secular and religious purposes in a sanctuary. Speaking of Perret's willingness to dream of a worship space that could be reconfigured as a secular meeting space, one scholar says, "Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the radicalism of the

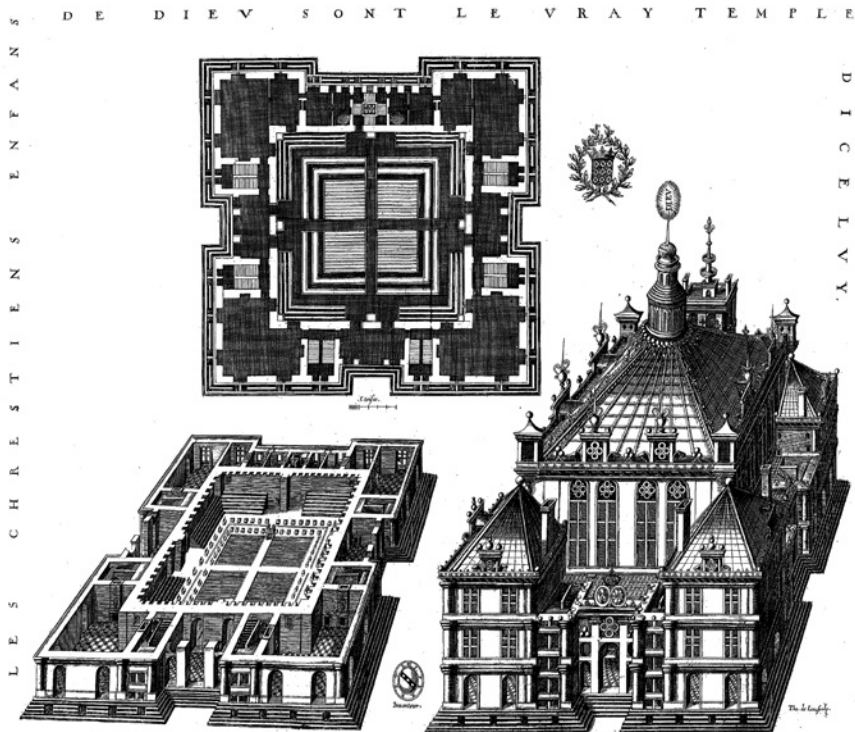


FIGURE 2.1 Jacques Perret's Design for a Grand Temple in his idealised city, 1601
 REPRINTED FROM JACQUES PERRET'S BOOK *DES FORTIFICATIONS ET ARTIFICES: ARCHITECTURE ET PERSPECTIVE* (PARIS, 1601). PUBLIC DOMAIN.

French Reformers”, Perret’s vision points to the fundamental rethinking about the place and purpose of the building happening in the Reformation, particularly in France (Hamberg 2002: 36). Written around the outside of Perret’s temple we find the slogan, “The Christian children of God are his true temple”. The building is still grand and ornate, but it is no longer the locus of God’s activity.

On important consequence of a more functional view of the church building is it opened up the possibility that the building could play an important role in the wider political and cultural sphere. Roman Catholic Cathedrals were sacred spaces that held religious relics and consecrated hosts. They were not envisioned as multi-functional spaces for community events. But once the locus of divine activity began to shift to the individual believer, church buildings could also host cultural and community events, which had the further consequence of establishing Protestant church buildings as important anchors in the community.

While Perret’s grand Temple was never built, Protestant churches in France adopted similar designs. Many were square or polygonal and had multiple levels from which all attenders could hear the sermon. A 1704 collection of Dutch engravings report the Temple at Quevilly attracted 8,000 worshippers, the one at Dieppe, 6,000 (Thomson 1995: 247–248). The Temple near Paris at Charenton and pictured in Figure 2.2 was perhaps the most famous. It seated several thousand, and was designed by another Huguenot court architect and contemporary of Perret’s, Salomon de Bross, in 1623 (Pannier 1911). It is not known if de Brosse and Perret had contact, but striking similarities between their designs exist. These buildings demonstrate an early goal among French Protestants to build large structures to accommodate thousands of worshippers and maximise the ability of individuals to both see and hear the leader perform worship.

5 Revivalism

Revivalism was another potent force fueling the creation of large churches. As France began to suppress Protestantism, England became an important site of Protestant activity. Revivalism was an important part of English Protestantism, exemplified by George Whitefield (1714–1770) who played a crucial role in fueling the Protestant impulse to reach the masses using large church buildings. He pioneered a theatrical, engaging form of revival preaching, which attracted crowds of thousands (Stout 1991). Best known for his open-air meetings, Whitefield also commissioned a number of ‘Tabernacles’ to be constructed throughout England. While originally built as temporary structures, quickly

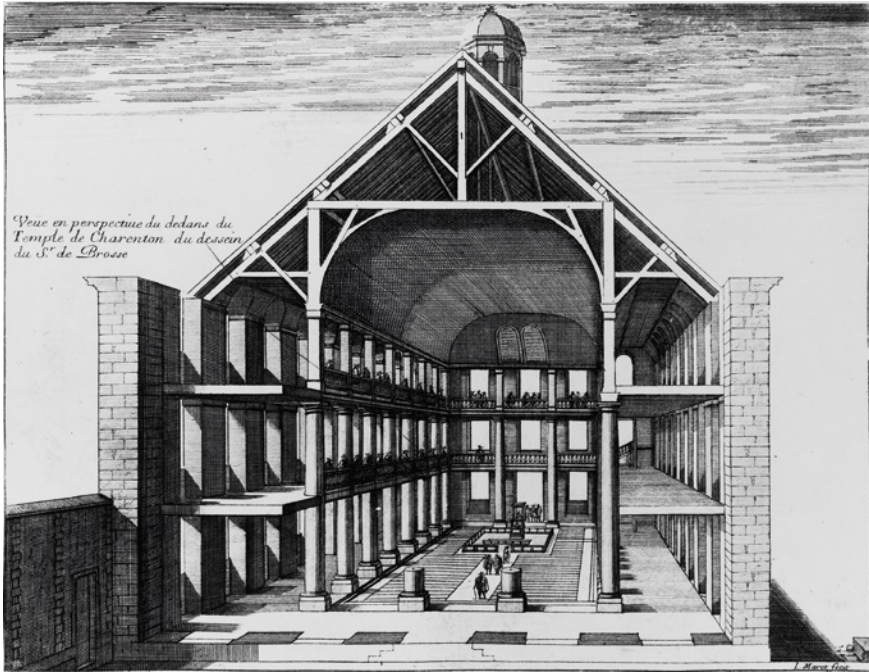


FIGURE 2.2 Temple de Charenton, an orthographic drawing by the architect, Salomon de Brosse, c.1623

USED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART

stone replaced the wooden buildings. Whitefield did not name his buildings 'churches' to avoid competition with the Church of England. The name also evoked images of the tabernacle used by the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert (cf. Exodus 25:25) and shared historical continuity with Scottish, Dutch and French Reformed groups (Spicer 2007). Two large Tabernacles, both accommodating several thousand worshippers, made their home in London – the Moorsfields Tabernacle, built in the early 1740s and the Tottenham Court Tabernacle built in the 1750s. These Tabernacles had the characteristic square-design and 'lantern-shaped' roof, as opposed to the more traditional long nave and recessed altar of many Anglican churches. This design amplified the speaker's voice and enabled seating in multiple levels around the speaker.

The famous English non-conformist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, came closest to encapsulating Perret's vision in bricks and mortar, eventually constructing the largest Protestant church building of his day. In 1853, he arrived in London at the age of nineteen to assume the pulpit of Park Street Baptist Church. His popular preaching attracted huge crowds and by 1861 he successfully oversaw the building of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, with room for 6,000



FIGURE 2.3 The interior of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, England, 1864
 REPRINTED FROM CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON'S BOOK *THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE PULPIT* (LONDON, 1864). PUBLIC DOMAIN

listeners (the church held multiple Sunday and midweek services). Figure 2.3 shows the interior of the original building. In continuity with earlier Protestant architecture – compare with the Temple at Charenton in Figure 2.2 – this structure maximised the ability of the audience to hear the preacher. Spurgeon's church did not merely serve as a place to hear preaching. It housed a huge Sunday School, a preacher's college, a popular annual conference, an orphanage and an alms house. One hundred years later – which demonstrates the important place of Spurgeon in the American evangelical imagination – a leading fundamentalist journal, *The Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, held up Spurgeon's church as an important exemplar for modern Protestant churches to emulate, a point to which I will return below.

6 The Institutional Church

Developments in the United States mirrored those in Europe. From very early on, American churchmen looked to Europe for their inspiration. Take the

Second Great Awakening revivalist, Charles Grandison Finney. In 1836, shortly after renovating the Chatham Theater in New York into a church building, he purpose built a new structure to house the Broadway Tabernacle. It bore a striking resemblance to the 'new' megachurches of the 1980s. Many considered Broadway Tabernacle one of the most influential congregations of nineteenth century America. It seated 2,400, but could accommodate 4,000 (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:38). As Figure 2.4 shows, it featured a central rotunda and a small stage, again emphasising the importance of preaching. It did not serve merely as a place of worship. The congregation rented the sanctuary during the week for various cultural performances; it hosted contemporary debates on women's rights, abolition, and prohibition; and the building housed an extensive ministry to the poor (Nichols and Chalmers 1940). This figure depicts the Tabernacle being used for the distribution of the American Art Union Prizes, again showcasing how from early on in America, using a church building to host high-cultural, and notably secular events, had an accepted place.



FIGURE 2.4 The interior of the Broadway Tabernacle, New York, NY, 1848

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. NO KNOW RESTRICTIONS ON PUBLICATION

The Baptist Temple, built in 1891 in Philadelphia, PA, provides another clear example of the late-twentieth-century megachurch in nineteenth century garb. Standing as a leading exemplar of the Institutional Church Movement and seating at least 3,000 (and perhaps as many as 4,500) the church “combined the auditorium church form and multipurpose facility, enabling them to appeal to the urban elite while at the same time fulfilling a commitment, inherited from the revivalists, to promote moral reform and to evangelise the masses” (Loveland and Wheeler 2003: 38). The Temple boasted a college; one of the best-equipped gymnasiums in Philadelphia; a nearby cricket field and baseball diamond; an affiliated Hospital (to which the Sunday services were broadcast over special speaking tubes); a separate ‘Young People’s Church’, which met in the basement and could accommodate 2,000; a large banquet facility; and regular concerts, lectures, debates, and readings in its main sanctuary (Burr 1905). As Loveland and Wheeler (2003: 79) note, “The church’s founder, Russel H. Cornwell, justified the Temple’s sponsorship of ‘entertainments’ on the grounds that the church should use ‘any reasonable means to influence men for good’”.

Early twentieth century church building manuals demonstrate that structures like the Baptist Temple occupied a solid place in Protestant thinking about church organisation. A 1928 manual remarks that “the church has passed beyond the experimental stage in gymnasium work”, and, “Bowling alleys have been found very popular. Some churches have difficulty in finding sufficient hours to schedule the alleys” (Conover 1928: 141, 143). Even planning for cutting edge communication technology enters the discussion, “A picture booth for a moving picture machine and stereopticon must be considered when planning the parish hall or gymnasium. Several rooms should be equipped with shades so that they may be darkened during the daytime. Provide convenient storage space of the visualization equipment” (Conover 1928: 144). In 1948, another manual states, “Swimming is an increasingly popular form of recreation. In one institutional church in a crowded city section, the total attendance in the swimming pool in one week was 1400” (Conover 1948: 131). Of core importance to churches was the religious education and socialisation of children. This pervades much of the literature at the time, “The Church does not wish to or need to compete with either the theater or the public schools, but the Church has successfully used and adapted other techniques learned from secular education” (Conover 1948: 132). At the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, a model of the winning Sunday school design from an international competition was constructed. Another shows floorplans of several church Sunday schools, which could accommodate several hundred children in large-group and graded space (Lawrance 1911). Many churches had separate spaces for youth groups and

youth churches, demonstrating that ministry targeted at young people as a distinct demographic predates the youth ministries of the post-WWII era.

7 Early Twentieth Century Developments

And while more formal Gothic designs became more popular after WWI, Protestants continued to build large worship spaces that maximised the ability of participants to hear and see the drama unfolding on the stage. The Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, CA stands as perhaps the finest witness to the continuing attraction of the huge, multipurpose church building to Protestants. The Temple housed prayer rooms, broadcast facilities and venues from which to run social-service agencies. The desire to reach the masses with the gospel message and to provide a mission outpost to influence the broader society stood behind the Temple's founder Aimee Semple McPherson (Sutton 2007). The sanctuary, built in 1923, is pictured in Figure 2.5. Angelus Temple continued one of the dominant forms of Protestant sanctuary design – a large,



FIGURE 2.5 The interior of the Angelus Temple, Los Angeles, c.1930
INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF THE FOUR SQUARE GOSPEL, HERITAGE
DIVISION, USED WITH PERMISSION

multi-galleried worship space to accommodate thousands that still maintains an intimate focus on the stage.

A clear ecclesiological vision anchored Angelus Temple and other similar congregations. Historical sources document the enduring evangelical concern for 'mass evangelism' – reaching as many people, by whatever means possible, with the gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ. Beyond simply 'saving souls', mass evangelism was also motivated by the desire to bring about the redemption of American culture, which many evangelicals felt was slipping into chaos. A commitment to mass evangelism, facilitated by a typically more congregational – (as opposed to denominational) – centred polity, led evangelicals to gravitate towards building big meeting spaces, which allowed a large number of people to gather to hear a message in a relatively anonymous setting. They stressed the importance of using of contemporary forms of music and communication to maintain relevance, and they targeted programmes and services to expressed needs. Not all evangelicals embraced mass-evangelism, nor did they uniformly endorse the creation of large, contemporary, needs-oriented churches, but mass-evangelism, building large, visible churches, and using a variety of 'attractions' to bring people to the congregation formed a dominant refrain in American Protestantism from at least the mid-nineteenth century onwards, more than 100 years before Willow Creek, Saddleback and its contemporaries appeared on the scene.

The influential Christian social commentator Josiah Strong, whose popularity was only eclipsed by Harriet Beecher Stowe, gives voice to a vision of the church whose marching orders are to 'save souls' and to reverse the moral decay of America through the healthy spiritual and physical growth of adults, children and families (Utzinger 2006:13). In 1893, Strong wrote what could easily have come from a modern church marketing manual,

The question then becomes this: Will the church enlarge her conceptions and activities to the wide measure of her mission and apply the principles of the Gospel to the entire life of each community? Here is the opportunity of the ages for her to gain a commanding influence over the lives of the multitude and fashion the unfolding civilization of the future.

STRONG 1893: 241

Strong, like many others of his day, realised that the centre of gravity of American culture was rapidly shifting to large cities. One challenge was the city often conjured negative images in the imagination of nineteenth century evangelicals (Utzinger 2006: 15–17). Even the prominent Chicago urban revivalist

Dwight L. Moody had a dark view of the rapidly expanding urban areas of the United States: "The gulf between the church and the masses is growing deeper, wider, and darker every hour" (cited in Strong 1893: 204). But Strong criticised evangelicals for their fear of the city. He viewed the rise of urban para-church ministries like the YMCA/YWCA as indicative of the local church's failure to develop an effective strategy to reach the masses (Strong 1893: 238). Billy Sunday, a prominent American Presbyterian revivalist, controversial and theatrical in style, argued along similar lines:

Every preacher is striving to get the multitude to come to church. If not mass evangelism, then why church mass meetings? In sport we appeal to the masses, in baseball, football, prize-fights, theaters.... The Church will never reach the spiritual position held fifteen years ago until it returns to mass evangelism.

SUNDAY 1933

Accompanying Sunday's comments in the *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, another author remarks, "Where the revival, or 'mass evangelism', is discounted by pastor or church.... this results in a cold church formalism which will preclude any kind of evangelism or spiritual religion" (Benson 1933). These quotations echo the chorus of revivalism, a constant refrain throughout nineteenth and early twentieth century American evangelical religion. Here the refrain of revivalism urged evangelicals to see the city as an opportunity for outreach and expansion. The church represented the key institution in this clarion call to reach the cities for Christ.

Dwight L. Moody spent several years in London where he attended the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Spurgeon's church left a deep impression on Moody and exerted an important influence on fundamentalist ecclesiology. In a 1934 article in the *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* commemorating the centenary of Spurgeon's birth, Rev. W.H. Hockmann extols the ministry of the Metropolitan Tabernacle,

The Tabernacle has been a bee-hive of activity. Overflowing in all directions, not less than thirty centers of Christian ministry were established in different parts of the London area, with some eight thousand children enrolled in various Sunday Schools. A colportage association was formed [for the distribution of tracts and religious materials], alms houses sustained, orphanages for both boys and girls established and the world renowned Pastors College brought into being. Never did the crowds of eager listeners cease to gather at the Tabernacle doors long before the hours for Sunday services.

Yet in the midst of this popularity:

No man was keener to detect its [modernism's] subtle sophistries, or sense its deadly perils. While his particular forte was evangelism.... nevertheless he waged a valiant and uncompromising warfare [with modernism].... The Metropolitan pulpit never ceased to thunder against compromise with evil, or unbelief or modern thought.

HOCKMANN 1934: 446–447

This article leaves little doubt that the eighteenth century emphasis on reaching the masses remained alive and well in the early part of the twentieth century. Seventy-five years later, Spurgeon's 'megachurch' continued to occupy an important place in the evangelical Protestant imaginary.

Temple Baptist Church, in the quintessential American boomtown, Detroit, MI, exemplifies the strong connections between revivalism and the construction of large, elaborate churches. By 1937, the church had moved into a 5,000-seat sanctuary, which was filled to capacity by their pastor, the famous Texas revivalist J. Frank Norris. With 5,000 people in attendance at Sunday school in 1955, many considered it the largest church in America (Towns 1969). After relocating to the Detroit suburbs in 1968, they built a 4,500 seat-sanctuary. Of this structure, one admirer remarked, "The four million dollar building is a testimony to the desire on the part of the people to honor God with the very best.... The carpeted aisles and blue velvet seats give an atmosphere of luxury". But as their long-time pastor, Dr. G.B. Vick pointed out (he shared the pulpit with Norris, who split his time between Temple Baptist and the huge First Baptist in Dallas, TX), the luxurious surroundings do not indicate a movement away from their simple, revivalist roots, "If this church gets too fancy, I'll sprinkle sawdust down the aisle and remind the folks that this is an evangelistic tabernacle" (both quotations are from Towns 1969: 84–85). Vick's remarks remind us that large evangelical churches of the early 1970s continued to invoke the legacy of revivalism and mass evangelism as central components of their identity, all the while constructing buildings that appealed to middle class tastes and sensibilities.

A move to reach the urban masses raised the issue of the degree to which cultural accommodation should occur within churches. Leaders tempered the focus on mass evangelism by concerns about apostasy – churches must not attempt popularity without proper theological integrity. A letter in response to Billy Sunday's call to mass-evangelism article complained, "The argument about mass-appeal of sports, theatres, and politics, is much out of place when applied to religion. Those things have to do with the carnal and physis, not the spiritual" (Sloan 1934). Some worried that mass evangelism and using popular

methods to appeal to the masses would cause the church to lose its core beliefs, a trap into which so-called liberal or modernist churches had fallen. In spite of these concerns, evangelicals remained convinced that firm conviction could overcome any of the inherent problems with appealing to the masses. The editor of *Moody Monthly* remarked, "There is still something to be said for mass evangelism, although like many other things it suffers from 'misuse'. The appeal to the 'carnal and physis' is the common appeal of the gospel, and therein it demonstrates its power..." (Sloan 1934). In an article about church publicity, the managing editor of a Christian magazine writes:

The church needs promotion. We need to forward our work by means of publicity. It is vitally necessary for us to adapt modern methods to our advertising program. Adapting modern methods of promotion does not mean that we must be modernistic in doctrine. We can apply sane, up-to-the-minute promotional principles and suggestions, and keep our message sound and evangelical. The primary purpose of the church is to proclaim the message of God's grace and win people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. *In order to do this it is necessary to utilize every means at our disposal.*

ENGSTROM 1945

Fears about cultural accommodation leading to theological apostasy had long held back many evangelicals from ministry to the urban masses. But a pragmatic appeal to doing whatever it takes to win souls, coupled with separating cultural relevance from theological integrity, remained an important counter argument throughout the twentieth century. In 1969, Dr. Dallas Billington, pastor of the Akron Baptist Temple, with an average Sunday school attendance of 5,762, demonstrated the continuing appeal of this logic, "Our aim is to win a soul, not false advertising. We will do anything possible to get people to attend, and present the gospel" (Towns 1969).

8 The Post-wwII Boom

The end of the Second World War brought with it the prospect of millions of soldiers returning to settle into families, homes, and churches. Suburbs experienced explosive growth, the government poured money into building thousands of miles of highways linking residential communities to factories and other employment centres, the cost of owning and operating a car dropped considerably, and large retail shopping centres began to dot the suburban

landscape. By 1955, *Life* magazine reported that \$750 million worth of church building construction had begun that year (\$6.6 billion in 2014 dollars); Denver, CO alone saw the birth of 45 new congregations (Staff Writers 1955). A writer in *Moody Monthly*, born by patriotism and post-war optimism gave evangelicals their marching orders:

The.... guarantee that our flag may not lose its meaning is to win America for Christ and the Church.... Christians must begin to invite the young and old to church.... Every Christian must get out and touch American life with Christ's saving power if the millions of unchurched children, young people, and adults of our nation are to be won.

HANSON 1945: 274

A buoyant economy and an exploding urban population meant new churches, some of them very large, began to pop up everywhere. Elmer Towns, who from 1969 to 1974, produced a list of the ten largest Sunday schools in America, documented very large Baptist churches in Hollywood, FL, Riverdale, MD, Akron, OH, Hammond, IN, Denver, CO, and Van Nuys, CA (Towns 1969, 1972, 1973, 1974). Because of the explosion in congregation building during this period, it was easy to mistake the sudden appearance of large congregations across the United States as the birth of a new kind of institution. However, the bulk of the evidence presented here demonstrates that the megachurch enjoys a long historical precedent among Protestants. The eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries gave birth to a number of large, multipurpose churches, often built around a popular preacher. These congregations employed the latest technology to reach as many people using all available means. The cultural fuel for the creation of these kinds of churches came primarily from a desire to reach the 'unchurched' with the salvation message, to keep society from falling away from its Christian foundations, and, ultimately, to redeem the culture for Christ. The rapid urban and suburban expansion of the United States, which had continued apace since the early eighteenth century and exploded after WWII, provided the fuel for these expansionist dreams.

9 All Things Mega

The 1970s and 1980s brought the right mix of factors to put very large, Protestant congregations on the broader cultural stage. But how did they get branded specifically as megachurches? And, what did that branding imply about these organisations? A series of other 'mega' institutions provided the narrative

framework on which the media repackaged the large Protestant, institutional church. U.S. atomic scientists popularised the attachment of ‘mega’ at whim to other words. By the mid-1940s, they talked of megabucks (one million dollars) to refer to the enormous cost of nuclear facilities; they spoke of atomic weapons with megaton destructive capacity (a megaton is the equivalent explosive force of one million tons of dynamite), leading to megadeath (one million deaths).² The media caught onto this usage in the 1950s (Amrine 1951; Colby 1951; Staff Writers 1952). Mega began to appear appended to other words shortly thereafter (Alsop and Alsop 1953).

Mega begins to attach itself to institutions – always with negative connotations – in the 1970s. ‘Megacorporation’ emerges as one of the first examples (Kirgis 1970). A later *New York Times* writer laments the corporate sponsorship of the arts by ‘MegaOil Inc’ (Rockwell 1982). The most relevant for this project is the attachment of mega to shopping mall to produce the ‘megamall’, which appears first in the mid-1970s (Maxa 1975). The megamall provided the framework upon which to fabricate the megachurch. Megamalls fit within a larger trend of the rapid increase of large regional shopping centres from 1950 onward. From 1955 to 1980, the number of large regional malls increased from about 10 to 1,250 (Chaves 2007). The media responded to this expansion with a barrage of vitriolic attacks. “They loom like monsters next to the freeways of Orange County: South Coast Plaza, the county’s mega-mall, and her 14 lesser sisters”, wrote one Los Angeles journalist (Rivera 1983). The *Washington Post* cynically editorialised on a mall in Jefferson County, CO, “To the swelling strains of ‘Oh, What a Beautiful Morning’, on the Muzak, a new day was breaking at Southwest Plaza, an enormous pentagonal shopping mall that floats above a vast sea of suburban homes like the battleship New Jersey at a convention of canoes” (Reid 1985). An architect also in the *Post* wrote, “Who can deny the efficacy of the modern mega-mall.... ? Yet rarely are such architecture behemoths truly lovable, either as works of art or as humane, charm-filled places” (Lewis 1992). The *New York Times* also joined the refrain,

Malls are dinosaurs, ungainly, vulnerable, completely out of scope with their environment... Malls are symbolic of undisciplined American consumption, showrooms for planned obsolescence.... They are a flagrant

2 The prefix ‘mega’ did not enter popular usage until Thomas Edison in 1878 invented the megaphone (lit. large voice). It had earlier, more technical, usage in megalithic (c.1839) and megaopolis (c.1832) and in megalomaniac (c.1890). The term was also used extensively in science. Think of the electronics term, megahertz (one million cycles per second c. 1941) and, later, megabits (one million bits of information c. 1957). These dates come from Harper, D., *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com>. Accessed 5/9/18.

violation of the conservation ethic that is emerging as key response to the energy crisis. Malls denigrate the character and quality of life in the neighborhoods in which they exist.... Malls defy the test of common sense. The values that sustain them have been challenged. They have no justification, no purpose, other than those of their makers.

NEILL 1979

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, critics blast the megamall for embodying the 'un-American' values of anonymity, greed, and consumption.

Commentators cry foul, when all of sudden, American Protestantism, a central – but hotly contested – locus of 'American' values, appears wrapped in megamall packaging. Even though megachurches in everything but name have a long history in U.S., the media did not brand them as a distinctive form of religious organisation until the 1980s. A collective awakening in the media to the presence of large Protestant congregations occurred in and around 1983, concurrent with the rise of the church growth movement. As already mentioned, this movement promoted marketing-based approaches to church organisation and heralded several signature churches (Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church, included) as purveyors of a new kind of church for a new age. For all their rhetoric about newness, the church growth movement relied heavily on a strong historical precedent in Protestant ecclesiology and bricks-and-mortar congregations.

The media took the proclamations about the unprecedented nature of these new, conservative, large, and fast-growing congregations at face value and branded these 'new' organisations megachurches.³ What was new about megachurches was not so much the institutions themselves. Rather, a detailed examination of how the term emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s in American newspapers reveals how large Protestant churches were situated in previously established (and continuing) debates over megamalls. As with megamall, megachurch carried with it a sinister tinge – megachurches are armies, out to conquer America. Growing concerns about the take-over of American society by evangelical religion fuelled these concerns.

3 Who exactly coined the term is probably lost to history. Already by 1985, the word had appeared in a dissertation title, see Grantier, R. 1986. *Perception: A 'Mega' Church Concept*. Master's thesis, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS. Carol Flake, however, in her 1984 book on the subject opts for the term 'Super Church', indicating that megachurch as a term was still relatively new.

Based on the best available data, the term ‘megachurch’ appeared for the first time in the *Miami Herald* on April 3, 1983.⁴ The article begins:

As the sun breaks this morning on the most joyful and significant day of the Christian calendar, 12,000 people – roughly the same number who live in St. Augustine – will be drawn here, to sing their hosannas on this one particular spot just up the road from the pretty, pagan delights of the Mai Kai. This is Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, measurably the fastest-growing Presbyterian church in the country. It is a temple of superlatives, a huge, 3,200-seat spiritual supermarket built by the hand of man and the grace of God. This is about as far from the little church in the wildwood as you can get. It is mega-church, vigorously, fervently evangelical, and – the Devil beware – it is on the march.

FICHTNER 1983

The article goes on to describe in detail the size of the building, the expensive Italian pipe-organ, the vast array of educational offerings, its publishing and media empire, and the successful ‘Evangelism Explosion’ programme founded by its senior pastor, James Kennedy. Kennedy, once an aspiring stage performer, tells of arriving at the congregation with a freshly minted degree from Columbia (SC) Seminary in 1959 to a congregation of 45, which soon dwindled to 17. By knocking on doors and encouraging his parishioners to do the same, the church quickly grew to mammoth proportions. It constructed its sanctuary in 1974 at a cost of \$4.25 million dollars (more than 17 million in 2010 dollars).

This basic tone continues through the next decade. In 1991, Gustav Niebuhr wrote,

‘Megachurches’ like the 6,000-seat Second Baptist Church in Houston TX, led by H. Edwin Young, are gaining popularity across the US. Considered the hottest thing in Protestantism, such churches are primarily designed for a generation unversed in theology, essentially nonsectarian and unsentimental about the old neighborhood church. The Christianity served up at megachurches is mostly conservative and to-the-point, stripped of most of the old hymns, liturgy and denominational dogma that tend to bore the video generation.

NIEBUHR 1991

4 A keyword search was conducted on the *America's Newspapers* database. This database does not contain all of the newspapers published in the U.S. but it has the largest and most comprehensive electronically-searchable collection.

Another article from the 1990 edition of the San Antonio *Express-News* uses more graphic, visceral language. It described the “inevitable” outcome of people shopping for a church is:

.... the ‘one-stop church complex’, or ‘megachurch’ that, like a combination hot and cold spiritual salad bar, provides a ‘total environment under a single sacred canopy’. But what happens when the canopy turns into a sealed bubble meant to block out every secular germ that might otherwise infect the spiritual purity of those inside? Will they, like little albino cave fish, lose the use of their eyes? Or will their survival, like the child born without a functioning immune system, hinge upon the total sterility of their environment?

Staff Writers 1990

As with the debates about megamalls, the themes of an impersonal corporate takeover of a once local organisation loom large. There is an outcry against dumbing down the content of religion in favour of attracting adherents. The megamall set the narrative framework into which large, evangelical Protestant churches were dropped, despite the fact that these types of congregations had been around for a very long time.

The media does not bear singular responsibility for the historical amnesia about the megachurch. Many insiders share equal complicity. By the 1970s, a group of large-church pastors including James Kennedy, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren already had a well-developed sense that their form of congregational organisation lacked precedence. And while megachurch promoters went out of their way to dispel media stereotypes of these churches, they did not argue with the idea that their institutions lacked historical continuity. As I cited early on in this paper, Bill Hybels was convinced he was doing something new that was specifically tailor to a new cultural reality. Why did Hybels and many others of his generation of large church pastors claim their movement lacked precedent? Simply put, novelty carries enormous value in American culture; a new social phenomenon sells better than the continuation of a long historical trend.

However, in spite of media accounts and the proclamations megachurch promoters, big churches offering a wide array of services and focused on attracting adherents was not something new. Protestants had long built large, multi-purpose buildings that offered a host of religious and worldly services under one roof. The 1970s and 1980s brought the right mix of factors to put these churches on the broader cultural stage. Suburban development pressures and fears

about impersonal corporations taking over American life had already surfaced in connection with large retail shopping malls. When journalists caught wind of leaders of large, growing Protestant churches proclaiming that the melding of retail marketing strategy with the church would create a new, superior form of church, they paid attention. Few stopped and recognised the historical precedent for the megachurch, which, as a Protestant impulse, goes back to the beginnings of the Reformation in Europe.

10 Conclusion

At the beginning of the 1980s, reporters and pastors cemented the image of the megachurch as a new, made-in-the-USA religious institution. But those who see the megachurch as a modern invention, without a long history, are wrong. Protestants had long built large, multi-purpose buildings that housed a host of religious and worldly services under one roof. Few have stopped to recognise the strong historical precedent for what we now term the megachurch. As a Protestant impulse, the megachurch goes back to the beginnings of the Reformation in Europe.

During the 1980s and 90s, middle class America experienced important social-structural shifts that privileged large churches. In particular, the increase in female labour force participation put a time squeeze on the discretionary time enjoyed by families, and made large, well-staffed congregations more popular (Chaves 2006). Nevertheless, while changing family dynamics and favourable development processes aided the popularity of megachurches in America, we make a mistake if we confuse their increase in prevalence with them constituting “a new social form”. They are not a new religious phenomenon, let alone one of “the most important developments of modern Christian history”. They represent an enduring model of ecclesial organisation in Protestantism, stretching back to the early seventeenth century. Hopefully, situating megachurches in their proper historical context will avoid starry-eyed optimism at the wonder of these spectacular congregations, and curmudgeonly critiques of them as flash-in-the-pan organisations with little staying power.

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Toward a Typology of the Megachurch

J. Gordon Melton

1 Introduction

In the 1980s, observers of the religious community in America began to take note of a new phenomenon, a movement aimed at the building of large congregations which could serve and actually were attracting crowds of 2,000 or more worshippers on a weekly basis. Leading the trend were congregations that had reportedly reached above 10,000 in weekly attendance. Given the resources that such large congregations could accumulate, they were able to place the best orators in their pulpits, provide professional musicians for worship, utilise the latest developments in audio visual equipment, and offer an array of classes, programmes, and recreational activities not just on Sunday but throughout the week. In their exuberance at discovering the megachurch, religious observers offered a variety of predictions concerning its coming dominance of the religious landscape including its largely pushing aside the smaller congregations of 300 or less members, which had been typical of church life over the previous centuries. In the decades since, urban dwellers have watched large new sanctuaries arise close to freeway exits, their signs welcoming rush-hour commuters. The megachurches seemed to be remaking American religion.

Bolstering the claims of the importance of the new megachurches were the changes in religious television and the increasing number of networks devoted entirely to religious programming. Many of the pastors of the largest megachurches were also regularly seen on cable TV, each offering a slightly different presentation, emphasis, and message. By the 1990s, the recognition of the impact of the new wave of megachurches attracted researchers who began long-term observation of the churches,¹ among the most important being Scott Thumma and his colleagues at the Hartford Institute for Religious Research. Thumma has concentrated on gathering basic data and cataloging the

1 An initial set of studies of the megachurch began to appear in the first decade of the new century and included a recognition of the importance of African American participation in the movement: Barnes (2010); Hey (2013); MacNair (2009); Thumma and Travis (2007); and Tucker-Wongs (2012).

megachurches which has provided the foundation for our consideration of the phenomena.²

2 Some Historical Background

In assessing the uniqueness of this seemingly new phenomenon of the megachurch, it is helpful to have some perspective on the overall growth of religion in the United States. Following the American Revolution, with the destruction of the colonial establishments, religion was in a drastically weakened state. The great majority of Americans paid little attention to religion. Ministerial leadership was lacking and in many cases not of the highest quality. Only ten to fifteen percent of the residents were church members. There were no churches at all in the western frontier into which the citizenry was moving. That condition would prompt a reaction by the churches – a great evangelistic push that would last through the nineteenth century. As a result, while the population would grow from 10 million to 75 million, church membership would grow from around 1.5 million to 25 million. Although the church experienced significant growth, it remained the domain of a minority of Americans, with only a third of the population making the minimal effort to affiliate with a church.³

Meanwhile, the number of denominations grew significantly, from less than twenty to some 300. Many of these new denominations were regional, with a measurable number established to serve a linguistic and/or racial minority. The growth of so many denominations would in turn prompt the formation of a counter movement that sought to unite the many churches. The ecumenical endeavour experienced some notable success through the twentieth century.

3 Religion-Population Growth, 1800–1950

Through the twentieth century, Christianity continued to grow. The denominations began the century counting only a third of the population among their

2 I am in debt to Scott Thumma for his dedicated data gathering, and this paper draws heavily from the data published on the “Database of Megachurches in the U.S.” pages of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research website. <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/database.html>.

3 This sketch of the growth of the churches over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been assembled from the data presented in Gaustad and Barlow (2001); and Melton et al. (2009).

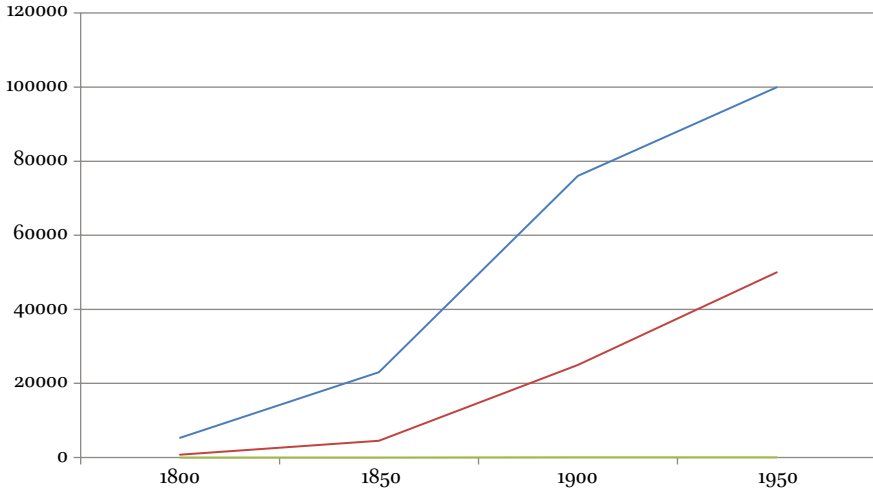


FIGURE 3.1 Population growth (blue line) and church growth (red line) in the USA, 1800–1950.

members but by the end of the 1940s could finally claim half of the public on their rolls and by the end of the century a super majority with more than 70 percent. At the same time, the ecumenical movement experienced significant success in uniting the churches with major splinters of the Protestant churches coming together to form the likes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American, The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the United Church of Christ. At the same time, several dozen churches showed outstanding growth including the Southern Baptists, the Latter-day Saints, and the Missouri-Synod Lutherans. Pentecostalism, founded at the beginning of the century, grew spectacularly with several of its leading denominations – The Church of God in Christ, the Assemblies of God, the United Pentecostal Church International – assuming a place among the leading American church bodies, with more than a million members in the United States and a multinational missionary enterprise abroad. African Americans also made their presence felt with the growth of the National Baptists, the African Methodists, and several new Pentecostals bodies like the afore mentioned Church of God in Christ. By 2000, half of the American population were members of just 25 Christian denominations (each with more than a million members). When one added in the next 40 denominations (each with more than 100,000 members) that percentage jumped to nearly 60 percent of the population.

The movement of Americans into the larger denominations did not stop the splintering, however, and dozens of new denominations continued to emerge decade by decade. Many were formed by those who rejected some of the

modern trends pursued by the larger Protestant denominations, others emerged from new and innovative spiritual impulses, the Pentecostal movement being the most visible. Still others originated from energetic clergy unwilling to stay encased in what they felt to be a limiting denominational structure. Thus, over the twentieth century the number of Christian denominations grew from some 300 to more than a thousand.

While the American religious story often focuses primarily if not exclusively on Protestantism, some acknowledgement needs to be made of Catholicism. Already in the mid-1840s, the Roman Catholic Church had become the largest denomination in America, a position it has never relinquished. While remaining politically inactive through much of the next century, it has reasserted its position as a prominent voice on national issues in the decades since World War II. Today Catholic membership is four times larger than its nearest Protestant rival, a status that has a direct bearing on our consideration of megachurches. Recent media attention to the phenomenon, including websites calling attention to the 'largest churches' in America focus entirely on Protestant megachurches. As Thumma has noted, if we were to add the large Catholic parishes to our consideration of megachurches, we would more than triple the numbers, there being some 3,000 Catholic parishes hosting more than 2,000 worshippers each week.

Finally, as we turn our attention back to the presently existing Protestant megachurches, we should note that the erection of large venues for worship is by no means an entirely new phenomenon (Eagle 2015).⁴ Several church sanctuaries that accommodated more than 2,000 worshippers were constructed in the nineteenth century with the idea of creating such structures going back to the sixteenth century, possibly inspired by the likes of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The size of such churches was only limited by the ability of preachers to make themselves heard in a day before electrical amplification. Most major cities had at least one such church, the pulpit of each being a target to which talented young preachers could aspire. The contemporary proliferation had been partly facilitated both by the development of amplification systems and the willingness of the present generation to move out of basilica-style church structures into more functional spaces even if void of traditional ecclesiastical trappings. If one covered the signs in front of the buildings and the Christian symbols attached to the front façade, many of the modern megachurches could pass for secular office or warehouse buildings. In fact, many congregations have moved into spaces formerly used for commercial purposes, none

4 See also Stokes (2010).

more noteworthy than the largest American megachurch, which moved into a former athletic arena.

4 Denominational Backgrounds

In constructing a typology of megachurches, prominent consideration should be given to their denominational base. This initial focus poses some problems as 'denomination' has become an increasingly contested term in American Protestant circles. Over the last two hundred years each generation has produced movements protesting the division of Protestantism into multiple denominations (each with its more-or-less 'unbiblical' distinguishing name – Lutheran, Baptist, Adventist, Methodist, Episcopal, Mennonite, etc.) and attempted to develop a programme for uniting all the denominations into a single 'Christian' church and/or congregations existing simply as the 'Church of God'. Such movements have repeatedly encountered strong arguments by denominational leaders for maintaining the sectarian truths and practices held dear by each Christian sect, and over time each anti-denominational movement has itself slowly transformed into another new denomination. As each new denomination is formed and incorporated, a distinguishing name would be adopted and trademarked.

Then on a practical level, each new non-denominational congregation settled down to long-term existence, it could not remain merely 'Christian'. It had to adopt an organisational form and a means to make group decisions. As it accumulated property, it had to decide who would hold ownership. It had to relate to governmental structures and regulations and choose how it would acknowledge the near-by presence to other Christian groups. And it had to make theological choices about key practices such as baptism and the Lord's Supper and evolve a theology. It had to choose a name that would distinguish it from all its ecclesiastical neighbours and allow it to incorporate.

In the post-World War II era, a new non-denominational thrust has become evident, with leaders abandoning any privileging of denominational identifications and adopting a name asserting their primary self-image as being simply a 'Christian'. In making that transition, local congregations may, without abandoning their denominational affiliation, adopt a name that makes no reference to their denomination or its particular beliefs and practices. Possibly the most famous instance of such a contemporary congregation is the Saddleback Church, a megachurch in Orange County, California, which is also a congregation of the Southern Baptist Convention. Other congregations refuse any

organisational alignment with one of the older denominations while largely maintaining the teachings and practices familiar to their founding members. Thus the large Lakewood Church in Houston, while independent of any denomination, operates out of a familiar Charismatic/Pentecostal theological framework similar to that found for example in the Assemblies of God or the Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Other independent megachurches were founded by ministers trained in Baptist seminaries and now lead independent congregations that are Baptist in every way but their name.

In examining the affiliations of the congregations reported in the Hartford database, the new megachurches report affiliations with more than 50 different denominations while additional congregations identified with a particular denominational family without designating affiliation with a specific denomination. In fact, contrary to a widespread image, about two thirds of all the 1600+ megachurches are denominationally aligned, with some like First Baptist Church of Dallas and First United Methodist Church of Houston, being old large parishes of America's more established denominations. Others are relatively new congregations that were started in recent decades in fast growing suburbs. Those denominations that continued to grow through the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new century are especially prominent on the list, with various Pentecostal and Baptist denominations most noticeable.

Of the 89 largest congregations, that is, those reporting an average attendance of 10,000 or more, almost half (39) describe themselves as 'non-denominational'.⁵ And it is these largest of the megachurches that have attracted the most attention to the megachurch phenomenon from the media, which often pictures them as offering a new direction away from the older more well-known denominations. The situation is, however, somewhat more complicated.

5 For purposes of this analysis, we have included those reported as affiliation unknown in the non-denominational grouping. We also would note that the confusing term 'non-denominational' has two very different meanings in the literature. Most groups identifying themselves as non-denominational mean that their church is neither affiliated with one of the larger well-known denominations nor identifies with the larger family tradition they represent – Baptist, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian. Others, including most sociologists and historians of religion think of congregations self-designated as 'non-denominational' as possessing no denominational-like ties whatsoever, which in fact many have. A number of the 'non-denominational' megachurches, for example, are in fact the lead church of one of the newer denominations, albeit one that eschews any reference to the more well-known denominational families.

Larger churches that report 10,000- or 20,000- or more in weekly attendance immediately raise questions as to how the church accommodates such a number of congregants each Sunday. And immediately one thinks of the standard practice of holding multiple services each Sunday, and in many cases that is what occurs. However, increasingly common is the practice of breaking the congregation up into multiple meeting sites. In fact, many new independent megachurches began with a goal of being a multiple-site community with some like Gateway Church (in Dallas-Fort Worth) developing sanctuaries throughout a large urban complex while others like Antioch Community Church (based in Waco, Texas) developing sites at cities across the United States.

Not unusual among megachurches is Trinity Community Church based in Amarillo, Texas, which describes itself as “one church in many locations”. In fact, there are seven locations, three in various sections of Amarillo and its suburbs, and four spread out between Amarillo and Fort Worth (some 350 miles). Each of the local fellowships carries out a programme, shares basic beliefs and practices, and has its own local leadership. In fact, each Trinity ‘site’ operates as a new local congregation, each with its own senior pastor, and cooperating together as the Trinity Fellowship of Churches. Thus Trinity Community Church in Amarillo not only emerges as a mega-congregation, but as the lead church of what has become a new ‘denomination’.

Similar is Christ the King Community Church based in Burlington, Washington. It describes itself as a single multi-location church. It has ten sites (that is, congregations) in the state of Washington, and additional sites in five other states. Other congregations that at times describe themselves as nondenominational, are in fact congregations of older denominations. For example, The Potter’s House, the large congregation led by televangelist Bishop T.D. Jakes, is a congregation affiliated with the Higher Ground Always Abounding Assemblies, an Oneness Pentecostal denomination based in Ohio, Bishop Jakes has been designated as the Assemblies prelate for the southwestern United States. Televangelist Cheflo Dollar not only pastors his large Pentecostal church in Atlanta, but oversees the ‘fellowships’ of World Changers Church International, with its affiliated congregations meeting across the United States from Los Angeles to Boston. These local fellowships (congregations) are periodically tied together through modern technology with Dollar’s sermons being streamed to each location.

As megachurches grow into new denominations they typically found schools to train both lay leaders for the many programmes within the church and future ordained ministers to lead the congregations at the multiple sites.

The more successful megachurch ministers have joined the ranks of the televangelists, television being one of the most effective tools in contemporary mass evangelism. They will also develop a publishing programme, spearheaded by their own in-house books, cds, and dvds.

Of course, most 'non-denominational' megachurches do not transform into new denominations, many remaining simply large independent congregations. Overwhelming, such non-denominational churches show decided Baptist influence. They tend to be non-creedal, affirm the autonomy of the local church, and practice baptism (by immersion) and the Lord's supper as ordinances (rather than as sacraments). Some will in the future quietly align with one of the 1000+ denominations now existing in the United States with which it discovers an affinity. That being the case, one may begin to classify the non-Catholic megachurches by their affiliation/alignment as:

- Mainline Protestant
- Baptist
- Pentecostal
- Lead church of a new Evangelical/Pentecostal denomination
- Independent unaligned congregation

5 Numbers

We have already noted that of the 1,600+ megachurches less than a hundred have reported attendance over 10,000 or more, of the remainder, the great majority report attendance in the 2,000 to 2,500 range, with the remainder reporting 2,500 to 9,999 in attendance. The cursory examination of the annual reports of the larger denominations indicate that there are many congregations, numbering in the thousands, reporting attendance just below the definitional threshold number of 2,000, attracting from 1,000 to 2,000 for worship weekly. At the same time, there are a variety of significant factors that operate to limit the size of congregations.

Most megachurches have started as small fellowships in areas with high density population, on the fringe of urban complexes. They will begin with rented facilities, often a public school auditorium or hotel meeting rooms. As they grow, they will purchase their own facilities, and may move to multiple sites before finding a relatively permanent site in a facility they have either constructed themselves or one that has been abandoned by a previous congregation. As the congregation grows and its programme diversifies, it needs also increase. It may need multiple buildings, and most importantly, it will need

additional parking space. As parking increases, so do traffic concerns and the difficulty of a larger number of people making their way to the church. Churches must often move up by moving out of their original neighbourhood. They must seek a new site that has relatively cheap land with ready access to freeways, and proper zoning.

As a congregation grows, at some point it must make a significant financial commitment, which will minimally include raising money for a down payment on new facilities and the maintenance of a mortgage over a number of years. At this point, the pastor's leadership in developing additional streams of income from publishing and/or a broadcast ministry can make a considerable difference in bolstering the confidence of the congregation to move forward. Most megachurch pastors, however, do not author books and do not develop broadcast ministries.

In fact, most megachurches hover around the number 2,000 and for a variety of internal and external reasons will remain there. Not the least of these limiting factors is the implicit commitment to serving the needs of the presently existing congregation. While megachurches feature a large (and largely impersonal) Sunday worship built around a superstar preacher and high quality music, it thrives on more intimate small group meetings during the week. Future expansion for a congregation often means movement to a new location at a significant distance from its present primary site. Such a move upward would often meet opposition from those most negatively impacted by such a move. It becomes easier to grow by developing multiple sites and over a generation transitioning into a new denomination. Megachurches can thus be further classified by numbers, that is, those with attendance around 2,000 (and up to 2,500), those attracting 2,500 to 9,999 weekly, and those reporting above 10,000. At each level one will find differences in programme emphases and strategies for future growth.

6 Location

Megachurches are largely a suburban affair. There are a number of megachurches in small cities and a few in rural areas, though they are limited by the size of their population base and are concentrated among those attracting 2,000 to 2,500 weekly worshippers. There are also a few very large urban megachurches such as Lakewood Church in Houston, West Los Angeles Church of God in Christ, and First Baptist Church in Dallas. Each church has a unique story of how it was able to expand with Lakewood purchasing the sports arena, and both the West Los Angeles COGIC and First Baptist Dallas being able to

locate affordable land close to their earlier locations. Like First Baptist Dallas, a number of the larger urban churches have a long history. Bethel Church in Jacksonville, Florida, for example, is the oldest African American congregation in the city with a history reaching into the Antebellum period, while the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Nashville, dates to 1866; it was organised immediately after the American Civil War. The Apostolic Church of God in Chicago, a congregation of the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, was originally founded in 1931.

Typically, however, the largest megachurches have found sites close to free-way exits in the suburbs. Following Houston's Lakewood Church in size are Northpoint Community Church in Alpharetta (suburban Atlanta); LifeChurch in Edmonds (suburban Oklahoma City); Gateway Church in Southlake (suburban Dallas), Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington (Suburban Chicago), and Fellowship Church in Grapevine (suburban Dallas).

The location of these churches is, of course, a bit more complicated as they are all 'multi-site' churches. Northpoint Community Church⁶ in Alpharetta, for example exists as six congregations scattered throughout the Metro Atlanta area, each with its own programme and leadership, and more than two dozen additional congregations across the United States that have adopted Northpoint's basic theological and operational perspective and are now tied together through North Point Ministries. The 30,000 members who attend LifeChurch⁷ each week are spread out among some 20 congregations in Oklahoma and others in eight additional states. The Gateway Church⁸ has six congregations spread through the northern suburbs of the Dallas Fort Worth Metroplex. Willow Creek Community Church⁹ based in South Barrington now exists as eight congregations scattered throughout Greater Chicago. And the members of Fellowship Church¹⁰ based in Grapevine attend one of eight congregations, six in Texas and two in Florida.

In reporting on megachurches, Lakewood Church emerges as a somewhat unique congregation, located in a single facility that seats 12,000 people. With three services on Sunday (including one in Spanish) and another on Saturday, its facilities easily accommodate up to 40,000 each week. Other churches reporting weekly attendance in the tens of thousands are working on a relatively new concept of congregational life, a model made possible by modern advances

6 <http://northpoint.org/>.

7 <https://www.life.church/>.

8 <http://gatewaypeople.com/>.

9 <https://www.willowcreek.org/>.

10 <https://fellowshipchurch.com/>.

in technology, but largely informed by a certain antagonism toward older denominations – a single large church/congregation meeting in many alternate locations often at a significant distance. The idea of “one congregation with multiple locations” is a perfectly appropriate theological assertion, however, the reporting of the attendance of all of the location sites (sometimes termed campuses) as that of a single congregation tends to miscommunicate to the larger community what is happening, especially when described with terminology generally used to refer to traditional single congregations. Thus to its members, Gateway Church is one congregation meeting in eight locations; but to outside observers, it appears as a group of local congregations sharing a common vision, programme, and organisational ties (that is, what has generally been termed a denomination).

Many of these new megachurches have developed from the application of a relatively new church planting philosophy that emerged in the 1980s out of the perception that some of the larger more-prominent denominations had lost their zeal for church growth, were failing to train their ministers effectively in evangelism, and even in the face of a growing population, had entered a period of decline. Additionally, Evangelical church leaders criticised the larger liberal Protestant denominations with adopting doubtful theological stances, if not outright heresy, and began to project new approaches to church growth that evolved into a new church planting philosophy that had the effect of wooing members from the older denominations. Pioneer exponents of the church planting philosophies trained initial future pastors in tutorial relationships, but as the techniques proved effective, Evangelical seminaries (including seminaries founded by some of the early megachurches) began to integrate new church planting methodologies with their promises of relatively quick success into their curriculum. Meanwhile, the more established seminaries serving the older denominations have been very slow to recognise the competition that the new church planting curriculum represents.¹¹

Those churches initially founded and developed using the new church planting techniques have found a home in American suburban settings, but as they have grown, they have been able to start new congregations in the cities (though few have grown into megachurches) and in smaller cities (typically county seats).

11 A sampling of the vast amount of new church-planting manuals would include: Herbert and Herbert Meneses (1995); Ott and Wilson (2011); Payne (2015); Stetzer and Im (2016); and Wagner (2010).

Thus next to denominational affiliation and size, one can begin to classify megachurches relative to their location, and take notice of at least five types of megachurches:

- Suburban (single location)
- Suburban (multiple locations)
- Urban
- Small city based
- Rural

Even as church planting efforts have been most successful in growing suburbs, they have also shown a regional bias. The majority of megachurches are found in the American Sunbelt with the largest concentration in Texas, southern California, and Florida. One third of all the megachurches in the United States have been established in these three states, with Texas and California being the only states with more than 200 megachurches. It is also the case that the southern states (and their major cities) have been expanding even as the northern states have been declining in population.

7 Theology

One of the most persistent images associated with the new megachurches is their adoption of a theological perspective generally referred to as the prosperity gospel (Brown nd; Whitehead 2017). A high percentage of the largest of the megachurches (Lakewood, Willow Creek) are led by pastors preaching the prosperity gospel, while a number of the most popular prosperity gospel advocates (Creflo Dollar, Kenneth W. Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price) both pastor a megachurch while simultaneously leading a new national denominational network of churches focused on their teachings. While the prosperity gospel is generally associated with Charismatic churches, it is not exclusively so, and counts among its exponents Kirbyjon Caldwell,¹² the pastor of the 16,000-member Windsor Village United Methodist Church.

The Prosperity Gospel is a version of the prosperity consciousness movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century. It suggested that those who rose to the top of the corporate world, who became the wealthiest, who reached the top of their chosen field of endeavour, exhibited certain characteristics that set them apart and followed either consciously or unconsciously a set of

¹² Cf. Caldwell and Kallstad (2004) and Caldwell with Seal (2000).

social laws that allowed them to rise above those who merely worked hard. It developed as a secular philosophy passed from the likes of O.S. Marden (1894) and Charles F. Haanal¹³ and reached its epitome in the writings of the likes of Napoleon Hill (1937), radio commentator Earl Nightengale, and Rhonda Byrnes.¹⁴ It also showed itself capable of merging with different religious perspectives and while originally identified with New Thought, it also found a home among both mainline Protestantism¹⁵ and Catholicism, and even the Eastern religions.

In the 1970s New Thought found a home among Pentecostals, especially among those previously involved in the 1950s healing movement – Oral Roberts,¹⁶ A.A. Allen, and Kenneth W. Hagin. Oral Roberts became the first exponent to attract a national audience, while Kenneth Hagin made the prosperity gospel the keystone of his ministry and became the first to build a national following and organisation with teachings on prosperity a foundational teaching. From his base in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he successively built a megachurch, a school, and a national network of congregations pastored by people trained in the school. Many of the current prosperity gospel exponents were at one time his students, and all matured theologically reading his material.¹⁷

To some extent, the association of the megachurch with the prosperity gospel has a basis in fact. A number of the more well-known pastors of the largest megachurches are advocates and the prosperity theme permeates their books and television shows, and is integrated into the life of the congregations founded by their hundreds of students. The prosperity gospel resonates with the entrepreneurial spirit that is found in the pastors willing to go out and found churches from scratch in unfamiliar settings and keeps them motivated through the years of initial growth. It also resonates with lay members who are

13 Haanal, like his mentor O.S. Marden, published a number of books expanding upon his approach to success and prosperity, most notably his 1912 classic, *The Master Key System*. He in turn inspired Napoleon Hill.

14 Rhonda Burns is the most recent author on prosperity consciousness as the author of the best-selling text *The Secret* (2006).

15 Norman Vincent Peale brought prosperity consciousness into mainline Protestantism in the 1950s with his best-selling *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1932).

16 Oral Roberts introduced prosperity consciousness into Pentecostal circles as early as 1956 with his pioneering text, *God's formula for Success and Prosperity* (1956).

17 Since the elder Hagin's death, televangelist Kenneth Copeland has emerged as an important force in promoting the prosperity gospel through his Believer's Voice of Victory television network and his annual conferences that regularly feature the major prosperity advocates including Jerry Savaille, Jesse Duplantis, Keith Butler, Creflo Dollar, Kenneth W. Hagin, and Rick Renner.

struggling upward in a career in the business world where prosperity consciousness sustains them as they work their way toward success.

At the same time, while the prosperity gospel is found in a number of the more prominent megachurches, it is by no means the majority opinion. One can find an equal number of megachurches based in twentieth century Evangelicalism, as well as the majority of megachurches that have found a home in the major denominational life and thought.

Thus as a final tool in classifying megachurches, one can ask about the church's theological tradition. The majority appear to operate out of a Calvinist Baptist perspective with the next largest groups from a traditional Pentecostal Charismatic background. It is among those of a Charismatic background that the prosperity gospel has most prospered.

8 Conclusion

The new megachurches are among the more important phenomena to appear as the twenty-first century has begun. While acknowledging its importance, we should not over estimate its importance. Among the hundreds of thousands of congregations now found across the United States, there are less than 2,000 megachurches. They have an extraordinary impact due to their presence on religious television and their being the home to many of the most talented orators in the world of preaching. However, they are not replacing or pushing aside the smaller congregations in which the overwhelming majority of Christians still find their church home.

As a whole, they find their role in continuity with past Christian history in which there have always been larger congregations housed larger buildings among the many average and smaller congregations. In the two hundred-plus years of the American church, there has been a steady increase in the number of new denominations (the number tied to the growth in population and the trend toward urbanisation) from the original 15 that formed immediately after the Revolution to the 1,100-plus in the present. While the majority of megachurches still represent the largest congregations of the older congregations to which the most talented and successful ministers can aspire, some of the megachurches have become the seedbed of still more new denominations emerging largely in the growing suburbs surrounding the country's urban complexes.

In looking at any given megachurch we can get some handle on its life (and to some extent its future) by inquiring into four factors – its denominational

TABLE 3.1 Denominations, size and theological perspective

Denomination	Size	Location	Theological Perspective
Protestant	2,000–2,500	Urban	Reformed/Baptist
Evangelical	2,500–9,999	Suburban	Pentecostal/Charismatic
Pentecostal	10,000+	Small City	mainstream Protestant
Unaligned		Rural	Other

affiliation, its size, its location relative to the nearest urban complex, and its theological perspective.

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Megachurches and Popular Culture: On Enclaving and Encroaching

Simon Coleman and Saliha Chattoo

1 Introduction: Performing the ‘Mega’

Christians have always built large churches. Imposing cathedrals dominated the architectural profiles and often the economies of cities in medieval Europe, and spread into the New World along with colonisation and missionisation (Coleman and Bowman 2018). Yet, while such churches are often huge, we do not think of them as *mega*. Their size – expressive of ecclesiastical authority – has a different quality to the dynamic, ostensibly more democratic forms of expansion that we associate with today’s megachurches.¹ If many Gothic and neo-Gothic cathedrals expanded upwards towards the heavens while ostentatiously occupying urban centres, contemporary megachurches have tended to expand sideways, taking up large swathes of land in suburban areas, or repurposing large-scale facilities such as sports arenas. Furthermore, these differences in models of growth go beyond the spatial or the architectural. Cathedrals have tended to represent ‘high culture’, embodying national identity, craftsmanship, education, and patronage. Megachurches inhabit a very different cultural realm, relying on an ability to attract people to their services and consumers to their products. An empty cathedral (and there are many) still provides an important symbolic and civic function. An empty megachurch serves no purpose at all.

This chapter demonstrates the importance of popular culture to the development of megachurches, showing its intimate connection with such churches’ performances of what is often made to seem like ineluctable expansion. Our use of the word performance here is very deliberate, since it is meant to convey the sense of both producing growth and displaying it through a variety of media (see also Goh 2008; Maddox 2012). We intend to show that the popular culture engendered by megachurches is typically marked by a creative if

¹ Thus Goh (2008) argues that the Australian Hillsong Church explicitly prides itself on the fact that its church complex contrasts with the architecture of traditional cathedrals, displaying more modern forms of functionality and openness.

sometimes tension-filled negotiation between two models or ethical approaches to performing the mega: what we call 'enclaving' and 'encroaching'. Enclaving is oriented towards fellow believers, encouraging them to perceive how apparently separated areas of their life can come under church influence, ranging from worship to leisure to family and even work. It draws a moral boundary *around* different practices while re-establishing articulations *among* them, so that for instance prayerful and pleasurable activities come to be juxtaposed ethically, socially, and spatially. While the idea of an enclave tends to imply a restricted community, in evangelical eyes it is always in a potential state of expansion. This type of moral encompassment can respond to the anonymising challenges and temptations of the post-modern city, much as nineteenth-century evangelists had to take account of burgeoning urban life in developing their styles of preaching, worship, and church life. Encroachment, on the other hand, involves a more explicit attempt to move into and aggressively (re-)moralise secular realms, seeking fresh markets alongside new converts as believers carry out their evangelical duty of reaching out to non-believers, not merely through testimony but also through product placement of such goods as music, films, theatrical performances, or even clothes.

Like many analytical binaries, these models are meant to be productive to think with rather than defended as rigid categories. Engaging simultaneously with *both* ethical frames of action informs the lives of many of those who engage with megachurches. While enclaving and encroaching have long constituted broadly evangelical ways of viewing and responding to the world, they take on particular characteristics in the contemporary landscape of megachurch activity. As we note in the next section, we should be cautious in arguing for the exceptionality of the present-day, but many megachurches do seem notable not only for their attitude towards size but also for the extent to which they challenge behavioural, material, and aesthetic boundaries previously assumed to exist between Christian and secular forms of activity. Whether enclaving or encroaching, the actions of megachurch members therefore complicate conventional distinctions between exclusivist Christian piety and the behaviours or even desires of non-believers, with sometimes unpredictable results.

Let us provide a brief initial example of what we mean. In the 1980s, one of us (Coleman) began to carry out fieldwork in the neo-Pentecostal, Prosperity Gospel-oriented Word of Life Foundation situated just outside Uppsala in Sweden. During that decade, the Foundation was in its first stage of growth, moving swiftly from being a relatively modest congregation into becoming a fully-fledged megachurch, with over two thousand members, a Bible School and university, a publication business, and so on. Although still relatively small

compared to other Swedish religious movements, the Word of Life caused a national panic at the time, accused by secular observers and many fellow Christians of being *both* fanatically religious ('fundamentalist') *and* not sufficiently religious enough ('money-grabbing'). Many factors lay behind such controversy (Coleman 2000), but for our purposes the most notable are those that involved the group's deep involvement in popular cultural forms. The Word of Life differed from more traditional Swedish Pentecostal congregations of the time in its staging of theatrical performances, encouragement of some rock music, aggressive marketing of consumer goods ranging from evangelical videos to coffee cups, and celebration of such 'secular' lifestyle accessories as fine clothes and expensive cars. It appeared to outsiders to represent an anomalous hybrid of deep commercialisation alongside a highly conservative emphasis on adherence to biblical literalism. Yet, with hindsight, we might see the Word of Life as being in the vanguard – at least in Sweden – of an attitude towards popular culture that has, if anything, become increasingly evident among megachurches, especially those promoting greater or lesser degrees of the Prosperity Gospel: a sense that active Christians should preserve their own morality (enclaving) even as they also have a moral obligation to work *through* popular, material forms, such as money, popular music, film, sport, and so on – appropriating ('encroaching' upon) them for Christian purposes.

In considering such attitudes towards culture, brief comparisons and contrasts with cathedrals are again helpful. The latter offer impressive liturgy, precious material objects, and so on, combining high culture and high cultural capital with a 'low threshold' of entry adapted to the need to make cathedral spaces as accessible to as many people as possible:² generally speaking, at least during visiting hours, anybody is allowed in to view a cathedral, albeit sometimes for a fee. Megachurches cannot usually offer much in the way of historical artefacts, but operate through establishing their own low thresholds of accessibility to their goods and services: after all, little is to be gained by scaring off potential converts or customers. Thus Charles Brown notes that the 1960s in particular saw the emergence of a "large scale, mass-produced, and consumed evangelical material culture";³ and one that forced producers to work out how to promote their faith simultaneously "toward both fellow Christians and those outside the subculture" (2012: 115). While Brown also traces an overall shift in emphasis, in the United States at least, from a focus on non-Christians (1950s–1970s) towards a more contemporary stress on Christians themselves, it remains necessary for megachurch members to strike a fine balance between

2 For a discussion of the use of this term see Coleman and Bowman (2018).

3 See also McDannell (1995).

reinforcing their subculture and expanding that subculture (and market) so that it does not become stagnant or lose conversionary ambition.

If achieving such a balance is a challenge, it is one that fires what Christine Gardner (2017: 162) refers to as the “evangelical imagination”, and its constant wrestling with the “push-pull effects” of being “in the world but not of it”. In the process, the use of popular culture enables forms of public witness through relatively unthreatening media: “If fewer lost souls are coming to church, then the Good News needs to come to them through a Christian pop song or movie” (2017: 164). Thus John Connell (2005: 316–317) calls megachurches both “full-service” (providing more than just obviously religious needs) and “seeker sensitive” (tailoring programmes to cater to the needs of people who have no fixed church).

As Gardner notes (2017: 168), the blurring of genres that results from such activity goes against stereotypes of evangelicals being always engaged in an inherently antagonistic relationship with secular culture, and indicates how such Christians may simultaneously criticise but also borrow the cultural forms of non-religious neighbours. We should not make the mistake of seeing this borrowing as a mere surrender to self-indulgence or an indication of the triumph of secular values. To begin with, it is important to understand the necessity – at least in ideal terms – for believers to steel themselves to engage in practices of encroachment as well as enclaving: in other words, it takes a certain discipline to be constantly oriented toward the possibility of converting potentially unwilling others to the faith. More broadly, however, the appropriation of secular forms provides a variant on a deeper theme of conversion that can be traced within broadly evangelical, and certainly Pentecostal and charismatic congregations. Joel Robbins (2004) has traced the variety of ways in which such Christians engage with other cultures, ranging from demonisation of the non-Christian Other to a strategic adoption of the latter’s local idioms and cultural forms, even while investing such forms with new moral values. For Robbins, this combination of cultural preservation and appropriation is one of the reasons why Pentecostalism in particular has managed to become such a successful global movement, even as it encounters a multitude of local cultures. We do not need to adapt Robbins’s argument too much to make the case for a megachurch encroachment into, and yet re-evaluation of, secular cultural forms. For such Christians, examples of ‘low’ cultural media such as rock music or wrestling (Ebel 2009) should not be dismissed as mere secular entertainment when they might prove effective bridges of communication with non-Christians.

In the following, as we trace megachurch engagement with popular culture, we begin with a short historical section, examining the current megachurch

phenomenon in the light of its immediate forebears. We then explore our central themes of enclaving and encroachment in more detail, while drawing on examples taken from within and beyond the Euro-American world.⁴ As we shall see, a comparative perspective on the forms of popular culture promulgated by megachurches demonstrates similarities but also some significant differences in understandings of culture, popularity, and the meaning of the ‘mega’.

2 Popular Culture: Past and Present

When the Word of Life’s impressive new building was constructed in an industrial suburb of Uppsala in the 1980s it was widely mocked by its critics, who called it a ‘sports hall’ (Coleman 2000), barely distinguishable from the warehouses and sales rooms surrounding it. The somewhat brutalist architectural style of the foundation’s headquarters provided a particularly marked contrast to the city’s other outsize religious building, its famous Gothic cathedral, begun in the thirteenth century and situated down the hill from the megachurch. Yet, if the Word of Life could not compete with the cathedral’s medieval credentials, it nonetheless drew on another historical genealogy, and one where the imagery of the sports hall was not so far out of place. As Robert Brenneman and Brian Miller (2016: 85) write of the corporate, shopping-mall style of Willow Creek megachurch located in a suburb of Chicago, such buildings recall the nineteenth-century revivalist liking for large, functional urban buildings that minimised religious symbols and maximised sight lines and clarity of acoustics.⁵ David Eagle (2015: 589) takes the historical resonances back still further, to the sixteenth-century Huguenot architect Jacques Perret, who developed “an early Protestant vision for a large, multi-functional worship space”.

As Brenneman and Miller note (2016), such architectural infrastructures aid the functioning of buildings as instruments of evangelism – or, we might say, any mass event. It is no surprise that some megachurches, including that of Joel Osteen’s famous Lakewood congregation in Houston, are adaptations of former sporting arenas (Carney 2012), just as the renowned nineteenth-century evangelist Charles Finney agreed (albeit sometimes with some misgivings,

4 Connell (2005: 316) compares the dimensions of American megachurches, containing more than 2,000 worshippers each Sunday, with Korean ‘gigachurches’, which attract some 10, 000 members to Sunday worship.

5 Eagle (2015: 595) notes that the English non-conformist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, constructed the largest Protestant church building of his day – the Metropolitan Tabernacle, with room for 6,000 listeners.

according to Kilde 1999: 176) to take over secular theatres in order to preach his message to urban America. Such venues were not only practical for a preacher, but they also literally reached out into secular space, and Finney's 'New Measures' methodology was explicitly designed to lower the institutional threshold for conversion and acceptance into the faith, granting instant church membership to those declared to be saved (Carney 2012: 62–63).

Aside from the use of secular-looking venues, the provision of popular forms of entertainment has long historical roots in revivalism. Brown (2012: 113) describes how, in the eighteenth century, Charles Wesley borrowed from popular opera, English folk melodies, and even popular drinking songs to write his hymns, and in the next century, the American evangelist Dwight Moody – ill-educated but in tune with the times – would deploy music as a means of attracting crowds (Brown 2012: 115). One of the most famous American evangelists of the twentieth century, Aimee Semple McPherson, built up a media empire designed to project her voice and image over the radio and into movie theatres, and she moved to Los Angeles in 1918, constructing a temple that looked similar to surrounding places of entertainment (Carney 2012: 63). As Carney puts it, McPherson constructed a form of Hollywood religion, where a radio station and Bible College might easily be juxtaposed, and where she understood the advantages of appearing in adverts before secular feature films, asking moviegoers to convert even as they were waiting to be entertained (2012: 64). A later generation of preachers, the televangelists, would harness the power of Christian-themed variety television shows, involving both music and celebrities, to garner attention. Some buildings – such as Robert Schuller's 'Crystal Cathedral', an extraordinary part of the southern Californian architectural landscape – would be built precisely to accommodate television cameras (Beckering 2011: 41–42).

We have provided the briefest of sketches of certain antecedents to contemporary megachurch activity and expansion – an expansion that has now come to inhabit the virtual landscape of social media alongside earlier forms of communication. We hope to have demonstrated the resonances and affinities between burgeoning urban populations, strategic forms of evangelism, and the broadening cultural power of Christians who, especially in the period following the Second World War in the United States and to some degree elsewhere, have gained more and more access to material resources of communication. In response to the challenge of bringing Christians into the fold, Christian leaders ranging from Charles Finney to leaders of the Church Growth movement of the 1980s have understood the need to adopt systematic and entrepreneurial approaches (Eagle 2015: 591) in their mission, combining popular appeal with careful planning and an eye for the market. As many evangelicals have

increasingly moved away from stricter, Calvinist understandings of Christian discipline and piety, the use of popular culture as means of entertainment, source of income, but also bridge into secular realms of action has become more evident than ever before. Even among the already converted, popular culture provides potent media to retain the interest of younger generations of Christians who combine access to consumer choices with relatively less respect for hierarchy than in earlier periods (compare Connell 2005: 318). At the same time, the very act of marketing appeals to the entrepreneurial character of much post-War evangelicalism, and one that has displayed increasing confidence with the prospect of operating in the public spheres of many societies within and beyond the Euro-American world (Oosterbaan 2015). And yet such culture still contains its dangers, its possibilities for indulgence and temptations of the flesh. In the next section, we explore some of the ways in which popular culture is deployed but also corralled for megachurch purposes through strategies that we call enclaving.

3 Expansive Enclaves

Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas (1993), the anthropologist Jackie Feldman (2002: 91) talks of the importance of the enclave in creating a boundary in relation to the wider world but also permitting relative freedom of expression within. In these terms the enclave is a social formation that needs to use carrot rather than stick in order to retain its members, given that it is relatively easy to move elsewhere. For Douglas and Feldman, the enclave tends to emphasise the voluntary character of its membership along with the value of each individual participant, but also the need to protect the self from threatening external forces.

Feldman's argument is based on ethnography of young Israelis making trips to sites of the holocaust in Poland, but in certain respects his and Douglas's depiction of the enclave fits megachurches quite well. Admittedly, such churches may be run by an authoritative head pastor, and yet in practice they depend on the willingness of people to turn up to fill auditoria, purchase goods, and provide, through their very presence, an impression that the 'mega' is being created and that a successful enterprise is underway. One way of retaining the participation of people who have other options is to expand horizontally – not only spatially but also socially and culturally. Carney (2012: 68) stresses the ability of many megachurches to become "consciously self-sustaining communities", and in order to do so they may include not only worship facilities but also "game rooms, bowling allies, kitchens and cafes, movie

theaters – anything a contemporary American worshipper would want for entertainment”. The provision of such facilities in the context of suburban life carries with it a number of advantages: it is convenient for busy families, it encourages socialisation among congregation members, and it suggests that religion can be fun as well as challenging. Importantly, it provides a measure of security, especially in contexts where gated communities may be favoured by richer residents and thus form part of the imagery of successful middle-class life. Parents of teenagers also gain a degree of surveillance over the activities of their offspring.

Thus exclusivity but not complete exclusion of outsiders is promoted, and if such measures seem attractive in the context of a north American suburb, they may take on even more powerful resonances in other parts of the world. In the summer of 2018 Coleman carried out fieldwork in Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM), a Nigerian Pentecostal denomination founded in 1989, with its headquarters based in a former slum area adjoining the University of Lagos campus. Not just the main worship hall, but the entire area speaks volumes about the aspirant culture of the group. So-called ‘area boys’ (aggressive gangs of street children, common in Lagos) have been chased away or reformed, incorporated as members of the Church, and traffic is regulated to create a streetscape that contrasts in its relative peace and order to the urban cacophony beyond – aided by a gate that marks the perimeter of MFM influence. Some buildings bought up by the ministry are even painted purple, the colour of its ‘brand’. Yet, this area is not merely a zone of overt regulation. Among the services on offer are a café, a music school (where training in popular and classical music is offered), and a large shop stocked not only with recordings of services and Christian books, but also the sports kit of MFM FC, a successful professional football team owned by the denomination. What is being displayed – and performed – is not only the ability of the church to expand into and reform parts of the ‘unruly’ city, but also lessons in a new lifestyle of rational consumption, self-development, and morally approved entertainment.

The MFM gated zone and other similar megachurch activity also express a further form of enclaving, operating at an economic level. Provision of leisure services and goods both furthers the activities of the church and helps provide it with resources to continue its activities. As Brown argues (2012: 114), despite its size the industry of evangelical popular culture is often relatively unnoticed by many outsiders, even as it contains a significant blend of ministry and commerce. Indeed, megachurch denominations around the world tend to create franchises that involve the movement of consumer items across national and transnational contexts (Coleman 2017). Such movement provides an excellent example of what we are calling ‘expansive enclaving’ – the sense of covering

the whole globe with an evangelical brand, while finding primary markets in fellow believers whose consumption practices reflect the religious identities they wish to create and project. At times, of course, such identities may blend religious and ethnic identities, and Jonathan Walton (2011: 144; see also Johnson 2011) traces the distinct history of African American megachurches in American Protestantism, while noting the ways in which such churches reflect a larger African American outward push from the centres of cities during the latter part of the twentieth century.

One of the first scholars to point out the significance of seemingly trivial material culture to evangelical (and other) Christians was the art historian Colleen McDannell (1995; see also Brown 2012: 115) who pointed out that objects such as bumper stickers, jewellery and T-shirts were not only of economic importance, but also provided visible and tactile means through which to enact a religious subculture. In this way the deployment of everyday and yet branded material culture helps form a certain kind of community, albeit one that competes in the public sphere with numerous other groups that also mark out their identity through clothes, mugs, stickers, and so on. We might therefore think of the MFM shop mentioned above as a place of commerce but also much more than that – a context in which members can come together outside of church services and engage in acts of self-formation that are, in their way, quite as effective as forms of prayer or Bible reading. It seems fitting that when Coleman bought MFM football shirts for his children, the manager of the shop accompanied such purchases with the gift of a free book containing the writings of an MFM preacher.

Reflecting on the relative success of evangelical products, John Lindenbaum (2012: 69) states that “popular music featuring evangelical Christian lyrics, is one of the most widely consumed forms of commercial entertainment for America’s 70–80 million white evangelical Christians”. He provides a highly nuanced analysis of the way in which it is appreciated and deployed by believers as it helps to ‘spiritualize’ their everyday lives. His focus is on an evangelical megachurch in the suburbs of Sacramento, California, and its activities during what are called First Friday concerts – monthly occasions dedicated less to outsiders and more to the work of retaining members, including many youngsters brought up in the faith. Such occasions provide opportunities for organisers to propagate culturally appropriate music to youth, attempting to persuade “Christian teens and pre-teens that they can be themselves – interested in loud music and violent movies, insecure, flawed – and still be Christians” (2012: 79). The production and consumption of this type of music parallel but are also partially removed from a purely secular, market sphere. Lindenbaum recounts that in interviews fans, musicians, and organisers portrayed commercial success as admirable, but only along certain delimited ethical

lines, even as he observed the youth pastor instructing the audience to “buy some merch” after concerts. Thus a musician noted (2012: 74):

I make money playing shows and I don't think there is anything wrong with that The only reason I have issue with that is when you are making Christian music strictly for profit and not at all for Christ.... It shouldn't be strictly about the money.

According to Lindenbaum, concerts encourage people's self-identification with Christian industry products that do not differ stylistically from other genres of popular music, but which are nonetheless classified as set apart through their value-added Christian dimension. For the analyst, part of the fascination of such practice is precisely the carefully calibrated balance it must strike, retaining proximity to and yet ethical distance from unredeemed forms of popular culture.

In these discussions of megachurch branding and in particular the influential role of music in creating a sense of expansion, the type example must be Hillsong, an Australian-founded network of megachurches oriented toward youth-focused services and the professional production and marketing of pop-rock (Abraham 2018: 2). The story of Hillsong is one of growth and diffusion across and through a variety of media, after its foundation in suburban Sydney in 1982. Goh (2008) makes the intriguing claim that the church tries to locate itself not only within evangelical practices, but also in the orbit of other populist ‘megastructures’ such as malls, tourist attractions and even the iconography of global cities such as Sydney. Connell (2005: 328) describes megachurches such as Hillsong as new “cathedrals of suburbia”, yet unlike most visitors to cathedrals, many who come to such megachurches spend large parts of their leisure time in these newer mega-spaces. In this sense, Hillsong is another good illustration of a ‘full service’ church, where life can become all-encompassing for the individual, aided by the church's offering frequent and convenient times of worship at weekends alongside “an ethos of structured diversity” geared towards meeting the interests and needs of different sub-populations (Wade 2016: 666).

Abraham sees Hillsong's global influence as resulting predominantly from its popular brand of worship music, reflecting a clear corporate-style vision of expansion as well as its international reputation as a “hipster megachurch”, oriented around global youth fashions in clothes as well as music (2018: 6–7).⁶ The receptiveness of Hillsong to such trends and its ability to adapt to current

⁶ Connell (2005: 326) notes that Darlene Zschech, one of the most successful Christian music performers in the world, has been a Hillsong pastor.

market demands within its Christian subculture permit it to blur boundaries between conventionally evangelical and more charismatic, Pentecostal style of worship and music – a blurring that we see in other megachurches as well. It often appeals to worshippers who do not see Hillsong as their primary denominational affiliation: and so, again, the enclave can expand. Furthermore, the economic dimension of the Hillsong enclave is extended even more by the way it links Christian businesses, for instance through the production of a Christian Business Directory (Connell 2005: 324) in Australia, supported by financial partners that include the National Australia Bank.

While a group such as Hillsong is a product of the 1980s, it is worth reflecting on the experience of older denominations that have themselves become attuned to megachurch attitudes and practices. Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church is currently one of the largest non-denominational congregations in the United States, averaging over 50,000 visitors a week, but it was founded in 1959 by John Osteen, Joel's father, as a more exclusive Baptist Church. The Word of Life is a product of the 1980s, but it derived much of its impetus from the classical Swedish Pentecostal Movement, which emerged in the country in the early years of the twentieth century. In both of these cases, we see megachurches emerging out of more behaviourally restrictive and conventionally pious forms of Christianity and moving towards much more culturally expansive orientations.⁷ Indeed, Cristina Rocha (2017) argues that the fascination many young middle-class Brazilian migrants to Australia have with Hillsong lies with the group's glamour and inclusivity compared with the more restrictive churches they have experienced back home. It is true that Hillsong does not approve of such behaviours as sex before marriage, but it appears to focus on love of God rather than following specific rules or punishments for minor infractions, and is associated with such famous supporters as the musician Justin Bieber and the Brazilian footballer David Luiz.

One of the most striking examples of this phenomenon of relative 'opening out' to culture and the world comes from Nigeria. The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) is one of the most active and visible charismatic denominations in the contemporary world, with millions of members and branches in close to 200 countries. It was founded in Christian-dominated south-western Nigeria in 1952, but remained an almost wilfully obscure,

7 Drawing on the work of George Ritzer (2010), Wade (2016: 666) refers to the broader phenomenon of processes of re-enchantment in late capitalism, including the emergence of "cathedrals of consumption" where magic and wonder are produced through rationalised means, such as large-scale theme parks (see Mathews 2015) – or, perhaps, megachurches. Both Ritzer and Wade draw on Colin Campbell's (1989) famous analysis of the late Calvinist shift from asceticism to forms of consumption and self-construction willed by the divine.

holiness-oriented group until the early 1980s, when it was taken over by Pastor Enoch Adeboye, a lecturer in mathematics and a powerful and strategic moderniser of his Church (see e.g. Coleman and Maier 2011; Ukah 2008). In 1988, Adeboye helped to catalyse RCCG expansion by sanctioning the development of so-called 'model parishes' designed to attract a more upwardly mobile membership of government, military and academic elites as well as middle and working classes supporters. Speaking English was encouraged rather than purely Yoruba, and the Church adopted a Prosperity message that retained an emphasis on morality yet challenged older, Holiness ideas. Such a shift towards more mainstream attitudes to culture and deportment, including for instance permitting the wearing of jewellery for women, helped create the conditions for a movement that would spread transnationally along with its members as they migrated around the world. In Nigeria itself, the RCCG also created a truly spectacular expansive enclave, a prayer camp located along the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway that now contains two giant auditoria (the larger one three km by three km in dimensions) alongside extensive housing estates for members, shops, a medical centre, and educational facilities. Like the MFM area that we discussed earlier, the Camp provides a challenge to Lagos city life by presenting its members with an alternative urban lifestyle: but while such a lifestyle is ordered, relatively sober, and gated, it is not afraid to embrace aspects of popular culture, and indeed the Camp now runs its own amusement park that is open to members and non-members alike.

In this section, we have traced the development of varieties of enclaves produced by megachurches located in – but also spreading across – different parts of the world. While restrictive in one sense, drawing a boundary between members and non-members, in practice such enclaves have permitted performances of growth that have suited the cultural expansive styles of broadly evangelical and neo-Pentecostal Christians as they have sought both to retain and to entertain members while extending their cultural reach across all areas of life. In our next section, we move to a related but different form of expansion, that aimed more obviously at non-believers, including efforts to appropriate elements of popular, secular culture in order to appeal beyond the boundaries of the enclave, while keeping within its boundaries of propriety.

4 Varieties of Encroachment

Some years ago (2010–2011) I and Katrin Maier, a PhD student, were carrying out fieldwork on the RCCG's activities in London, England. Our first interview was with a young man whom we call Chris, who was happy to tell us about the

glossy magazine that he had started to edit on behalf of the denomination.⁸ We were sitting in his office at Jesus House, the largest RCGG church in the UK, which was located in an industrial/commercial zone in North London close to Brent Cross, the site of one of the first shopping malls in the country. To the surprise of both Katrin and me, sitting on Chris's desk were not just a Bible but also some distinctly secular-looking publications, such as *GQ* and *Esquire*. When he saw us looking at the lurid front covers of the latter, Chris explained that his aspiration was to see his own magazine for sale in high street stores like the famous British stationers W.H. Smith, and so he needed to know how to produce the right format to hit that kind of market. He remarked that he was keen to “learn from the best” publications, even if his aim was not to offer advice on sex or clothes, as they did, but “something better”. According to Chris, there were around two million Christian men in the UK, and “they need[ed] to be reached”. But his ambitions did not stop there. By referring to W.H. Smith he was indicating his desire to be represented in a store well-known to the entire British population, and one with no obvious religious associations; furthermore, he added that, some day, he hoped to expand his operation into Europe. In a subsequent conversation, I was to encounter Chris's ambitions in another direction as well, when he asked me for advice on how to do a Master's degree in anthropology. He explained that he wanted to deploy the research tools of the social sciences to understand how most effectively to understand – and reach – his target readership. Drawing not just on popular culture, but also on the study of culture, was part of his strategic plan of how to encroach on the world at large.

Chris's example tells us much about wider megachurch attitudes towards expansion. There is certainly an ‘enclaving’ dimension to his ambition, as he seeks to catch the attention of aspirational and especially younger Christian males, and to do so through offering a cultural product that is of a high professional standard. However, his magazine is clearly meant to encroach upon the secular world in at least two respects: first, through its appropriation of secular formats – products that are potentially of interest to believer and non-believer alike (rather like the songs that Hillsong produces); and second, through his desire for it to compete on the open market, as represented by the high street store. Indeed, Chris's vision has already been achieved by some of the most famous megachurch pastors. If one walks into any larger airport bookstore in Europe or North America and heads for the section selling advice on how to succeed in life, there is a good chance that one will find books by Joel Osteen with titles such as *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*

⁸ See also Coleman (2017) for a description of this encounter.

(2009) and *Making Wise Choices – Your Decisions Determine Your Destiny* (2005).

In recent years, considerable interest has been paid to the phenomenon of ‘spiritual warfare’ carried out by many evangelical and Pentecostal believers – involving the idea that, through strategic forms of prayer, Christians can ‘take back’ secular territory and associated culture from demonic powers, and place them under the control of divine order. While such warfare constitutes a striking and often spectacular example of how the world at large may be perceived with mistrust, it is important to bear in mind that other means of approaching the secular world are available, such as the encroachments through popular culture described in this chapter. Once again, a balance must be struck. Wade (2016: 669) talks of Hillsong erecting a “partition of insularism” through invocations of “the enemy” and yet also reaching out into the world of the unsaved (and spiritually vulnerable) at the same time.

A recent and increasingly popular example of evangelical missionising that manages simultaneously to enclave and to encroach is provided by the phenomenon of Hell Houses, which have been observed by one of us (Chattoo) in congregations in the American South. Often produced to compete with Halloween, these are theatrical events that enact sinful situations in front of believers and non-believers, depicting the consequences of continuing to live a sinful life. The staging of realistic scenarios is often followed by an earnest attempt to convert unsaved audience members. Both entertaining and potentially frightening, Hell Houses come close to the secular horror genres from which they draw some influence, and yet they flip the spiritual register of the theatrical event towards evangelical intentions and values.

The negotiation of the balance between encroaching and enclaving emerged in another area of Chattoo’s fieldwork, involving her observation of a long-standing internal debate about the use of ‘secular’ music in relation to an American Assemblies of God competition known as Fine Arts. The use of ‘secular’ popular music has become an important narrative tool in a Fine Arts performance category known as ‘Human Videos,’ where a live movement piece juxtaposes scenes from a fallen world (set to ‘secular’ music) before switching to worship music that backgrounds performances of Jesus’ redemptive power. However, with recent performances having introduced popular music choices that were perceived by some members as going ‘too far,’ debates about what it means for youth to interact with this type of popular music reignited discussions in the community about the potential harm of including such media in church projects of youth education and ministry. New rules were set in place to ensure that teams were choosing their music thoughtfully, while calls to ban popular music outright were rejected. A document was published to justify the

contentious decision, explaining that in addition to honing their performance skills for a future of confident and effective ministry, Fine Arts should be a place where young members of the church can engage in critical thinking about how to negotiate the tensions and complexities of bringing Christ to a fallen world.

This latter example allows us to make a productive ethnographic contribution to longstanding academic debates about processes of negotiating the use of popular culture mediums in megachurch spaces (Sargeant 2000; Twitchell 2007; Wilford 2012). Certainly, an important aspect within the scholarship addresses current theological debates regarding how one might interact with the world enough to save it without becoming *of* it in the process. The example also helps us contribute to the project of complicating the “religious market principle” that other scholars have already taken up (Wilford 2012), given that Fine Arts is its own microcosm of sorts. If one wishes to compete, one must be a member of an Assemblies of God church and must follow the rules as set by the centralised body of rule-makers. Thus, while certain aspects of the creative process can be “shopped” for (Twitchell 2007) by attending different churches and competing in different districts,⁹ ultimately, students and parents want to compete on the national level¹⁰ and have a vested interest in remaining members and actively debating the parameters of youth outreach. Though the district level of competitions enacts similar situations to the forming of small groups in a process akin to what Wilford terms “how to make a big church small,” there are always ways that the church becomes “big” again (2012, 90–93). Considering the performance-based ministry microcosm of Fine Arts as one of the many spaces where questions of boundaries of belonging are drawn (and redrawn) adds to conversations around the “flexibility” of such megachurches “in how they express their theology” (Sargeant 2000, 166).

As a means of encroachment on the world, the deployment of popular culture may have the particular advantage for some evangelical populations of carving out a realm of influence in societies where direct political engagement is difficult. Thus Terence Chong (2015) provides an account of the growing appeal of megachurches to emergent middle-class Singaporeans. In Chong’s analysis, such churches have proved to be effective in their deployment of marketing strategies and the promotion of a consumerist and self-help ethos, expressed through such media as rock-concert-like worship and televised

9 Discussions in social spaces abound regarding which churches and indeed, even districts are more or less lenient on issues such as the use of ‘secular’ popular music.

10 The national level is where students can bank money for college scholarships for use at any Assemblies of God institution, which is one of the largest motivating factors for Chattoo’s interlocutors’ years of dedicated financial and emotional investment.

sermons, alongside the visual aesthetics of the shopping mall. So far, such actions – alongside a good deal of ministering to the disadvantaged – have been maintained without creating conflict with the Singaporean state, and indeed the churches have catered to welfare needs and materialist desires alike without critiquing the operations of capitalist governance.

Other contexts of operation provide very different opportunities for encroachment. In Brazil, for instance, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, founded in 1977 in Rio de Janeiro, now owns one of the largest television networks in the country, which supports the aims of some of its members to take political office. In this sense, the Church is seeking to link together not only different aspects of members' lives, but also the economic, civic, religious, and political realms of society at large: popular culture is thus seen as a contributor to a form of theocracy. The Universal Church is often deeply controversial (even 'unpopular'), but benefits from seeking influence within a national context where religious discourse is widespread. In certain respects a similar situation is described by Birgit Meyer (2004: 92) in her discussion of how, over the last few decades, popular culture and Christianity have expanded in tandem in Ghana as the country has moved towards democracy and a liberalisation of the media. Just as the Ghanaian video-film industry has expanded, so it has echoed the views of widespread Pentecostalist-charismatic churches, contributing to what Meyer terms a pentecostally infused, or 'pentecostalite', public culture. In using this term, she refers more broadly to the deployment of expressive forms that allow such religion to operate in spheres of entertainment – music, theatre, radio, radio programs, as well as video-films – that constitute a genuinely 'popular' culture. Furthermore, we see how supposedly secular activities can borrow from the religious world, and not simply the other way round.

5 Concluding Remarks

Over the past century and more, evangelical Christians (including Pentecostalists and charismatics) have often been accused either of opposing and demonising the world at large, or of simply capitulating to its temptations in the search for fame, fortune, and power. We hope in this chapter to have used an examination of megachurch deployments of popular culture to complicate this binary view of such Christians, and to indicate some of the subtleties of engagement and motivation among believers who constitute their very identity through inhabiting a space of agency that lies on the border of, and frequently crosses between, redeemed and unredeemed arenas of action. The enclave offers a space of relative spiritual and social security, but it is not enough:

believers must also perceive themselves – or their surrogates in the varied forms of preachers, records, magazines, television programmes, websites, and so on – as reaching out into a world that may be more likely to accept their presence if they adopt cultural forms that do not look too alien to the average city- or suburb-dweller.

While revivalist churches have always had to cultivate something of a populist dimension, in recent decades megachurches have taken their expansive performances into some newer territories, engaging in a double-pronged strategy of retaining members and attempting to attract new ones by accepting the value of popular culture as a means of communication, but one whose morality needs to be monitored. This relative shift from the ‘pious’ to ‘the popular’ should not be seen in simple terms as a surrender to secularity. Rather, it provides a means to engage in the sometimes difficult discipline of having to expand into new economic, cultural, social, and even national territories as a means of acknowledging and responding to the constant demands of performing the ‘mega’.

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“Your Church Can Grow!” – A Contextual Theological Critique of Megachurches

Martyn Percy

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1 Introduction

The sheer scale of North American megachurches comes as a great surprise to the casual visitor from abroad. But equally, they are of no surprise to the average North American. One cannot easily understand the phenomenon of megachurches apart from some sense of the prevailing principles and practices which shape North American culture, together some understanding of the Church Growth Movement, as well as the Health, Wealth and Prosperity Movement, and also a certain kind of Revivalist-orientated Evangelicalism. The compact between culture and Christianity in North America has seen size elided with success; and success, in turn, elided with blessing.

However, we also note, at the outset, that the phenomenon of the megachurch is not restricted to the North American ecclesial cultures. Megachurches now exist in virtually every continent in the world – South America, Central America, parts of Africa, and also Asia – and perhaps most notably South Korea, which has five of the largest ones in the world. It is estimated that there are over twelve hundred megachurches in North America. Typically, to qualify for the nomenclature of ‘megachurch’ the congregation would have to exceed 2,000. (Correspondingly, and in this chapter, we will sketch one such megachurch in outline, in order to gain some sense of the appeal of these ecclesial behemoths).

So far as global Christianity is concerned, megachurches are no longer exceptional. It is really only in Europe that they are sparse; and in Australasia they are also not a significant feature of the ecclesial landscape. Most of the specimen megachurches that can be analysed tend to be shaped by Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism or Charismatic Renewal. They tend to be conservative in their theological character. Most dwell on personal salvation, and frequently exhibit strong cultures of positive and motivational thinking with a stress on personal fulfilment and the attaining of personal goals. Some megachurches can even sometimes feel slightly secular in character.

But not all megachurches are like this, by any means. There are some examples of megachurches that have targeted niche groups – so called ‘Metropolitan’ congregations, for example, that are especially affirming of lesbian, gay, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) groups. The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) is active throughout the world, with the individual congregations being broadly Protestant in character. They enjoy the full recognition with the World Council of Churches, and have been constituted (founded by Troy Perry) since 1968. Some of these congregations have now reached the requisite ‘megachurch’ size.

Other megachurches are, by character, not especially Evangelical or Pentecostal, but have developed as practically-orientated independent Protestant congregations. In South America, there are some Roman Catholic megachurch-style congregations, although it must be noted that the vast majority are Protestant or Pentecostal in denominational proclivity. There are also several examples in Africa of indigenous independent congregations that have reached a significant size that would suggest qualifying for the ‘megachurch’ label. Until recently, one of the largest in the world was in Seoul, South Korea – and under the ministry of Paul Yonggi Cho (see P.Y. Cho 1979; with foreword by R. Schuller). The largest megachurch in the United States is currently Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas with more than 50,000 members every weekend. At one stage, the largest megachurch in the world – South Korea’s Yoido Full Gospel Church (Assemblies of God) – may have had as many as a million members.

Although primarily a modern phenomenon, we should take note of historical exemplars, even though they were rare. One such example was Charles Spurgeon’s Baptist Metropolitan Tabernacle (sometimes quirkily known as ‘The Tab’) in London, which for many years attracted 5,000 weekly attendees well into the late nineteenth century. The charismatic preacher and religious broadcaster, Aimee Semple McPherson, with her Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, attracted similar numbers. However, the term ‘megachurch’ is most commonly associated with those sizeable congregations that have emerged in the

post-war years, and to some extent can be seen as an inevitable religious expression of economic prosperity through late capitalism.

Correspondingly, it is not uncommon to find church growth and megachurch exponents exhorting their congregations to read business studies books that focus on growth, organisation, sales and marketing. A text such as Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) might enjoy particular prominence in the construction-phase of a megachurch. Since publication, it has proved to be an enduring envoy for the power of positive thinking, and an ardent champion of 'persuasion': how to win people to your way of thinking, how to change people, how to increase your popularity and prestige, get out of a rut, and so on. Carnegie's work, centres on winning – growing churches in both numerical size and number.

The fundamental principles for church growth and underpinning the ecology of megachurches were first devised by Donald McGavran (1955, 1959, 1970), who examined churches and their numerical growth in the Developing World and later founded the Institute for Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon, subsequently relocating it to Fuller Theological Seminary, California. Stemming from there, the movement now touches thinking from the hedonic ecclesiology of Robert Schuller, to the austere revisionist Calvinism of Arthur Glasser, to the restrained dispensationalism of George Peters, to the Neo-Pentecostalism of John Wimber. Since the 1970s there has been prodigious literary production in support of the church growth principles and megachurch exponents, from personal testimonies to the 'How to' type of handbook. Yet there are still very few studies critical the underlying principles, and the consecrated pragmatism of the movement has usually meant that criticism has often been answered in a rather *ad hoc* fashion (see Shenk 1983).

There is, of course, nothing new about church growth principles. Early church leaders like Marcion knew only too well that the promulgation of selected essentials from within Christianity led to popularity and growth. Cults, schisms and heresies have often grown by affirming an apparently 'lost' doctrine or revelation, denying others, or oversimplifying certain beliefs in order to appeal to a new or wider audience. However, the principles presented by the church growth movement and exponents of megachurches are not quite like this. On one level anyone can use church growth principles; they are said to be 'neutral tools' for growth, and can be used by Christians, but also by people of different religious persuasions. Yet on another level there is, of course, nothing new about church growth principles. It assumes the church to be a sick 'body', and in decline; whereas God intended the Church to grow. Therefore a complex array of curatives that will bring healing and restoration has been devised. New converts and disciples are God's revealed priority, and the church must be

the means for harvesting them. The 'formulas' offered, if applied correctly, will bring salvation to others, along with growth, success and prosperity for the ailing church. C. Peter Wagner is perhaps McGavran's most prominent apologist for church growth principles and many of the current megachurch exponents, and his crystallisation of those principles is cited by Eddie Gibbs:

Church Growth is that science which investigates the nature, function and health of the Christian church as it relates specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all nations'. Church Growth is simultaneously a theological conviction, and an applied science which strives to combine the eternal principles of God's Word with the best insights of social and behavioural sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference the foundational work done by Dr Donald McGavran.

quoted in GIBBS 1981: 227

The use of the word 'science' is curious and suggestive – that of an axiom of correspondence exists between an ideal or desired reality, and the current state of the Church. The 'reality' is contained within 'the eternal principles of God's Word', and the church should match up to this reality. Church growth principles and megachurch exponents usually attempt to argue for this axiom, and what does not fit into this axiom is necessarily defined out of existence. We will explore in a later section the nature of this rhetoric. Namely, the ways in which discourses of church growth principles and megachurch exponents are constructed to achieve certain goals.

This will primarily consist of a broadly contextual theological approach to the subject, taking into account some of the fusions of culture and contemporary Christianity that have given rise to the phenomenon of the megachurch. This will begin with a brief introductory ethnographic account of one megachurch (scene-setting, in effect), before turning to the association of size-with-success, and which is such a feature of the Church Growth Movement. This is followed, quite naturally, with an exploration of consumerism and branding in religion, as one of the ways of understating how ecclesial identity can be reinforced through the apparent experience of success and size-related congregation life. Some contextual theological critiques of this are introduced, before turning to our conclusion. The kind of contextual theological approach taken here is one that is rooted in 'grounded' ecclesiology (that is, the study of the 'real' church as it is encountered, rather than 'ideal' constructions of its reality). Moreover, this is an enterprise undertaken in a very particular kind of way – done dialogically, through judicious and selective immersion in social

sciences, cultural studies and other disciplines. (For further discussion of the approach taken here, see Markham and Daniels 2018).

2 Encountering the Megachurch

Encountering the megachurches of North America is something of a wonder. Megachurch congregations typically cater for several thousand members, employing large numbers of staff and occupying substantial sites. I have visited several over the years, and their most striking feature remains their capacity to engage with the scope of human desires. A drive to South Barrington near Chicago will surely draw even the idle-curious to Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest and most prominent megachurches in the USA. Founded by Pastor Bill Hybels in 1975, the church grew from small beginnings to a membership of several thousand in just a few years. (Hybels stepped down from his role as leader in 2018 in the wake of charges of sexual misconduct). The church today – in reality a giant conference and meeting centre, with a bookshop, several restaurants, lecture theatres and a large sanctuary – can accommodate about several thousand people at any one time. The church runs several identical services over the weekend. Like some Roman Catholic churches, there is some recognition that Sunday has evolved within American culture to becoming a family day, so church gatherings have been transferred to Saturdays. The normal Sunday Service gatherings still continue, of course. Over the course of an average weekend, Willow Creek may be able to cater for in excess of 25,000 worshippers.

The congregation is what is termed a 'Seeker Church'. These are churches that are mostly devoid of explicit religious symbolism, and the services are a fusion of uplifting folksy Christian messages, moral advice (but not too prescriptive), and some singing. The services at Willow Creek are 'performative' set pieces that adopt a 'magazine-style' format; carefully choreographed, sensitively hosted and thought-provoking. They are stirring and compelling, but without being demanding or intrusive. The message is moral, infused with Christianity. But there is little in the way of dogma or doctrine to encounter. The character of the communication is overwhelmingly affirming and positive, with message frequently dwelling on family situations or minor moral issues that are carefully unpacked and resolved.

However, it is the Resources Centre that is arguably the more striking feature of the church. The sheer range of self-help, support and encounter groups is overwhelming. There are several types of social groups: bowling, soccer and other leisure pursuits for all ages. The therapeutic provision is comprehensive

and engaging. There are groups for 'Moms and Daughters Hurting', 'Fathers and Sons Bonding', individuals coping with their own sexuality, or individuals who suspect that they might have problems with the sexuality of their partner. There are support groups offering counselling, help through bereavement, loss, eating disorders (obesity and anorexia), and more besides. On my visit there I counted more than forty different kinds of self-help, therapeutic and support groups, and several dozen groups devoted to sport and leisure activity. The total numbers involved ran into several thousand persons.

Compositionally, Willow Creek's membership mostly reflects its context. The congregation are mainly white, affluent, college educated and working in the city, with a large percentage aged somewhere between 30–50. The sermons carry an evangelistic timbre coupled to a politically centrist appropriation of ethics. In some ways, the ethos of Willow Creek could be reasonably characterised as 'conservative' – in terms of family values, at least. But this does not translate into a specific kind of politics, particularly. So, there are activist and advocacy groups that some members of the congregation participate in – covering food banks, immigration, literacy and credit unions, for example. Willow Creek primarily represents the arrival of a distinctive brand of consumer church: worship, lunch, family activities, leisure events and self-help groups fuse together in a seamless spiritual-consumerist experience. The division between the secular and sacred is some extent obviated by the church. The sheer size of the operation ensures a remarkable comprehensiveness.

'Seeker Churches' of this kind exist in various forms throughout North America in a variety of denominational guises, although they are predominantly evangelical and charismatic in ethos. Bill Hybels, (former) pastor of Willow Creek Church in South Barrington, Chicago, is widely regarded as their pioneer. Seeker Churches deliberately set out to remove all 'churchy' barriers that might prevent people from attending or joining churches. Thus, at the Willow Creek church itself, there are no robed ministers, no hymn books, no altar, nor obvious Christian symbolism. The church 'services', as such, resemble accessible 'magazine style' TV chat shows – interviews, features, 'staged' discussions or seminars, and perhaps some drama. The church attracts enquirers and committed members, and aims to cultivate patterns of Christian lifestyle that resonate with contemporary culture.

In contrast, a visit to Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, offers a more familiar type of megachurch. Over 50,000 weekly attendees, and several million watching on livestreaming in over 100 countries opens a window on a highly accessible 'Word of Faith' preaching ministry. The sermons from Pastor Osteen Key are recognisably shaped by the (so-called) 'health, wealth and prosperity' movement. But one can also detect influences from Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*, 1952), whose legacy was

most obviously manifest in Robert Schuller's ministry and the once startling Crystal Cathedral in California. There is more than a hint of Protestant positivism and pragmatism to the messages: personal salvation; the believer taking responsibility for their life (that is, their health, wealth and human flourishing); and their overall potential. To some extent, another obvious influence upon the movement, sociologically, is a belief in an ever-growing economy. Houston, like much of Texas, is prosperous. Although exponents of megachurches would not explicitly articulate such a view, their actual assumption about investment and return assumes a pattern of exponential economic growth. In such cultures, where growth is assumed, megachurches thrive, unquestioned.

Megachurches that draw on these cultural and spiritual roots have become an enduring feature of the Protestant Evangelical and Pentecostal landscape of North America. Pat Robertson, Kenneth Copeland, William Branham and Oral Roberts are names that jostle for pre-eminence. Others, such as Jim Bakker, Morris Cerullo and Jimmy Swaggart have also seen the size of their churches and ministries grow substantially, although they have also struggled with financial, reputational and personal crises that have cast some doubt on the movement as a whole.

Further afield, Paul Yonggi Cho, at one time the pastor of the world's largest church in Seoul, South Korea, offered a distinctive brand of megachurch, shaped by health and wealth teaching fused to Korean culture and its newly modernised economic expectations. In Brazil, Edir Macedo's Universal Church of God's Kingdom has claimed more than six million followers spread over 85 countries. Macedo, a former sales assistant in a lottery shop, headed a church that owned a bank, a soccer team and various media outlets (radio, TV, newspapers, social media, and so forth), with the organisation once enjoying an estimated annual turnover of over \$1 billion (USD).

Megachurches of this kind are successful, in financial terms; and they like to talk about their success, and encourage followers to share in that success 'that God wills for his own'. As Kate Bowler (2013) points out, the favoured biblical text that underpins this dogma is found in Mark 11:24: "... whatever you desire, when you pray, believe that you shall receive them, and you shall have them....". It is on the basis of this last point that the health and wealth movement is dubbed 'Name it and Claim it'.

3 The Rhetoric of Possibility – Church Growth and the Megachurch

Rhetoric, classically, is part of the trivium of grammar, rhetoric and logic. Grammar is the specific art of the ordering of words (like narrative), and logic

is the art of producing meaning, although logic and meaning can be the same thing. In the past suspicion with rhetoric both as a creative and as a critical activity has sometimes meant that assertive, descriptive or factual writing has been viewed as a direct union between grammar and logic. Yet it is probably true that the only road between grammar and logic “runs through the intermediate territory of rhetoric” (Frye 1957: 331; see also Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, and Vickers 1988). Northrop Frye has divided rhetoric into two types or stages: Ornamental and Persuasive speech or writing. ‘Ornamental rhetoric’ attempts skilfully and admirably to state the case for its audience. ‘Persuasive rhetoric’ tries to lead the audience kinetically towards a course of action. In other words, one articulates the state of play, the other manipulates or directs it.

In view of this, it is important to recognise that the rhetoric of the church growth movement and that of megachurches – with all the manuals, books, courses, exponents and other forms of apologia – is a presentation of or an argument for a particular type of Christianity, supported by ‘evidence’. This ‘evidence’ might be an increase in numerical growth in the congregation, more people ‘equipped’ with spiritual gifts, or just a more ‘powerful’ church. This is essentially apologetics, but re-presented as ‘science’.

The unfolding as well as the starting point of such apologetics presupposes the agreement of the audience. When a speaker or writer selects and puts forward an argument, reliance upon the basic adherence of the audience to the underlying premises is crucial, before propositions or arguments can be developed. Thus, acceptance of the principles advocated is usually dependent on the audience agreeing in the first place about the present nature of the church (for example, weak, powerless, etc), of God (for example, strong, powerful, etc) and of creation. In this way, it is common to encounter church growth and megachurch literature introducing itself by pointing to slow or no growth in church life, or ‘nominal’ church attendance in the western world, in contrast to the booming growth in some Developing World countries. Thus, the establishment or selection of a proper ‘context’ is a necessarily rhetorical device; it sets the stage for subsequent presentations of Christianity. Frequently, such presentations are rhetorical ‘alloys’: positive thinking fused with passionate faith; pragmatism with ecclesial polity; expansive capitalism with Christianity.

Examples of this sort of contextual rhetoric abound in church growth and megachurch literature, as the functional use of statistics in the church growth courses illustrates. For example, if Pentecostal ‘converts’ in Latin America can rise from 20,000 in 1900 to 20 million by 1980, “why can’t God do something similar in your neighbourhood?”. Testimony to growth in one area, compared with no testimony of (measurable) growth in the audience’s area, begs a

contextual rhetorical question. In a similar way, it is quite common to find church growth literature and megachurch exponents drawing a distinction between 'dead' and 'alive' churches. There can actually be no such thing as a 'dead' church; logically, the phrase is an oxymoron. Yet terms like 'dead' and 'alive' are used to denote those with the 'right attitude' to evangelism, worship, spiritual gifts, and so on. And because no one actually wants to be part of a 'dead' church, audiences are often persuaded to select the life-giving formulas and principles that will ensure that their church is saved from decay.

Persuasive discourse is effective because of its insertion as a whole into a situation which is itself usually rather complicated. Since the various elements of the discourse interact with one another, both the scope of argumentation and the order of arguments need to be looked at with care. Having established context, it is important that the next stage of rhetorical argument is exegesis or eisegesis: appealing to sources or authorities, seemingly beyond the realm of the specific argument or possible self-interest of the rhetorician. In church growth and megachurch literature, statistics can again be functionally applied here, or perhaps the nature of God appealed to, given the context already set by the type of worship employed. The Bible is often used too, since it apparently contains – according to church growth and megachurch literature – formulas and strategies for church growth, and reveals that growth-related principles are “on the heart of God”.

There are numerous examples of selective exegesis or eisegesis. For example, one might expect Matthew 22:36–38 to form the heart of a mission strategy for a church under any normal circumstances; love of God and neighbour was what Jesus himself described as the only 'great' command. But in church growth and megachurch rhetoric, Matthew 28:18–20 is the key text for mission; it is the 'Great Commission'. This is partly because it permits a mechanistic view of conversion, and discipleship, but also because it can be specifically interpreted from the axiom of correspondence to suit existing church growth principles that support megachurch identity (Hopewell 1987).

Much of Donald McGavran's *Understanding Church Growth* (1970) is devoted to establishing the centrality of Matthew 28:18–20 and thereafter drawing CGM principles from the text. Similarly, the work of James Engel serves the cause by grading responses to God using a scale. Beginning with no personal knowledge of God (minus ten), the scale ascends to the Matthean text, which is the pivotal point (zero) at which a new disciple is born. A new convert can then go on in the faith, passing 'stages' evaluated and numbered from one to ten. The development of this mechanistic approach church growth and megachurch discourse can be seen in the final stage of the rhetorical argument, which is usually the identification of principles (from the previous stage of

argument) culminating in 'application'. Like rhetoric, mechanistic approaches to Christianity focus on the effectiveness of a proposal, and therefore usually operate according to rational principles. This final phase of the rhetorical argument is crucial to church growth and megachurch apologists, since these are the directives or principles that the audience is being led to, and being persuaded to adopt. These are the governing formulas of successful church growth, and are the result of applying the exegesis or eisegesis that came out of the context.

Of course these applications, isolated here for study, form part of the whole rhetorical discourse and are in constant interaction at more than one level: interaction between various arguments and presuppositions that are put forward, interaction between the arguments and the overall drive of the rhetoric; between the arguments and their conclusions, and, finally, between the arguments occurring in the discourse and those that are about the discourse. Yet it must be noted that directives and principles are not the same as 'logic'. Logic aims at articulating truth, whereas the goal of rhetoric is the adherence of the audience or judge.

So, the applications or conclusions of church growth *apologia* and typical megachurch rhetoric are designed to be effective in action (mechanistic) and thus convincing to the audience. But that effectiveness includes supporting the supporting rhetoric and the choices of context. Peter Wagner again provides an excellent illustration of this as he describes on several occasions the 'Seven Vital Signs' of a 'healthy church':

- A pastor who is a possibility thinker and whose dynamic leadership has been used to catalyse the entire church into action for growth.
- A well-mobilised laity which has discovered, has developed and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth.
- A church big enough to provide the range of services that meet the needs of and expectations of all its members.
- A proper balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation and cell.
- A membership drawn primarily from one homogeneous unit.
- Evangelistic methods that have proved to make disciples.
- Priorities arranged in biblical order (Gibbs 1981: 228; Wagner 1976: 159; see also 1981 and 1989).

Wagner's vital signs are, of course, packed with persuasive power. Indeed, he uses numerous images of power or mechanism to induce his audience: dynamics, catalysis, mobilisation, size, range, balance, unit, priority, and order. A 'healthy church' is clearly going to be one in which there is a lot of 'energy'. Church growth and megachurch literature typically argues for and presents us

with this view of Christianity: the successful church is a 'power-packed' one, and God himself, the supreme power-packed being, is just waiting to energise his people.

James Hopewell's exemplary deconstruction of such ecclesial rhetoric takes this kind of approach to church growth to task (Hopewell 1987: 23–36). Rhetoric of this kind has attracted suspicion in the past for its corruptibility for precisely these reasons: manipulation, lack of proper debate and subsequent loss of true freedom for the adherents. In addition, bad rhetoric is usually a sign that what is actually being witnessed to in the discourse is of itself corrupt. Church growth apologetics and megachurch exponents drive a complex ecclesial panacea. They advocate a 'problem-centred' missional activity or curative that is obsessed with power in God and in the church: simplistic, dismissive and pragmatic in orientation, yet complex; mechanistic in composition, yet dualistic and romantic in its theology and worldview. Seeing the discourses of the church growth and megachurch language as 'rhetoric' though, as well as how the rhetoric is structured, only partly supports this proposition.

Church growth and megachurch literature ultimately offers us a window into a type of flawed missiology, expressed in 'bad' rhetoric, that protects and addresses forces that 'win' and 'influence' adherents in a manipulative way to a Christianity that is flawed. The realities that the church growth and megachurch exponents witness to are twofold: 'power' (in God, church and individuals) and 'mechanism' which both communicates and searches for power. Like a classic heresy, it is right in some things it affirms; but arguably corrupt in what it denies. The world church growth and the megachurch represent a selective form of theological realism, which is emphasised by rhetorical means, but by its axiomatic approach denies other equally important fundamental realities.

But to leave the criticism at this point might just imply that church growth and megachurch outlooks are a perversion of something that is basically sound. Yet the very vehicle and content of Christian communication is under scrutiny here. The church growth and megachurch advocates present a brand of Christianity rhetorically, and in largely functional terms. It is useful for meeting individuals or groups in need, averting anxieties or crises, overcoming limitations, or other problems. It is a pathological approach to mission. Adoption of this kind of Christianity heals and repairs what has gone wrong. The seductiveness of this approach is that it is partly correct. There is indeed good news for every painful, needy and problematic situation or person.

The flaw lies in the fact that it ties God into an axiomatic relationship with the world, in which God's communication and being centre on personal or corporate problem-solving activity. It fails to acknowledge God's freedom inside and outside creation, inside and outside the Church, as well as inside and

outside invented or perceived axioms. In short, it fails to acknowledge God's total abundance and dynamism, and the centrality of the missiological approach shifts quickly and imperceptibly from being dynamically theocentric to being problem-centred. That is to say, the identity of God becomes too linked to limitations or problems, and therefore limited. What needs to be appreciated is that God is already ahead of all evangelism, mission and church growth. God's abundance is poured out way beyond all the principles, pragmatism, and power-producing-paradigms that might be devised and divulged by church growth exponents and megachurch advocates. But as we shall now see, the advocacy of principles, pragmatism and power-producing-paradigms is rooted in the very culture of capitalism and consumerism, in which church growth and megachurches inevitably flourish.

4 Megachurches in an Age of Consumerism and Market Branding

As we indicated at the outset, it is not easy to understand megachurches without some comprehension of the broader cultural context from which they emerge. One key interpretative lens might be to see megachurches as complementary religious by-products in an age of consumerism. Our contemporary culture is one in which consumerism and marketisation are largely taken for granted. And it follows quite naturally that religion – in all its forms – is part and parcel of such a consumerist culture.

There is a broad and burgeoning field of literature that addresses this quite distinctive phenomenon in North American culture. However, we begin this section by carefully noting other critiques of megachurches. One of the better guides to the field is Scott Thumma and Dave Travis' scholarly study (2007). In this carefully constructed study – full of data, interviews and analysis – the authors show that megachurches are (in no particular order) not places that achieve their size through a developed personality cult centred on the leader. Nor are they especially homogenous (though they may contain a broad range of homogenous groups who don't often interact – a standard approach to church growth). Nor are megachurches guilty of putting quantity before quality, and of 'dumbing down' the faith to reach a wider audience. And interestingly, megachurches do surprisingly little to emphasise their size. Thumma and Travis sensibly 'normalise' the megachurch movement, by simply pointing out that they tend to be well led, well marketed, and enjoy some kind of prominent identity within a crowded and competitive marketplace.

In my view, it is more useful to conceive of megachurches as exemplars of branding and marketisation in religion, rather than dwelling on size. Brand

loyalty, consumer-focussed religion and spiritual choice play their part in the marketplace of contemporary spirituality. Jean-Claude Usunier and Jorg Stölz's study (2014), the editors propose a straightforward premise for understanding the cultural context with which we are concerned. Namely, that during the twentieth century, and the early twenty-first century, religion features within the market place of modernity as much as it also shaped consumerist trends more generally. Churches and religious groups have been pressed into 'selling' God in order to appear more attractive to potential 'religious consumers'.

Market-based competition between denominations and religions is not new, of course; it is as old as conversion itself. So is branding. The cross is the enduring symbol for Christianity: the ultimate logo that defines the brand. But what is new today, perhaps, is seeing religions and faiths as 'brands', with identities that can be packaged and promoted. Megachurches are just particularly successful exemplars of religious consumerist choice within this marketplace. Such ecclesial organisations and identities strive to maintain their loyal customer base, but also reach potential new markets and individual consumers, who are perhaps dissatisfied with their present identity and choices.

This does leave some questions, however. One wonders, for example, if Donald McGavran's 'homogenous unit principle' (that is, like attracts like) for church numerical growth – popularised in the post-war era and promoted strongly by some missionaries – is anything more than sacralised branding and marketing? McGavran's brand of market-led missiology led many an evangelist down a well-trodden path, paved with the benefits of North American pragmatism coupled to capitalism – the latter treated like some sort of apotheosis. The likes of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale were simply the Old Testament Fathers to church leaders such as Robert Schuller – an emergent New Testament heir of 'positive thinking', late capitalism and post-modern branding. Schuller and his followers recruited marketisation into the service of faith. But the likes of Schuller, and other megachurch exponents, have also recruited religion into the market. Faith is a business. And business needs faith. Within the context of this ecclesial petri-dish, a megachurch culture is relatively easy to grow. Moreover, exported to the right kind of host (that is, culture, context, church, etc.), it is utterly infectious.

The engagement of Protestant Christianity in suburban North America can in some sense to have penetrated deeply, and been largely successful. But the success is not without a price, and the hybridity of expressions of cultural-Christianity has led to the development of significant frameworks of faith and paradigms of ecclesial polity that are deeply indebted to consumerism. These ecclesial expressions are branded, marketed sold to consumers, so re-defining and re-branding everyday faith, such that it became contiguous with the

American dream. So health, wealth and prosperity are available every believer; with guaranteed annual growth for all successful, well-run churches. In America, it is always hard to say where business and ends and religion begins. The two are not so much joined at the hip as genetically spliced together. As Gibson Winter (1961) once observed, America's churches are in a kind of 'suburban captivity' – individualist, aspirational, capitalist and success-seeking. To speak of markets and faith, is simply to describe what any visitor can encounter, on countless billboards strewn across any freeway, or any advertisement on TV or radio. In the USA, religion is branded and sold, like any other commodity. Megachurches are just another example of this.

But does it really make any sense to talk about 'consumer religion' in relation to megachurches? Hall, Neitz and Battani's study of culture is riddled with references to the power of consumerism – one in which religion has been marginalised to a large extent: pushed into the sphere of the private (2003: 130ff, 250ff, etc). So megachurches can represent a very public and sizeable refutation of such marginalisation. Equally, McDannell's (1995) work shows that Christianity's absorption with consumerist culture is long-standing, but has accelerated in the capitalist optimism of the post-war years. Again, we can see megachurches as a by-product of this culture. McDannell examines how the production of religion has shifted from the textual (that is, books, tracts, etc.) to encompass the ephemeral (for example, baseball caps, fridge magnets, etc.). Megachurches are particularly prolific at producing signs and symbols of branding and belonging. The worshipper-consumer-member symbolises their participation in something manifestly expansive and successful. Tom Beau-doin's *Consuming Faith* (2003) suggests that membership of megachurches can potentially offer "[integration] – who we are with what we buy". Interestingly, the premise of this thesis is that what individuals buy, eat and wear says much about their deepest values. So in megachurches such as Willow Creek, and discussed earlier, we can see that the bespoke support groups, shops and restaurants are natural complements to the megachurch culture. It should be noted that Beau-doin's thesis calls for a deeper critical wisdom in engaging with consumerist culture – but otherwise sees no way out of it, and accepts it as a given.

5 Critical Perspectives

Unsurprisingly, the megachurch movement has had many critics within practical theology and missiology. Liberation theologians have attacked the movement for its absorption with prosperity. Others have attacked the movement

for its deficient (simplistic?) hermeneutics. Others have pointed towards the potential of psychological and pastoral damage that can be done to those who fail to receive either (much-promised) health or wealth, and are forced to conclude that this is their own fault, due to a lack of faith. Others regard the megachurch movement – with its emphasis on homogenous unit principles – as a deviant form of ecclesial orthopraxy that runs counter to the true nature and purpose of the Church. Others, that the emphasis on growth and success runs counter to the church where the primary calling is to one of faithfulness. More generally, it is hard to imagine recent and contemporary commentators who address ecclesiology writers such as Ched Myers, Stanley Hauerwas, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Walter Wink, Walter Brueggemann Miroslav Volf and Dietrich Bonhoeffer quickly come to mind as having much sympathy with a market-led and business-like approach to mission, and the kind of approach to recruitment that megachurches might adopt.

Wendell Berry's work has drawn attention to the difference between agriculture and agri-business (see Peters 2007), and then framing this discussion within a contextual theological and ecclesiological debate. Berry's distinction is suggestive for megachurches. Is the 'mass production' of these ecclesial behemoths really a better mode of ecclesial being than something that is relatively small, sustainable, organic and local? Speaking of 'organic', James Hopewell's contextual theological critique of the 'mechanistic' negotiation and worldview offers a suggestive perspective on megachurches (Hopewell 1987). If these enormous churches are essentially engineered and geared up for perpetual growth, then what is the impact on the dweller (or buyer), the neighbourhood, and the overall spiritual prioritisations of such congregations? Gibson Winter's (1961) analysis of the 'suburban captivity' of churches also offers a potential critical lens through which megachurches might be assessed.

As suggested earlier, the premise of megachurch thinking is that growth and size are unquestionably good. So, resources and thinking are placed at the disposal of such reification, in the wider cause of mission and ministry. In effect, the missiology and ecclesiology of megachurches are typically shaped by a cocktail of rational-pragmatic thinking. This, any kind of science, engineering, management consultancy, marketing, selling, group dynamics, communications – to name but a few – have an inordinate influence over the theological and spiritual character of a given megachurch congregation. Thus, and as we saw earlier, C. Peter Wagner expressed the growth-size worldview-horizon so typical of most megachurches with remarkable clarity:

Church growth is that *science* which investigates the planting, multiplication, function and health of Christian churches...., Church growth strives

to combine the eternal theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences, employing as its initial frame of reference, the foundational work done by Donald McGavran....

McGavran's approach to church growth was, in effect, a cocktail of pragmatics, blended together with a relatively simplistic and highly partial hermeneutical reading of New Testament approaches to mission. But this approach to mission had its critics, perhaps most notably Lesslie Newbigin:

Modern capitalism has created a world totally different from anything known before. Previous ages have assumed that resources are limited and that economics – housekeeping – is about how to distribute them fairly. Since Adam Smith, we have learned to assume that exponential growth is the basic law of economics and that no limits can be set to it. The result is that increased production has become an end in itself; products are designed to become rapidly obsolete so as to make room for more production; a minority is ceaselessly urged to multiply its wants in order to keep the process going while the majority lacks the basic necessities for existence; and the whole ecosystem upon which human life depends is threatened with destruction.

NEWBIGIN 1986: 38

This might seem to sufficient as a critique, in effect framing church growth thinking and megachurches within the ecology of capitalism. But Newbigin turns the critique into something altogether more surprising, and here perhaps has in mind the metaphor of the Church as a body (*Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 3:6 and 5:23; Colossians 1:18 and Colossians 1:24*):

Growth is for the sake of growth and is not determined by any overarching social purpose. And that, of course, is an exact account of the phenomenon which, when it occurs in the human body, is called cancer. In the long perspective of history, it would be difficult to deny that the exuberant capitalism of the past 250 years will be diagnosed in the future as a desperately dangerous case of cancer in the body of human society – if indeed this cancer has not been terminal and there are actually survivors around to make *the diagnosis*.

NEWBIGIN 1986: 38

Karl Barth, although not writing about megachurches in this passage, nonetheless goes further, and resonates with Newbigin:

The true growth which is the secret of the up-building of the community is not extensive but intensive; its vertical growth in height and depth..... It is not the case that its intensive increase necessarily involves an extensive. We cannot, therefore, strive for vertical renewal merely to produce greater horizontal extension and a wider audience.... If it [the Church and its mission] is used only as a means of extensive renewal, the internal will at once lose its meaning and power. It can be fulfilled only for its own sake, and then – unplanned and unarranged – it will bear its own fruits.

BARTH 1958: 648

As Albert Einstein once opined, not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that is counted, counts. Counting ‘members’ or the hard, inner core of congregational attendees does not tell the whole story; indeed, it does not even account for the half of it. The mission of the Church is a vocation to serve communities, not just convert individuals into members and grow that body exponentially. Partly for this reason, the insights of Barth, Newbigin and other interlocutors may suggest the megachurch exponents perhaps ought to be more cautious when it comes to framing ministerial and missional paradigms ecclesial life in growth-success related moulds. As one writer puts it:

What is happening to ministries that equip the saints for the work of service when we adopt the language and values of the corporate world and describe ministers as Chief Executive Officers, Heads of Staff, Executive Pastors, Directors of this and that? Why is it that ministers’ studies have become offices? [This] may be superficial evidences of the problem.... [but it is what happens] when the values of the corporate world join with the values of the market place in the church.

GUDER 2015: 37

Guder’s missiological and ecclesial assessment articulates what many critics of the church growth movement and megachurches are thinking. Namely, that for all the apparent success, there is an underlying functionalism that may be doing significant damage to organic nature of ecclesial polity. The apparent success may, in fact, turn out to be a significant betrayal of identity, and undermine the actual mission of the church:

The more the Church is treated as an organisation, the more its mission becomes focused on techniques designed to maximise output and productivity. We become obsessed with quantity instead of quality, and where we have a care for quality, it is only to serve the larger goal of increasing quantity. The Church moves to becoming a managed machine, with its managers judging their performance by growth-related metrics.

GUDER 2017: 37

One obvious pinnacle of megachurch philosophy and church growth advocacy that we have not yet touched on is the Health, Wealth and Prosperity Movement. The world's largest megachurch – South Korea's Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul – was led by Paul Yonggi Cho, and exponent not just of the megachurch, but also teaching centred on health, wealth and prosperity. The equation between investment and growth in these churches is interesting to note (Cho 1979). Many of these megachurches require believers to tithe (that is, give 10 percent of their income) to the church. No gift would be said to lead to no growth. But some churches go further, and argue that God will not only match the gifts of believers with assurance and blessing, but will actually *multiply* those gifts, and return them to the individual.

Exponents of this teaching – such as Morris Cerullo – have gone further and suggested that believers can expect a 'sevenfold' increase on their gift or investment. For every one dollar that believers donate, they could expect to receive the equivalent of seven back, either through promotion at work, good fortune, or other means. Ironically, Cerullo has appealed for such generous giving from supporters in order to help him evade the deepening debt that had threatened to curtail his ministry. A variant on this teaching would be the 'seed faith' practice of Oral Roberts. Believers are encouraged to make their offering, even if (or especially if) they are in financial difficulty. Only by giving will believers be able to receive – "your return, poured into your lap, will be great, pressed down and running over" (Oral Roberts, quoted in Hadden and Shupe 1988: 31).

Other exponents have suggested that the gospel *guarantees* health and wealth to believers who have realised their sanctified and empowered status. Thus, all the believer needs to do is have the necessary amount of faith to claim their God-given heritage – a mixture of heavenly and earthly rewards. Correspondingly, poverty is seen as the outcome of a lack of faith. The ultimate premise of the health and wealth ideology – sometimes called "name it and claim it" – is that there is no blessing or gift that God would wish to deny [his] people, because God is a God of love, generosity and abundance. "God does not want you to be poor" is the frequently cited mantra of the movement. Again, examples of this in practice might include Oral Roberts' advocacy of a 'Blessing

Pact'; in return for donations from believers, their financial, spiritual, relational and health concerns will be addressed.

The roots of the Health, Wealth and Prosperity movement are certainly complex. Culturally, they can be traced to the very origins of American entrepreneurial frontier religion – the independent preacher that went from town to town, 'selling' the gospel, and establishing networks of followers who supported the ministry by purchasing tracts and subscribing to newsletters that tended to develop distinctive and novel teachings that were not found within mainstream denominations. Fused together with 'New Thought', pragmatism and materialism, the movement is, in a sense, distinctively American. Indeed, the Health, Wealth and Prosperity gospel can be said to be rooted in a distinctive 'American dream' (success, prosperity, etc), even though the movement is now encountered all over the world.

This leads us, finally in this section, to debate whether megachurches represent a critique of American culture, or rather are (merely) accommodations of that culture. H. Richard Niebuhr's (1951) work has done much to shape theological thinking in culture-Christianity deliberations. Niebuhr draws his definition of culture from Malinowski (see Malinowski 1944: 43) and describes culture as an "artificial, secondary environment" which humanity imposes on 'the natural', comprising "language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artefacts, technical processes and values" (1951: 32). This leads Niebuhr to suggest that culture has four hallmarks: it is social; it is a human achievement; it is a world of values (their temporal and material realisation, as well as their conservation); and it is pluralism. Megachurches, as a phenomenon, clearly fit within this paradigm.

Niebuhr suggests that there are five theological responses to the complexity of a Christian faith immersed in culture. The first type stresses the opposition between Christ and culture, which Niebuhr characterises as an almost tribal mindset: "missionaries who require their converts to abandon wholly the customs and institutions of so-called 'heathen' societies" (1951: 41).

This is the Christ *against* culture, with Niebuhr offering Tertullian as prototypical exponent. The second type is diametrically opposed to the first: "there is a fundamental agreement between Christ and culture" (1951: 42). This is the Christ who is *of* or *for* – the fulfilment of cultural aspiration, with Schleiermacher and liberal Protestantism in general cited for support. Type one sees faith living in contemporary culture as mainly a matter of resistance, and if necessary, withdrawal (for example, Brethren, and other communitarian Christian groups). Type two understands that for faith to flourish in contemporary culture, it is best-guaranteed through forms of accommodation, including social relevance and enculturation.

Niebuhr then offers three further types, all of which are related. Type three is synthetic in character, seeking to show that although culture may lead people to Christ, Christ nevertheless enters culture from without: this is the Christ *above* culture. Aquinas or Hooker would be good examples of this position, stressing as they do the laws and principles that may lead to humanity closer to God, but are not in themselves a substitute for encounter or revelation. The fourth type is something of a paradox: the claims of Christ are not to be compromised with secular society, yet God requires obedience to civil authorities. This is a more sophisticated version of type one, recognising that Christians live in a *relation of paradox* with the world which they are committed to being involved with: Luther is offered as “the greatest representative of this type” (1951: 44). Finally, the fifth type is *conversionist* in outlook; the Christian neither withdraws from the world nor blends in with it. Rather, Christ transforms culture: Calvin and Augustine are cited as the chief exponent of this theological worldview (1951: 45).

Niebuhr sees the last three types as being closely related, since they all accept a form of mediation in which both Christ and culture are distinguished and affirmed. However, Niebuhr was also aware that there was fluidity between these types: “strange family resemblances may be found along the whole scale” (1951: 40). Niebuhr’s work was far ahead of its time in its attempt to categorise Christian engagements with culture, at a point in history when pluralism was surfacing as a serious missiological issue for the churches.

However, what we can say with some clarity that megachurches represent Niebuhr’s second type of engagement: primarily an accommodation of (American) contemporary culture. Megachurches are typically positivist, pragmatic and mechanistic (Hopewell 1987). They are consumerist, branded and marketed – to a public who are all too conscious of being spiritual consumers. Megachurches tend to be conservative and individualistic, focussing on a cluster of contemporary cultural tropes: life-enhancing, enabling, fulfilling, meaning-seeking, personal, bonding, therapeutic – and ultimately satisfying. They ‘add value’ to customers. They are organisational, business-like, focussed on programme-effectiveness and measurable results. In some sense, they are strangely secular as phenomena, as they also mirror that same culture which is absorbed with increased size and growth, and which reads such results as signs of success and blessing.

Ultimately, there is great risk for the Church investing in an uncritical stress on growth, mission and organisation. For when this is not rooted in deep and dense inhabitations and articulations of its ethos and virtues, the church easily slides into organisational ennui. John Fitzmaurice’s essay (2016) on virtues and values in ecclesiology calls the Church back to those guiding lights and principles that should ultimately shape its life and identity. Those values that are

located and locked into an ecology of (what he terms) ‘virtue ecclesiology’, and prioritise dignity over achievement, equality over advancement, and trust more than efficiency. Virtue ecclesiology interrogates that standards of the world, and calls the Church to live more fully as God’s redeemed community – to be the life and vision of the Kingdom of God, proclaimed and enacted by Jesus Christ. The Church is to become the body of Christ.

Fitzmaurice’s work reminds us that the work of the Church may not be best-judged by the usual metrics of success that other (worldly) organisations might use to measure themselves. The Church does not exist to grow exponentially. The Church does not exist to compete with the world on the world’s terms. The Church does not do itself justice if it imagines that success is an indicator of faithfulness. So, the numerical growth of the Church cannot be a greater priority than the foundational mandate set before us by Jesus. To state this more boldly, Fitzmaurice understands that a *good* Church – one that embodies goodness – but may not show tangible effectiveness, is a far more faithful model of discipleship than some seemingly effective Church that struggles to be truly good. There are, perhaps, a surprising number of examples of the latter – effective churches that are numerically growing, but actually model a degree of unkindness and hostility to the stranger, the alien and to other groups: growing, yes – but not *good*. Some small, struggling churches, in contrast, turn out to be essentially faithful – but may never reach any kind of size, let alone become a megachurch.

One example of this might be the immediate aftermath of ‘Hurricane Harvey’, and which hit parts of Texas in August 2017. Many small churches in Houston opened their doors to victims, medical support agencies and emergency services. But Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church – Houston’s megachurch – remained closed. Lakewood Church declared it was inaccessible due to severe flooding, and so refused to participate in the relief programmes embarked upon by other churches to provide essential space for food, medical care and shelter for those made homeless. In fact, the church was wholly undamaged by the hurricane. It appears it was simply unwilling to let the space be used by others – a facility that could accommodate almost 17,000 people. Only when social media posts showed the church to be in pristine condition did it eventually open the doors to those who had lost their homes, other victims of the storm – and the emergency services.

6 Conclusion

At this juncture, it would be neglectful for a contextual theologian not to reflect just a little on the scriptures. The gospels provide both subtle and supple

material for the Church to engage with when it comes to considering mission and numerical church growth. Jesus told a number of parables about growth, and they are all striking for their simplicity and surprise. Especially the allegory of the sower (Matthew 13:3–9, etc.). And perhaps especially for those committed to megachurches. For what Jesus is saying to the Church is this: have regard for your neighbour's context and conditions. Particularly those people and places that work in different contexts, represented in the parable by the soil-related metaphors. For not all ground is conducive for growth. Some churches succeed because they happen to be rooted in good soil. Some struggle, not because of lack of their lack of faith or enterprise, but purely because the soil is different. So the parable is an invitation to be open-minded and open-hearted about other contexts. In ecclesial terms, the parable encourages churches to be good and virtuous first and foremost, and so see their neighbour differently – not competitively or indifferently.

One might work in a context with the richest soil, where every seed planted springs to life. The seasons are kind; the vegetation lush; the harvest plentiful. But some places are stony ground; and faithful mission and ministry in that field might be picking out the rocks for several generations. Others labour under conditions where the seeds are often destroyed before they can ever germinate. Or perhaps the weather is extreme in other places, and here we may find that although initial growth is quick, it seldom lasts.

The parable throws a question back to the Church: what kind of growth can one expect from the ground and conditions one work with? And this is where our current unilateral emphasis on numerical church growth can be so demoralising and disabling. Is it really the case that every leader of a megachurch and of exponential numerical church growth is a more spiritually faithful and technically-gifted pastor than their less successful neighbour? The parable says 'no' to this. It implies that some churches labour in harsh conditions; some fairer. So the parable invites us to be wise to the different contexts in which our individual and collective ministries take place.

An appreciation of virtue ecclesiology teaches a kind of generous orthodoxy – that there are many different kinds of growth to be celebrated and shared in God's kingdom – and that in God's eyes, all have value. The only true aim a church can have is to be the fullest expression of God's goodness and love. This is because, ultimately, ecclesiology is simply the social-institutional reification of the Theology, Christology and Pneumatology of a denomination. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit worshipped, adored, manifest and immanent in a given congregation and ecclesial community manifests itself in our aesthetics, structures, governance, polity, mission and praxis. The Father, Son and Holy

Spirit a church believes in and worships – consciously and unconsciously – is what is ultimately reified in denominational-congregational-institutional life.

Thus, a belief in a broad, deep, relaxed, non-intervening God will lead, most likely, to a fairly mellow, non-intense church. A subscription to an intense and passionate theology will most likely result in that being manifest in worship and polity – formal and informal. Adherence to a God who frets about the state of the world, might be angry about our state of being and anxious to save souls, will, inevitably, lead to a fretful polity that is anxiety-ridden about those who are not ‘members’ (that is, saved). A belief in a mechanistic theology in which programme centred on effectiveness and growth are more or less guaranteed, provided principles are discerned and closely applied, will lead to a particular kind of efficient and success-orientated church – and most likely result in some kind of expression of megachurch.

So one observation to make about megachurches – and perhaps all churches – is to say that a truly virtuous church will rise above such paradigms, and try to see the world as God sees it; and love the church as Christ loves it. After all, the scriptures do testify to a God that counts *generously*. The poor, the lame, the sick, the sinners; all are promised a place at God’s table in his kingdom. That’s why Jesus was seldom interested in *quantity*; the Kingdom is about small numbers and enriching *quality*.

Yet contemporary culture appears to be obsessed with measuring by things by size (which usually equates to success), and by numbers, further judging success from this. A contextual theological critique of this turn in ecclesial modernity would simply note that God is loving enough to tell us lots of counter-cultural stories about numbers: going after one, and leaving the ninety-nine, for example (Luke 15:3–7). Or, dwelling on a single sparrow (Matthew 10: 29); or numbering the hairs left on one’s head (Matthew 10: 30). The good church – one rooted in a virtue ecclesiology rather than a size-related paradigm – does not count success in the same way the world does.

In summary, I merely observe that God’s maths is different to ours. And God does easily not concur with our obsessive ‘growth-equals-success’ panacea. No-one denies the urgency of mission, and for the Church to address numerical growth. Moreover, no-one denies the impressive organisation and scale of megachurches. But as Barth and Newbigin remind us, and quoted earlier, the Church does not exist to grow. It exists to glorify God and follow Jesus, and to be the body of Christ. After which it may grow; or it may not. Faithfulness must always be put before the search for size and success. If the Church can be good, as God is good, then our congregations might well become the places and bodies that naturally attract others. A good ecclesiology, therefore, rooted in the

God-given virtues embodied in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, gives us the only true basis for any super, natural mission.

Perhaps we need to heed John Robinson's counsel in his fine *The New Reformation* (1965, 27): "We have got to relearn that 'the house of God' is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor's hut set up in the grounds....". Put another way, the Church was only ever meant to be the constructor's cut on God's building site, which is the world. The church – even a fabulous and well-resourced megachurch – is not God's main project. The world is. Christ's life and ministry is how the church is called to be: an incorporative body that expresses the life of the Kingdom of Heaven, ultimately reconciling all things to God. Christians today assume, all too easily, that God's primary concern lies with the Church. But God's work is building a kingdom in the world – a prophetic polity rooted in abundant justice, equity and compassion. Churches are merely 'transitory temples' to achieve such ends. Churches are not God's final goal. They are rather, simply a means for God's intention in creation – a Kingdom that is to come.

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PART 2

Dynamics and Trajectories



Megachurches in the Religious Marketplace

Marc von der Ruhr

1 Introduction

Megachurches represent a relatively new way of ‘doing church’. Given the nature of their general success, their approach is likely to offer some insight as to how to be a successful church in a time when many other churches are losing congregants. As Thumma and Travis’ book title, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America’s Largest Churches* (2007) suggests, much of what many think they know about megachurches may, in fact, be incorrect. This chapter explores the strategic efforts megachurches have employed in a volatile religious marketplace to better understand their success.

The chapter begins by characterising the marketplace of religion in the USA in recent history, documenting the fluid nature of church membership resulting from a consumer driven approach to choosing a church. We then relate these trends to a significant literature drawn primarily from economics and sociology. The literature offers insights as to how and why churches succeed or fail, and then reconciles the lessons learned with the megachurch experience (the interested reader is directed to Iannaccone (1998) and Witham (2010) for comprehensive summaries of the academic literature on an economic approach to religion). In doing so, we will see that megachurches have been strategic by approaching the religious marketplace emphasising flexibility in their approach to supplying a religious product and allowing for a customised spiritual experience to attendees. We end by examining a challenge that many of the newer megachurches will need to face: that of managing pastoral succession.

2 The United States Religious Landscape

The religious marketplace of the United States is well known to be a rather competitive one. There is no state sponsored monopoly church. Instead, the freedom of religion allows United States ‘consumers’ of religion to choose from a wide variety of religions and denominations. Likewise, religious ‘entrepreneurs’ have the freedom to open new churches with the hope of attracting new members. Megachurches have thrived in this environment.

Since megachurches are a product of a competitive religious landscape, it will be helpful to consider some trends of religious participation in the United States to better contextualise how megachurches are structured. The Pew Research Center has recently published two expansive surveys of the USA religious landscape (see Pew 2008 and Pew 2015a). Each study was published the year after the survey was conducted and, in combination, they reflect many interesting facts about how religion is practiced in the USA, as well as how its practice is changing. Among the trends identified in the survey results are the following. Between 2007 and 2014, the share of the population identifying as Christian fell from 78.4 percent to 70.6 percent. This is primarily a function of a decline in Catholics and mainline Protestants. On the other end of the spectrum, the results indicate that churches in the evangelical Protestant tradition have shown modest gains in membership. The single largest growth was among the religiously unaffiliated (often referred to as 'nones').

Concomitantly, there has been a great amount of religious switching that has taken place. If Protestantism is treated as a single group, 34 percent of USA adults have switched from the religion in which they were raised. If we allow for some finer distinctions between the three major Protestant traditions (evangelical, mainline, and historically black Protestantism), the statistic rises to 42 percent. These trends are also reflected in the work by Kosmin and Keysar (2006). One last detail in the Pew surveys that will be important when we turn to megachurches is that when the Pew study provided detail in percentages of people leaving and joining a group, nondenominational churches saw a combined decrease in people leaving, and a gain in people joining the group. Thus, nondenominational churches, for whatever reason, seem to be doing well in our current religious marketplace. As we will see later in this chapter, megachurches are increasingly joining the ranks of nondenominational churches.

Last, though there are mixed results regarding winners and losers in the religious marketplace, with a general downward trend in religious belonging, measures of spirituality have simultaneously risen over these seven years. Survey questions about a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being as well as a deep sense of wonder about the universe demonstrate increases across generations ranging from the silent generation to younger millennials.

3 Megachurches' Recent Experience

When it comes to data on megachurches, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research offer regular survey results describing their recent experience. The key authors summarising the data on megachurches are Scott Thumma,

Warren Bird, and Dave Travis. Thumma et al. (2005), Thumma and Travis (2007), and Thumma and Bird (2008, 2011, 2015) document trends in megachurch growth in the USA. Highlights they find in these surveys begin to paint the picture of how megachurches are structured to negotiate the tumultuous environment in which churches today find themselves. In addition, the trends identified shed light on why they have grown so successfully.

Between 2000 and 2005, the number of megachurches doubled, growing to 1,210. Their average 5-year growth rate of megachurches founded between 1991 and 2005 was 424 percent, and their median attendance was 3,440. At the time of their 2008 survey, a result of note was that their attendance was rising without increases in their capacity, suggesting that megachurches were creative in offering more services and using multiple venues, sometimes on multiple campuses, to satisfy the demand for their services.

Another potentially enlightening fact found in the 2008 survey was that megachurches seemed to be moving away from finding pastors educated at formal pastoral schools and instead are generating their leadership from informal, internal internship programmes and clergy training. Megachurches are increasingly becoming their own replacements for denominations, thereby freeing themselves from external denominational authority. We saw evidence of this above in the increased presence of nondenominational churches. There is a movement away from specific Protestant distinctions to favouring the label of 'generic evangelism'.

In their summary of the analysis of their 2009 survey, Thumma and Bird mention that the continued growth of megachurches is fueled, in part, by new members accepting invitations by existing members to attend. Initial attractors included the church's reputation, worship style, and pastor's reputation. All of these factors also had a positive impact on long term attendance (along with the community, music/arts, and small groups). Thumma and Bird stress, and this arises with increasing frequency, that attendees are able to create a unique and customised experience through many channels that the megachurches provide. We return and discuss this in much more detail later in this chapter. There is a clear emphasis on the megachurch recognising that potential church members are consumers looking for an experience which satisfies their needs, and working to satisfy this inherent need. Since there will be diverse needs, it seems that pastors of these churches have been strategic in structuring the church to allow potential members the flexibility they require to create the experience that they want from a church.

Thumma and Bird comment on a number of common themes in their 2011 and 2015 surveys. They document continued growth, additional use of multi-site facilities, multiple services offered both in terms of time and style, and

increased denominational identity stated simply as 'evangelical'. An important thread to these findings that may likely be key to the megachurch phenomenon is adaptability, or flexibility. As examples of such flexibility, consider the following megachurch practices. Megachurches work to discover the perceived needs of potential members and accommodate these needs through a variety of services that can be fine-tuned to subsets of members' life stages and associated needs in the style and content of the service. Many megachurches employ a number of sites to make getting to church easier. They can broadcast their message through custom tailored social media. Megachurches offer small groups that cater to a variety of interests (both religious and secular). With the flexibility these practices offer, the megachurch is poised to be successful and grow.

We turn next to a brief review of the (mostly) economic literature applied to explaining religious outcomes and then more clearly explain how the deliberately chosen structure megachurches have adopted may have aided them in achieving their success.

4 An Economic Approach to Religion

Given that practicing religion is a behaviour and that it involves making choices, it is open to analysis through the lens of economics. We consequently first consider a marketplace for religion in order to more deeply explain the megachurch phenomenon. An excellent application of economic analysis to a religious marketplace is provided by Ekelund et al. (2006). They argue that since religion is a set of organised beliefs and that a church is an organised group of worshippers, it is wise to use economics to explain the behaviour of organised religion. They then proceed to carefully apply economic logic to trace the Protestant Reformation in reaction to the Catholic Church acting as a monopolist and in turn, the Catholic Church's counter-reformation.

The rise and fall of churches as evidenced by the fluid market described earlier begs the question of what makes a church succeed, or what makes a church strong. Iannaccone (1994) considers what makes a church strong, and comes to the somewhat counterintuitive conclusion that strict churches will be strong. Many at first think that this ought not be the case. If a church is strict, it is essentially charging a high price for membership and since demand curves tend to slope downward, we would expect to see less interest in the church. Iannaccone, however, astutely points out that the practice of a religion is better seen as a jointly produced experience, much like a book club, rather

than an individual pursuit. As a result, the issue of free riding enters the analysis. When we consider the fact that in any club related activity, one person's satisfaction (or utility) is a function not only of his or her effort or contribution, but also of other people's contributions. Thus, we see that if members of the group free ride, they reduce the satisfaction of other member's in the group. For a church, this means making it too 'easy' to be a member may welcome such free riding behaviour. However, if the church is clear that it is strict, meaning that it requires significant sacrifice and/or stigma, it will attract only those which are fully dedicated to the church, resulting in a strong church. Interestingly, one strategy for these strict churches to further encourage members to be dedicated to the church is to make competing (often secular) activities unavailable. This then makes the church's substitute to the secular activity experience an increase in demand.

The framework of considering ourselves in two contexts, one as consumers of religious activity, and another as consumers of secular activity provides a useful framework for distinguishing a church from a sect, and borrows from the idea of changing the relative price of religious and secular activities. Iannaccone (1988) tackles the analytical issue of distinguishing between a church and a sect in a clever manner. There has been an on-going debate about how to properly define and distinguish these two forms of religious establishments. In the past, researchers have used differences in size, exclusivity or inclusiveness, how demanding expectations are, how much secular society is rejected, and income and religiosity of members to distinguish a church from a sect.

Iannaccone derives a model of church and sect that leads to comparative statics which are consistent with stylised facts listed above to distinguish these two types of religious organisations. His model focuses on normative conduct that impacts our opportunities in either secular or religious consumption. His model begins with an individual that maximises her utility by consuming a secular (Z) and a religious (R) good. Each good is a function of time (T), purchased goods (X), experience and human capital (S), and conduct (C). Conduct is the key to the model. One's conduct is singular, that is to say, the model does not allow for people to have different modes of conduct in the different marketplaces. Thus a person's conduct affects both the consumption of the secular (Z) and the religious (R) goods. A kind of conduct that increases R will reduce Z and vice versa. A certain kind of conduct is accepted as a behavioural norm by a religion and maximises R . Another kind will maximise Z .

A key result deals with shifting norms across Z and R . If the norms diverge too much, it will force the individual to take an extreme position to either the

secular or the religious. Further, it will lead to reduced tolerance. Extreme positions become preferred to moderate ones. Last, Iannaccone discusses the alternatives a sect must provide since they distance themselves from secular society. They must offer substitutes for Z, the secular activities.

Iannaccone (1992, 1994) empirically test these predictions. He finds that sect-like characteristics increase attendance, contributions, and prayers after controlling for a variety of demographic characteristics including age, gender, education, income, marital status, and region. However, these results must be balanced by Iannaccone's (1988) comment that strictness can be taken too far, resulting in restricting how much a sect may grow.

To summarise, due to the collective nature of producing a religious good, churches will want to reduce free riding so that adherents enjoy the greatest satisfaction from the experience since everyone attending is contributing. One attractive strategy to engender such behaviour is to require significant sacrifice of a church's membership in order to discourage potential free riders from attending a service.

It may be interesting to note at this point that many people perceive megachurches to be 'religion lite' given all of the flexibility they offer potential members. Clearly, they may be seen as such. Whether this is clearly true is a question to which we return later.

These insights are quite helpful in understanding some factors that help predict success in a static environment. However, we live in a time of speedy social changes, and churches exist in this environment. Thus, we ought to spend some time considering how some churches have responded to social norms changing.

Iannaccone and Miles (1990) extend the themes of Iannaccone's earlier work in a more dynamic context by considering shifting social norms. This is interesting in that it impacts how a person's conduct contributes to the production of the secular and religious products when a stable conduct interacts with changing norms. We may ask, as secular norms become more liberal (and more distant from religious norms) how people and the church will react? Iannaccone and Miles study the response of the Mormon Church to the changing roles of women recent history. In particular, they assess the impact of the Church's response to these changing roles on member commitment rates and conversion rates between 1950 and 1986.

A church faces two major tensions as social norms change in a manner inconsistent with a church's teachings. First, a church supposedly teaches to a transcendent truth that ought not to change. If a church accommodates social change in its teachings, does it undermine its own authority? Second, it faces a potentially no win situation. If it accommodates a social change, it is likely to

attract younger potential members which embrace such social change, but at the expense of alienating more established members that resist such change. On the other hand, if the church is intransigent, it will likely fail to attract new members while satisfying existing members that resist social change.

Iannaccone and Miles gather data on how the Mormon Church had responded to changes in women's roles and how Mormon members responded to the Church's response. They find that the Church did respond to women's changing roles, but with a lag of approximately five years. The short run resistance to change led to a long run accommodation of social change. The inevitable dilemma of alienating one group to attract another played out for the Mormon Church. More established members participated less when the Church accommodated social change, but this outcome was outweighed by the increased participation by younger members. The Church tried to appease both groups by reaffirming traditional ideals while accommodating new roles and behaviours for women. As Iannaccone and Miles quote Tawney (1926) (Iannaccone and Miles 1990: 1245), the Mormon Church aspired to ".... flexibility in practice while maintaining purity of doctrine".

Iannaccone and Makowsky (2007) explore the nature of persistent religious regionalism. They note that, despite a very fluid labour market that often involves relocation in order to take a new job, the United States has historically demonstrated significant stability in its religious landscape: the south remains relatively religious while the west remains largely irreligious. The authors employ simulation techniques to model multiple interacting factors related to religious behaviour (social ties, denominational affiliation, past religious experience, and personal demographics) and integrate them into a religious landscape over space and time to investigate how various factors affect religious outcomes as people migrate. Their simulations allow for an emergent culture that combines characteristics of social conformity and preference for one's original religion.

Their simulation triggers a random move of an agent, and after the move the agent reevaluates her religious attributes. These are subject to her original attributes (determined by birth), her current attributes (that existed just before the move), and her new social environment (impacted by her new neighbours). They show that the desire for social conformity can lead agents to engage in religious switching so that they conform to the religious nature of the neighbourhood to which they moved, providing an explanation for the persistent religious regionalism.

Miller (2002) studies the importance of competition in the marketplace of religion. More specifically, the recent rise of market competition of churches gives reason to consider organisational and competitive aspects that fall under

the umbrella of strategic management. Miller works to specify the role of management, inter-organisational rivalry, and the conditions of sustaining competitive advantages. Some of the key questions he outlines and comments on that are relevant to our work include how new religious organisations can remain viable, how they can gain and sustain advantages over other religious and secular offerings, and how to respond to rivals. Miller highlights the roles of social legitimacy, inimitability, and market segmentation as factors that promote success.

Miller (2002: 439) invokes Peter Berger's 1963 analysis which notes that historically, religious tradition could be authoritatively imposed. In contrast, more recent evidence suggests that it must now be marketed. It must be 'sold' given that customers are not forced to 'buy' the religious product. Thus, churches compete not only with other churches, but also with secular activities. As we will see, megachurches have embraced this fact and meaningfully addressed it with their strategies.

Among the factors that Miller identifies as contributing to a sustainable competitive advantage are for a church to project a credible commitment and social perception of legitimacy. These interact in an interesting way when it comes to a church segmenting the market, especially in light of our earlier discussion of strictness and a successful church. While sects may begin as very strict organisations, the sect-to-church literature notes that the strictness will be reduced for the group to grow and become a church, as we also saw in terms of the Mormon Church changing to accommodate modern roles for women.

A sense of social legitimacy may be impacted by a number of factors. Those relevant to megachurches will include the sheer size of the church, and the fact that many new members become members after being invited by friends who attend the megachurch. Further, megachurches' ability to adapt to the environment (react to market forces with flexibility) in a manner that reflects cultural continuity also contributes to their ability to attain and sustain credibility.

Megachurches have been strategic by advertising themselves as a 'second chance' church. In terms of the language of an economist, this strategy suggests that people unhappy with a previous church ought to feel as though they can transfer their religious capital to the megachurch with minimal depreciation of that capital. Previously, the theory would indicate that if a person engaged in religious switching, their religious capital (for example, their familiarity with religious teachings, customs, etc.) would be highly compromised. Megachurch leaders were quite forward looking to suggest this does not need to be the case if you switched to their church.

In light of these theoretical factors that affect a church's ability to thrive, we turn next to some further discussion of strategies megachurches may employ to understand their success.

5 Megachurch Strategies for Success

The evidence provided thus far would suggest that churches face significant challenges in attracting and retaining members. The Pew studies (2008, 2015a, 2015b) clearly show that there are significant social trends away from organised religion to a more personalised spirituality. Further, though a smaller share of strict churches are maintaining membership (along the lines suggested by the literature presented) more and more churches struggle to maintain membership in the marketplace.

Consequently, megachurches face some non-trivial headwinds in the modern marketplace for religion. Yet they seem to succeed. What strategies have they pursued in order to grow their congregations to attract at least 2,000 attendees to services each week? Among the tasks they must accomplish is to distinguish themselves from other churches, and to employ strategies to not just attract new members, but to maintain those people's enthusiasm to continue to attend services.

If we focus on seeker-oriented megachurches, we can most clearly understand the context for success. Rick Warren's (1995) account of growing Saddleback Church serves as an excellent case study. He grew Saddleback from a small group meeting in his living room to one of today's preeminent megachurches. The first key to Saddleback's success was to acknowledge the challenges any church faces: people are increasingly consumers of religion and feel very comfortable switching churches, denominations, or leaving religion altogether. Again, churches face competition not just from other churches, but also increasingly from secular activities. As a result, two key factors that a successful church must accomplish are to demonstrate that they are different from the churches others have left and to find an alternative strategy to strictness to overcome the free rider problem.

Rick Warren states explicitly in his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, that he wanted to attract 'seekers' to his church. In other words, he was not interested in stealing members of other churches to populate his own. Rather, he wanted to bring people back to church that had previously left a church as unsatisfied attendees. This is no easy task, as the aspiring megachurch needs to convince potential attendees and future members that, though they were dissatisfied

with a previous association with religion, they ought to give the new church a try.

Thumma (1996) argues that megachurches represent a unique spiritual organisation. They offer a new congregational life that accommodates changes in American society. As established above, megachurches often offer multiple services, employ different styles of services to target various interests in their congregation, and some even have multiple branches to serve their members. Megachurch pastors have gone so far as to poll people to better understand what people want from their experience. Consequently, megachurches excel at deliberately implementing strategies that attract new attendees and help them to become integrated in the church while minimising the potential of alienating members who have deepened their affiliation with the church (Thumma and Travis 2007).

Traditionally, most megachurches have been evangelical, but many have downplayed their denomination affiliation, at least while hosting activities that are intended for new(er) attendees. For example, Rick Warren notes (1995: 199) that Saddleback is doctrinally and financially affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). However, his concern that widespread misperceptions about the SBC may inhibit seekers from attending led him to a strategy to attract seekers first and only later educate them about the SBC. His logic being that after seekers have found a good fit between their needs and what the church offers, their concern about denominational affiliation will be less important. Moreover, as referenced earlier, the trend towards outright disassociation from any denominational affiliation has gained momentum. As we saw, this allows the megachurch increased flexibility in dealing with social change and accommodating members' potentially changing attitudes towards social movements and the church's response to them.

Megachurches have successfully challenged much of the conventional wisdom regarding strategies that will lead to a strong church discussed earlier. A notable example is that megachurches encourage growth by allowing the new attendees to participate as 'free riders' with very little or no expectation to tithe, volunteer time, or even learn about the church's doctrines. The church essentially bets on the idea that a subset of these free riders will feel a strong sense of connection with the megachurch and after that point, be willing to make the required sacrifices the church requires in order to be successful. By way of analogy, they follow a strategy along the lines of introductory pricing of a new product in which a firm takes a loss in order to encourage consumers to try the new product and once they discover that they like it, will pay the higher price in order to continue to consume it.

As briefly mentioned earlier, the approach taken by seeker-oriented megachurches to attract members often leads to a common myth that megachurches

are 'religion-lite'. It is understandable that the combination of people with lower denominational loyalties and a consumerist mentality along with megachurches' efforts to provide a personalised religious message may suggest such a reputation. However, megachurches make significant efforts along these lines to become the path by which these individuals reconnect with God and in doing so they ask much of the people that become members. According to Thumma et al. (2005), megachurches are among the most successful churches today in attracting and retaining members, suggesting that they foster ongoing commitment and involvement of their members.

Work by Von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012a, 2012b) cite the aforementioned strategies and further offer a theoretical model that allows them to empirically test these theories. They begin by noting Warren's (1995) reflection that as he established Saddleback, he only expected of members of the church to contribute offerings, non-members were explicitly told that they are not expected to give. Both Warren (1995) and Thumma and Travis (2007) mention that seeker-oriented megachurches understand that seekers want anonymity and pastors wish to provide the required anonymity. Naturally, megachurches would then not make requirements of additional time and effort of seekers who are just becoming acquainted with the church early in their affiliation.

Von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012a) employ data from the FACT2000 survey about megachurches to examine three questions that they argue offer evidence of a lower cost to attract new attendees to the megachurch. The survey questions ask about: (1) the number of services offered at different times during a weekend, (2) the variety of styles of services, and (3) the types of group activities that exist in which attendees may participate. The idea behind considering the answers to the first two of these questions is that, if the megachurch offers more services than the non-megachurch, the megachurch succeeds in making it easier on a person to fit attending a service into a busy schedule. Further, if the megachurch can offer different styles of services, the likelihood that one of those styles will match a given person's preferences rises, making the service more enjoyable and thereby lowering the perceived cost of attending. The data suggest that megachurches offer statistically significantly more services than non-megachurches on Saturdays, Sunday mornings and Sunday afternoons.

The FACT2000 survey asks churches that hold more than one service per weekend, how varied or similar they are. The data again suggest that megachurches offer a larger range of styles than non-megachurches.

The last question listed addresses the types of groups that the megachurch offers. Von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012a, 2012b) study these groups and ask whether they may be a key factor in the success of megachurches. They speculate that the use of groups, in particular groups centred on secular activities,

allow the megachurch to accomplish two important goals. First, megachurches can signal they are a different kind of church to people who had either left a church with which they had previously affiliated due to dissatisfaction, or to people who had not previously affiliated thinking a church could not offer activities interesting to them. Second, though Iannaccone (1994) stresses the strategy of requiring sacrifice or stigma to ensure full participation by members through discouraging free riding, he notes an alternative strategy is to subsidise religious participation (though he suggests this alternative is unlikely to be feasible). Megachurches astutely realised that by housing church groups based on secular interests, they would in fact be able to successfully subsidise religious participation. Members could enjoy, for example, a running group through the church and in joining it, simultaneously contribute to the church's life and incorporate a required run for the week. Further, we earlier saw that people are increasingly wanting a personalised religious or church experience. Being able to choose from a host of group activities offered by a megachurch, the ability to stitch together a personalised experience becomes much easier.

Megachurches offering a group related to a particular interest was statistically significantly greater than non-megachurches in the following themes: community service, parenting and marriage enrichment, choir, performing arts, book clubs, self-help groups, fitness activities, sports teams, and youth groups. Von der Ruhr and Daniels note that the percentage difference in the offering can become quite large. The difference is particularly large for secularly based activities such fitness activities (a 59 percent difference) and sports teams (a 57 percent difference). Clearly, megachurches are making it possible for people to engage in an activity that may not usually be church based, but bring it under the roof of the church.

In an effort to play devil's advocate to Von der Ruhr and Daniels, it may be argued that the ability to offer these groups is a function of a supply side effect. In other words, a larger church can offer more groups than a small church, and that these differences are not an outgrowth of a deliberate strategy. The authors investigate this potential criticism and find that the turning point in terms of offering these groups comes once the church experiences attendance rates between 200 and 500 weekly attendees. Thus, it seems as though the supply side argument is viable when comparing churches with 200 or fewer attendees to larger churches, but is not relevant to comparing megachurches to the churches with greater than 200 attendees.

Taken together, we see that seeker-oriented megachurches have found a strategy to both signal that they are a new way of doing church and also reduce the full price of participation for new attendees. Critics may argue that this strategy waters down the religious message of megachurches. Thumma and

Travis (2007) argue that this is not the case and that members actually pay a high full price. Ease of entry remains for members, but the full price of participation may rise through other costs, requirements, and commitments that increase as affiliation rises.

The model outlined von der Ruhr and Daniels predicts that, subsequent to a seeker discovering a good fit, the church will raise its price. The FACT2000 survey asks three questions that we may look to in order to find evidence supporting the fact that the megachurches do expect more of members than of new attendees. The survey asks: (1) about the difficulty in getting people to volunteer, (2) about the expectations of members' personal practices outside of church and general strictness, and (3) about the existence of community outreach programmes. We follow the same approach as Bird (2007), and argue that all these activities would be most relevant to people who are further in their process of becoming members or are already members of the church.

The survey responses show that the church has less difficulty in recruiting volunteers, expects more of members in their personal practices away from home (personal prayer, scripture study, family devotions, fasting, and abstaining from pre-marital sex), and that the church is clearer and more strictly enforces its expectations of its members. Last, the megachurch has more outreach programmes/volunteer programmes than non-megachurches, suggesting that the megachurch can more effectively recruit its members to serve others than non-megachurches.

The evidence we have seen in the data suggests that the unconventional techniques used by megachurches, especially the use of small secular-interest based groups, are no accident and are a deliberate strategy to attract new attendees. The strategies are result of, in many cases, polling people to better understand what potential and actual members want and incorporating those wishes in church programming. Thumma and Travis (2007) note that some even employ church growth specialists to attract and retain new members. Putnam and Campbell (2010) go so far as to characterise American Evangelicals as innovative entrepreneurs in their efforts to grow their church, thereby reinforcing the argument here that megachurches have been structured in a thoughtful and strategic manner to create flexible routes to involvement and participation by members. Further, that this outcome is no accident. It is the result of careful planning and action.

Since the megachurch's strategy to grow is based on reaching out to religious refugees, it maintains a deliberate flexibility to respond to the perceived needs of potential members. Wuthnow (1994) points out that groups represent a good way to accommodate change as members' needs change and provide a church additional flexibility in adapting to social change. Thumma (1996)

likewise notes that this approach can be seen not only in their institutional practices but also in their physical structures: both are designed to be flexible, anticipating adjustments that will allow for future growth. One important manifestation of their flexibility is the use of small groups based in many popular secular interests (for example, a fitness group or sports team) as a way to engage new attendees. The idea being that, as new attendees participate in these church-sponsored activities, they add to their religious capital.

6 The Role of Flexibility

One theme that arises as we take stock of the strategies of megachurches is that, at least to some extent, they have employed strategies which counter conventional wisdom with regard to how to be a successful church. As we saw in the previous section, they offer an initially low cost path to membership, and they subsidise participation via group activities. We must acknowledge, however, that for members who deepen their affiliation, megachurches resemble successful churches in requiring significant sacrifice of their members.

Thumma, et al. (2005), Thumma and Bird (2008, 2009, 2011, and 2015) track trends in USA megachurches. The use of small groups and the outreach discussed above seem to be key determinants of megachurch growth. However, some other trends seem vital to the exceptional growth we have witnessed in the megachurch phenomenon. The element that links them all together involve trends which allow the megachurch to be flexible and adapt to environmental changes. The first we address, and perhaps the lynch pin is that of decreased denominational affiliation. It was previously established that megachurches had initially down played denominational affiliation to attract potential members. As these annual reports document, megachurches are currently on a trend to drop denominational affiliation altogether and form their own quasi-denominational network of like-minded churches.

This is particularly powerful in light of another trend identified in the 2008 report stating that megachurches are shifting from formal pastoral schools toward informal on-the-job programmes and internships for clergy training. Being free of the oversight of a formal denominational hierarchy and even conducting in-house clergy training essentially changes the landscape of constraints that a church faces. In the same report, Thumma and Bird note a trend of megachurches turning away from distinctive theological segments within conservative Protestantism toward what they term a 'generic evangelicalism'. These trends combine to allow the megachurch enormous flexibility to respond to changes in their environment.

If we consider all these noteworthy characteristics of megachurches we can easily understand the last point Thumma and Bird (2009: 1) share under their summary of the most prominent findings. They state, "Attendees can craft unique, customized spiritual experiences through the multitude of ministry choices and diverse avenues for involvement that the megachurches offer". In the same report, they note that megachurches have been able to allow participants to interact with the megachurch in their own terms allowing them to meet their own individualised needs. Thus, while the megachurch may well maintain a clear theological vision, it allows members to find many paths by which to embrace the church's message. Further, many have endowed themselves with the independence of denominational affiliation to make changes deemed necessary to respond to environmental factors.

Further, this structure of flexibility can be extended into the future and be considered as a consistent strategy rather than a departure from the church's identity. If the church has been embraced by past members precisely because it did respond to environmental changes, they are more likely to respect that it continues to do so. Additionally, the use of groups based on secular interests allows the church to scan the horizon for new interests that can become the focus of a group, thereby attracting new potential members. This strategy of flexibility offers the megachurch what is essentially a renewable resource for sustaining and growing the church.

Martin (2007) researched the structure and leadership of two different megachurches to more clearly understand how the small groups in big churches may contribute the megachurch's success. She notes that people are on a quest to find community and a yearning for the sacred. Given the size of megachurches, it is easy to think that people may feel anonymous among the hundreds or thousands of other attendees at a service. The use of small groups help to overcome the potential for feeling lost in the crowd. Once again, we see that historically, small churches were seen as being able to apply strict standards and larger churches less able to (thereby being perceived as lax). However, megachurches have been able to employ the small groups such that strictness can be accommodated by a large church.

One of the research questions Martin delves into is how the small groups are promoted and supported by the megachurch. Her time spent at the two different churches contributes to our understanding of different approaches applied, both with great success. At the first megachurch she visited, the groups were based on the interests of those who founded the group. Perhaps this is what we'd expect given the discussion of megachurches so far. It is no wonder, then, that many of these groups had ties to secular interests, but were offered through the church. Also of note is that these groups were open to outsiders.

This fact is consistent with our previous discussion of megachurches using secular interest based groups to attract religious refugees. However, the second megachurch placed a significant emphasis on Bible Fellowship programmes. Thus, we see two distinctly different management styles: in the first, we see a ‘bottom up’ or rather organic approach to generating the small groups. In the second, we see a ‘top-down’ hierarchically organised approach to the use of small groups. In both cases, the small groups generate the ties between people that serve to bind them to the larger church.

To summarise, megachurches are successful religious enterprises at a time when many churches are struggling to maintain a stable membership in terms of size. USA consumers of religion are increasingly invoking their rights as consumers, seeking churches that can satisfy their preferences for not just a religious product, but an experience which satisfies the consumer on a number of levels. These include the type of service, the time of the service, the kind of facility in which the service is offered, and a host of ancillary activities that appeal to the attendee. In many of the cases we have discussed so far, this reaction to the fluid marketplace of religion has been the product of the pastor of the megachurch. It is in the pastor’s entrepreneurial approach to selling religion in the modern marketplace that these innovative (perhaps even rebellious, given the traditional approach to religion and the traditional academic literature on what makes for a successful church) strategies have allowed megachurches so much success. Consequently, considering leadership and leadership succession at megachurches is an important focus if megachurches are to thrive after the original pastor retires. It is this issue to which we turn to next.

7 Leadership and Succession

“Every pastor is an interim pastor” is the first sentence of the preface to “Next: Pastoral Succession That Works” by Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014: 9). This sentence is quite revealing in that it focuses attention on a topic inadequately addressed by so many churches (megachurches and non-megachurches alike). Succession should be a process rather than an event. Yet, for many understandable psychological reasons, too many megachurches do not have a thoughtful succession plan in place that involves all the stakeholders of the church in the process.

Founding pastors of megachurches definitely may be considered to be religious entrepreneurs. They surveyed the landscape of religion and created a new way to deliver a religious product to a segment of the population that was

dissatisfied with the existing religious products other churches offered. However, as is well documented in the literature of entrepreneurial succession, the process is often difficult and frequently unsuccessful. For the megachurch, this can mean the transition from one pastor to another may make the difference between continued success, or the end of the megachurch. As Wheeler (2008) documents, following one early megachurch's pastor's departure, the church declined from a membership of 4,000 to just over 500 over the course of a decade.

Succession is an important topic to consider for the future of megachurches. Given that many have grown to be megachurches in recent history, it stands to reason that many will face succession issues in the future. Further, the transition in many cases will involve the religious entrepreneur responsible for the original growth of the church into a megachurch departing and handing control over to a new senior pastor. As Goldsmith (2009) points out, entrepreneurs tend to be driven, be a big deal in their community, be the go-to people, and have focused on their market for a long time. Filling these shoes can be a daunting task for any successor. Consequently, it will serve megachurches well to have a thoughtful succession plan in place. Though the literature points out that there is no 'one size fits all' plan, this section will borrow from Wheeler (2008) and Vanderloemen and Bird (2014) to point out some issues to consider relevant to successful succession plans.

One comment that Vanderloemen and Bird (2014) make is that they hope that churches will borrow what can be learned from secular businesses in their efforts to create succession plans that work. To that end, borrowing from the business literature, Wheeler (2008) notes that succession is both inevitable and introduces organisational instability and that the effectiveness of the successor is strongly impacted by the circumstances surrounding the previous leader's departure and the organisational knowledge of the successor. He goes on to note four sources of tension involved in organisational succession. These involve interpersonal issues in which the predecessor fails to hand over control to the successor, opposition to the successor within the organisation, generating the requisite 'buy-in' for a new style of management, and the perceived or real mismatch between the skills or knowledge of the successor and the skills knowledge needed for the job.

These issues suggest that finding the right pool of potential successors is critical for a megachurch. However, as Wheeler (2008) points out, the qualities needed to successfully lead a megachurch will likely offer a very small pool of potential successors; thereby highlighting the need to consider developing a process to identify and groom the best candidate(s). The stakeholders identified to be a part of the process include the departing pastor, the board of the

megachurch, a transitional consultant that can offer objective opinions regarding the process, the personnel committee, and the incoming pastor.

Wheeler borrows from Collins (2005) in sharing an anecdote relevant to the challenge a new pastor will face coming into a church, especially in light of our modern consumer based religious switching in which a member may have more loyalty to a person (here, a departing pastor) than to the church. The anecdote references a CEO who was hired to serve as a dean presiding over a faculty, a subset of whom are tenured and consequently may feel free to voice disagreement with a new dean's policy proposals. Collins discusses two leadership styles; one is executive in nature and the other is characterised as legislative. The executive draws from concentrated power and decision making while the legislative involves a softer touch, borrowing more from the art of persuasion and leveraging social capital in order to create a positive environment for policy making.

Wheeler (2008) identifies key themes that megachurches shared in their succession experiences. They experienced ambiguity in the process and instability in the congregation. They noted the need for time for the successor to gain trust, change fatigue among those involved, and the need to transition other involved parties (for example, the elder board and staff) at the same time as the departing pastor left so that new loyalties to the successor pastor could be formed. These insights from management reveal that succession planning is hard work that must overcome many obstacles. Such planning, for obvious reasons, is also crucial for the on-going health of a megachurch.

8 Conclusion

In a marketplace of religion characterised by significant consumerism among potential members of churches, megachurches seem to be among churches that are gaining members when many other churches are losing members. The exact contributing factors can be debated, but the data and analysis seem to point to the emphasis megachurches have placed on flexibility to being a deliberate strategy they have employed in order to achieve the success we have seen. They maintain this flexibility in many aspects of their organisation, from the physical nature and décor of their place of worship, to the number and styles of services, to the nature of the small groups they employ to bring members under the umbrella of the larger church.

However, despite everything they have done well to thrive as an organisation, one challenge they face is how to maintain that level of success over time and across the leadership of different pastors. Developing and mentoring future

generations of pastors that can clearly articulate and live the core of the church as it was founded, but also to extend the church into new directions to leverage its historical success is a challenging proposition. To the extent that megachurches can create a thoughtful plan that generates buy in from existing leaders and the congregation will help to sustain past success into the future.

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Megachurches as Total Environments

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1 Introduction¹

We argue that megachurches create and optimise total environments, which answer the desires of the human heart and generate an emotional energy that is both powerful and satisfying. By total environment, we mean a context that provides megachurch attendees with sufficient ministries, resources, and social ties such that attendees generally do not need to seek secular sources to have their fundamental emotional needs met. The megachurch and its activities provide a structure for their life. Megachurches build stable, confident, and encompassing sacred canopies for their members – virtually all of the material and emotional needs that accompany each stage of life and development are addressed. From early childhood development classes, through youth mission trips, on to marriage counselling, and, at least at one church in our study, a senior living facility on the church campus. The megachurch model must be understood as a comprehensive system – each element carefully crafted as a building block of what becomes a *total environment* protected by a comforting and nourishing sacred cocoon. The megachurch model is far from indestructible, and yet, as we have seen time and time again, even devastating scandals and dramatic cultural pressures barely touch the total system. Pastors may be ousted, but the megachurch model survives. The obvious question facing scholars and social critics alike is: *How? What is so compelling about these churches? Why are they able to operate successfully as total environments?*

All contexts and cultures have feelings rules—rules that tell people how they should feel and express their feelings in any particular moment for a given situation (Hochschild 2012). The current emotional climate of modern society is one in which people are highly aware of emotions with strict regulations on when, where, how, and by whom certain emotions should be expressed (Riis

1 Part of this chapter is reprinted and adapted with permission from James K. Wellman, Jr., Katie E. Corcoran, and Kate Stockly-Meyerdirk, “God is Like a Drug...”: Explaining Interaction Rituals in American Megachurches,” *Sociological Forum* 29 (2014): 650–672. Copyright [2014] by Wiley and from James K. Wellman, Jr., Katie E. Corcoran, and Kate J. Stockly, *High on God: How Megachurches Won the Heart of America*, Oxford University Press (2020). Copyright [2020] Oxford University Press.

and Woodhead 2010). Strong emotions are rarely encouraged in public places with the exception of sporting events (Riis and Woodhead 2010). We argue that megachurches are successful because they satisfy a demand for intense shared emotional expression in public places (see also Corcoran and Wellman 2016).

Echoing Randall Collins (2004) we begin with the knowledge that humans seek emotional energy through social engagement, in fact, emotional energy is the force that forms the foundation of human sociality. Humans desire emotional energy because it feeds their fundamental needs – not only for individual satisfaction, but also for the emotional fulfillment of joining with others while remaining oneself. In this way, emotional energy is central to how humans address what Emile Durkheim calls the problem or paradox of *homo duplex*: humans desire to be independent, masters of their own universe, sui generis individuals, but they must necessarily do this in and through others (Durkheim 1964). The viscerally felt embodied desire for emotional energy achieves the feat of complex human cooperation, because through cooperation, energy is generated that is, quite literally, a drug experience that sustains humans across time and every tradition.

The ligaments that construct this social matrix are rituals. Social interaction rituals function to initiate the generation of emotional energy and social bonds, and are then repeated to reinforce and recreate this solidarity. When moments of intense emotional energy occur, they are typically one of the highlights of a person's life, a peak experience that sometimes feels like a 'drug' high if you will, that binds people together and helps sustain them in times of isolation and differentiation. This desire to be one with others and one with self, when met, is an explosive combination of joy, deep contentment, and ecstasy. Christian megachurches² and their characteristic ritual structure are enormously successful in making this experience available and possible for human beings.

When our megachurch informants said, "I feel like I'm high on God", it made us wonder at first, "Is this a drug trip? Is it some form of phony manipulation?" Of course, we are very aware of the dark side of megachurches. There is little doubt that in any complex, humanly constructed social form, especially those with hierarchical power structures, scandal is rife and manipulation is not uncommon. But, in general, that is not our thesis. To put it boldly, the megachurch experience is a drug that works. And we don't mean this as a problem but as a solution to the dilemma of *homo duplex*.

² Megachurches are defined as Protestant congregations with weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more adults and children.

In this chapter, we present a summary of our theory of the Megachurch Ritual Cycle—a model for church that has taken over the market for megachurches and proven to be very successful. The Megachurch Ritual Cycle is comprised of six components or links that provide a powerful cumulative experience; we'll outline these six steps below: welcoming ethos, awe-inspiring worship, sermon providing reliable leadership, altar call inviting transformation, service projects, and small-groups. Along the way, we present our own theory for how people are drawn to participate and invest in these rituals; we call this *embodied choice theory*, and it is in large part based on the insights of Randall Collins's theory of interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004). We support our theory with qualitative data from interviews with megachurch attendees and pastors. We argue that the Megachurch Ritual Cycle enhances, manages, and directs what Collins calls emotional energy with which megachurches are overflowing, in a way that facilitates a total environment. We show how Durkheim's theory of *homo duplex* is addressed through megachurch rituals.

Our argument is simple and to the point: megachurches have understood the ways to create, motivate, and charge their congregations with emotional energy that stimulates intense loyalty and visceral desire to return repeatedly for a recharge. In this way, megachurches are like drug dealers offering members and non-members alike their next hit. They have perfected ways to produce and mark human experience so that it is reproduced and creates a positive and life-sustaining energy. Interpreted as the physical manifestation of God's love and Christ's supernatural presence, this emotional energy becomes the life-blood of attendees that draws them back and binds them together in a total environment. In what follows, we show that the creation of dramatic, emotionally powerful rituals is no small feat. Whether those who facilitate megachurches know it or not, they have created a ritual system that speaks to the human desire for emotional energy and is one of the most successful religious structures in America today.

2 Data

Since 1992, Thumma and Bird (2011) have tracked the known population of all American megachurches – Protestant (Thumma and Travis 2007)³

3 Thumma and Travis (2007, xviii) note that while “there are many American Catholic and Orthodox churches, and a few synagogues and mosques, that serve over two thousand attendees in an average week,” those “churches are organized and led in distinctively different ways that separate them as unique phenomena from Protestant megachurches”.

congregations with weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more adults and children – and have compiled them into a Database of Megachurches in the U.S., providing a rough census of American megachurches. There were a total of 1,250 such congregations in 2007. From this 2007 census, Thumma and Bird selected twelve megachurches that represent the national megachurch profile in terms of a wide variety of characteristics including attendance, region, denomination, dominant race, and church age.

While these churches were selected to be representative of the entire population, the sample slightly under-represents the western region and is slightly larger than the average megachurch (Thumma and Bird 2009). In 2008, at each church, Thumma and Bird conducted focus groups and the interviews were transcribed. Leadership Network, a non-profit consultancy and research group, funded and collected this data and we are using it with permission. We personally observed at least one worship service at each church and read through and coded various church materials provided on their websites. We also incorporate observations of megachurch worship services from other megachurches. While we use the interviews as our primary source of data, we combine these data sources to provide a more comprehensive picture of megachurches.

During the focus groups, respondents answered questions about how they came to the church; how they became involved in their church, and in what ways they had, or had not, experienced spiritual growth at the church. Because responses may vary by type of attendee, in each church, three separate focus groups were conducted with newcomers (i.e., have been attending the megachurch for 3 years or less), longtimers (i.e., have been attending the megachurch for 4 years or more), and lay leaders (i.e., perform some form of leadership role in the church). The focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour and a half. Our three-person research team read, discussed, and coded transcriptions of the interviews. We coded 282 interviews (150 females, 132 males): 81 newcomers (NCs), 91 longtimers (LTs), and 110 layleaders (LLs).

3 *Homo Duplex* and Ritual

Durkheim's description of human nature as *homo duplex* is at the heart of our understanding of why and how megachurches function so well to orient and to provide community (Durkheim 1964). In a fundamental way, Durkheim's description of the profane and the sacred is captured in the movement from our existential and individual isolation to an interactive and cooperative group. This movement from the individual to the social group is neither smooth nor automatic, but to survive we must cooperate, and achieving this cooperation is

experienced as both a challenge and a gift. A gift, not only because it means our survival, but also, being facilitated by emotion, this movement creates collective effervescence, which human beings have interpreted as ‘sacred’ throughout history. So while cooperation may be difficult to achieve, the gift of divine presence makes it more than worth the cost.

As Durkheim makes clear, the union of individual and society is never a one-way movement, each is penetrated by the other, thus there is no pure ‘individual’ nor is the individual erased when she enters society – the two share measures of each:

Although sociology is defined as the science of societies, it cannot, in reality, deal with the human groups that are the immediate object of its investigation without eventually touching on the individual who is the basic element of which these groups are composed. For society can exist only if it penetrates the consciousness of individuals and fashions it in ‘its image and resemblance’. We can say, therefore, with assurance and without being excessively dogmatic, that a great number of our mental states, including some of the most important ones, are of social origin. In this case, then, it is the whole that, in a large measure, produces the part; consequently, it is impossible to attempt to explain the whole without explaining the part – without explaining, at least, the part as a result of the whole.

DURKHEIM 1964: 325

But Durkheim takes this dynamic further: not only is the person saturated by their social reality, but what Durkheim calls the “passions and egoistic tendencies derived from the individual”, and the interests of the whole remain in tension. “Therefore”, he continues, “society cannot be formed or maintained without our being required to make perpetual and costly sacrifices. Because society surpasses us, it obliges us to surpass ourselves.... ” (Durkheim 1964: 338). We would argue with Durkheim’s supposition that humans are by *nature* egotistical, and only by virtue of *culture*, social and moral.⁴ Rather, we assert that *both* aspects of our human nature are biologically and culturally rooted. Neither can be extracted from nor reduced to biology or culture. Social desires are part of our evolutionary heritage, along with what we call egocentric desires. These

4 Durkheim inconsistently discusses *homo duplex*. In some works, he seems to indicate that humans are by nature egoistical and become moral through culture, but in other places he suggests that egoism and individualism reflect the cultural context. See Jonathan S. Fish (2013).

two dueling impulses are in dynamic interaction with each other. We argue, then, for a more complicated understanding of *homo duplex* that includes the recognition that there is no clean distinction in the biological and cultural origins of self or society, and that each is deeply entangled with the other.

In summary, humans must solve the problem of *homo duplex* continuously. Rituals – including of course religious rituals – are the processes by which this is achieved. Religious rituals, at least up until the modern period, have been the most effective way of, facilitating cooperation through their ability to generate affective and emotional energy within and between participants. We continue this line of thought by arguing that, among religious structures in the United States, megachurches are one of the most successful at this goal.

Importantly, we argue that megachurches are remarkable in that they juggle the two sides of *homo duplex* smoothly and effectively, developing the self *within* society in ways that nurture both sides of Durkheim's polarity. Through energising rituals and totally encompassing environments, megachurch attendees experience intense energy that is emotionally satisfying for individuals, but can only be attained in the context of group rituals, thus requiring social participation for its acquisition and thereby not only supporting but *integrating* the sides of *homo duplex*. To be sure, megachurches create rituals and opportunities to discipline and increase self-control, selfless behaviour, cooperation, generosity, and a desire to care for others. However, one of the most dynamic marks of these churches is the focus on the other side of *homo duplex* – the need to *exert the ego* – this is evident in the uplifting of the uniqueness of the individual, the focus on personal salvation and finding your personal spiritual gift(s), and the mission for everyone to become a better person and experience more fulfillment and love. However, a person's 'YOU' is only real and special if the person acts it out within the body of Christ. Christ's body is the CHURCH and exists to serve the wider community, both locally and internationally. This presentation and call to exert the ego works well within the megachurch model because empowerment of the individual always has the goal of serving the other as part of the whole: the church, the 'body of Christ'. Therefore, it is argued that when one is acting in one's gifts, one is witnessing to the work of God in the individual; in other words, exerting the ego is framed as a way of witnessing to the work of Christ in oneself. It is presented as one's sacred duty.

Those outside of megachurches often view members as self-centred, self-involved, and obsessed with their own salvation, but we have also found a prominent theme emphasising the importance of nurturing one's individual gifts for the sake of family, friends, the church and in service to the wider community. In one sense, we argue that megachurches offer an effective solution to

the individualism that deeply concerned Durkheim. Writing in France in the late nineteenth century, Durkheim was alarmed by the European focus on valuing the individual above anyone else: “This cult of man has for its first dogma the autonomy of reason and for its first rite freedom of thought” (Durkheim 1975: 65). He goes on to say that “if [individualism] does not serve something which exists beyond it, it is not merely useless; it becomes dangerous” (Durkheim 1975: 70). We found within megachurch leadership an urgent effort to go beyond simply maintaining the individualistic cultural status quo by serving both the needs of their members and empowering them to serve each other along with their national and global communities.

4 Embodied Choice Theory

Embodied choice theory suggests that people make reasonable choices (consciously or unconsciously) based on the needs and demands of human experience: they make choices that will increase their emotional energy; choices that will expand their access and acceptance into helpful coalitions and mating markets; and choices that will enhance their political and social capital. Inclinations toward these human success strategies are driven by cognitive systems that rely *heavily* upon information that comes from the body’s affective systems including somatic markers attached to prior experiences. Human sentiments lead in judgment. Megachurches work by meeting human emotional needs. And human beings, as we show in the interpretation of our data, make embodied choices, and in the aftermath of these experiences, rationalise these experiences *ex post facto*.

While we use Collins’s theory (2004) of interaction ritual chains to describe the process by which humans experience, consume, and produce emotional energy, we add to this by arguing that these processes are integral to the nature of what it means to be human. That is, humans are *homo duplex*, both entranced and sometimes hobbled by their selfish needs and interests, but also yearning, whether consciously or not, to be a part of a greater whole. These impulses are always deeply entangled since even our selfish desires are socially constructed and our social interests are deeply motivated by egocentric desires. Durkheim’s explanation of this multifarious web in human nature is nearly mystical, but it also, we believe, points to the tragic edge that stalks the human condition across time and tradition – our successes are intermingled with remarkable chaos and tragedy. We are a species whose desires can be noble but are often tripped by deep inner conflicts that put us at odds with others, whether other groups, religions, nations, or, in the end, with our

environment. Durkheim meditates on the inner-conflicted nature of these entangled human drives:

The body is an integral part of the material universe, as it is made known to us by sensory experience; the abode of the soul is elsewhere, and the soul tends ceaselessly to return to it. The abode is the world of the sacred. Therefore, the soul is invested with a dignity that has always been denied the body, which is considered essentially profane, and it inspires those feelings that are everywhere reserved for that which is divine. It is made up of the same substance as are the sacred beings: it differs from them only in degree. A belief that is as universal and permanent as this cannot be purely illusory. There must be something in man that gives rise to this feeling that his nature is dual, a feeling that men in all known civilizations have experienced. Psychological analysis has, in fact, confirmed the existence of his duality: it finds it at the very heart of our inner life.

DURKHEIM 1964: 326

Our theory of embodied choice dovetails with Collins's work on the processual ingredients for rituals that are critical for the way human beings create emotional energy: bodily assembly to achieve co-presence, barriers excluding outsiders, shared emotional mood, and a mutual focus of attention. The first and most basic of these requirements – *bodily assembly* or *co-presence* – is facilitated by the first step in the Megachurch Ritual Cycle: the *Welcome*. Megachurches are total life systems in that they seek to produce an experience that is all-enveloping, beginning with the ritual process of co-presence. From websites, architecture, and branding aesthetic, to an ultra-friendly church welcome team, to evangelism and outreach, entering a megachurch is in many ways like coming into a womb – a total system that seeks to communicate that 'you' belong and that 'you' are accepted. As one woman described her experience emphatically: "When I walked in, it was like I had come home. It absolutely was. And I had never set foot in this place before. The Holy Spirit was here, that's all I can say, and still is". Another concurred: "I have never felt so welcome in my whole life". We know from our data that the experience can be quite electric, and that it leads to a feeling of being comfortable, accepted, loved, and welcomed. Upon entering, people don't feel judged, looked down upon, or conspicuous. Attendees report feeling like they really 'fit in'. For many, entering a huge venue in which everyone other than those who may have invited them in a stranger is a jarring and anxiety-inducing experience. At that moment then, the 'need' to be accepted is at its most intense, and so for megachurches, the entrance, the first impression, becomes a critical moment in determining

whether newcomers stay or leave. What we found during our visits to megachurches as well as in our data is that megachurches think intensely about how to welcome newcomers to their venues; they choose and train volunteers to greet with smiles and warm handshakes and they labour to ensure that an excited sense of anticipation is triggered by signs and messaging that both direct and reassure the stranger that he or she is neither strange nor unwelcome. These experiences build on one another for the result of turning participants to Christ, and, perhaps just as importantly, to bind them to the group and institution, making them feel that this is *their* place and this is *their* community. The thoughtfulness and intentionality of these churches is remarkable and often overlooked.

Megachurches are nothing if not places where bodily assembly is critical to the energy and sense that *something is about to happen*. Certainly, when a megachurch venue is packed, the energy in the room 'feels' full of potential. Many would say at these events, 'expectation' is in the air, and sometimes pastors, like any good entertainer, make the people wait a bit, coming in just a little late – anticipation is built, and the wick of emotional energy in the room is lit. Crowds give the feeling of expectancy, that something is happening, that you don't want to miss it. By nature, humans find their emotions elevated and expectations increased as they gather for an event.

The next processual ingredient is critical to the process of feeling in or out and is established during the *worship* phase of the Megachurch Ritual Cycle – a *shared emotional mood*. Of course, the mood is already initiated by a greeter who is also one who guides and gives information. Coffee to one side, a place for children on the other, information for newcomers and for those who know what they want, and a friendly smiling face to give one a sense that in these churches the mood is, well, 'happy' and the greeters are happy to see newcomers. The lead into the worship service is also an 'opportunity' for greeters and ushers to introduce newcomers to the lighting, songs, and bodily movements of worship. Seats are comfortable, the singing is upbeat, often accompanied by swaying and raised hands, but nothing substantially different from what one would find at a subdued rock concert – at least not at first. Leaders voice and show that they want 'you' to be there, welcoming newcomers with announcements directed at those who are new, and displaying the vitality and warmth of the community by offering prayers for those who are lonely or in need. The collective shared mood is one that speaks volumes about the desire to make one feel not only accepted but to suggest that this is a place where the moment of 'wow' is experienced: people feel and express joy and want to share that mood of uplift with one another, or as one newcomer exclaimed, "I watched the Holy Spirit like people doing the wave at a football game.... hundreds got saved!"

The singing and music are vital components of attendees' emotional experiences: "It's the singing: you enjoy it. [...] an hour and a half goes by and it's like we're done, can't we hear some more?" Some respondents were so touched by the musical worship that they cried: "The worship was so powerful that I was in hysterical tears the entire time. I couldn't even sing". One man described how he and his wife "were kind of blown away by the theatrical set. [...] It touches every modality that we have. And so it was kind of [like] 'Whoa'". Respondents noted how powerful it was for the entire congregation to be engaged fully in the worship: "The singers can stop singing. [...] You can stop the music and that place will still be vibrating because the whole congregation is singing". One participant said, "There is just nothing more powerful than when 10,000 or 11,000 people [are] singing at one time". Another respondent noted how during this time, people are "standing up and excited"—they are "into it" so it feels very "alive". It was common for respondents to describe the emotional energy produced by the worship as "huge" or "unreal" or to use expressions like "wow" or "whoa".

The production of high levels of *emotional energy* is clearly demonstrated in the interviews, which are permeated with words conveying emotions and senses. Individuals described their megachurch experience with emotive and sensory terms, such as (word frequencies): loving (385), feeling (680), amazing (81), awesome (43), exciting (51), wow (56), crying (29), touching (38), and feeding (56). The worship and sermon combined to create a powerful emotional experience for attendees, who described this experience in vivid and ecstatic ways—as a high, a drug, a feeling, energy, life, the Holy Spirit, and so on. One respondent expressed how the music energizes him: "I love coming here to a concert every Sunday. It's the bomb. [...] It just energizes you that you never know who is going to be there". Similarly, another said, "And we loved it [the worship service] because of the energy and it just recharges us". One man raved about the effective preaching of his pastor and how it "opens you up" to God, such that "God's love [communicated through the sermons] becomes [...] such a drug that you can't wait to come get your next hit". One interviewee compared the preaching from the pastors to youth camps. He explained, "You'd go to these youth camps and you would come back just so jacked up and then [...] you'd get back to the church [i.e., his previous church] and its already pulling you back down, but this was the first church [i.e., the megachurch] that we ever walked into where I felt like I did coming out of those camps. And that was every Sunday".

A female interviewee in another focus group responded by describing the feeling of being "jacked up" as a "spiritual high". Many respondents identified *needing* the experience and used sensory terms such as "hunger", "thirst", "being fed", and "feeling" to describe it. Indeed, the lively and powerful singing and

music are important for attracting individuals and keeping them in the church. One attendee described how the singing and music keep individuals coming to the church, including herself: "I think this [the worship and music] is why it hits people right away. So they don't want to miss the singing and worship and see all these people enjoying this". Many respondents concurred. In other words, the intentionality and focus that goes into creating a viable co-presence intensifies and initiates a shared mood, and this is only the beginning of what's coming.

The third processual ingredient is a *mutual focus of attention*, and this comes through with singers and song-leaders, but culminates in the *sermon* or "message" and the key focus is on the *pastor or lead teacher* who is almost always male. As Collins summarises, "At peak moments, the pattern tends to be jointly shared among all participants: in high solidarity moments, bodies touch, eyes are aligned in the same direction, movements are rhythmically synchronized" (Collins 2004: 135). As if on cue, Collins describes the power of worship services in megachurches in which bodies are aligned, often moving, in rhythm with one another, to the song, and then with heads pointed forward, as the pastor begins to preach. Through the preaching, a desperate need is expressed, in that each person is, in some sense, found wanting, a sinner. The minister is clear that he too stands in judgment, but that is quickly followed by the declaration that while he's human and has many flaws, he also knows that in Christ, the solution is found, that new life is available, that anyone can claim this life, and that the whole world is offered this free gift of grace. In other words, the worship service messaging emphasises and creates a sense of need, which is immediately followed by the redemptive inspiration that there is a way out, that relief is within reach, that one can be *delivered* and that there is a *solution*. Thus, the leader, who relates to you and knows where you have been, presents to you this way out, a solution that liberates you from the grip of sin and confers access to God, the Father who knows you, forgives you, and wants more than anything else to *save* you. So, the focus of attention is the charismatic leader, the *reliable leader*, who while human, has found a way through to the Father that will never fail. And this Father is not like one's earthy father, but he is one who will forgive, release, and send you out into the world a new woman, a new man, delivered and guided into a new life in Christ.

Megachurch pastors are invariably charismatic figures, whom Collins calls *energy stars*. They take centre stage and become the key focus of attention, making them critical to the growth of megachurches. One megachurch member made an analogy between his senior pastor and the Energizer Bunny, stating that he is always on top of whatever God asks of him: "[Senior pastor] is totally led by the Holy Spirit. If God is telling him this is what we need to do,

then he's all on it. He's like that bunny, that bunny that goes like that". Another described her senior pastor as constantly working and wondered how, as a person, he could do everything he does without being drained: "I'm thinking when do you [the senior pastor] sleep? [...] I'm drained on Sundays [...] and I can imagine if it's draining for me what it is for him, he's doing it [the sermon] three times". She then answered her own questions: "When a person is anointed and appointed by God, the Holy Ghost is going to take over. You know you are not going to be operating [on] your own strength and your own endurance. [...] You know you're not ordinary, you're extraordinary". She suggests that the senior pastor's ability to do what seems superhuman is through supernatural intervention, which gives him the strength and endurance he otherwise would not have. The senior pastor and his sermons also evoke emotional responses in the attendees. For example, one respondent said, "He blesses me to no end and I love that in him. [...] He's such a courageous speaker; transparent; baring his soul. When you hear his voice, you feel relieved. He's just that good. He's good. He's good and I love everything that he does". Attendees were emotionally affected by the words and behaviors of their senior pastor: "When [the senior pastor] stands up there and tells us we pray to God to send us the people that no one else wants. [...] How can that not affect you? You know he's our spiritual leader and we believe in him, that's why we're here. You know we love him and we trust him and we want to do what God's told us to do". Here we can see that the emotional connection is bidirectional—the attendees feel love from their senior pastor and they in turn feel love toward him. One respondent emphatically declared his positive sentiments toward the senior pastor: "He's on fire. [...] He's the shepherd". Others shared similar feelings; another mentioned how the senior pastor has "got a regiment that will follow him off the cliff" and another said that the senior pastor is "revered because he knows his flock [...] and] connects with people".

There is really no way to overestimate the impact of the senior pastor on the vitality of these churches as total environments. In one case, as senior author, I visited the site of a megachurch, where a former, longstanding charismatic pastor had been relieved of his duties a year earlier due to sexual relations outside his marriage. A new and much younger pastor had been called to the church. I visited to see how the church was faring; it was clear that the new pastor didn't have the same charisma. The sanctuary, built to fit 8,000, had curtains cutting the seating in half, and the energy of the place felt depressed at best. I met the pastor afterwards, and my primary impression was that he was depressed himself. He was a dynamic young man, but had stepped into shoes that he could not fill, and the experience seemed to drain him, quite literally, of energy – his emotional tone was depleted. I felt it and walked away feeling bad

for him. This is not what one finds in energy stars, and it generally means the beginning of the end of a megachurch, which in this case, occurred not too long afterwards.

Collins's fourth and final processual ingredient is *barriers excluding outsiders*, which is revealed during the fourth phase of the Megachurch Ritual Cycle: the *altar call*. Collins explains that emotional energy is normally heightened in the context where barriers exclude what are perceived as 'outsiders'. These barriers reduce distractions (facilitating the sense that what's happening *here* is all that matters) and enhance the feeling of an engaged in-group. As humans, we have a sense that if some place is off limits there must be something worth seeing and experiencing in that place. What is fascinating about megachurches is that there is nearly none of these typical barriers. In this way, megachurches are a part of the broader trend of "new paradigm churches" in which individuals are encouraged to "come as they are" to services with the clergy and attendees dressing informally (Miller 1997). Indeed, wherever we visited a mega) church as part of our research, both those churches in our research sample and many more beyond our sample, the message communicated was always 'you are welcome'. No matter the venue, people were welcome, overflow spaces were available, no one was left out. A mother and new member described how her previous church required one "to wear your Sunday best", which was difficult for her children. One of the things that stood out the most to her about the megachurch was that people could wear whatever they wanted and that her son could "wear his jeans". Others mentioned the benefit of being able to go to church in regular clothes – "shorts, flip flops, whatever" – and highlighted how this made visitors, including homeless individuals, feel comfortable attending. Indeed, in the two churches that were majority African American, and another that was majority Hispanic we were struck by the fact that even when, and perhaps especially when, we were the only white person in the room, the welcome was intense and overwhelming.

That being said, the door may be *theoretically* open to all who want to come, it is also true that in nearly every megachurch we studied, there is clear discouragement of gay relationships and a refusal to perform gay marriages. So, for members of the LGBTQ community and their allies, these barriers are high and the costs are often insurmountable. Although, even here, some contemporary evangelical megachurches are slowly becoming more inclusive on some social issues. Indeed, one of the surprises about megachurches is that there is a diversity of positions on these more controversial issues. Even in churches where gay marriage is not celebrated, we've interviewed gay couples who feel "welcome" even if their marriages are not.

Perhaps, if there is anything that separates insiders from outsiders, it is whether one can feel the affective and emotional pull of the services. Indeed, the primary barrier excluding outsiders in megachurches is that true insiders must feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, pledge one's faith in Jesus Christ and a pledge to support the church monetarily in one's service to the community. And to be sure, either a person experiences a 'tug' that moves them into the emotional energy of the group (whether they respond and give in or reject it), or a person may feel nothing but astonishment at the strange reactions of others; not everyone responds to or is interested in this particular type of emotional energy.

Indeed, if one doesn't feel the sense of the crowd or doesn't share the emotion of the group, a situation can quickly become excruciating, and those who are self-conscious quickly head for the exits. But for those who sense that this is *their place and these are their people*, there is almost nothing quite like participating in an ecstatic group in which you feel the emotions of inclusion. Indeed, in one of the megachurches that one of us attended, the pastor would put up his Bible and then move it across the large sanctuary, and everywhere he would go, a wave of folks would rise and then sit as the Bible passed; it created enormous energy across the crowd and as the pastor's Bible hovered over large swaths of people, the crowd became giddy as the wave initiated by the Holy Scripture came upon them and then went over them.

The combination of Collins' four processual ingredients produces a powerful emotional experience for participants. Megachurch attendees leave church charged with emotional energy from the interaction ritual, but it immediately begins to wane the longer individuals go without participating in subsequent events. Indeed, many members reported how terrible they felt when they miss church services. For instance, one explained, "I didn't miss a Tuesday and Sunday until this week. And I was miserable" and "I hate to miss a Sunday of church because my whole day's off". One woman described how the church service fills her and her husband up and the emptiness they experience when they miss it: "My husband always says that he needs to come on Sunday. Because it gives him a brand-new feeling for [the] entire week. [...] And sometimes when we miss it [...], we felt like so empty. [...] I know it's crazy to say this, but we really need it. And we are more happy". One member expressed this desire by wishing that he could have the same experience throughout the week: "I would just love to start every work day here for an hour. [...] It's just, you leave here so exuberant and then it's on us, I know it is, but it's so easy to get back into that rut". To help address this desire, megachurches continue the interaction ritual chain with links outside of the worship service. Within the model of the

Megachurch Ritual Cycle, small group activities act as pit stops between Sundays. As one member described: “We get poured into from the sermon. [...] But during the week we may not get poured into [...] and some of the small groups are for us to get poured back into from each other”. Another said, “And I can’t go just Sunday morning and close the door [...]. I want relationships throughout the week”.

The desire to maintain emotional energy throughout the week led many respondents to join small groups, which further developed their attachment to the megachurch and enhanced feelings of belonging and acceptance. This contributes to the creation of the total institutional environment. In the words of the participants, these groups help individuals “build relationships with one another in the body of Christ”. They do not put “pressure on you” or “judge” you, but instead are people that one “does life with” and whom you call if you have a problem. Small groups are the “real arms and hands and feet [of the body of Christ] to love and support people”. These small groups make the large church feel small: “But I don’t consider this a big church because it is broken up into little groups. We’re all part of the same ministry and when we see each other it’s like a family”. Through small groups “you develop relationships and [...] then] this megachurch becomes just one little small church”. Consistently, respondents identified that they felt at home and accepted, that they belonged in the megachurch, which was in large part due to participation in small groups. Small groups are enduring and tremendously effective in creating support networks and communities of friends, thereby sustaining loyalty to the group, all the while maintaining the emotional energy generated from the church services. Thus, the emotional energy creates a desire for more involvement and for a totalistic environment.

In the Megachurch Ritual Cycle, worship is never understood as a once-a-week Sunday event. The invitation and expectation are not only to enter ‘into Christ’ but also to enter into community, to mark oneself as a member of the family, and to discover your strengths and purpose to serve others. Therefore, service projects and opportunities constitute second chain link outside of the Sunday service and an integral phase in the Megachurch Ritual Cycle. The identity of evangelical Christians is inextricable from the call to serve the world in the name of Christ – to be Christ’s body, his hands and feet, within their communities and throughout the world. This process then is one in which one not only takes on a new identity ‘in Christ’, but one’s gifts are identified for the sake of serving the community and one’s neighbour. Members are invited and encouraged to participate in all sorts of service projects aimed at enacting the identity of work of Christ within the wider community and world. Being a part of the ‘body of Christ’ is presented as a duty to serve, give, and spread the word.

This has the dual effect of filling participants with a sense of purpose and direction, while also signaling to themselves and the rest of the group their devotion and loyalty to the gospel message and to the church community.

The megachurch model is designed as a total life system, and in the process of accepting God's grace, one is invited into small groups that underscore, develop, and reinforce one's new identity and that further solidify membership and commitment to the church. Small groups and opportunities to serve are vital ingredients for the *megachurch model* because they function to *enact* and *mobilise* what is learned (symbols) and gained (emotional energy) during the worship service, molding these into cohesive personal *identities* and a vibrant, cooperative *community* (supported by sub-communities and small groups) which permeate the rest of their lives, both individually and communally. In a pragmatic sense, they create a bridge from Sunday to Sunday to keep the fire burning throughout the week. And in a theoretical sense, they provide two vital 'chain links' in the sense of Collins's interaction ritual chain. The Sunday service, as we have shown is a solid interaction ritual complete with each ingredient; however, interaction ritual chain theory suggests that the emotional energy gained in one interaction ritual is carried with each person to the next interaction ritual they engage in. If one goes too long between interaction rituals, their emotional energy fades. Small groups and service projects provide members opportunities to express, share, and recharge their emotional energy stores throughout the week so that by Sunday they are almost just as 'on fire' as they were when they stepped out of the auditorium the week before.

Of course, both of these chain links within the Megachurch Ritual Cycle – service projects and small groups – are interaction rituals in and of themselves, even as they contribute to the larger chain initiated in the worship service. Our focus on these elements emphasises the importance of what sociologists Edward Lawler, Shane Thye, and Jeongkoo Yoon (2009, 2014) call the *micro-to-macro process*. They extend Lawler and Yoon's '*relational cohesion theory*' (1996) to explain how social interactions that include joint tasks, shared responsibility, and social unit attributions can accumulate to transform a network of individuals and pairs of individuals into a cohesive, centralised group. That group, in turn, becomes an object of commitment, loyalty, and immense positive affect. "In an individualized world", they explain, "group ties are self-generated from the bottom up. That is, they develop and are sustained through repeated social interactions that take place around joint tasks or activities, promoted and framed by the group unit ... [that] involve *affective sentiments* about the group itself" (Lawyer et al. 2014: 79).

This is directly related to Durkheim's *homo duplex*: "How do individualized, privatized actors create and sustain affectively meaningful social ties to social

units – relations, groups, organizations, communities, and nations?” (Lawyer et al. 2014: 78). The answer: the micro-to-macro process. Megachurches – including each interaction during the worship services, small group meetings, and outreach social service activities – are complex collections of micro units that facilitate and enact macro impulses of devotion to the larger group. Through this process, individuals’ commitment expands to motivate not only service for the church, but also service for its surrounding community, the state or nation, and even the world with the ‘life-changing’ and ‘world-transforming’ power of the message of Jesus Christ. And here, it is not only a big-picture view that one is called to but a *process* by which members are invited to first, ‘discover their gifts’, then ‘develop their gifts’, and ultimately to be called to ‘use their gifts’ on behalf of Christ. Thus, as we have suggested all along, this micro-macro project, resonates with a way to solve the tension Durkheim outlines in *homo duplex*, one is in-between, caught halfway between the self and the world, and the individual needs to be deeply invested in both, even at the same time. Megachurches understand that model, and create a system that functions to do both – develop individuals in their gifts, as well as to bind these folks together in a community, small and large, in which to find rest, strength, co-presence, a shared mood, tools to develop oneself, and opportunities to help and serve the world. The genius of these institutions is that they meet the needs of individuals but also maintain a focus on their communal context. And when they serve, they do so in ways that use individual gifts that serve the person, the megachurch community as well as the wider community and the global setting.

5 Megachurches as Small Towns

Megachurches present themselves like small towns – communities that welcome all, where every conceivable form of care is given, like hospital clinics for ‘every sinner and sickness’. The needs of the many are tended to from birth to death: there is prenatal care, newborn care, childcare, schools, youth sports leagues, after school tutoring, college prep help, college-age activities, singles groups, marriage classes, car maintenance facilities, hair salons, job search help, dance classes, fitness classes, recovery resources, medical care, Senior living facilities, even a columbarium at one church. For some churches, it seemed as though if you didn’t want to, you’d never have to utilise a secular resource again. Whether intentional or not, there seems to be an attempt to create a utopic community that Christians can reside in without fear of impinging secularity.

The church structure wraps each member in community and constant fellowship with like-minded people. Because of the size of megachurches, there is enough visible variety to make the community feel vibrant and exciting, but in fact, in terms of diversity, whether delineated in terms of other opinions, lifestyles, or values, there is little to no diversity. In the vision of Peter Berger, the megachurch provides a sacred canopy with members who know the outside world, because most work in it, but choose to live within the constraints and continuities of a world in which one's beliefs are mirrored back to them as good, true and beautiful. This kind of reinforcement creates a sense of contentment that the world can make sense again. Small town America can indeed exist, where traditional values of hard work, doing the right thing, and finding like-minded neighbours is possible. We saw this repeatedly – most sermons avoid controversial topics or alternative ideas, instead they function to set up and maintain basic but solid plausibility structures of beliefs and actions. They focus on creating and supporting members' sense that the evangelical theology and lifestyle is entirely possible and eminently preferable to all other options – it is what God wants and what the Bible commands. Megachurches, even when they are in the midst of metropolitan areas, embody an imaginary of a comfortable small town atmosphere, in which one feels that one can trust others, one knows what to expect, and one can nestle into this enclave of peace and well-being.

6 Conclusion

In describing megachurches in this way, we've painted them, in some sense, as idyllic worlds of 1950s America. But this isn't altogether true, since the problems of the 21st century are deeply intertwined in all of these communities. So, while on the surface it seems that things maintain a conventional morality of yesteryear America, these churches are also deeply committed to taking on the real-world problems of present day culture, whether these issues are in the inner cities, or in the suburbs, megachurches are facing the central issues of our era. To be sure, they typically don't comment at all on larger political issues. And this is somewhat of a shock to outsiders, because the conventional sense is that these churches are breeding grounds for the Christian Right, and while members certainly participate in those kinds of organisations, megachurches themselves are not promoting these issues from the pulpit, even if the conservative position is subtly assumed in the prevalent rhetoric.

In a certain sense, evangelical megachurches practice a parochial cosmopolitan experience. That is, from one angle of vision, LGBTQ issues are not

addressed. Gender transitioning is not addressed. Political candidates aren't supported at least in any explicit fashion. Megachurches instead present themselves as focused on the core issues of salvation, growing each person's character, building communities of happy, healthy marriages and families, and reaching out in service to their communities, serving the needs of the people who are homeless, sick, or hungry, and sometimes also taking this work overseas in similar international service ministries. Their explicit stated core and crucial purpose is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, there is nothing that is more important than commitment in one's heart to Jesus Christ. And all are invited to this committed relationship. How this faith and purpose is ideally lived out is nurtured in a family-centric way, with care of others, forgiveness towards enemies and goodwill towards all.

As we have shown, megachurches are sociologically remarkable because they complete a complex ring of desire for many human beings. They make many feel welcome; they give people a sense that something special can and will happen in this place; the pastor dives deep into their psyches to answer the questions that many are facing today, and pastors quite often meet that question with an answer – but also with a request – to commit themselves to Jesus Christ. Deliverance from all things, whether uncertainty, drug addiction, violence, despair, whatever it might be, is offered in this follow up: Come forward and be delivered, be counselled, be loved by professionals, and cared for by family, those who know what you are going through. And then be ready to be challenged to service, to give one's life and goods for others, in care for the needy, for those who are local and those who are global. And finally, none of this is done in isolation, but in relationship to one's small group, a community of like-minded people who struggle and want to be healed. The Megachurch Ritual Cycle offers a church experience that constitutes a full arc of coming in as an individual and leaving fully embraced in a community of faith and love. Megachurches create powerful totalistic communities of love, support and service and the emotional energy that sustains this arc of desire is captured and personified in the belief that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now, of course, all of this can go terribly wrong and become subject to destruction; megachurches are not exceptions to the rule that power and money corrupts.

Our conclusion: Megachurches provide *remarkably* successful total environments because they are particularly good at generating the processual ingredients of interaction rituals and meeting the desire for emotional energy among attendees. We argue that megachurches are an astonishingly effective solution to the problem of *homo duplex*: binding people together in cooperative moral communities held together by cohesive, affective interaction ritual chains.

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Megachurches as Educational Institutions

Mark J. Cartledge

1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the notion that megachurches function as educational institutions for a sector of contemporary Christianity. This sector is largely, if not exclusively, represented by Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, although there are Evangelical examples as well. For the purposes of this exercise, the chapter will focus on this family of the Christian tradition, which is mostly represented by Independent churches, although it can be found in classical Pentecostalism and denominational Charismatic and Evangelical churches around the world. Given the limitations of space, an exhaustive account cannot be offered. Instead, the intention is to elucidate the significant features of these churches and to reflect on them in the light of the literature in order to offer some evaluation and suggestions for future trajectories.

Before proceeding further, a couple of key terms need to be defined. First, by 'education' is meant the overall process and context for individual and corporate learning. This education may be focused around the development of faith understanding and practices in order to fulfil the vision of what it means to be a Christian within the megachurch setting. But it may also include aspects of a more general nature, most often associated with human flourishing, character and skills development for the benefit of the individual, family or community. Therefore, a broad understanding of education will be taken and it will not be limited to theological cognition and articulation. Second, by 'institution' is meant the organisational context, structure, processes and practices, within which learning occurs and by means of which members affiliated with the institution both contribute to and benefit from the association. In effect, this study discusses church congregations as institutions and the examples used will illustrate educational features from the different sectors of institutional life.

In order to fulfil the aim of the study, this chapter will first offer a general overview of the nature of Christian congregations as sites of educational processes. This is because megachurches are, in effect, subsets of wider congregational level education, as well as transcending this model by means of their

more extended multi-congregational, multi-site and network arrangements. Once this context has been established, the study continues by describing the features which often characterise megachurches as educational institutions. This is the heart of the chapter and it is illustrated by examples for the literature in the field as well as megachurch websites, which are crucial ways of gaining initial access to their ethos and ideology. The chapter closes with a summary of the general characteristics of these educational institutions before offering an evaluation, as well as suggesting possible future trajectories for them. A conclusion places this essay in the context of the megachurch literature and suggests ways in which it is significant for scholarship.

2 Congregational Education

In general, it could be said that churches and congregations function as sites of educational processes (Everist 2002). This is because central practices enacted by groups of people meeting for congregational life provide structures and opportunity for learning to occur: they participate in social learning experiences (Hermans 2003: 275). Of course, it would be a mistake to assume that congregations are primarily like schools and colleges. Their main aim is not to produce citizens for earthly employment; nevertheless, they do contribute to the equipping of the saints for gainful activity, even as their focus is the formation of disciples who follow Jesus Christ and worship God. In other words, while their primary concern is the worship of God and the mission of the church, often defined in terms of evangelism and social action, they also shape individuals to be particular kinds of people that represent their faith in wider society (see the discussion of congregations as institutions by Jordan 2005). Congregations shape their members by what is made explicit, what is signalled implicitly and even by what is obviously avoided (sometimes referred to as the null curriculum) (Hinton 2009, 2011; Pazmiño 2008: 243–248). Given this background, a number of distinct features of congregational learning may be identified.

2.1 *Education in a Congregational Setting*

It could be argued that at the heart of congregational learning is the process of socialisation. Socialisation refers to the means by which individuals take on board the beliefs, values and practices of a particular community or society such that they move from the outside to the inside of that community (Fulcher and Scott 2003). In terms of society in general, primary socialisation is mediated by means of parents and families, schools and children's organisations,

clubs and subsequently institutions of Higher Education. Congregations are very much part of these socialisation structures because they provide resources that both support the values of wider society as well as challenging them from time to time. Chiefly, though, they are the primary means by which individuals come into contact with the Christian faith via a significant other (family member, friend, or pastor) and begin to explore the Christian faith as a viable alternative to other religions or no religious affiliation. Very often, children simply grow up within the faith, in which case the relationship between the family and the congregational socialisation of faith is very close indeed. At the heart of the socialisation process is the weekly act of congregational worship: faith is inculcated and enacted in the worshipping practices of the congregation (Chaves 2004: 182–201). Faith is learned, practised, felt, embodied and performed not just individually but also collectively. This activity cannot be underestimated as the engine of institutional learning for congregations.

Congregations provide opportunities to acquire knowledge of the faith by means of specific learning practices. For example, it was common in the Church of England and other mainline denominations to prepare young people for the rite of confirmation (at which young people affirmed the faith for themselves). In the preparatory confirmation classes, a pastor or priest explained key doctrinal points as well the nature of the Sunday liturgy. Alongside these classes, specific age-focused learning opportunities, such as Bible studies or discussion groups are provided that enable the young people to explore the meaning of faith, not just in general terms but also in specific ways as they seek to understand how religious commitments affect them personally. The growing up in the faith is an important aspect of congregational education and a considerable amount of energy and resources are channelled towards children and young people.

Increasingly, congregations are realising that just as they need to provide opportunities and resources for children and young people, so they need to attend to other groups, so that the growth in knowledge and understanding of the faith can be seen across the different generations in the church, including adults (Isaac 2012: 86). This means that while Sunday morning worship is often mixed generationally, there are now mid-week opportunities for men, women, younger and older people, as well as mothers and toddlers. The range of learning activities will vary according to the resources and culture of each individual church community. Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness that spiritual maturity is something that develops over time and certain opportunities facilitate this maturity, thus providing leaders for the current congregation and its future. For some church leaders, this means exposing congregants to critical biblical scholarship as part of the learning context (Mercer 2006: 174).

It is always the case that congregations are embedded in and function in relation to wider society. It cannot be any other way. This means that they draw their members from this wider society and they also contribute to it in multiple ways. Congregational members live, work, socialise and engage in multiple activities as part of this wider society. Very often, this is based at the local level in which these congregations are geographically situated. They provide various resources that impact communities in positive ways. Congregations also belong in many cases to denominations, and these denominations produce resources and commentaries on public issues in society. Sometimes they come into direct conflict with national and local government policy on matters of social and political issues. In other cases, they appear to reflect direct sympathies with political parties and policies. In many cases these congregations and denominations are part of networks and groups that work together to foster greater cooperation and the sharing of ideas, projects, resources and expertise. At times, there can be tensions with wider society, as values once aligned between the two become strained and fault lines emerge both between church groups and wider society, as well as within and among church groups on precisely the same issues (for example, the changing values and attitudes towards sexuality and social institutions such as marriage).

2.2 *Congregations as Institutions*

As institutions, congregations provide many different kinds of educational opportunities. In a lot of cases what is offered would not be classified as 'formal' education because there is no accredited qualification provided at the end of a given course of instruction. In some cases, there are arrangements with universities and colleges, with congregations providing learning hubs as part of a network. This educational trajectory starts informally, develops by means of networking, then conferences and subsequently formal arrangements with a local Higher Education institution are established. Based on information gleaned in 2000, Thumma and Travis observe that approximately 30 percent of US megachurches sponsor some kind of training or educational arrangement, whether formally accredited or not (2007: 131). Congregations often function as part of a wider parachurch network and the academic expertise for this learning is provided elsewhere. For the most part, what is offered by congregations is less formal education, although it is mediated through the teaching offices of the church leaders and staff. In many cases, these are people who have been trained in theology, having some recognised qualification, such as degrees in theology from universities as part of their ministerial training. They use their training to provide teaching through sermons, very often constructed as part of a series and dealing with everyday issues by bringing the Bible into conversation

with them. The sermon probably stands out as the most important teaching vehicle that the congregation has in the formation of its members in their Christian discipleship.

This main vehicle of learning is supplemented by other means, for example small group meetings, which include Bible studies of various kinds. Sometimes there are specific study groups, perhaps linked to a season of reflection such as Lent or Advent. In some cases, these seasonal activities provide an opportunity to collaborate with other churches in the area as part of an ecumenical arrangement. These group activities thus offer a peer-learning context, which supports the existing learning opportunities through Sunday worship. There are also courses directed at specific groups of people at certain life stages, such as marriage preparation courses, parenting courses, workplace spirituality courses and bereavement courses. Some churches seek to invest in the next generation of their members by delivering courses to grow new leaders and perhaps nurture vocations into full-time ministry. As part of this kind of learning activity mentors and prayer partners are provided for a period of time, which allows individuals to obtain what appears to be similar to a personal tutor in the spiritual life.

3 Education and Megachurches

Given this general context to congregations as institutions, the precise nature of megachurches as educational institutions will be considered in this section. In many ways, the picture is somewhat similar to the one already painted above, but megachurches also offer features that are distinct, given their character, and these are important to note. Of course, megachurches vary enormously, and a certain liberty is expressed in the description that follows in the sense that generalisations need to be made for the purposes of this kind of discussion. Nevertheless, examples of practices are based in the literature of megachurches from around the world. [Given the discussions of the nature of megachurches and how they have been categorised (e.g. Thumma and Travis 2007), a description of them will not be attempted here.]

3.1 *Congregational Education*

To attend a megachurch Sunday by Sunday is to be part of a congregation of hundreds, if not thousands, depending on the church and its location. Due to the sheer scale of the operation, for many people it feels as though they are attending a conference, a major event or a concert. But it is none of these

things; it is a regular weekly event, whether it is held on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning. Therefore, given the numbers attending this kind of weekly worship, the first thing to observe is that learners, at least at the weekly Sunday level, are part of the crowd and a very large crowd at that. They are often herded by ushers into a very large auditorium, which may or may not be a dedicated church building. This means that the physical context for the main learning experience can communicate the everyday, the utilitarian and the idea that this is an experience of learning for the masses. The experience of worship becomes, in effect, an educational tool, which is initiated the moment a person enters into the church building (Barnes 2010: 39, 61), communicating aesthetic values that are learned over time (Klaver 2015).

The faith is communicated, taught and learned via a variety of means, including the prayers that are prayed, the songs that are sung, the sermon that is preached and even the notices that are announced, as well as any socialising that occurs before or after the service in the cafeteria or coffee areas contained within the buildings. In many megachurches, there is a shop that sells books and material that supports the ideology of the particular community, so the preacher's sermons are edited and published as books, which the members read and discuss among themselves.

The way in which leaders from the platform articulate their faith and communicate it in public prayer is one of the aspects that is absorbed by the congregations. Very often in megachurches, the person leading the opening and closing prayers will pray in an extempore fashion, using particular Christian jargon and code words that signal theological commitments and specific understandings. For example, they might reflect an understanding related to the 'prosperity gospel' and the fact that God provides for the material needs of his children not just their spiritual ones. This discourse is therefore modelled by the leader and promoted consistently through repetition. This kind of understanding is absorbed by the members over time, as part of the overall socialisation process, such that new members begin to use the same language, understand the same concepts and practise the same kind of speech themselves. Thus, they move from the outside of the language game to the inside of it. Quite often megachurch leaders think in terms of attendees as belonging to different commitment levels, with core members at the centre (about 20 percent of weekly attendees) and visitors and spectators at the periphery (about 10 percent of weekly attendees). One of the goals of megachurches is the mobilisation of as many people as possible for the sake of their mission and this means socialising people via learning structures and processes towards being core committed members, or moderately committed members (about

40 percent of weekly attendees) which means that the overall educational environment is central to the life of a megachurch (Thumma and Travis 2007: 102–107).

Music is important to Christianity and it has a rich musical history that reflects the varied times and places of its practice around the world. Music in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, among which the megachurches of the world tend to be located, has elevated the musical component to a significant place in the overall liturgical process. In most of these churches there will be a praise and worship period when the congregation is led in a sustained act of singing three to six or more songs. These songs are selected according to the worship/band leader's interests or according to the theme of the Bible passage set for the service. The words of the songs are sung repetitively, so that while they appear on big screens in front of the congregation they are easily memorised and internalised. The theological content of these songs will tend to be on the light side, with a strong affective component. It appeals less to the intellect and more to the affections, allowing congregants to express their heart-felt instincts towards God in praise and adoration, as well as feeling connected to the community of the church (Wade and Hynes 2013). This means that what is learned theologically via the songs is also connected at an emotional level, which supports the ideas that the most profound learning is not simply cognitive but also emotional and volitional. People choose to sing these songs with others and by doing so they allow themselves to be socialised into a set of beliefs about God, the world and themselves.

The sermon in megachurches is often a slick message, simple, very well crafted using Bible verses as pegs from which to jump from idea to idea and providing a practical and highly motivational message. Different examples can be seen in the sermons of Joel Osteen (Carney 2012; Sinitiere 2015), T.D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar (Hinton 2011). The styles of preaching will vary according to culture and context, but it has been suggested that they do not represent the classical homiletical styles of older traditions (Thumma and Travis 2007: 65). Nevertheless, the quality of presentation can be very high, often with polished PowerPoint slides and images to reinforce the key points of the message. The congregation is treated to a skilled rhetorician, who has tapped into the desires and aspirations of those individuals present and seeks to communicate in a way that is accessible and relevant, while often avoiding controversial social and political issues (Vermeer 2015). Some megachurches, designated the 'Charismatic/Pastor-focused' churches founded by an entrepreneur, or perhaps a so-called 'pastorpreneur', often focus on the preaching and teaching of the founding pastor as the most important educational focal point (Thumma and Travis, 2007: 37–38). Even when this is not the case, the sermon is still the key learning

experience for many megachurch members and it would be easy to think that such a learning experience is a rather passive one. It could be assumed that listeners simply take what they hear: believing it and receiving it. This may indeed be the case in some contexts. But in others, members of the church follow along by looking up Bible texts in their own Bibles or by using phone apps. They are assimilating ideas critically, even when this appears not to be the case. Thus, ideas from the preacher are actively assessed at the individual level during the service and perhaps discussed with friends after the service in social settings. One of the key criteria for assessment is whether the preacher bases his or her teaching in the Bible itself, hence very often there is a proliferation of biblical texts in use, often cited in a proof-text fashion in order to demonstrate that the preacher is in fact preaching from the 'Word of God'. But again, it is worth noting that the theological discourse communicated via sermons has a profound affect on the learning of congregations as they absorb key ideas through such discourse. This is noted by Barnes, when she states: "I contend that in the Black megachurch tradition, worship represents a time of collective instruction where a captive audience can be socialised toward the specific vision and theology of a charismatic senior pastor. Not only do congregants 'see' physical examples of success on the church grounds, they are taught that God can make similar successes possible to the faithful and that they should expect them" (2010: 63).

It is easy to overlook the apparent minor points of the service as learning experiences, for example the announcements and the collection. In many megachurches, the weekly notices are communicated via a short video, which is played during a dedicated slot in the service. This short video is probably the nearest thing to the branding tool of the website for communicating events and activities and for packaging the life of the church for the outside viewer. So, while this event of giving inside information on the life of the church is primarily aimed at members, it is also outward facing and so intended to be attractive for would-be members. This means that while the discourse connects with the internal narrative it has an accessible quality. Thus, again, it models how to communicate the faith of the church in a manner that is engaging and with high quality media.

In this section, it is also worth noting how the church expresses itself in terms of the giving of money. Almost every congregation, let alone a megachurch congregation, has an act of giving as part of the liturgy of worship and, in this regard, megachurches are no different to any other kind of church community. However, because the numbers attending are so large and because the 'prosperity gospel' has often been associated with megachurches (Tucker-Worgs 2011: 87–102), it is worth noting that the language around money is also

transmitted and learned from the ways in which money is collected and received. It comes as no surprise to find that there appears to be some association between prosperity rhetoric and the rite of the collection bag or bucket. However, a note of caution must be struck here because it has been suggested that not as many megachurches espouse a 'prosperity gospel' as has been imagined and very often 'Seeker-sensitive' megachurches will refrain from speaking about money at all (cf. Bowler 2013; Thumma and Travis 2007: 114–115). This means that attitudes towards money can be reinforced, challenged and even occluded by the practices of money collection.

3.2 *Learning through Small Groups and 'Courses'*

Many megachurches are regarded as 'programme-based'. That is, they provide a great array of different programmes and 'courses' that cater to the interests and needs of their membership. Megachurches 'intentionally structure multiple ways for people to interact and form social ties', such that the use of small groups is now regarded as a universal practice among megachurches (Thumma and Travis 2007: 48; von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012). Many of these small groups are constituted for the purpose of Christian education as part of a 'course' or a 'class' and regarded as central to their vision of spiritual formation. By a 'course', I mean a series of meetings aimed at informing members and visitors about a body of knowledge (although not called that) and assisting them to process that body of knowledge via learning strategies such as talks, discussions, question and answer sessions and homework of some kind. Bible classes have been identified as the primary means of Christian education in the so-called Old Line/Programme-Based churches (Kay 2004: 235; Thumma and Travis 2007: 3). Many of these courses include at their heart exercises that enable people to study the Bible, suitably mediated through a particular lens that is acceptable to the doctrinal stance of the church leadership.

In many cases, there is a programme-based process evangelism course, that explores the basis of the Christian faith, builds relationships and integrates enquirers into the fellowship of the church. Very often courses are supported by mentors who help the integration and socialisation of new members (Thumma and Travis 2007: 49). Some courses help individuals to navigate their way through the complexities of life. So, as noted above, life seasons are often attended to, for example preparation for engagement and marriage, parenting and life changes such as bereavement and retirement. Other courses are therapy-based, such as addiction, eating disorders and mental health support through groups. Further courses are intended to support career development, for example advising on how to get into the best universities and colleges, or how to integrate the Christian faith into working practices, as well as finance

management and the avoidance of debt. Added to these educational courses, there are more leisure-based courses similar to what one might find in a community centre, such as art, exercise and sports classes of various kinds. The so-called 'New Wave/Re-envisioned' type of megachurch has rejected the reductionism of the 'Seeker-sensitive' approach and has embraced more traditional forms of spirituality, which include classes on spiritual journaling, fasting and prayer, as well as contemplative meditation practices (Thumma and Travis 2007: 41).

These courses attempt to bring a Christian perspective on the subject under discussion. So, for example, while money may be discussed in a practical manner, there may well be a discussion of what the Bible has to say on the subject, its stewardship and the dangers of falling into debt. While these types of courses are constructed for insiders, there is always the possibility that visitors may be taking them for their own interest. Thus, these courses may provide a dual role of skills development as well as building relationships through which the Christian message may be shared, and the outsiders evangelised. For many megachurches, this is where there is an integration of what is offered for their membership with an opportunity or entry point for would-be members to experience what is on offer; thus education and evangelism intersect. Megachurches tend to see all events as potentially evangelistic opportunities and, while there is often sensitivity to outsiders, there can be a boldness in sharing the Christian message when this is viewed as appropriate. The 'Seeker-sensitive' megachurches attempt to make the whole of their culture as accessible as possible for enquirers and this can have a major influence on the nature of language, the use of symbols and a toning down of distinctly Christian practices, for example the frequency and location of the sacraments, which can be minimised for the sake of evangelism (Thumma and Travis 2007: 39).

It was stated above that only a minority of megachurches have formal educational programmes as part of their provision. (This is indeed the case, although I shall note the Black megachurch school provision below as part of their engagement with local social need.) Nevertheless, there are examples of megachurches participating in formal Higher Education provision. There are two obvious examples that are identifiable from research.

First, Hillsong Church, Sydney, Australia provides an on-campus vocational-level diploma in Christian ministry, focusing especially on leadership and theology, that attracts approximately 2,000 students from around the world at any given time (Burns 2017: 273). This is located at their two Sydney campuses and the students meet daily for worship and classes from lecturers who are qualified at least to the Master's level, with some having Doctoral qualifications. The students are taught theology and ministry in an integrated and confessional

manner that interfaces with Pentecostal and Charismatic scholarship. More recently, a partnership with the Pentecostal College, Alphacrucis, has opened up the delivery of BA and MA programmes in Christian theology and ministry. All of these courses are fully accredited through the Australian educational system. The educational approach of the College is to instil the culture of the Church into the programmes of the College, by which is meant the core values of the Church since the students are immersed in both the College and the Church during their studies (Soon 2017: 111). The educational processes of the College thus reinforce and support the distinctive theological identity of the Church in the context of wider Pentecostal and Charismatic expressions of Christianity with which Hillsong is connected.

Second, Holy Trinity Church Brompton [HTB] has been known to support theological education via its St Paul's Theological Centre [<https://sptc.htb.org/about>], which is affiliated with St Milletus College [<https://www.stmellitus.org/history>]. This College prepares women and men for ordination in the Church of England and it is sponsored by the Diocese of London, being located in Courtfield Gardens, Earls court. This church is one of four congregations that form the hub of HTB and it doubles as an educational and worship site. This particular church is known for being more intellectual in its offering on a Sunday and so attracts people who desire this kind of church community. Additionally, HTB has been known to sponsor theological conferences. For example, in 2010 it hosted the 'Holy Spirit in the World Today' conference, which attracted speakers such as Jürgen Moltmann, Rowan Williams, Miroslav Volf and David Ford. Thus, HTB provides a high-level opportunity for theological exchange and interaction, which is unusual for megachurches in general (Cartledge et al, 2019: 121–130).

3.3 *Learning through Service Opportunities*

One of the great advantages of participating in the life of a megachurch is the exceptional array of activities that one may be drawn into and to which one may make a contribution. Very often these service opportunities are linked to participation as a member of a small group of some kind (Thumma and Travis 2007: 87). As part of the range of activities is the opportunity it affords members to learn new skills. A number of new skills stand out as important for the life of the church, but which are eminently transferable to other spheres of life, thus enhancing the versatility of members within the church but also outside of it, even contributing to their employability in more general terms. A number of examples can be identified, but I shall simply note three at this juncture: public communication skills, organisational knowledge and skills and interpersonal skills. In many cases, it is through these opportunities that pastors are

active in their attempt to train the next generation of lay and ordained leaders (Barnes 2010: 87).

An important aspect of any church is the ability of its leaders to communicate verbally. This is especially important in Protestant churches, where the proclamation of the Christian message via the pulpit can be prized as a sign of one's calling to the pastorate. In the megachurch setting, pastors who have the platform must be able to communicate to thousands of people simultaneously, because sermons can be 'live streamed' to different campuses of the same church. The preacher may be speaking to two or three thousand people sat in front of him or her, but there are many more watching via relay screens at other locations. And this need to be able to communicate effectively via public speaking is also transferred to smaller gatherings, whether these are smaller worship events for children or youth, or evangelistic events, or social engagement events. There is a premium on clear and effective communication and this is modelled and encouraged by those leading small groups or specific ministries. Volunteers in these ministries can find themselves called upon to speak in front of others quite quickly and over time develop confidence and skills in communication that would take considerable time to develop otherwise. Once attained, this basic ability to speak publicly and address a group of people can be transferred to other contexts whether committee meetings, work-based conferences, other voluntary sector opportunities, or the political sphere and even the media. Indeed, many megachurches have developed their own TV networks and the most gifted may find themselves developing a ministry via these opportunities that would not have been possible had they not been given initial learning opportunities on a smaller scale.

Another area of skills training through ministry opportunities is the organisational side of megachurch life. Quite clearly, for a megachurch to function in any meaningful sense there needs to be people with administrative acumen able to work alongside pastors and leaders to organise things. These organisations often have huge budgets given their numbers and so financial planning and management are essential. They also have significant buildings to use and maintain, as well as the technology that accompanies contemporary worship services with musical equipment, computers, projectors, screens and lights. Many of these churches organise huge annual and seasonal events that attract thousands of people and require long term planning and periods of intense organisation. They also use cutting-edge technology, especially in the use of the media, and individuals can acquire expertise often lacking elsewhere in the voluntary sector. Many of the Black megachurches provide material for recognised TV channels (Tucker-Worgs 2011: 22). In order for the life of these megachurches to function, they require gifted and committed people. This

also gives opportunity for members to volunteer in these areas, provide personnel support for tasks but also to learn through their service in a variety of organisational roles. These organisational service roles provide many different experiences of gaining knowledge and skills of how to plan and manage the life of a large institution. Once again, over time, this knowledge base can become internalised to such a degree that it is transferable to other spheres of working life.

One cannot be involved in congregational life at any level before it is realised that fundamentally it is about people. Of course, Christianity claims and functions on the assumption that there is an interaction with God, but from a sociological perspective we are dealing with people (even if we assume theologically that the Holy Spirit is mediated via people). Learning to work with people and with all kinds of people is something that is acquired over time. Once again, it can be noted how megachurches through their ministries provide opportunities to work with a variety of people, from children and young adults to the range of congregational members, to those who are on the margins of society, such as the homeless, the unemployed, migrants and refugees. It is easy to miss the fact that with the huge numbers attending these churches there are learning opportunities all over the institution when viewed in terms of working with people. Most of the social outreach activities are staffed by volunteers and they obtain challenging and valuable experience regarding how to work alongside others in the provision of a service as part of a team, as well as direct engagement with service users. These people may be struggling with mental and physical health issues as well as social issues, so the experience gained from this interaction, especially when sustained over a period of time, can be hugely formational in terms of character and virtue. It is not just about what people know and what skills they gain, but also what kinds of people they become. Megachurches provide service opportunities that help shape individuals and communities. This learning dimension is often lost in the analysis of megachurches but it is hugely important for them and for us in our assessment of their contribution.

3.4 *Learning as a Community in Relation to Culture and Society*

One of the main criticisms of megachurches, especially from the sociological literature that has been produced from the analysis of the American megachurch scene, is that megachurches simply reflect American culture. The main criticism is that they are consumerist in ethos and treat attendees as consumers looking for a product to satisfy their religious needs (Twitchell 2004: 80–108). They have constructed and branded a form of religion that is uniform, undemanding and palatable for the American religious consumer, one that

reinforces the 'happy narrative' of the American dream and places Jesus in a kind of megachurch Disneyland, where fact and fiction blur, but where there is always a happy ending and all is well, protected, secure for middle class America in its way of life. Rather than inculcating Christian habits based in a distinct set of beliefs and values, it is suggested that megachurches have actively participated in the commodification of religion (James 2013: 27). It has also been suggested that this criticism can be targeted at other megachurches around the world (Yip 2015). This is a powerful critique and one that deserves to be taken seriously. But it needs to be observed that there are different types of megachurch, for example in relation to migrant megachurches in Europe. Even in America, the picture is not exactly uniform and the Black church stands out as somewhat different from this consumerist model in some respects, if not others.

There is still a religious and cultural divide in America today. While culturally diverse congregations do exist, on the whole it is still the case that Sunday morning is the most racially divided time of the week in American society. Black megachurches exist throughout the USA and provide an interesting case in terms of a learning community. So far, I have tended to look at education in terms of individual education and this is something that continues throughout this chapter. But it needs to be noted that Black megachurches provide a community for individuals to belong to in order to negotiate the racism that continues in America today (Barnes 2015: 112; Tucker-Worgs 2011: 73). Many of these megachurches are located in metropolitan areas, since increased social mobility after the civil rights movement was matched by increased migration to the suburbs (Tucker-Worgs 2011: 45). In all these locations, they provide alternative communities where members develop knowledge and skills, as well as the strategies to cope and thrive in the context of America today. Their educational traditions have roots in the 'self-help legacy' of segregation with many schools emerging from the basements of Black churches (Barnes 2010: 5–6). When this is translated into Black megachurches today it means that these communities are committed to the socio-economic uplift of Black people in which education, both formal and informal, is understood as the key factor in social transformation alongside political and community engagement (Tucker-Worgs 2011: 35–39, 103–132). Of the megachurches studied by Barnes approximately fifty percent of them sponsored Day Schools, private academies as well as youth and adult educational programmes, including health education, for example with regard to HIV/Aids (Barnes 2013). This is in response to poor educational provision in the urban areas associated with poverty and lack of resources (2010: 26). Similar to other megachurches, their size means greater economic and human resources, which in turn translates into a greater number of

cafeteria-style programmes (Tucker-Worgs 2011: 22). Barnes estimates that the average Black megachurch sponsors at least forty programmes at any given time, thus providing educational opportunities at a variety of levels including computer literacy and social advocacy (2010: 28). These programmes develop especially when the church sermons tend to be practically-orientated ones (2010: 31). Barnes also observes that where large Black churches have embraced a liberationist agenda, then they tend to foster education-related programmes (2010: 132). For Hinton (2011), Black megachurches offer a primary curriculum via worship, especially preaching and prayer, and a secondary curriculum via praxis, or prayer-in-action.

Another example of how megachurches as communities have provided institutional learning environments is the immigrant-led megachurches in the global north, especially western Europe (Athyal 2015: 34–35). The most obvious example that can be identified is Kingsway International Christian Centre (London and Kent), often referred to as KICC (Asanoah-Gyadu 2012; Cartledge and Davies 2014). This church is largely populated by West Africans, especially Nigerians and Ghanaians, but it also contains some members from the Caribbean. This church provides an alternative community for migrant Africans, one where they can feel at home while away from home. It is one in which their own cultural values are understood, appreciated and honoured. But it is also one in which the differences between the old culture and the new culture can be negotiated with the help of fellow travellers. These fellow travellers offer knowledge and insights on how to adapt to the new cultural environment, providing guides and interpreters for the journey. It is often the case that these largely migrant populated churches also provide technical support to assist their members with immigration and visa issues, as well as advice about employment and education. In this way, these types of migrant oriented megachurches facilitate the socialisation of ‘culturally other’ individuals into a western context via the mediation of those who have become third-culture individuals, managing to maintain a hybrid existence: successfully adapting while also remaining culturally rooted in their African heritage (Cartledge et al, 2019: 190–199, 203–205, 308–311). As learning experiences go, this is surely one of the most significant ones and it is often overlooked. It is facilitated by a community that is in its very ethos a megachurch educational institution.

4 Characteristics, Evaluation and Future Trajectories

In this section, the study aims to summarise some key characteristics before suggesting points of evaluation and possible future trajectories for megachurches globally.

4.1 *Key Characteristics*

It is important to remember that megachurches as educational institutions are very much like other types of congregations insofar as learning occurs in the usual ways of Sunday worship, small group experiences and individualised attention. Where megachurches differ quite considerably is the way in which information and knowledge is packaged for mass consumption, as well as the sheer range of courses and opportunities for learning to occur. There is an economy of scale that influences everything and this includes learning support, provided that individuals adapt to the mass production of everything and can find their own way into it and benefit from what is on offer. In this manner, it could be said that the educational processes that are offered are not formal in the sense of being accredited but they can be very well managed and delivered to a very high standard. This must be one of the attractions of belonging to a megachurch, namely the very professional delivery component of their events and courses. Combined with the worship experience and small group activities, these opportunities offer an overall package of formation that develops conceptual knowledge, hands-on experience, emotional and social intelligence, as well as an embodied form of spirituality. They also provide alternative communities that function as social enclaves against wider culture, but which resource their members with knowledge, skills and support to engage creatively and successfully as wider citizens.

4.2 *Evaluation*

There are a number of strengths that can be noted regarding the nature of education provided for members of a megachurch. First, they demand a high level of observation from the members. If members attend an event, the chances are that they will be watching others operate for the most part, somewhat similar to a concert. While this can create a passive sense of participation, the strength of this expectation is that often what is modelled are highly skilled performances, whether that is in terms of speaking, music, technical expertise or organisational skill. Second, having picked up a serious amount of tacit knowledge through intense observation members can be funnelled into service streams via ministry events that allow them to see the range of opportunities provided for them to serve others. The range of opportunities to serve others can be staggering in scope and number and thus individuals can learn a range of skills and aptitudes by 'having a go' and 'learning by doing', often with mentor support along the way (Barnes 2010: 18). Skills acquired over time through these different ministry opportunities can be subsequently transferred to other domains, thus enhancing the person's ability to find new employment or develop their existing skill set for the purpose of work or other kinds of volunteering, which would have been previously closed to them. Third, it is also the

case that many ministry opportunities require close working relationships with other people. This means that these opportunities require inter-personal skills, sometimes at very high levels with demanding and vulnerable people. These skills can be personally beneficial, by developing emotional intelligence, but also contributing to family dynamics at home and work dynamics elsewhere.

Megachurches are not perfect institutions and there are weaknesses with them as identified in the literature. In terms of educational weaknesses, there are a number. First, these types of churches, while containing intelligent people from all walks of life, appear to communicate a form of Christianity that is at times simplistic and naïve. Once again, this is not the case with all churches, but it is a sufficiently supported characteristic to be noted as a weakness. This means that the messages that are preached and the material that is produced for discussion can be intellectually undemanding. This has been viewed as a misperception by Thumma and Travis (2007: 91–117), but from the perspective of an academic theologian this perception appears to have sufficient support when considered across the whole spectrum of megachurches. The discussion of this idea by Thumma and Travis (2007) does not really deal with the intellectual side of the criticism but rather focuses on issues around church growth, biblical orthodoxy, aesthetics, the nature of the liturgy, homiletical styles, and theological beliefs, which relate to the question of the intellect but they are not the same thing. From an analysis of megachurch discourse it could be suggested that, by and large, the discourse does not deal with the complex and demanding questions in society requiring an informed and thoughtful response. Second, the information that is communicated is very often out of touch with the best scholarship associated with the sector. Increasingly, there is a vibrant community of Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars from around the world writing on various subjects pertinent to church life, but it is rare to find megachurch pastors who are connected to this scholarly stream. Instead, they appear to recycle ideas from within their own networks, often framed within an anti-intellectualist cordon. Third, the educational material that is produced, while being high quality in form, has a mass-produced character to it that feels as though any thinking outside the tramlines will be met with robust steering back into set ways of thinking. It is aimed at processing the numbers and this means that individual learning needs are overlooked because the mass processing of courses and programmes drives the whole educational venture. The disadvantage of being part of such a massive institutional structure is that it is easy to lose one's own educational trajectory amid the mass-produced world of megachurch culture.

4.3 *Future Trajectories?*

What will happen in the future as far as megachurch educational culture is concerned? Sadly, it appears that this culture will continue to function at a shallow intellectual level, because the consumerist mentality and drive for numbers is so embedded in it, especially in the USA. The programmes will proliferate and be refreshed over time, somewhat like products on a supermarket shelf. They have a 'shelf-life' and will be replaced once consumer demand has waned, so in order to keep up the numbers new products will be created, marketed and consumed. Some may develop greater intellectual rigour and there are examples of theology conferences being developed to connect with scholars in the field. Some may also find ways of engaging critically with cultural issues, thus developing associate organisations that position themselves in a constructive yet critical posture in relation to wider society. Many megachurches are already using the Internet to their advantage. In some cases, they have set up what have been called 'Internet campuses', where there are virtual churches as part of the megachurch provision (Thumma and Travis 2007: 186). Research on megachurches needs to keep up with these developments by evaluating how they communicate their beliefs and values on the Internet and among virtual communities in particular (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007; Campbell and Wallace 2015; Hackett 2009; Martin et al. 2011). Going forward, this aspect of megachurch worship will develop at a rapid pace because of technological advances. What would be really exciting is for a number of megachurches from around the world to collaborate on an event at which they expose themselves to some of the leading international megachurch scholars. These scholars would be able to offer constructive and critical feedback on their educational practices in order to help them to reflect on what it is that they do and how they can improve their activities for the benefit of their members and wider society.

5 Conclusion

By and large, there has not been a full description and assessment of educational practices found among megachurches in the literature. Therefore, given this lacuna, the strategy of this study has been to consider how learning can be understood when one looks at the life and work of megachurches in general terms. It is important to consider learning holistically not just in the light of what might be considered structured events for learning, which would have limited my analysis to specific courses, such as the Alpha course produced by

Holy Trinity Church, Brompton and distributed to over forty countries around the world (Cartledge et al., 2019: 130–135, Heard 2009; Hunt 2004). These courses are important, but they only really make sense when they are placed within a wider narrative framework, which provides the context in which such courses exist and from out of which they function. This study has not attempted to sketch all the formally accredited educational programmes that can be found among megachurches because most learning occurs as part of the general life of these churches and necessarily so. What is significant about these findings is the fact that megachurches are both similar to congregations of smaller size in that learning exists in the same kind of way as other congregations, but that they are different insofar as their size offers a greater range of opportunities for participation. They are also different to smaller congregations because of the need for high quality productions and performances, without which the numbers would diminish. Thus, the modelling of certain knowledge and skills becomes an important factor in the overall learning environment sustained by the institution of a megachurch over time. In certain settings, they provide a large alternative community that helps inculcate values and practices at a communal level that sustains groups under adverse social and cultural conditions, such as those existing for migrant communities. This learning support is crucial and cannot be underestimated in its value to the individuals and communities concerned. In this regard megachurches as educational institutions play a significant role in the relationship of religion, and especially Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, to wider society.

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Horse and Carriage? Megachurches and Revivalism

Stephen Hunt

1 Introduction

There are perhaps strong arguments buried in the conjecture that, much like love and marriage and the proverbial horse and carriage, there is an inseparable reciprocal relationship between contemporary megachurches and the tradition of Christian revivalism. In short, that such churches have habitually grown when underscored by the oft pragmatic imperative, embraced by their leadership at least, of enduring and constant revival. It is an imperative embellished by the cultural ethic that 'big is beautiful', 'big is good', and the conviction that revival is a key instrument for the realisation of these ideals in the religious sphere. Yet the envisaged co-joining remains problematic for several underlying reasons. Firstly, linking the megachurches and revivalism essentially depends on precisely what is meant by 'revival', especially within the distinct context of the emergence of the megachurch phenomenon. Secondly, that some features of the megachurch concerned with increasing congregational growth by providing a 'safe space' for potential converts and especially active 'seekers' in a highly competitive so-called 'spiritual marketplace' would seem to mitigate in some respects against the cause of revival with all of its emotionalism, collective dedication, and spiritual intensity. In particular, that the 'unsaved' are not initially attracted to a church which appears to be threatening in terms of pressurising 'seekers' to conform to a rigorously strict and demanding form of religious life that 'revivalism' suggests. Thirdly, evidence of megachurch 'revivals' implies that they are not exclusively related to seeking converts and boosting the ranks of the faithful. Rather, revivals may have more of a function of 'refreshing' and retaining extant members and even constitute part of the church-switching phenomenon which is an integral part of the spiritual marketplace.

In the light of these considerations, this chapter ponders the apparent centrality of revivalism to the success or otherwise of the megachurch or, more precisely, one distinctive brand of megachurch: those of a Pentecostal or Charismatic (neo-Pentecostal) genre which have experienced a considerable influence on the megachurch movement. At first glance this emphasis might appear to be unfounded since, according to the Hartford Institute of Religious

Research, only some 5 percent of megachurches are of Pentecostal persuasion. That acknowledged, to the list can be added, suggests the Institute's research, some further 5 percent which are Charismatic – 'classical' Pentecostalism's highly influential outcrop that emerged from the 1960s and which subsequently developed as a number of unique but over-lapping 'streams'.

The distinction between Pentecostal/Charismatic and other types of megachurches however is hardly straightforward given that even those claiming not to be of this theological persuasion share, according to the 2011 Bird and Thumma survey, some essential similarities given that the majority of megachurches were found to embrace "*a high view of their own spiritual vitality*" and an overwhelming 98 percent agreed that their congregations were "spiritually alive and vital" – the kind of rhetoric mostly associated with 'spirit filled' churches of a Pentecostal/Charismatic nature and which resonates as an element of the language of 'revival'. It may be conjectured, then, that the culture, theology and praxis of the Pentecostal/Charismatic evangelical strand has, in fact, impacted megachurches which do not necessarily claim to be of such a genus.

This chapter commences by considering the nature of revivalism and then proceeds to consider the centrality of revivalism to the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition and its wider influence, exploring the relationship with church growth philosophies and the emergence of the megachurch. And, moreover, the chapter seeks to discuss the discernible connection between that tradition and the dynamics of modernity which underpin these churches. The chapter concludes by considering the more recent revivals and, as flagged up briefly above, of the specific impact of revivalism on church growth in the spiritual marketplace.

2 Revival, Revivalism and Modernity

The term 'revival' is one which frequently forges excitement and emotion for evangelical Christians of different persuasion. From one perspective the 'revival' is an essential part of fulfilling the renowned 'Great Commission'; that is, winning converts as accounted in the biblical record where Jesus instructed his disciples towards the end of his ministry. This is a dimension fused with millenarian hopes on behalf of the faithful of the return of the messiah to earth and the establishment of God's Kingdom. That numerous Christians of a more evangelical/fundamentalist preference have linked this to expectations of a great future revival and 'winning of souls', where the mission field would be 'white unto harvest', is more than evident in past and recent revivals.

The nature of revivalism, and indeed how it might be defined, is somewhat more complex than this simple appraisal might indicate. Revival is an exhilarating word within the Christian lexicon. It evokes visions of the new life wrought by redemption, the active power of the Holy Spirit, renewal and restoration, and the promise of hope for the future. The reality however is that revival is a diverse, multifaceted, and frequently controversial religious manifestation. This is well-emphasised in Walker and Aune's introduction to their edited volume, *On Revival* (2003), where they query whether Christian revivalism is a wider culturally-bound religious phenomenon largely produced in the Western context, or a more narrowly biblically-based one founded on certain Christian scriptures. Moreover, is there a difference between a 'revival' and a 'renewal' – the spiritually of believers and the Church, constituting a 'time of refreshing' for the faithful? Some recent major revivals (considered below) involve both and confirm that revivals are, more often than not, multi-dimensional in nature.

Taking the subject even further, Steve Latham's chapter in the same volume additionally nuances the differences between 'revival' and 'revivalism', identifying various levels of what is often called 'revival', ranging from a (spiritual) 'quickenings' of the individual believer in their faith, to the full-blown reversal of secularisation of society through mass conversions, to increased spiritual interest or renewal in the life of a church congregation with perhaps a local, national or global impact. Revivals can be also seen as the broader revitalisation of the universal Church to what is perceived as a vital and fervent relationship with God following a period of moral decline (Latham 2003). All of these interpretations of 'revival' should clearly be distinguished from the largely 'in-house' evangelical use of the term 'revival' to refer to an evangelistic meeting or series of meeting organised to galvanise the faithful and 'win souls'.

In the form of mass conversions of non-believers, revivals are often viewed by church leaders as having positive moral effects for their congregations and potentially, at least, wider cultural consequences. In this way the concept of revival is derived from biblical narratives of national decline and restoration during the history of the Israelites as a result of collective sin and cycles of national revival associated with the rule of various righteous monarchs. In turn, of a more academic hue, Church historians have identified and debated the effects of various national revivals within the history of the USA and other countries. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries American society experienced a number of 'Awakenings' around the years 1727, 1792, 1830, 1857 and 1882 (McClymond 2004). The revivals in the first decades of the twentieth century, several with roots in some of the earlier revivals, included those of the

1904–1905 Welsh Revival and the 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles that is associated with the emergence of the Pentecostal movement. To this can be added the mid-century revival in the form of (Charismatic) ‘Renewal’ of the mainstream denominations, as well as the forging of independent ministries and churches of which the megachurch phenomenon was a further element.

Do the particular datings of these ‘Awakenings’ and periods of revival suggest movements fundamentally reactionary in nature, resisting aspects of modernity and secularity, and amount primarily to attempts to win converts and rejuvenate the spirituality of the faithful? The picture is complex. In an earlier contribution to the subject, Andrew Walker (1997) pulled attention to the connection between revivalism, especially in its Pentecostal/Charismatic mode, to modernity and much of what it entails by way of a world-accommodating ethos. This is an observation which, on initial consideration, seems to be counter to common sense understanding of modernity’s rejection of religion since such revivals were historically fused with a belief in the supernatural and ‘signs and wonders’ as the essential ‘proofs’ of that supernatural – prophetic utterances, claims to divine healing, glossolalia and so on associated with ‘primitive’ forms of ecstatic and esoteric Christianity (Cox 1996). None of this would seem to equate with the Enlightenment’s preoccupation with rationality, secularity and utilitarianism.

Pentecostalism, and its Charismatic derivative proved, according to Walker (1997: 19), to be the most successful embodiment of revivalism in the present age. Yet he points out that revivalism, as a broad religious occurrence, itself came into existence at the commencement of the Enlightenment and can be understood as essentially “thoroughly modern”. Walker’s analysis of the history of revivalism leads him to conclude that the early revivals during this period not only stressed piety but individualism and rationalism: “The Age of Reason was also the age of revivals”. Leaders of revival in the eighteenth century, such as John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, were admirers of science; the latter influenced in his thinking by the likes of John Locke and Isaac Newton. The First Great Awakening (1730s–1740s) in New England where by adherents to Protestantism strove to renew individual piety and religious devotion, Walker relates, was part of the cultural transferal from feudalism to capitalism. In advancing his argument Walker conjectures that the most convincing evidence of the modernising tendencies of early revivalism comes from Jon Butler’s (1990) revisionist accounts of the American Awakenings (especially the Second Awakening at the advent of the nineteenth century which was essentially a Protestant revival led largely by Baptists and Methodists) where he demonstrates that the passion and piety of the revivals also fuelled the progressivist vision of the American dream infused by the conviction of the virtues of the ethic of

equality of opportunity, allowing the highest aspirations, potential and goals to be realised.

Walker continues his analysis by arguing that the early revivals generated unintended consequences, not least of all because their emphasis on experience and the self were profound in the sense of encouraging individualism. Yet it was also conducive both to the religious freedom of the United States Republic and to the pietistic but theologically non-specific 'civil religion' of middle America with all of its sacred symbols bringing social and cultural integration through the belief in the 'Manifold Destiny' and dedication to the virtues of liberty, individualism, and hard endeavour for self-advancement. More obviously, revivals were themselves aided both by the technology and the principles of modernity (Walker 1997: 19–20). Walker writes of the consequences of this for orchestrated revivals, an observation that was to be particularly relevant with late twentieth-early twenty-first Pentecostal/ Charismatic revivals:

Not only is this the case with the appropriation of firstly the telegraph and later the phonograph for the more routinized revivals and urban missions of the nineteenth century, but it is also the case that revivalists came to see their campaigns in terms of pragmatic techniques.

WALKER 1997: 20

Walker goes on to state that

... The first revivals were too new, spontaneous and unexpected to be honed into a technique. But the assertion does not hold for Finney's great revivals of the early years of the nineteenth century. As he says in his *Lectures On Revival*: 'A revival is not a miracle, or dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is purely philosophical result of the right use of constituted means as much as any other effect produced by the application of means'.¹

The early revivals, for Walker, contributed to the advancement of modernity because they provided, in his words, "... a value matrix conducive to the ascetic Protestantism of early capitalism. The enthusiasm, freedom, individualism and moral values of the revivals entered the mainstream of American society" (Walker 1997: 20). Pentecostalism, as a powerful mechanism for revival, did not escape this development. Walker (1997: 21–22) explains that the later Pentecostal revivals of the early twentieth century were apparently even less candidates

¹ Quoted in J. Seel's "Modernity and Evangelicals" (1994, 293).

for carriers of modernity than those which predated them. The early Pentecostals, through their pre-millenarian theology, were convinced that the end of the world was on the horizon and the Kingdom of God imminent. Moreover, Pentecostalism revival was itself seen by its adherents of the confirmation of the End-Days before the return of Christ. Such a conviction spurred worldwide evangelising missions, initially void of the concern to build churches of any substance.

However, over time, as Walker insists, the Pentecostals became at least “an unwitting symbolic carrier of modernity as well as falling under the spell of secularising tendencies of the modern world”, although the response has varied between ‘classical’ and neo-Pentecostals and those in the developed and developing world. Walker (1997: 26–27) explores how, over time, Pentecostalism trod the well-worn path of earlier urban missions in the USA with all their pragmatic tendencies and awash with the latest modern technologies, advertising, management techniques, entrepreneurship, and theological colleges for training ministers for their growing churches as an organisational basis for foreign mission fields. Neither were such developments limited to the Western world. Walker points to David Martin’s (1990) studies of the modernising tendencies of Pentecostalism in many nations with Christian traditions and amount to ‘emerging economies’. This variety of evangelical Christianity came, towards the end of the twentieth century, to be the fastest growing form of the faith in nations with rapidly expanding capitalist economies, making particular inroads in Central and South America where the movement’s leaders are not only Spirit-led but also leading politicians, entrepreneurs and small businessmen.

In discussing the emergence of the neo-Pentecostals (otherwise known as the Charismatic movement) Walker (1997: 29–30) notes how Pentecostalism had become attractive especially to the middle classes. It was in an era moving from early to late modernity; where the advent of consumerism in the 1950s saw the demise of ascetic individualism and the rise of hedonistic individualism concomitant with a consumer economy. Such an appraisal resonates with a recognition, albeit indirectly, of some of the ethics and alluring characteristics of the megachurch in the spiritual marketplace, but there is more which fused Pentecostalism in its various forms with the culture of such churches, even if not exclusively so.

The gentrification of Pentecostalism, argues Walker, proved to be phenomenologically identical to being a Pentecostal but culturally redefined by class, tastes and the late modern preoccupation with therapy, self-fulfilment and self-expression. It was in the 1970s and 80s that revivalist figures such as Jimmy and Tammy Baker rejected their strident fundamentalism and adopted

“a folksy, cosy approach”. It was a time when tele-evangelism, with all of its revivalistic tenor, reflected the narcissistic streak of modern American hedonism (Walker 1997: 30). From the late 1970s, during the heyday of the so-called Charismatic Renewal, there occurred the emergence of numerous independent ministries, maverick organisations, new networks of churches, and parachurch groups. There is no coincidence that it was during this era that megachurches began to proliferate in some number. Whether the revivals involved then and since has amounted to a significant quantity of new converts is questionable.

Walker’s observation that the excitement and novel outlandish experiences of the period was not solely due to the spirit of revivalism also stands for the apparent success of the megachurch. He writes: “Charismatic growth has resulted primarily through recycling Christians from one denomination to another, or renewing pockets of established denominations and sects” (Walker 1997: 34). While such ‘recycling of the saints’ can be identified as part of the growth and endurance of the megachurch, revivals were nonetheless at least potentially capable of winning over large numbers of people which led to the establishment of churches with sizeable congregations or even, in time, the creation of new denominations.

3 Historical Revivals

As Martyn Percy (in this volume) points out, the megachurch movement as it is understood today has arguably precedents in many of the vast Protestant congregations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, born of revival and capable of growing particularly rapidly during times of revivalism in the USA. Typical, Percy suggests, was the Moody Church of Chicago which sustained megachurch status longer than any other American church (from 1876 to the present). Certainly, as Percy advances, the church’s connection with the Moody Bible Institute has been important, but there have been many other churches tied to colleges that have declined or ceased to exist. In the past such churches were linked to revival and revival was always about winning souls as well as spiritually reinvigorating the faithful.

Previous to the emergence of Pentecostalism, probably the most vibrant form of global contemporary evangelicalism, movements of revivalism and renewal had come and gone throughout two thousand years of Christian history with some frequency, although their expression and form, as well as their impact on the wider socio-cultural environment, varied considerably. It may also be said that socio-cultural environments also helped generate such revivals, not least of all secularising impulses to which revivalistic missions at least

partially reacted. Periods of revivalism by their very nature quickly evaporated, but the sects spawned in their wake often endured for appreciable lengths of time. Other periods of revivalism rapidly dissipated, frequently reduced to mere footnotes in religious history.

Whatever their duration, more often than not these revivalist movements displayed similar characteristics (see for example, Knox 1961). Recurrently exclusively sect-like in nature, such movements typically broke away from established denominations, dismissed them as corrupt, worldly, and heretical (a compliment often returned by the churches from which they seceded). Typically, these sectarian crusades saw their own emergence as signifying the return to New Testament principles – a claim often accompanied by reference to fresh divine revelations forged within an eschatological vision of restoring the ‘true’ faith. Over time, as in the case of the Methodist revival of the eighteenth century led by John and Charles Wesley, revivalist movements, if they did not entirely disappear from Church annals completely, settled down to become large denominations of some note throughout the British Empire, the USA and beyond as a result of vigorous mission work.

Many of these processes of sectarian development seemed to characterise the evolution of several principal strands of ‘classical’ Pentecostalism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the revivalistic movement went on to attract hundreds of thousands of followers with a distinct form of Christianity. Largely, in patterned sectarian development, it was ostracised by the mainstream churches. Thus, Pentecostalism carved its own way in the world. Over a relatively short period however, the movement was to forge institutional structures of its own and to the extent that many of its sectarian expressions gave way to denominational forms in much the same direction as previous revivalistic movements had done.

The precise initial origins of Pentecostalism are open to much debate. Events at the Azusa Street revival (1906), in Los Angeles, rightly have their venerated place in the history of Pentecostalism, not least of all because clergy of different traditions visited the Azusa mission and took the revivalistic spirit back to their own churches. The selected emphasis on one particular episode has however, tended to obscure the fact that the momentum for an apparently fresh version of ecstatic Christianity had already occurred in several places in the USA and elsewhere in the world and, as it were, prepared the way for full-blown Pentecostal-style revivalism (see Allan Anderson (2004) for the historical details). The exact roots of its emergence in the USA, especially its foundations in early revivalist movements such as those of Methodism and Holiness meetings, need not concern us here however.

From the 1906 to 1909 the USA South became the first region in the world where Pentecostalism put down deep roots and significantly changed the spiritual landscape of a nation not unaccustomed to 'great awakenings'. The movement spread to the South-West and Mid-West, then beyond those regions. As a religion largely of the 'disinherited' (R.M. Anderson 1980) it found futile soil among the impoverished and where both blacks and whites struggled for subsistence on the margins of society. It was in the USA that the first Pentecostal denominations in the world, including the Church of God in Christ, the Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Church of God and the Assemblies of God, went on to enjoy an extraordinary appeal. Indeed, in the decade that followed the southern Pentecostal groups emerged to play major roles in developing the ethos and character of the movement.

These denominations also forged some of the largest individual megachurches in the USA. Today, the Hartford Institute's database lists more than 1,300 megachurches in the country. According to that data, approximately 50 churches on the list have attendance ranging from 10,000 to 47,000. Those of a Pentecostal persuasion are well-represented among these groups taken at random from the list and include Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale (FL) – 30,000; City of Refuge; First Assembly of God (Fort Myers, FL), Pentecostal Assemblies of the World – 10,000; James River Church (Springfield, MO) Assembly of God – 14,000.

From an early stage the Pentecostal movement extended rapidly across the world, forming churches in countries where Christianity already had a foothold. And, as a revivalistic movement, spread to fresh fields through missionary endeavours which often put down roots for some of the largest megachurches in the world, a fair number of which associated with Pentecostal denominations or other bodies founded in the USA including Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea (253,000) associated with the Assemblies of God; Elim Church, San Salvador, El Salvador (117,000); Assemblies of God Grace and Truth, Kyanggi-do, South Korea (105,000).

4 Renewal

Renewal movements or 'revivals' within the more established or 'mainstream' churches, as Pousson (1994) explores, are far from new. He notes that by the end of the nineteenth century practically all Christian denominations throughout the Western world, including Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, had been 'renewed' in one way or another. Those representing Protestantism during this

period included Pietism, Puritanism, Moravianism, the Evangelical revival in England and the related Wesleyan revival and the Great Awakenings in the American colonies, several of which laid the grounding for Pentecostalism. In turn, during the mid-twentieth century, a number of principal Pentecostal bodies established dialogue with the historical churches, and from this initiative neo-Pentecostalism in the shape of the Charismatic Renewal movement was seemingly born as the established denominations opened themselves up to the theology (such as Baptism in the Holy Spirit) and praxis (healing, prophecy, glossolalia etc) of Pentecostalism.

Using the UK as an indicator of the success of neo-Pentecostalism, the context of renewal led to Charismatic churches from the 1960s into the 1990s becoming the highest proportion of growing churches over a period in which church attendance was generally on rapid decline (Brierly 1991: 131, 153). Renewal was also responsible for the emergence of some of the largest churches in the country during this period, a number of which could be described as 'mega'. Miller (adopting the term 'New Paradigm Churches') gives the example of St. Andrews church in Chorelywood, and Anglican congregation, and its connection with the nationally organised New Wine Christian convention (Miller 1997: 115). Such churches then (and now) were in reality few and far between. Nonetheless, at the time they were frequently regarded as an ideal model for church growth and churches of a greater size were, for a season at least, growing at the expense of more traditional forms. The organisational dynamics and range of attractions of the megachurch were discernible in such congregations. The majority were of a Pentecostal/Charismatic disposition.

To these churches, at the time, were added a relatively small number of UK megachurches located in the more traditional Pentecostal denominations. Much was typified by Kensington Temple, London, of the Elim denomination, often assumed to be the largest congregation in the country with its predominantly black ethnic congregation. Within a few years 'KT', as it was known, came to be matched by other Charismatic megachurches. This included the Abundant Life Church in Bradford, northern England. Withdrawing from the Covenant Ministries, a large 'New Church' 'stream', the ALC in the late 1990s could claim 2,500 attendees at its Sunday services. The broadcasts of its international Charismatic ministry reached over 150 countries. A similar church (with an attendance of 2,300) was the Renewal Christian Centre in Birmingham which was associated with the Free Methodist Church in the USA. While the size of such congregations hardly matched that of many megachurches in North America, in the context of a largely post-Christian UK, these were on an impressive scale.

The development of an increasing number of Charismatic 'streams' in the UK was reflected in similar developments in the USA – often in the form of

New Paradigm Churches, regarded by Donald Miller (1997) as a fresh 'reformation', with an emphasis on revivalism and church growth, not infrequently leading to the founding of megachurches. Much has been exemplified by the Association of Vineyard Churches and its centrality of church-growth strategies, not to mention its emphasis on personal conviction, spiritual experience and variations of 'Christianised' therapeutic techniques which were all in integral part of what became known as the 'neo-Charismatic' movement and which perhaps was best remembered for its emphasis on 'signs and wonders' that became a unique form of ministry its own right.

Classical Pentecostalism was born to a large extent in the milieu of an increasingly relentless culture of disbelief and scepticism. It is not surprising then, that the early Pentecostals were subject to the scorn of a secular world. Moreover, as already acknowledged above, they were ostracised by the Christian establishment whether liberals or conservatives. The Pentecostals were marginalised not merely because they were 'new' or 'different', or even because of their emotionalism and ecstatic manifestations, but because they sought the reality of the supernatural through miraculous healing, prophecy, demonic deliverance and so on. Such manifestations, the 'proofs' of the reality of God, became central to Pentecostal 'signs and wonders' that accompanied mission and revival.

Throughout the Charismatic movement, as it grew to significance in the early 1960s, notions of signs and wonders were far from absent. The neo-Charismatics, a new wave of renewal in the 1990s and typified by the Association of Vineyard Churches – a network of churches emerging in the USA and then spreading globally – began to take signs and wonders to their furthest conclusion. The ministry of John Wimber, leader of Vineyard, epitomised the ministry, while Peter Wagner and others at Fuller seminary articulated the theological direction in terms of church growth strategies. Wagner, in turn, was influenced by the writings of Donald McGavran well-known for his advocacy for church growth through the 'homogeneous unit' principle which claimed that converts could be won by attracting them to churches comprised of congregations of people from similar backgrounds, a strategy not lost on the developing megachurch movement (Hunt 2009a: 397–402). For Wimber, as with Wagner, a reading of the history of the great revivals of the past showed conclusively that converts were won through the 'proofs' of signs and wonders such as miraculous healings. 'Equipping the saints' of today, argued Wimber, meant teaching the faithful how to call on God for signs and wonders in preparation for future revivals. Here the belief in the reality of supernatural manifestations meet the pragmatism of church growth strategies. So-called supernatural phenomenon, such as healing, prophecy and demonic deliverance, became a familiar part of the Vineyard movement's ministry and evangelistic campaigns

and in many respects to good effect by way of church growth. The Vineyard movement grew and many of its churches became congregations of mega-church proportion, displaying numerous familiar structural and cultural characteristics associated with them.

Not surprisingly, the success of Vineyard and similar organisations drew academic interest. Among them was the work of Mauss and Perrin (1992). Vineyard, so they argued, offered a convincing belief system, a sense of being caught up in a successful movement of revival, but was not particularly strict about personal lifestyles or commitment. There were the additional attractions of emotional healing, contemporary music and a middle class cultural milieu that allowed the opportunity for like to be with like in terms of social background membership. Often world-accommodating and relatively open-minded on social issues, Vineyard did not insist on a great deal of theological and ethical conformity. Vineyard also thrived off the novelties which it promised its members, mostly more signs and wonders that was believed to herald revival on a huge scale. A leading figure in the Charismatic Renewal movement in the UK, the late Douglas McBain, with veiled reference to the Vineyard organisation, critically observed that

When one theme does not deliver what is expected of it, the tendency has been to drop it without further ado. But the truth is that these enthusiasms pursue each other with restless haste across a stage of the consciousness of renewal, each one concerning its predecessor with a cannibalistic ferocity pursuit of its successor.

MCBAIN 1997: 68

It was a statement itself that was to prove extremely prophetic in terms of the revivals which occurred from the 1990s onwards. These revivals were often initiated in the pursuit of church growth as well as retaining church members in a competitive spiritual marketplace. Three revivals in particular highlighted this tendency: those in Toronto, Brownsville and Lakeland in the USA, which occurred over a period of about a decade. Each revival seemed to have arrived, in a short period of time, after the leadership of these churches had prayed for revival and church growth and took practical steps to bring it about with what Peter Ward (2003) has termed 'entrepreneurial revivalism', where once again in no uncertain terms the conviction of the reality of the supernatural met the pragmatism of orchestrated revivals. These were revivals encouraged and carried through by a network of prominent church leaders and charismatic (in a Weberian sense) evangelists linked by global systems of communication.

In a sense there was much in these revivals to confirm Thumma and Bird's (2015) conviction that megachurches in the spiritual marketplace were very apt at offering a unique and customised experience through many channels that the megachurches provide.

An earlier study by Scott Thumma and Dave Travis' (2007) suggested that megachurches placed no particular emphasis on achieving their size as a 'selling point', alongside the developed personality cult centred on the leader. That acknowledge, some churches are able, if temporarily, in times of revival to reach megachurch status and emphasis the significance of numbers. Moreover, revival means, in the mind of leaders of revivals, seeking for large numbers of convert and constitute 'poofs' of God moving among the faithful. In turn, this raises interesting questions about definitions of megachurches. Churches may numerically swell during times of revival, as with those discussed below which lasted for several years, but are not necessarily able to retain the enthusiasm of revival and church attendance over a protracted period of time.

5 Late Twentieth-Century Revivals and Beyond

Philip Richter (1995) numbers among several academic commentators who explored the so-called 'Toronto Blessing' revival which those involved saw as both a movement for church growth and spiritual renewal of church members. It could be comprehended as a form of religious experience characterised by many unusual physical phenomena evidenced at the Airport Vineyard Church, Toronto, from 1995, a member congregation of the Association of Vineyard Churches. This included a sense of bodily weakness and falling to the ground: shaking, trembling and convulsive movements; uncontrollable laughter or wailing and inconsolable weeping; 'spiritual drunkenness'; animal sounds; and intense physical activity – as well as accompanied by such phenomenon as a heightened sense of the presence of God; 'prophetic' insights into the future and 'prophetic' announcements from God; visions; and 'out of the body' mystical experiences. Events at the church coincided with the visit of South African evangelist Rodney Howard Browne and, before that, the influence of John Wimber's 'power ministry' of signs and wonders.

The Toronto Blessing was claimed by those who led the revival to surpass earlier similar phenomena in terms of its wide geographical spread (to at least 34 of the countries apparently witness the distinctive attributes of this revival), its frequently and its intensity (Poloma 2003). Richter (1995) sees its popular

embrace by evangelicals as predominantly a 'supply-side' orientated manifestation. He points out that it was not the first time that phenomena similar to the Toronto Blessing have been mobilised to increase market share in the religious economy at a time when Charismatic Renewal needed its own further 'renewal' (Finke and Stark 1992: 92–93).

In December 1995 the Airport Vineyard Church, whose leadership had previously prayed for revival and congregational growth, parted company with the Association of Vineyard Churches, following the AVC's withdrawal of their endorsement on the grounds that the Toronto church was not within the framework of values and ministry style of the Association. In turn, the Toronto church appeared confident of the benefits of the split since its regular attendance was reaching megachurch proportions and that events at the church amounted to a revival which would spread globally. Moreover, one of the most salient features of the Toronto Blessing was the number of 'pilgrimages' that took place at the church from numerous countries. By June 1995 over 300,000 people had visited the church. On average Airport Vineyard Church hosted over 800 people per night since the Blessing first manifested itself. Its legitimacy, as Richter (1995 : 99) suggests, was that the church's principal pastor, John Arnott, associated events with previous revivals such as that at Azusa Street, central to the birth of modern Pentecostalism, pointing out that it similarly drew huge numbers of people from all over the world. More of the same ilk was to follow.

Amanda Tellefsen and David Bromley (nd) recall how the Brownsville Revival (also referred to as the 'Pensacola Outpouring') occurred within the Brownsville Assembly of God church in Pensacola, Florida. From 1993 to 1995 the leadership and the congregation had been praying for a revival in their church that was experiencing decline. The church reported prophecies of a coming revival from within its congregation and beyond. The pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church (Assemblies of God) in Korea (as noted above believed to be the world's largest megachurch) announced that God had said to him in 1993 there would be a revival in the city of Pensacola, and it would spread like a fire until all of the USA had been consumed by it.

It is generally agreed by those involved that the Brownsville Revival began during the sermon of guest evangelist Steve Hill in June 1996. Hill was originally asked to preach during an evening service but was later invited by the church's leadership to speak during the Sunday morning service at which the revival manifestations reportedly began. Manifestations particular to the Brownsville Revival included shaking and jerking of the body, crying, uninhibited laughter, paralysis of the body and even brief moments of unconsciousness

(manifestations earlier associated with the Toronto Blessing). These gifts could be transmitted to believers through touch ('impartation') by the leaders of the revival. Word quickly spread about the manifestations at the revival, and attendance at the Brownsville Assembly increased dramatically as visitors from different denominations, USA states, and countries flocked to the church. Within the first two weeks of the revival the church had temporarily at least reached megachurch proportions when approximately 10,000 people attended services, and by the end of July 1995 the revival was drawing around 4,000 visitors nightly. The revival thrived for several years, but by 1999 revival meetings were reduced to a one-night-a-week schedule as the church lost its temporary 'mega' status.

Following the Toronto and Brownsville revivals, further revivals were expected by those involved and prophesied to be accompanied by an increase of esoteric and ecstatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Minor revivals in fact broke out across churches in various cities of the northern United States, **some of which were well-known Charismatic megachurches** (Poloma 2003), before the third major revival occurred. The two men who most prominently involved in the events that became known as the Florida Outpouring (or the Lakeland Revival) were Stephen Strader and Canadian evangelist Todd Bentley (Hunt 2009b). The Carpenters and Joiners Church had earlier continued to experience membership decline and finally closed in 2005. That same year Strader established and assumed leadership of the Ignited Church in Lakeland in 2005 which initially drew membership from the then defunct Carpenters and Joiners Church.

Leading up to the outbreak of revival in Lakeland, Bentley's visit for evangelism and healing in Lakeland was initially scheduled for five days but due to his personal charisma, claims of miraculous healing, and the unusual physical phenomena observed in the church he remained for over six months. Perceived as a significant move of the Holy Spirit, the revival claimed to have attracted an estimated 140,000 people from over 40 countries by the close of May and by the end of June 400,000 from some 100 nations. This was in addition to around 1,200,000 that watched via the Internet as well as those who tuned into the broad coverage offered by GODTV. The revival was also streamed live via Ustream by the Ignited Church and received over one million 'hits' in the first five weeks of transmissions. However, as with the revivals in Toronto and Brownsville, this revival too petered out and the church which for a year or two reached megachurch proportions experienced a decline close to its original congregational membership numbers. This raises further questions of not just what constitutes a 'megachurch' but any church if defined in terms of an

organised site of members and attendees, given that such revivals may merely temporary boost attendance and that the life of the megachurch may, in some instances, be merely limited to periods of revival.

While Pentecostal/charismatic revivals might come and go, the direct or indirect impact they have made in Protestant Christian circles nonetheless cannot be doubted. The success of Pentecostal/Charismatic megachurches did not go unnoticed by other churches of an evangelical persuasion. Their strategies for church growth, especially the revivalist element, was of particular attraction. To be sure, there were elements of classical/neo-Pentecostalism that evangelical churches in North America and Western Europe had long 'bought' into. The Charismatic Movement of the 1960s persuaded not only some more traditional evangelical leaders to embrace theological and cultural innovations around the 'gifts of the Spirit' but attracted some mainline churches too. Renewal was not only about spiritual blessings but revival to win converts at a time of the decline of the conventional denominations. In addition, evangelical churches generally moved towards loose affiliations and networks through which business models for church growth could be exchanged. The revivals at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the next century pulled in many non-Pentecostal/charismatic evangelicals to witness the mechanic of church growth towards which revival imperative was central.

6 Summary: Revivalism, Megachurches and the Spiritual Marketplace

This chapter has focused on megachurches in relation to revival mostly in the context of the USA (with a brief mention of such churches elsewhere) where the megachurch movement is often assumed to have begun and perhaps the most significant nation when it comes to Christian modern religious revivals and 'awakenings'. It is these churches which are typical in the sense that they are of an Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism or Charismatic Renewal hue. While such churches embraced revival locally, as with megachurches generally (Wollschleger and Porter 2011), many have come to experience global significance. From one perspective revivalistic megachurches have a lot to offer the religious 'seeker'. They tend to be conservative in their theological character without being dogmatic, most dwell on personal salvation, but also frequently exhibited strong cultures of positive and motivational thinking with a stress on personal fulfilment and the attaining of personal aspirations. And, as Thomas (2009) has pointed out, new religious group are more involved with the spiritual market and the consumption of religious 'goods' and attractions, while more traditional religions seem to struggle in this globalised world.

Pentecostalism is a significant religious movement which is not particularly new, being now over a century old, but in its various 'neo' forms is clearly capable of adapting to any circumstance or change which is likely to occur in both First and Third World countries (Poloma 2002). Its strength is that it is a world-wide religion linked by international ministry networks and seems to be successfully demonstrating that Christianity is still rigorous in different localised environments and a major competitor in the spiritual marketplace.

Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on revivalism and ministry, is conducive to the growth of many megachurches and their relevance is clearly by no means limited to the West. Jonathan James (a contributor to this volume), through his book *A Moving Faith: Mega Churches Go South* (2015), has charted the dynamic shift of Christianity to the South through neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic movements which constitute a global movement promising prosperity, healing, and empowerment. The centre of the faith has moved from North America and Europe to diverse places. This development has in part been expressed in the form of megachurches in as diverse as places as South Korea, Brazil, Peru, Ghana, Nigeria, Australia, India, and the Philippines, but also others which enjoin with Pentecostal/ Charismatic praxis and culture but do not necessarily refer to themselves as such. Kyle Murray (2012) largely concurs and argues that Charismatic and Pentecostal elements of global Christianity serve key roles in the production of free market hegemony within and between states, societies and markets across the world. While many of the institutions of these Christian social forces are fiercely decentralised, this popular global movement has converged on key elements of a shared conception of the world which links core, semi-peripheral and peripheral societies across national boundaries and class distinctions through networks of churches which the revivals from the 1990s onwards were encouraged to thrive.

Common to different contexts is the present mediatisation of religion in the spiritual marketplace results in its 'branding': a staging of religion according to the forms and patterns of commercialised media culture (Einstein 2007). In this respect Veronika Krönert and Andreas Hepp (2011) have explored the articulations of 'sacred worlds' around such specific 'brand symbols' to facilitate the mediation of religion, and how this impacts on media production and representation corresponds with religious individualisation in everyday life. These authors argue that in the context of an ongoing process of religious individualisation, 'brands' offer landmarks for individual religious questing and open up communicative spaces for personal spiritual experiences and the formulation of what Peter Berger called a sacred 'canopy' (Berger 1980). Religions are now forced to compete and communicate with each other in the infinite space of a mass-mediated public sphere as later revivals from the Toronto Blessing onwards indicates. And revival has its attraction in the spiritual marketplace

for those who wish to be part of the rollercoaster of what is perceived as that which 'God is doing' today.

As briefly mentioned above, the approach taken by seeker-oriented megachurches to attract members often leads to a common belief that megachurches play down commitment and religious dogma, in favour of being 'seeker friendly' and aim at satisfying a consumerist cultural mentality. To engage with a theme discussed in various chapters in this volume, calling upon Thumma et al. (2005) work, megachurches are among the most successful churches today in attracting and retaining members. This suggests that they foster on-going commitment and involvement of their members, a view which would seem to concur with Iannaccone's (1994) insistence that successful churches tend to be 'strict' in the sense of charging a high price for membership and interest in the church. To this end megachurches make significant effort to construct pathways by which these individuals reconnect with God and in doing so they ask much of the people that become members. Such is the function of revival. Revivals spiritually rejuvenate church members but also help forge commitment and push them along on a wave of emotion, purpose and enthusiasm. Revivalism also has the purpose of winning new members, but it must not alienate the unsaved by initially being too demanding of them.

While no two megachurches are the same, most of have essential similarities. Certainly, there is the belief that it is necessary to return to the dynamism of the first century Church: its authenticity and zeal which revivalism suggests. Historically revivalism generally typically took sectarian form, those involved seeing their own emergence as signifying the return to New Testament principles – a claim often accompanied by fresh divine revelations forged within an eschatological vision of restoring the 'true' faith. This element is not entirely missing from megachurch thinking, but supplemented by a safe 'seeking' environment for potential comments. Neither is the kind of revivalism adopted entirely dogmatic. Bird and Thumma (2011) note a trend of megachurches turning away from distinctive theological segments within conservative Protestantism toward what they term a 'generic evangelicalism'. These trends combine to allow the megachurch enormous flexibility to respond to changes in their environment. Or, as Wellman et al. (2012) have suggested "This isn't just same-old, same-old. This is not like evangelical revivalism. It's a new, hybrid form of Christianity that's mutating and separate from all the traditional institutions with which we usually affiliate Christianity". In that sense Miller's assertion that they amount a new 'Reformation' may be an overstatement. But megachurches certainly constitute a fresh direction and will no doubt continue to be a vehicle for revivals of the future whatever shape these revivals may take.

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‘The Evangelisation of the Nation, the Revitalisation of the Church and the Transformation of Society’: Megachurches and Social Engagement

Andrew Davies

1 Introduction

By common scholarly consent, Pentecostals have never been particularly engaged social or politically (Anderson 2012; Chong 2015: 219; Davies 2018a; Davies 2019).¹ It was not that they were uncaring or uninterested. It did not take the early Pentecostals long to confront the social challenges faced by their communities, even if in small ways, through the establishment of care homes, orphanages and feeding programmes (Kay 2009: 302; Wilson 2011:12). Yet they were too focussed on their hope for the ultimate (as far as they were concerned, impending) resolution of eternity to be too deeply and systematically concerned with the hardships faced in the here and now, even when these were hardships that were faced by their own community as much as by any other. Furthermore, they appear to have been concerned that engagement with any sort of ‘social gospel’ would distract them from their central call to preach the ‘full gospel’ of individual transformation through faith in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, the priority of the earliest Pentecostals was “saving souls rather than changing socio-economic and political structures” (Hunt 2011: 157), and they were so committed to individual transformation that systemic change never became a priority for them (Prakash 2010).

But, as time passed and the movement grew, Pentecostals found “such strong solidarity among themselves, courageously going against social norms such as racial segregation, that they forged a social and spiritual culture

1 I am indebted to my colleague Grace Milton for her invaluable support with the initial research for this chapter.

where the hopeless found a space to experience God's grace and power" (Ma 2009: 42), and that space simply had to grow outward. As Gros observes, Pentecostalism, though it did not possess a social programme, became itself a social programme (Gros 1987: 12). Their dynamic and entrepreneurial approach to life in general, their distinctive commitment and connection to the poor and downtrodden in society and their innate skill in gathering them, motivating them and releasing them into activism meant that when the Pentecostals did more consciously turn their attention to building a better world, they approached the task with dedication and vigour, and to dramatic effect. By the turn of the millennium, we saw the rise of 'progressive Pentecostals', a new kind of "Christians who claim to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and the life of Jesus and seek to holistically address the spiritual, physical, and social needs of people in their community" (Miller and Yamamori 2007: 2). The engine room of the Christian quest for social transformation had moved to the Global South and to the Pentecostals. And whilst they are very actively present in much smaller churches too (Miller and Yamamori 2007: 135), many of those socially-engaged 'progressive Pentecostals' can today be found in the world's largest megachurches, which in many quarters now embrace the social gospel with as much energy as their antecedents had denounced it just a couple of generations before.

Of course, by no means all megachurches are Pentecostal, even by the broadest definition. There are a handful of 'progressive' megachurches, one very notable example being All Saints Episcopal Church, Pasadena, California,² with its long tradition of social concern, rights advocacy and political campaigning. And there are lots of megachurches which are solidly Evangelical and equally firmly not Pentecostal, such as the smaller of London's two Anglican megachurches, All Souls Langham Place. But if a megachurch is rightly to be defined by its culture, its style and its theology as well as its attendance (cf. Chong 2015: 216; Niemandt and Lee 2015; Thumma 2012) then perhaps it is inevitable that there will be a significant amount of overlap between the Pentecostals/Charismatics and the megachurches ecclesologically. I suggest there are also strong connections between Pentecostal/Charismatic and megachurch notions of social justice and transformation, and that ongoing evolution of each movement's perspective has reinforced and sustained emerging change in the other's. It is doubtful the megachurch movement would exist in its current form without Pentecostalism, but equally I suspect the 'progressive

² <https://allsaints-pas.org>.

Pentecostals' would not have sought to pursue their transformative influence so extensively had they not seen the megachurches supporting this new agenda, sustaining and propagating it more widely through their collaborations, conferences and events, and consistently forging new pathways for others to follow by drawing upon the imagination and innovation that has long been a distinctive of Pentecostalism (Petersen 2013: 51). As we will see, many of these megachurches are now using that influence to immensely positive effect across the world, drawing upon their own distinctive approaches in contextually-appropriate ways to address the needs that are common to all humanity.

Socially-engaged megachurches understand their social concern activity to be a fundamental part of their commitment to be missional expressions of Christian community at the heart of society. Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) offers an excellent practical demonstration of this ideology in practice. Its vision, "to play our part in the evangelisation of the nation, the revitalisation of the church and the transformation of society" sounds at first as if the church sees itself as possessing three, albeit related, responsibilities, but actually the church sees the three clauses not only as indivisible and indistinguishable, but actually as amounting simply to different ways of phrasing the same core pursuit. As far as HTB are concerned, evangelisation, revitalisation and transformation are three 'modes' of the same unified mission rather than distinct *personae*. That mindset undoubtedly, and extensively, shapes the character and form of the church's social engagement, which for them is not an optional, supplementary concern, but is rather, to continue the trinitarian allusion, its very essence and source of being. For HTB, a revitalised church must, as its natural outcome, proclaim the gospel (through evangelism) and live it out (through social transformation) and the resulting spiritual growth must always both promote and result in human flourishing, thereby building stronger communities and making the world a better place for all its citizens. If that is the case, then, what are the megachurches doing to help deliver this world?

2 Megachurches and Social Engagement

2.1 *Confronting Poverty in the West*

If there is any element of commonality to the Western megachurches' social engagement strategies, it is that the vast majority of them offer a variety of activities seeking to improve the life circumstances of individuals in poverty

in their own community and, often, in other corners of the world, seeking in a variety of ways to address the “embedded sense of powerlessness” among the poor (Myers 2015: 117). The five London congregations we studied as part of the University of Birmingham’s Megachurches and Social Engagement in London research project from 2013–16³ all pursued such ministries, with feeding projects and initiatives for rough sleepers and the homeless such as touring medical and hygiene facilities, soup kitchens, short-term shelters, street work and hostel services being particularly important for them. New Wine Church in Woolwich, London, provides a free breakfast every Saturday for the underprivileged of the local community and invites them to stay, if they wish, for a short service (just about all of them do). Manchester, England’s 5,000-member !Audacious Church⁴ provides free lunches for school children from poorer backgrounds during the long summer holidays, and is one of a few British churches (also including New Wine and Kingsway International Christian Centre) that collect and deliver Christmas food and gift hampers for underprivileged families in their area. In Sweden, Uppsala’s *Livets Ord* (Living Word) Church runs its own hostel for the homeless and works closely with local police and civic authorities to offer a *Nattvandring* or ‘night patrol’ service to look out for those in need on the city streets⁵ whilst Ukraine’s Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations not only feeds the hungry but seeks to teach healthy living and eating to its congregation members.⁶

Poverty relief activities were also a prominent focus of the megachurches featured in Omri Elisha’s study in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he notes the commitment of what he labels “socially engaged evangelicals” to supporting “local populations such as the urban poor, the homeless, racial and ethnic minorities, and the sick and elderly ... [by] volunteering at soup kitchens and crisis shelters, mentoring inner-city youths, sponsoring immigrant refugee families, and providing charitable assistance to health clinics and halfway houses” (Elisha 2011: 8). Indeed, similar activities appear to be very common among the US megachurches. Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas, may have endured harsh criticism over its perceived slowness to respond to the Hurricane

3 Holy Trinity, Brompton (or HTB as it is popularly known, www.htb.org), Jesus House (www.jesushouse.org.uk), New Wine Church Woolwich (www.newwine.co.uk), Kingsway International Christian Centre (www.kicc.org.uk) and (the only non-Pentecostal/Charismatic megachurch in our study, and indeed in the UK) All Souls, Langham Place (www.allsouls.org).

4 <http://audaciouschurch.com>.

5 <https://www.livetsord.se/uppsala/socialt-humanitart-arbete/>.

6 <http://godembassy.com/blog/healthy-lifestyle/>.

Harvey crisis (An 2017; Dart 2017), arguably unfairly, but has since been publicly honoured by the city's mayor for its 'Hope for Houston' and 'Servolution' programmes, which include relief and rebuilding projects in hurricane-damaged districts as well as its 'Beacon Center' daycare facility for the homeless and its food bank.⁷ The USA's other largest churches all have their own equivalent programmes. Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois has its 'Care Center' which provides free optometric and dental services as well as clothing and grocery banks, and an innovative automotive service, C.A.R.S., which "provides reliable transportation to those in need through refurbished, donated vehicles with the help of volunteer mechanics".⁸ Care ministries at Californian multi-site Saddleback Church⁹ include hospital visitation programmes, support for those with mental health, career and financial and addiction difficulties, and even a weight loss and healthy lifestyle programme, the 'Daniel Plan'.¹⁰ Bethel Church, Redding, California¹¹ and Potters House, Dallas, Texas¹² also promote a wide portfolio of social care ministries. Such services are not restricted to purely physical locations, either; the translocal reach of the megachurches and their 'soft power' influence through traditional and social media mean that even their websites provide important resources for their communities (Martin et al. 2011), with America's many Black megachurches being viewed by statutory authorities as critically-important routes for focussed messaging on healthcare to African Americans (Campbell and Wallace 2015).

Outside the USA, one of the longest-established and most comprehensive megachurch social concern programmes is that offered out of 38,000 member Sydney-based Hillsong Church. Its CityCare programme¹³ was established in 1986, only three years after the founding of the church, and offers a wide range variety of community services, including advocacy and personal development programmes; counselling services (with professional as well as volunteer staff) and a health centre; a variety of teams supporting the homeless, visiting nursing homes, prisons and immigration detention centres; a variety of children's and youth activities including mentoring opportunities and 'strengthening

7 <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Ministry.aspx>.

8 <https://www.willowcreek.org/en/locations/care-center>.

9 <https://saddleback.com>.

10 <https://saddleback.com/connect/ministry/the-daniel-plan>.

11 <http://bethelredding.com>.

12 <https://thepottershouse.org>.

13 <http://hillsong.com/citycare>.

families' playgroups. CityCare's Justice Projects gather short-term teams to deliver "large-scale practical assistance" on projects such as "high school renovations, suburb graffiti blitz and many home renovations for families in desperate need of assistance",¹⁴ whilst the church also has special ministries working on providing crisis care as well as special feeding and food donation programmes around Easter and Christmas.¹⁵ Hillsong's 'Sisterhood' women's ministry holds regular 'Be the Change' mornings, where they have taken part in activities such as putting together 'Bravery Bead Bags' and crocheting headbands for children in chemotherapy, knitting blankets and teddy bears for children in the emergency ward, undertaking home renovation/makeover projects for underprivileged families, packing food hampers and 'care packages' for local businesses, and many other activities (Riches 2017). As a truly global megachurch, too, Hillsong also works alongside a variety of partner organisations across its international congregations on large-scale systemic global social challenges, including tackling modern slavery in conjunction with A21;¹⁶ working with street children and other vulnerable people in Mumbai with Vision Rescue¹⁷ and supporting vulnerable children worldwide through Compassion¹⁸ and the Watoto programme.¹⁹ Hillsong has also worked across all its international locations to address the Syrian refugee crisis in conjunction with World Vision.²⁰ Such an extensive portfolio and the church's global recognition both bring their challenges; Parkes suggests that the church's "global profile" has perhaps "necessitated its interface with ethical issues that it is not theologically prepared for", and this means that the church has to find itself in "a constant process of reimagining its approach to social engagement and ethical issues and demonstrates increasing energy for community mobilization" (Parkes 2017: 235), but it has managed to approach such challenges with a fair degree of reflexivity and creativity on the basis of a solid theological foundation (Davies 2017).

Though Hillsong's global programme is particularly extensive, many other Western congregations prioritise the alleviation of global poverty as a central

14 <http://hillsong.com/citycare/justice-projects/>.

15 cf. <http://hillsong.com/citycare/kilo-of-kindness/> and <http://hillsong.com/citycare/stuffthebus/>.

16 <http://www.a21.org>.

17 <http://visionrescue.co.in>, cf. <http://hillsong.com/bwc/vision-rescue/>.

18 <http://www.compassion.com.au>.

19 <http://hillsong.com/bwc/watoto/>.

20 <http://hillsong.com/bwc/refugee-response/>.

focus of their social concern ministries, too, with one excellent example being 6,000 member City Impact Church in Auckland, New Zealand, which promotes child sponsorship, support for those with disabilities, and development and aid work extensively as part of its international missions outreach.²¹

2.2 *Confronting Poverty in the Global South*

The pattern of activity around poverty relief in megachurches across the majority world is not hugely different either, except perhaps with additional emphasis on healthcare and special provision for children and for elders. Asia presents some excellent examples here. The 75,000 member *Onnuri* (All Nations) Community Church in Seoul, South Korea (en.onnuri.org/about-onnuri/onnuris-vision/) has a special ministry programme for the poor neighbourhoods of the city and the outlying fishing and farming villages, to tackle social exclusion and poverty there, and also hosts a variety of weekly special worship gatherings for those with learning difficulties,²² a ministry which is also a special concern of City Harvest Church, Singapore (Chan 2017: 298). The world's largest congregation, 480,000-member Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul²³ needs a separate ten-storey building to house its welfare division, which incorporates a health clinic, a medical mission unit and a hospice, a development department with its own specialist security team and a procurement division. Yoido also hosts an extensive ministry to North Korean refugees and "provides vocational and spiritual training for unemployed youth ... apartments for homeless senior citizens and cares for neighbourhoods in poor environments" through its Elim Welfare Town (cf. Anderson 2012: 163–165). In Indonesia, Bethany Church, Surabaya (with some 70,000 members)²⁴ offers a variety of clinic and health programmes through its Bethany Care agency. At the opposite end of the megachurch scale, the 2,500 member New Hope Power Assemblies of God Church in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, has recently introduced a free ambulance service to provide first response at accident sites.²⁵

The South American context is slightly different, however. In Santiago, Chile's largest church, *Catedral Evangelica de Jotabeche Chile* delivers much of

21 <https://cityimpactchurch.com/about-city-impact-church/outreach-and-missions/>.

22 <http://en.onnuri.org/ministries/handicapped/>.

23 <http://www.fgtv.com>.

24 <http://bethanygraha.org/id/>.

25 <https://johnarulministries.com/ministries.php>.

its social engagement work through its 'Dorcas Team' (*'el Cuerpo de Dorcas'*), a women's ministry programme named in tribute to the Dorcas of Acts 9:36, a woman who was "committed to social work, making dresses and robes for widows and the dispossessed" (*"una persona que se dedicaba a las labores sociales, preparando vestidos y túnicas para las viudas y los más desposeídos"*).²⁶ The Dorcas Team is overseen by the senior pastor's wife and seeks to provide spiritual as well as material assistance for those in need, with its first priority being identified as prayer for those in need. The 15,000-member *Iglesia Rey de Reyes* (King of Kings Church) in Buenos Aires has for the last few years organised an annual *Operación Vida* ('Operation Life') social and evangelistic event in different regions of Argentina. In 2016 this programme gathered a thousand volunteers from the church and other more local congregations in Concordia, Entre Ríos to collaborate on a remarkable five-day social concern campaign, during which they worked with 4,000 families, two hospitals, four schools, two prisons across thirty areas of the city, providing food, clothing, medicine and healthcare support before concluding the week with a huge stadium 'night of salvation' evangelistic rally at which "thousands accepted Jesus into their hearts".²⁷

On the whole, though, it is striking how the South American megachurches consistently provide comparatively little detail of their social engagement programmes on their websites. There may be both cultural, practical and theological explanations for this. Perhaps the social engagement priorities of churches on this continent are slightly less explicitly focussed on charitable approaches to the resolution of poverty, or perhaps the churches are simply less comfortable in promoting such ministries. It may also be that the 'cell church' model so prominent across the region means that active compassion for the poor is a function of the small groups which comprise the church more than of its wider organisation. Köhrsen (2015) suggests social class may also be a factor, noting an interesting distinction between the 'lower class' churches which attract members from the more deprived communities and which prefer to emphasise the spiritual practices they believe will bring deliverance from the challenges of life (such as prayer, healing and exorcism) rather more than economic or social intervention, and the more socially liberal middle class congregations, which focus more extensively on influence, commercial opportunities

26 <https://www.jotabeche.org/dorcas/>.

27 'Vivimos una noche de Salvación donde miles aceptaron a Jesús en su corazón', <http://www.claudifreidzon.com>.

and business success. It is entirely possible that systematic approaches to poverty relief in practical ways fall between these two ideological stools.

Köhren also observes, however, that by comparison with Latin America in particular, African Pentecostals have tended to be much more comfortable with publicly tackling humanitarian and development challenges, noting too that one of the distinctive features of Africa social engagement is caring for HIV/Aids patients, given the extent of that epidemic across the continent. Certainly the public social engagement profile of, for example, Rhema Church, Johannesburg, South Africa, which provides soup kitchens, health care, disaster relief and emergency accommodation through its Hands of Compassion programme, established in 1987,²⁸ is very different from that of South America's largest churches, and much more communitarian in focus than similar Western projects. Watoto Church, Kampala Uganda, sets out its mission as being "to serve the community holistically – spirit, soul and body" and is especially notable for its commitment to environmental and economic sustainability across all its projects.²⁹ As well as promoting its internationally-famous children's choirs, Watoto creates eco-friendly orphanage-villages for vulnerable children in traditional African community style, inviting members to commit to regularly visiting the villages to help bring up and socialise the children in the hope of creating as much of a traditional family environment for them as possible,³⁰ and have extensive programmes around trauma rehabilitation, adult literacy and business training as well as HIV/Aids care.³¹ Meanwhile International Central Gospel Church, Accra, Ghana, has its own fully-fledged development programme, Central Aid, which highlights the church's "divine mandate and responsibility to demonstrate the wisdom and creativity of God in providing solutions to the issues of poverty, deprivation, ignorance and diseases plaguing humanity".³² Africa's great need in some of these areas has certainly resulted in some innovative practice from its megachurches.

2.3 *Beyond Poverty: Other Social Engagement Strategies*

The above whistle-stop global tour highlights the huge variety of programmes by which the megachurches seek to relieve poverty in their own communities and sometimes beyond, therefore, but for all the importance of this agenda,

28 <http://www.rhema.co.za/hand-of-compassion>.

29 <https://www.watotochurch.com/index.php?id=11>.

30 <https://www.watoto.com/our-work/watoto-villages/>.

31 <https://www.watoto.com/our-work/neighbourhood>.

32 <http://www.centralaidgh.org>.

relief and development is in itself just one element of a broader commitment to social engagement. Many of the megachurches do much more than relieving physical need.

For example, first, there is, of course, a long-standing history of Christian involvement with education, training and personal and skills development, and this continues to this day in various forms, including formal theological education and vocational training as well as general schooling. So the 20,000-member *Fraternidad Cristiana* in Guatemala City has its own school,³³ as does Bethany Church Surabaya. Yoido Full Gospel Church oversees both Hansei University in Seoul and Bethesda Christian University in Anaheim, California for Korean-speaking students based in, or wishing to study in, the US. In Peru, Lima's *Comunidad Cristiana Agua Viva* has a leadership school, as does Potter's House, Dallas. Calvary Temple, Hyderabad, India's biggest church which claims almost a quarter of a million members and attracts some 40,000 attenders to each service, runs its own Bible College,³⁴ whilst Holy Trinity Brompton, London (HTB), has strong historic and ongoing connections to the multi-site theological seminary, St Mellitus College.³⁵ London's Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC) runs a ground-breaking access to higher education programme, 'Breaking Educational Barriers', which invites senior admissions tutors from leading global universities to talk to its young people about how to apply successfully for university admission, in the hope of them maximising their life opportunities.³⁶

Second, increasingly, megachurches are finding themselves needing to support migrant and minority communities, working with refugees, on immigration, supporting transnational communities and confronting people trafficking. Audacious Church, Manchester and All Souls Langham Place, London both work closely with the NGO Church Response for Refugees,³⁷ whilst a number of the British-African megachurches such as KICC, Jesus House³⁸ and Winners Chapel³⁹ maintain strong links with networks, congregations and leaders back in Nigeria and Ghana especially and draw upon these resources to

33 <http://liceofrater.edu.gt>.

34 <http://www.calvarytemple.in/calvary-bible-college/>.

35 <https://www.stmellitus.ac.uk/about-us/our-history>.

36 <https://www.kicc.org.uk/church/community-initiatives/>.

37 <https://www.forrefugees.uk/about-us/our-partners/>.

38 <http://www.jesushouse.org.uk/>.

39 <https://winners-chapel.org.uk/>.

promote business contacts and professional opportunities in both directions as well as to support new migrants to the UK.

Third, most of the Western megachurches at least also provide Counselling, Rehabilitation and Support Services, seeking to support their members and their wider communities through life challenges and challenges by the provision of services around child and elderly care, marriage and divorce, bereavement and grief support, mental health care and counselling more generally, and rehabilitation work with prisoners and (ex)addicts. Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) in London, home of the renowned Alpha Course, and Saddleback Church in California both have extensive programmes in this space, and KICC has a 24-hour pastor-on-call service for emergency counselling. In many of the South American and African congregations, 'counselling' means meeting for prayer and deliverance ministry rather than for therapy, but this spiritual support is a service that is frequently offered. Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God offers an online help centre through its London congregation where visitors can seek assistance and can email in prayer requests.⁴⁰

Finally, perhaps the most interesting range of projects, however, is the rather newer trend towards tackling the modern disease of social isolation through community-building, social participation and befriending programmes. Lim (2015) identifies this as an area in which the Singaporean megachurches have had particular success and to which they have a particular attraction, and wonders if such programmes are the Singaporean churches' conscious or unconscious demonstration to a slightly sceptical government that the advance of Christianity poses no threat to national cohesion, but rather an opportunity for extending social and civic harmony. Certainly the variety of friendship and community-building projects offered by Singapore's megachurches is impressive; Chan (2017: 293–94) observes that in 2013, just one of these churches, City Harvest Church, administered over 130 different projects, which range from offering home and hospital visits to the city's elderly poor to a dance and performing arts school for high school students, and highlights City Harvest's commitment to holistic ministry, support for the whole person across all the ages of life, through the provision of both explicitly religious and absolutely non-religious services. City Harvest has consciously sought to use contemporary pop culture in its quest to engage with the everyday lives of its younger attenders, and for that matter to 'redeem' that culture by imbuing it with

40 <https://www.uckg.org/in-need-of-a-prayer/>.

Christian values (Chan 2017: 295). Similarly, Hillsong London also features a 'community youth' arm it labels 'iCareRevolution',⁴¹ which it describes as helping to "release the unique potential inside every young person by offering practical help with the issues that every young person faces every day of their life ... changing the mind-sets of London's youth by encouraging them to be the difference ... telling the kids that they are not worthless and that they have a future no matter where they come from or what their background is".⁴² Care for the elderly is not neglected either, with an extensive range of projects including monthly lunch clubs, summer and Christmas parties and 'adopt a granny/grandad' programmes highlighted under the 'Regenerate RISE' banner.⁴³ For the Hillsong 'mother church' in Sydney, engagement with issues around mental health and wellbeing and active participation in NAIDOC week, which celebrates the role of Aboriginal and Islander peoples in modern Australia, have been among more recent interventions.

The value of these kind of contributions to the life of megachurch members and non-members is inestimable. The most obvious contribution, perhaps, is relational, in terms of the supportive networks of friendship they provide, helping people to connect with others in cities that are often isolating, and shaping the way people choose careers, develop friendships, relate to their neighbours, conduct their relationships and family lives, look after their health, use their money, or get involved in politics, charity work or campaigning, locally, nationally and globally. Naturally the megachurches wish, and seek, to see their members use those resources for the good of the church as well as the community. But in return they also make a significant investment into their members' own individual social capital.

In any truly global megacity such as London, the role of the church in supporting the integration of immigrant communities cannot be overvalued. One of the reasons for the success of London's African-led megachurches appears to be the support they provide for newcomers to the UK in offering them a reminder of home and the promise of a new community. But the phenomenon is rather wider than that. Because of London's black megachurches, the doctor just moved over from Nigeria to work in one of the capital's big teaching hospitals gets an instant family who understand the challenges she will be facing in coming to terms with British society, culture and environment, and quite

41 <http://icarerevolution.co.uk>.

42 <http://hillsong.com/uk/bwc/icarerevolution>.

43 <http://hillsong.com/uk/bwc/the-platt-centre/>.

possibly know her home region, if not city; a new network of friends who share her core beliefs and values and understand her needs; and a concrete link to and a positive reminder of home in her new church's exuberant worship (which, in the black churches at least, quite probably reflects African musical styles and may sometimes even be sung in her native language). But she is not the only one whose life is positively transformed by engaging with the megachurch. For the elderly widower living a lonely and isolated existence in his sheltered cul-de-sac, the weekly luncheon club might be quite literally a lifesaver, and attending church services might offer the only significant engagement with other people that he gets all week. Because of the megachurch, the teenager from the tower block has a group of friends who are like him, who respect and value him and mean that he no longer needs to seek that status in a street gang; whilst his older sister learns that she can accomplish more than society has ever told her is possible and encouraged to aspire to the very best future imaginable – a top university, a great career, a prosperous and fulfilling life. The immense contribution that the churches make to thousands of such lives across the world's great cities cannot be ignored socially, or indeed economically.

2.4 *Megachurches' Political Engagement and Cultural Influence*

Given such a diverse and wide-ranging portfolio of activities worldwide, it is clear that the megachurches do a huge amount to positively impact society. But it is also noteworthy that just about all the interventions above seek to address individual outcomes, ameliorate individual circumstances, rather than deliver systemic changes. The megachurches are by and large treating the symptoms of social deficit and not its causes. For example, perhaps we sometimes failed to ask the right questions, but in our study of London's black megachurches, the issue of racial justice was never once raised with us. There was plenty of talk about advancement, opportunity and achievement, but this was always in the context of each individual taking personal responsibility for living God-honouring lives. Racism, social deprivation and oppressive societal structures were never raised with us as challenges. There is more than anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is a more global phenomenon, too; one recent study of the priorities of mission programmes across over 450 US megachurches showed that racial reconciliation, AIDS, and social justice fell a long way down the list of priorities (with interreligious relations and environmental concerns propping up the table) (Priest et al. 2010). And there are quite probably ideological motivations behind this. As Anderson notes, "Pentecostals have traditionally been opposed to political involvement ... [and] have been

accused of an otherworldly spirituality that avoids ‘worldly’ issues like politics and the struggle for liberation and justice, and of being guilty of proclaiming a gospel that either spiritualizes or individualizes social problems” (Anderson 2012: 153). It seems to me that the megachurches have, for good or ill, most frequently gone down a similar path. The long and short of it, for good or ill, is that “while social engagement has often been inspired by evangelical renewal, the search for personal transformation and for authentic faith has always been the central impulse of evangelicalism” (Carpenter 2013: 265).

There are exceptions and qualifications to such a claim. Reynolds and Offutt point to the development strategy adopted in the last few years by Rick Warren at Saddleback Church as “borrow[ing] heavily from ideas of transformational development and holistic mission”, but claim that even this programme possesses “a less developed theological framework concerning the structural and relational forces contributing to poverty” than most freestanding faith-based development NGOs (Reynolds and Offutt 2013: 253–254). Yet most megachurches adopt significantly more individualistically-focussed strategies than Saddleback. Europe’s largest churches have on the whole actively tried to distance themselves from party politics. In London, both All Souls and HTB have a number of members who are politically active and who hold elected office, and both churches will regularly publicly pray for and commend them, but stay well out of the way of party politics at election times. Whilst they seek to maintain good relationships with local elected leaders, any sort of endorsement or public acclamation would be out of the question. And, on the whole, Asian megachurches have followed a similar path, though it is worth remembering that the political campaigns and street protests that led to the democratisation of South Korea in 1987 were actively supported by Pentecostals and Evangelicals (Chong and Goh 2014: 413). Terence Chong argues though that the apolitical approach adopted by Singaporean megachurches has been a conscious strategy to avoid conflict with the state, suggesting that a central part of their success has been because “local megachurches have learned to dedicate resources to welfare needs without being critical of the very capitalist ethos which perpetuates these needs. Unlike liberal Christianity, megachurches disentangled political activism from social action” (Chong 2015: 218).

Given the long (and arguably somewhat murky) history of Evangelical engagement with politics in the USA, we might have expected rather more political engagement from the North American megachurches, but here too, there is some evidence of increasing caution. One study from Campbell and Putnam (2012) identified a significant fall in the proportion of sermons having explicitly political content from 2006 to 2011, leading them to conclude Americans

were moving toward a “growing aversion to blurring the lines between God and Caesar” and noting “if clergy continue to retreat from politics, candidates of the religious right will have fewer opportunities to tap into church-based social networks for political mobilization”.

On the latter suggestion at least, the 2016 presidential election proved them to be in error. President Trump swept to power with the votes of over 80 percent of white evangelicals (Smith and Martínez 2016), and his evangelical advisory council included a number of megachurch pastors, many of them initially attracted to supporting him because of his perspectives on religious freedom. A number of them, too, have since felt obliged to speak out against some of Trump’s policies (Maza 2018), but the general position of at least the white megachurch leaders has remained at very least sympathetic.

Black and Latina/o leaders have certainly been more sceptical, but not generally too much more vocal. Indeed, it has been alleged that “the preoccupation of Black churches with ‘prosperity gospels’, color-blind theologies, and a strong focus on its communal and priestly functions has largely inhibited faith-based political action” (House 2018: 15; cf. Tucker-Worgs 2011). However, Bishop T.D. Jakes of Potter’s House, Dallas, perhaps America’s leading African-American pastor, is one who has been sharply critical of Trump’s policies on immigration (Jakes and Hill 2018) and indeed of fellow Evangelicals for their uncritical acceptance of the administration’s agenda (“I’m afraid that the church is compromising its integrity for the benefit of photo-ops at the White House”, Jakes and Hill 2018). It is sometimes suggested that the increasing proportion of middle class, educationally-qualified African-Americans and their sense of aspiration and hope have resulted in a generation who are more comfortable with the prosperity teaching of the black megachurches and are therefore equally comfortable with attending them (Benson 2011: 28), but it seems to me the causality might just run in the opposite direction. Even if the megachurches perhaps fail to confront injustice as publicly as they might, they certainly encourage aspiration, hope and opportunity.

Maybe some of their members are enticed to make something more of their life because of the megachurches’ ministry. And whilst the leaders of America’s black megachurches generally do eschew political campaigning, their preaching certainly emphasises themes of social concern and mobility, and in particular feeds personal and community empowerment. They seek to build community prosperity ‘from the bottom up’, by empowering individuals to change their world, impact those around them and then work together to change society (cf Algranti 2012; Barnes 2011).

There are two continents, however, where megachurches have adopted a much more positive perspective on politics. In both Africa and South America, megachurches and megachurch leaders have been very actively engaged in electoral politics. Hunt observes “Pentecostalism’s proliferating involvement in a range of political processes and penetrating social activity has been evidenced in various parts of the world”, adding that particularly in Latin America, “Pentecostals now stride the political landscape, increasingly abandoning their quietism to partake of orchestrated activity as they mobilize themselves for extending electoral opportunities” (Hunt 2011: 157). Such engagement has led to the creation of political parties in Colombia, Venezuela and Nicaragua in particular (Kim and Kim 2008: 169), and varying degrees of electoral success in Argentina and Brazil (Wilson 2011: 26), but it is at least arguably the case that ultimately such engagement has proven problematic for the megachurches. Algranti (2012) argues that for all their influence on their members, the Argentinian megachurches have singularly failed to shape national political life, and, indeed, that their leadership has become better trained, better qualified and better able to present themselves on the public stage and develop their own platform, they have distanced themselves from the community that they lead, resulting in a fair measure of conflict between church leaders and Evangelical politicians who both claim to speak for the community that neither groups now adequately reflect. This has led to a desire for churches to build influence in all spheres of society and encourage their members to engage with public life in all its fullness and aspire to leadership opportunities in other fields. Churches such as *Mision Carismatica Internacional* in Bogota, Colombia highlights the social significance of the church in its publicity, urge their members to take responsibility for growing into leadership roles across the arts, media and in business as well as in government.⁴⁴

The challenge in Africa, as outlined comprehensively in the Nigerian and Zambian contexts by Burgess (2015), has resulted in similarly complex and contentious outcomes. Whilst megachurch and denominational leaders may feel they have preserved their religious freedom and pursued public benefit by seeking elected office, it is difficult to argue that their contribution has been unambiguously positive. Little wonder that, as Adekoya notes, “there are those who would want the Church to keep out of politics” in Nigeria (2018: 50).

44 <http://mci12.com/blog/2018/07/03/verdaderos-reformadores/>.

3 Megachurches and Social Engagement: How and Why?

All this said, in many ways, it is not so much what the megachurches actually do that is of interest by way of comparison with smaller churches, but how and why they do it. Even a tiny village church can invest in international development ministry, given our globalised, connected world, and provide social support for the needy of its community (and many of them arguably engage a rather higher proportion of their attenders in such ministries, too). What sets the megachurches apart is the diversity and the scale of their offering and the sheer numbers they can engage with. Managing such a large and diverse portfolio of activities poses immense logistical challenges, but by definition the megachurches have the resources available to accommodate these. However, sometimes they do encounter challenges in aligning ministry and professional commitments. Some activities may invite legal complications, potentially significant financial risk to the church or reputational challenges. And in areas where external (secular) charitable or government money is available to support activity, there are always concerns from the donor side about appropriate alignment of religious and social objectives and the fear programmes might be used for proselytisation, and nervousness from the megachurch side that external funding might restrict their freedom to be explicitly Christian in their activity even though they seek to be wholly inclusive and shun any sort of religious test before or after providing assistance. Not least for such reasons, many of the megachurches set up separate agencies to deliver the work for them. So !Audacious Church, Manchester, routes most of its programmes through its !Audacious Foundation. New Hope Power Church, Madurai, focusses its social care work through an NGO founded by the senior pastor, Love and Care International, which cares for around 1,000 orphans and also runs infrastructure and development projects in some of the slum areas.⁴⁵ Yoido Full Gospel church separates out its relief and development work out into two separate NGOs, the Elim Welfare Town and 'Good People World Family',⁴⁶ which works on healthcare, education, development, emergency relief and child protection internationally and on child support and medical care and relief for North Korean refugees more locally in Korea. Singapore's City Harvest Church too "maintains a distance between its welfare ministries and politics

45 <https://johnarulministries.com/ministries.php>.

46 <http://eng.goodpeople.or.kr>.

through the learned behaviour of privatization and compartmentalization” (Chong 2015: 235).

Other churches seek to work collaboratively across sector on development projects, with some of the more creative work here including partnerships with “state agencies and private nonprofits on urban community development initiatives and other social enterprises” (Elisha 2011: 8). Indeed, much of the American Evangelical contribution to global development and poverty relief is the result of systematic collaboration, often delivered through parachurch organisations which also retain a campaigning as well as a delivery role (Reynolds and Offutt 2013). Still, the economic costs of some of the activities undertaken are immense, and even with external financial support and collaboration, the success of most of the megachurches’ most visible projects depends absolutely upon the generosity of church members in giving their finance and also their time to participate as volunteers in these programmes. It is interesting that the most prominent presentation of Lakewood Church’s social engagement and concern programmes on its website is in the context of seeking volunteers to serve the church’s vision, the community and ultimately God in participating in these activities, such as for example their ‘rebuild mission’ programme, where they ask members to take a week off work as ‘staycation’ to join a team working to rebuild flood-damaged communities. Willow Creek too extensively promotes its need for volunteers in specific areas⁴⁷ and presents this as an important opportunity for all church attenders to make a genuine contribution to church life – clearly a practical challenge for a church with members in the tens of thousands. Hillsong Sydney offer some 40–50 different volunteering opportunities across the church in logistics, hospitality and administration as well as aid and care ministries, reminding its members that “Hillsong Church is not built on the gifts and talents of a few, but on the sacrifice of many”.⁴⁸

Whilst one of the many attractions of megachurches in the West is sometimes (albeit somewhat sceptically) seen as being the opportunity to attend them with minimal commitment and remain distant and disengaged, that is not an approach that the churches encourage. For their own benefit as well as for the good of the individual members, the churches want to see all their attenders actively participating in the life of the church and actively engaged in ministry, and they seek to empower them to do this in a variety of ways.

47 <https://www.willowcreek.org/en/serve>.

48 <https://hillsong.com/hills/volunteer/>.

As 60,000 member SaRang Church in Seoul puts it, the central call of any discipleship-focussed church is to 'awaken the laity' (Niemandt and Lee 2015: 4), and mobilising the people to meet the need has long been a strength of Pentecostalism (Ma 2009; Petersen 2013: 51). Volunteerism meets needs on many levels. Barnes (2011: 191–192) highlights the important contribution that qualified professional members can make as volunteers to support project delivery, citing one pastor who told her, "We have a lot of folks in the church who are professionals and they are very generous with their expertise. We help people directly with access to funds and then indirectly with information that will help them to live their life or break out of poverty ... as folks tithe to us 10% of their income, we tithe it right back out".

That empowering capacity is, furthermore, not restricted to activities delivered entirely by the church. Many individual members of megachurches are highly active in society in their own right and are actively involved in social engagement work of some kind outside of the church context, either as a volunteer, employee or trustee. Quite a few members have significant roles in local, regional and even national activities in this space. In our research in London, for example, we encountered senior civil servants, leaders of NGOs large and small, major charitable donors and major charity managers, medics, teachers, social workers, academics, counsellors and councillors of all hues, national politicians and a huge variety of other change agents sat in the pews. Many of them told us that their church's contribution to their lives was immense and a critical element of their support mechanism; and, indeed, that it was their religious commitment that motivated and sustained their professional responsibilities and their personal obligations. I would suggest that the contribution made by individual members of the megachurches probably outweighs the contribution made by the churches themselves, and a number of the church leaders we interviewed agreed.

Furthermore, many of those individual members were themselves responsible for initiating major projects in the churches. One of the key discoveries of our empirical work, for example, was that many of the projects we uncovered were not initiated by church leaders directly, but by members of the congregation who had been inspired by the preaching and culture of the church to be entrepreneurial and challenged by a particular social need to initiate activities themselves. Perhaps, therefore, one key insight is that megachurches succeed by creating the right environment for such activities to flourish and encouraging their members to 'step up to the mark' and lead in life as well as in the church. Members who have imbibed such attitudes cannot do anything

other than respond to crisis needs because they have been trained to take responsibility for their own lives and commit to addressing the needs of others. Such activities are therefore as much church-initiated as anything the senior leaders themselves do, and are just as thoroughly integrated into the life of the churches and draw extensively on their values. Indeed, as Wilson observes, Pentecostalism's "principal focus" is "the development of human capital ... giving their converts a vision of what they and their societies could become", and seeking "to assist their own people in rising to the height of their spiritual, personal, and social potential". And as he continues, though this approach in the more explicitly religious context amounts to what we usually think of as evangelism, it "was not limited to the proclamation of the gospel. It was, in effect, a concerted effort to undertake social redemption from below" (Wilson 2011: 12). Human capital, then, is both the 'how' and the 'why' of megachurch social engagement; but there is value in unpacking the 'why' a little more extensively. Evidence suggests a variety of motivations feed into the social concern agenda – two of which are very much pragmatic and others which are rather more theological.

Practically, firstly, some of the megachurches' interventions are very clearly motivated by recognition of the social need of the church community itself because of its immediate need. Such commitments can arise from a sense of community or shared experience; Anderson notes that Yoido Church's commitment to confront poverty arises at least partially from the personal experience of its founder, David Yonggi Cho and that of the older generation of leaders in South Korea who still all too well remember the deprivation and economic collapse which surrounded the Korean War (Anderson 2012), whilst some of the younger leaders might relate to the challenges faced by rural to urban migrants (Chong and Goh 2014: 409). As the Korean churches preach God's blessing, their practical ministry also emphasises the role of God's people in bringing that blessing in concrete terms into the lives of their brothers and sisters in the church (and that is arguably very much a New Testament model). Second, there is the need of the surrounding community, which in itself is a call to action. It is sometimes said that Pentecostalism is a religion of the poor, not just for the poor (Ma 2009: 42). However it is also the religion of those who don't want to stay poor (Benson 2011; cf. Eagle 2015). At least to some extent, megachurches succeed because they present "the images (of the affluent lifestyle, contemporary relevance, and the created community) that prove the message of prosperity with the rest of the nation" (Carney 2012: 76); in Asia in particular, they represent the religion of the *emerging* middle class rather

than the *established* middle class (Chong and Goh 2014: 410). In other words, megachurch leaders and members remember times when they have had to struggle too. Megachurch concern for the poor arises from identification with the poor and a recognition that much of the church's membership has come out from such contexts. As Kay (2009: 302) notes, their "activism and energy ... may be stimulated by the narratives of their own lives ... [they] feel empowered to the extent that they wish to tackle the most difficult social problems by the most direct methods".

The theological motivations which underpin megachurch social engagement, however, are multiple and varied. They act because "Christ's love compels them" (2 Corinthians 5:14); because Jesus himself cares for and deeply loves the poor, pointing to "Christ's early and continued involvement among the poor as an example of God's special love, value, and concern for them" and arguing "If living and serving among the poor was acceptable for Christ, committed Christians should be comfortable following suit" (Barnes 2011: 193). They act because they understand themselves as a family, and "Families take care of one another and celebrate together, and being part of a family is extremely healthy" (Alexander 2009: 148; cf. Chan 2017: 303; Chong 2015: 233). They act because they believe God himself is love, and because they believe that loving one another is the concrete, empirical demonstration of that love in a loveless world. As Guatemala's *Fraternidad Cristiana* expresses its mission:

We are characterized by love for God and for our neighbor. In the Frather regardless of our race or economic condition, we are all one in God. We are united by our faith and that is enough and it is enough. Inspired by the love of God, we reflect His love for others, by sharing our faith and helping each other to live it.⁴⁹

They act, therefore, because to their mind there is an inherent and incontestable "link between Christian love, social action and eschatological hope" (Burgess 2009: 259). They also act because God has blessed them, and with that blessing comes the attendant responsibility of being a blessing to the world around, not least "by providing financial assistance to less-privileged believers and alleviating poverty in the wider society" (Burgess 2009: 258). They act because "the church is a sign of the kingdom of God and of the proleptic

49 <http://frater.org/es/acerca-de/que-nos-caracteriza/>.

manifestation of God's reign, both in what it is and what it does", and where God reigns, his purpose is accomplished (Niemandt and Lee 2015: 3).

They act because social engagement is for them fundamentally part of the task of mission and evangelism. In some ways, evangelism and social action are very clearly distinguished in the megachurches' thinking and strategy. They provide services to the community without as well as the community within, with no religious restrictions or obligations, free at the point of access and need. But they reject any assumption that there might be a difference between the preaching of the Gospel and its practice. For the megachurches, "Social action is mission" (Burgess 2009: 260). And as Elisha noted in his study of Knoxville's megachurches:

The tendency among many conservative Protestants to insist on a firm distinction between humanitarian effort and religious proselytization (privileging the latter) was rejected by those who favored a more integrative, holistic approach, the kind that prioritizes 'words and deeds' and regards both as equally crucial for effective evangelism among society's poor, distressed, and marginalized populations. Making the case for holistic evangelism in the evangelical churches of Knoxville – whether this meant arguing for broader conceptions of the church's role in society or simply arguing that, as one pastor put it, 'You can't talk to an empty stomach' – was a vital strategy by which the socially engaged evangelicals I observed appealed to their conservative base.

ELISHA 2011: 8–9

Here, then, in a sense, we find ourselves full circle, back where we started with the early Pentecostal rejection of an additional 'social gospel' being tagged on the end of the real thing, the 'full gospel', except this time, it is the 'real thing' that is in danger. For Elisha's 'socially engaged Evangelicals', any 'full gospel' expression of Christian mission which fails to make a practical difference on the ground for the poorest of the world fails to stand as a viable expression of God's grace in Christ. A gospel that isn't social is no gospel at all for the megachurches, who pursue social transformation on the basis of their theological obligations, and identify themselves as continuing a long tradition of Christian commitment to social change which can be traced back to heroic figures of earlier centuries such as Elisabeth Fry, William Wilberforce, Thomas and Syrie Barnardo, Robert Raikes, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Lord Shaftesbury and William and Catherine Booth. They act because they have a story to continue and a world to keep transforming. They act because the need is still

there. And, ultimately, as Hillsong Church explains,⁵⁰ they act simply because they can.

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⁵⁰ <http://hillsong.com/bwc>.

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PART 3

Global Contexts



Megachurches and ‘Reverse Mission’

Richard Burgess

1 Introduction

The presence of African Christian communities in Europe and North America represents one of the most significant developments within world Christianity over the past three decades (Adogame 2013; Gornik 2011; Hanciles 2008; Olupona and Gemignani (eds.) 2007; Ter Haar 2001). In Europe, African churches are becoming an increasingly important addition to the urban religious landscape, especially in globalising cities such as London, Amsterdam and Berlin. The majority are Pentecostal or Charismatic, which represents the fastest-growing Christian tradition worldwide (Johnson 2013). Gerrie Ter Haar (2001: 13) regards it as a fresh phase in European religious history, adding a new dimension to the multicultural society which Europe has become since the end of the Second World War. Whereas in the past, mission has been understood as a movement from the North to the South, now it is happening in the opposite direction, a phenomenon commonly referred to as ‘reverse mission’ (Burgess 2011; Freston 2010; Koning 2009; Währisch-Oblau 2009).

This chapter examines ‘reverse mission’ as it relates to megachurches of Nigerian provenance. In the literature, megachurches are defined as Protestant churches having at least 2,000 attendees per week (Ellingson 2016; Thumma and Travis 2007). The field of megachurch studies originated in the USA, where the largest number of megachurches are located (Ellingson 2016; Thumma 1996; Thumma and Travis 2007). However, there is now a growing recognition that megachurches are a global religious phenomenon exerting significant social influence in urban contexts around the world (James 2015; Thumma and Bird 2015a). This has generated an emerging body of literature by scholars from across the academic disciplines, including social scientists, theologians and missiologists. Researchers have studied megachurches in North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Australia (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015; Cartledge *et al* 2019; Chong 2015; Ellingson 2016; Fath 2008; Smith and Campos 2015; Thumma and Travis 2007; Vermeer 2015; Wade 2016). Nigeria hosts some of the largest megachurches in the world with multiple branches nationwide as well as in other African countries, North America and Europe. Nigerian Pentecostals

have also planted some of the largest megachurches in Europe. The most well-known are Sunday Adelaja and Matthew Ashimolowo, founders of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations in Kiev and Kingsway International Christian Centre in London respectively (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Cartledge and Davies 2013). Significantly, seven out of the twelve megachurches in London were planted by Nigerians.¹

While the USA has the highest number of megachurches, with an estimated 1,611 in 2011 (Bird and Thumma 2011), most of the world's largest churches are located in Africa, Asia and Latin America, reflecting the global shift in Christianity's centre of gravity southwards (James 2015; Thumma and Bird 2015a). Warren Bird's country-by-country list of global megachurches includes 33 megachurches with a weekly attendance of 20,000 and above in Asia, 19 in Africa, 15 in Latin America, and 15 in the USA. The world's largest megachurch is the Yoido Full Gospel Church in South Korea, with an estimated 480,000 attendees (Bird 2017). Winners' Chapel in Lagos, Nigeria, has the largest church auditorium in the world, the 50,400-seater Faith Tabernacle. Although they share family resemblances with their American kin in terms of their theology, architecture and programmes, many southern megachurches have flourished in ways that their more established counterparts have not (Richardson 2017). As Richardson (2017: 294) notes, these congregations, which are located in 'mega-cities' such as Seoul, Lagos and Rio de Janeiro, attract younger and poorer audiences than their American counterparts and often belong to transnational networks "that aim to replicate the success and growth strategies of the mother church".

The chapter begins with a discussion of the term 'reverse mission', a concept which has gained currency in the literature on transnational Pentecostal churches (Gerloff 2000; Ter Haar 2001; Währisch-Oblau 2009). Researchers have distinguished between the rhetoric of reverse mission and its reality on the ground (Freston 2010; Obinna 2014). The following section examines the phenomenon of reverse mission as it relates to megachurches in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora in Britain. Finally, the chapter explores the actual achievements of Nigerian Pentecostals against the background of European secularism. One of the issues raised in the literature on megachurches in Europe is whether their presence challenges the idea of secularisation (Richardson 2017; Vermeer 2015; von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012). The chapter considers whether the growth of Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain supports the idea that in certain European contexts religion may be gaining rather than losing

¹ These are Kingsway International Christian Centre, Jesus House, Winners' Chapel, New Wine Church, Glory House, Victorious Pentecostal Assembly, and Christ Faith Tabernacle.

strength in modern times. Studies of reverse mission sometimes measure success in terms of winning indigenous converts or adherents and consequently find diasporic churches wanting (Freston 2010; Währisch-Oblau 2009). As I will argue, the adoption of a broader conception of mission which includes social engagement enables a more nuanced assessment of their achievements. The chapter draws upon research conducted in Nigeria and Britain, which included interviews with Nigerian pastors, participant observation of Nigerian Pentecostal churches, and content analysis of media products.²

2 Reverse Mission and Religious Transnationalism in Europe

The term 'reverse mission' derives from mission studies and is closely linked to the evolving relationship between the global and local, a defining feature of late modernity. The predominant meaning of the term refers to the purported historic shift in the direction of mission. According to Paul Freston (2010: 155–156), this involves two main elements: a reversal in the geographical direction of mission and a reversal in the direction of 'colonisation', in other words an inversion of centre-periphery relations in Christianity, whereby the formerly colonised are now evangelising the former colonisers. Most commonly it is used to refer to the emergence of African, Latin American and Asian churches in Europe and North America and their aspirations to re-evangelise the former heartlands of Christianity, which are regarded as increasingly secular (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005; Ojo 2007). This reversal is said to owe its momentum to two historical coincidences: the shift in Christianity's centre of gravity southwards and the increase in transcontinental migrations from the non-Western world (Hanciles 2008). In the literature, the term 'reverse mission' has mainly been used of megachurches in Korea, Brazil, and Nigeria and their church-planting activities in Europe and North America (Burgess 2011; Freston 2010; Kim 2016; Oro 2014; Silva and Rodrigues 2013; Udotong 2010; Währisch-Oblau 2009).

The idea of reverse mission has gained currency in the media and academy largely due to the perceived decline in European Christianity compared to the religious vitality of the non-white Christian population, and by the presence of Muslim immigrants which has raised the question of Christianity's connection with European identity (Freston 2010: 154). However, Freston (2010: 160) regards it as a "discourse in search of reality", doubting the "capacity of diaspora

² Most of the research for this chapter was supported by a grant from NORFACE and a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which was administered through the Center for Religion and Civic Culture (University of Southern California).

communities to act as missionaries to native populations". He suggests that the concept is popular with southern Christians because it is a way to "boost the self-image of postcolonial nations and their diasporas" (Freston 2010: 172). Similarly, Rebecca Catto (2008: 235, 220, 254) suggests that while the rhetoric of 'reverse mission' has grown in popularity in Britain, and exists in "attention-grabbing pockets", it remains largely a discourse rather than a statistically demonstrable phenomenon. Asonzeh Ukah (2009) characterises Nigerian Pentecostal churches in Britain, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), as "asylum Christianity", providing a safe haven for African migrants, rather than as examples of reverse mission. He suggests that the "re-missioning rhetoric" provides "mechanisms to negotiate the hardships and deprivations that individuals encounter in the process of establishing themselves in Europe" (Ukah 2009: 125).

The presence of African churches in Europe's cities raises the question of the interplay between the local and global. In the literature on religious transnationalism, there is a growing interest in the way African Pentecostal churches in Europe are resacralising portions of the urban landscape (Adogame 2013; Eade 2017; Garbin 2013; Knibbe 2010; Krause 2008). Transnational movements such as African Pentecostal churches challenge the usual national frameworks for the scholarly study of religious movements. Some migrants remain strongly influenced by ties to their homelands or by social networks that transcend national borders (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). The transnational character of diasporic churches is sustained by migrants who increasingly move between home and host countries, visiting family, engaging in business, and attending religious conferences (Burgess et al. 2010; Levitt 2001). Transnational networks are also reinforced by media technologies such as mobile phones, the Internet and Satellite TV.

3 Nigerian Megachurches and Reverse Mission in Britain

Bird's global megachurch survey lists 119 megachurches in Africa, of which nearly two-thirds are located in Kenya and Nigeria (Bird 2017). There are also Nigerian-initiated megachurches planted in other African countries. For example, Winners' Chapel boasts the largest congregations in Ghana, Kenya and Zambia (Gifford 2004, 2015). Overall there are 14 megachurches in Lagos, which represents one the highest concentrations of such churches in the world (Bird 2017; Richardson 2017). The largest are Deeper Life Bible Church (65,000), Winners' Chapel (50,000), and the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (50,000). Lagos metropolis is an increasingly fragmented and unregulated

urban space characterised by a lack of basic infrastructure, traffic congestion, insecurity and a growing gulf between rich and poor (Marshall 2014; Ukah 2004; Ukah 2014). This has made it especially fertile ground for Pentecostal churches with their social support networks and promises of power to overcome sickness, poverty, unemployment and evil forces. The urban religious geography is dominated by a bewildering array of Pentecostal institutions occupying warehouses, office spaces, cinema houses, and purpose-built structures (Ukah 2004). A recent trend is the creation of Pentecostal 'cities' in the vicinity of Lagos, consisting of huge auditoriums, housing estates, banks, supermarkets, health centres, educational institutions and recreational facilities (Ukah 2014). RCCG's Redemption Camp has an auditorium that can accommodate one million worshippers.

Most Nigerian megachurches are affiliated to large Pentecostal denominations with multiple national and international branches. For example, RCCG, founded in 1952, has over 14,000 branches in Nigeria and branches in nearly 200 nations.³ The majority of RCCG churches outside Africa are located in Europe and the USA.⁴ Mountain of Fire and Miracles (MFM), founded in 1989, has over three hundred branches nationally, and branches in other African nations, 131 branches in Europe, 111 in the USA, as well as multiple branches in other African countries and Asia (Adogame 2005).⁵ Winners' Chapel has over 6,000 branches in Nigeria and congregations in 147 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the USA (Gifford 2015; Ojo 2006).⁶

Nigerians make up one of the largest transnational African communities in Britain, mainly due to Nigeria's status as Africa's most populous nation and its historic links to Britain as a former colony. Current estimates indicate that there were 191,183 Nigerian-born residents in the UK in 2011, up from 87,000 in 2001, with the large majority living in London.⁷ The spread of Nigerian Pentecostal churches to Britain must be understood within the context of social and religious developments in home and host countries. A relatively liberal British migration policy, combined with poor governance and a decline in educational

3 Ruth Gledhill, "Enoch Adeboye Steps Down As Head Of Redeemed Christian Church Of God In Nigeria", 9 January 2017, *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/enoch-adeboye-steps-down-as-head-of-redeemed-christian-church-of-god/103720.htm>.

4 National Chairman of the Central Missions Board (RCCG), interview, 25/04/09.

5 <http://www.mountainoffire.org.uk/index.php/branches> (accessed 11 April 2018); MFM USA Branches, <http://mfmus.org/branches/>.

6 <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/12/winners-chapel-has-six-million-members-spread-across-147-countries-oyedepo/>

7 Based on the 2001 and 2011 census data. This does not include undocumented migrants and UK citizens of Nigerian descent.

standards at home, resulted in a growing African migrant community, especially from Nigeria and Ghana. The first wave of African church planting in Britain followed the increase in immigration in the 1960s and consisted of mainly Aladura-type churches from Nigeria, transplanted to cater for their members in the diaspora (Gerloff 2000; Harris 2006). The second wave, which began in the 1980s, involved mainly Nigerian and Ghanaian neo-Pentecostals concerned with catering for members who had migrated to Britain at a time of economic decline at home (Osgood 2006). Church growth was stimulated by a conscious missionary agenda as Nigerian Christians, who had migrated in pursuit of education and employment, considered that God had given them a unique opportunity to bring the gospel back to those who originally provided it. Among the earliest transplants were branches of Nigerian megachurches such as Deeper Life Bible Church (1985) and the RCCG (1988). A more recent development saw individual Africans setting up their own independent congregations with no formal links to a sending denomination at home or in Britain. The majority were started by Nigerians or Ghanaians, and most were located in London. Examples of independent megachurches founded by Nigerians include Christ Faith Tabernacle (1989), Kingsway International Christian Centre (1992), Glory House (1993), New Wine Church (1993), and Victorious Pentecostal Assembly (2005). Meanwhile church-planting by megachurches in Nigeria continued apace as branches of MFM (2000) and Winners' Chapel (2003) were started initially in London but subsequently in other British cities.⁸

While the term 'reverse mission' was not explicitly used by my informants, the idea was implicit in some of their interview narratives. Pastor Olu first came to Britain as a student in 1994. He then returned to Nigeria where he became a pastor in the RCCG. In 1998, he again visited Britain and started a branch of the church in Birmingham. He explained the rationale behind this:

The story we heard was that Britain came to Africa to evangelise the place, brought the gospel, and whoever has sown deserves the right to reap. And because Britain has done this in the past, we are now looking at Britain as a place which itself needs to be evangelised. Many people no longer go to church in Britain. It is therefore the plan of the Redeemed Christian Church of God to do as much as they can to evangelise the land. What they have given to us in the past, bring it back to them.⁹

8 For the history of African churches in Britain, see Adedibu (2012); Osgood (2006).

9 Interview, 11/10/07.

Here we see the historical dimensions of the reverse mission paradigm and its associations with the re-evangelisation of Britain, one motivation for which is gratitude to British missionaries for introducing the gospel to Africa. Pastor Andrew, another RCCG pastor, makes a connection between the erosion of Britain's Christian identity, its status as a former missionary-sending nation, and its loss of global prominence.

"Great Britain unfortunately is no longer great because all the things that made Britain great are now gone.... So wherever Redeemed goes, backed by the Holy Spirit, life will be breathed back into that place. If Great Britain embraces the church once again, and embraces God once again, all that was lost will be restored. The men of God who were missionaries all over the world, they came out from Britain, they fought for God. But now this generation has turned their back on God."¹⁰

What these narratives have in common is their projection of a particular image of Britain as a former missionary nation turned mission field. This functions as a rhetorical device, enabling pastors to legitimise their sense of mission to the host country. The image is restorationist: restoring the British church to its former glory and Britain as a Christian nation. An article in the RCCG's magazine *Festival News* also illustrates this restorationist agenda. Entitled "From City of Sin to City of God", it describes the ministry of the RCCG's Jesus House Aberdeen against the backdrop of an increasingly secular community: "Aberdeen.... was declared at the last UK National census as the most godless city in Britain.... The churches were being transformed into flats, restaurants, casinos, bars and night-clubs at an alarming rate.... Into this deteriorating and chaotic environment, God introduced the Redeemed Christian Church of God".¹¹ A central thrust of the article was to celebrate the acquisition by the RCCG of a disused Church of Scotland building in the heart of the city.

Concern over the conversion of church buildings into secular spaces and a desire to reverse this trend is a popular theme in Nigerian Pentecostal discourse. For instance, shortly after the church purchased the former Church of Scotland building, a message appeared on the its website, entitled "This Church building will not become another pub or casino or night club!"¹² Another Nigerian pastor expressed similar concerns: "When I travel around any town or city, I see almost on every corner church buildings are empty; they are being turned into flats; they are being turned into nightclubs; they are being turned into

10 Interview, 16/02/08.

11 Ayo Adedoyin, "From City of Sin to City of God," *Festival News* (March 2008), 44–45.

12 www.jesushouseaberdeem.org. Accessed 12/12/09.

mosques".¹³ In his study of religious change in South West Wales, Paul Chambers (2006: 30) refers to the way abandoned church buildings "stand as mute witnesses to the decline of institutionalized religion" and "symbolic reminders" of a "rich religious past" as well as evidence of religion's loss of social and cultural significance. This stands in stark contrast to what Nigerian Pentecostals are used to back home where church buildings are springing up everywhere, and the only unused ones are those that are yet to be completed due to lack of money or derelict due to inter-religious conflict.

Transnational connections exert a strong influence on the religious practices of Nigerian megachurch transplants in Britain. This is exemplified by the RCCG, whose mission statement includes the goal to "plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries".¹⁴ The RCCG encourages members to plant churches wherever they are, thus fulfilling the divine promise given to its founder that the church would spread around the world before the Second Advent of Christ (Adedibu 2016). Asonzeh Ukah (2009: 117–118) identifies three ways RCCG congregations are founded outside Nigeria. First, a rich congregation in Nigeria could sponsor the establishment of a branch in Britain. Second, a member of RCCG who has migrated for work or study may start a church, which is incorporated into the RCCG family once it becomes viable.

Finally, a rich congregation in Britain can plant a church by commissioning one of its members. Transnational links between megachurch branches and their Nigerian headquarters are reinforced by visits from senior pastors in Nigeria, by the attendance of UK pastors at Nigerian programmes, and by the use of the media. For example, Daniel Olukoya, General Overseer of MFM, hosts an annual conference in London, which attracts over 3,000 people. MFM pastors in Britain also make regular visits to Nigeria to attend training events and prayer retreats. MFM services in Nigeria are streamed live on the Internet, and MFM devotional books, training manuals and DVDs are available for sale in UK branches. Significantly, most Nigerian churches have stronger links to West Africa and the USA than they do to church networks in the UK.

Due to the transnational flows of ideas, resources and people, Nigerian reverse mission churches, especially large congregations such as KICC and Jesus House London, share many of the features of their megachurch kin in Africa. As Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) notes, these include a charismatic and usually well-educated leadership, exuberant and affective worship styles, innovative use of

13 Interview, 16/02/08.

14 See <http://rccgint.org/vm.html>. Accessed 08/10/09.

media technologies, the establishment of transnational networks including the formation of international branches, and an emphasis on success-oriented theologies. Thumma and Travis (2007), based on their research in the USA, discern four megachurch styles: Old Line/Programme-based; Seeker-Oriented; Charismatic/Pastor-focused; and New Wave/Re-envisioned. Nigerian megachurches, both at home and in the diaspora, fit the profile of Thumma and Travis' Charismatic/Pastor-focused megachurches. The most notable example is the RCCG, whose General Overseer, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, is well-known for his personal integrity, charismatic gifts of healing and prophecy, and teaching skills. He has been largely responsible for transforming the RCCG from a small, localised Pentecostal denomination in southwestern Nigeria to a movement of global significance (Burgess et al. 2010). To some extent, Adeboye's charismatic style and gifting are replicated in the ministries of some of the more successful RCCG pastors in Britain. This is partly explained, from a participant point of view, by the transfer of charismatic authority through the ritual of ordination, which is usually conducted by Adeboye himself. It is generally the case that larger parishes are led by men or women who possess charismatic healing and prophetic gifts, organisational and preaching skills (Burgess 2012).

4 Reverse Mission and Post-secularism

An important debate in the literature on reverse mission is whether southern churches are succeeding in their ambitions to re-evangelise secular Europe (Burgess 2011; Catto 2008; Freston 2010). As suggested in the introduction, studies of reverse mission tend to measure success in terms of winning indigenous converts or adherents and consequently find diasporic churches wanting. This is based on a rather narrow conception of mission as evangelism and church-planting. Yet Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain often have a more holistic approach to mission, which includes evangelism and social action, and regard their movement as a significant social force capable of reversing the secularising tendencies of British society. This has driven some to embark on programmes of territorial expansion, not only through evangelism and church-planting but also through various kinds of civic activity.

Any discussion of religion as a social force must make reference to secularisation theory and current debates on post-secular societies. Until recently, European cities were considered secular territory, reflected in dwindling congregations, religious buildings lying derelict or used for secular purposes, and the withdrawal of religion from the public square. However, the recent resurgence of religious movements and communities in the West challenges the

assumption that cities are centres of secular modernity. This has generated widespread debates within the academy over whether societies are secularising or whether religion retains a significant role in modern social life (Baker and Beaumont 2011; Bartolini et al. 2017; Beckford 2012; Cady 2014; McLennan 2010; Wilford 2010). Indeed, some scholars are now writing about post-secular cities and societies (e.g. Baker and Beaumont 2011; Beaumont 2010; Habermas 2008). According to Justin Beaumont (2010: 6), the postsecular refers to “the limits of the secularization thesis and the ever-growing realization of radically plural societies in terms of religion, faith and belief within and between diverse urban societies”. Alongside processes of secularisation, we are witnessing the re-emergence of religion as a social force in Europe, reflected in the growing significance of faith-based welfare provision, the impact of new places of worship on urban spaces, and the growth of Pentecostal and Islamic communities (Baker and Beaumont 2011; Dinham and Lowndes 2009). In London, Pentecostal resurgence is largely due to the presence of black Africans and Caribbeans who account for a third of the city’s churchgoers (Brierley 2014).

Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2000: 307–308) identify three varieties of the secularisation approach. The first is the disappearance thesis, which holds that religion is destined to fade away in modern societies (see, for example, Bruce 1995). Arguing against the secularisation thesis in the sense of the disappearance of religion, many sociologists speak rather of a transformation of religion (Davie 2015; Hervieu-Léger 2000). Outside the walls of the mainline churches, religion seems to flourish in many ways, especially in forms that emphasise individual experience, including the various expressions of Pentecostalism. A second approach is the so-called differentiation thesis, which holds that religion gets pushed out of the public domain while remaining of some significance in private life (Wilson 1982). A third variety, called de-intensification theory by Woodhead and Heelas, is that religion remains but in a weakened form (Davie 1994).

Discussion of the significance of reverse mission churches in relation to secularisation must remain modest in its claims. The remainder of the chapter examines whether the reverse mission activities of Nigerian megachurches provides evidence of the re-emergence of religion as a social force in Britain. Does their presence in Britain support the idea that in certain European contexts religion may be gaining rather than losing strength in modern times? Woodhead and Heelas refer to this as sacralisation theory and identify three sub-theses: growth (by way of conversion), dedifferentiation (or deprivatisation) and intensification, corresponding to the three sub-theses of secularisation theory outlined above. I understand the concept of ‘social force’ in relation to migrant churches as having three possible dimensions. The first is the social impact on members’ lives in terms of capacity to shape the migration process,

determine levels of religious participation, influence socio-economic mobility, and motivate civic activity. The second dimension is the social impact on the wider society through the activities of religious organisations and persons resulting in individual conversions, church growth and social transformation. The final dimension associates social force with the 'de-privatization' of religion and its visibility in public space (Casanova 1994).

5 Migration, Religious Participation and Empowerment

Scholars of religious transnationalism have drawn attention to the resources religion provides in driving and sustaining migration (e.g. Adogame and Weissköppel 2005; Hagan and Ebaugh 2003; Levitt 2001; Ter Haar 2001; Vertovec 2000). African Pentecostal churches are especially important in this respect. One reason for their popularity is the way their social and religious support networks assist African Pentecostals to negotiate the migration process. This is important in immigrant contexts where people are separated from extended family networks. As Gerrie Ter Haar (1998: 43) notes, diasporic churches "contribute significantly to the material and immaterial well-being of African migrants", especially those living in urbanised areas of Western Europe.

In their theory of secularisation based on existential security, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004: 18) argue that the experience of growing up in less secure (i.e. poorer) societies heightens the importance of religious values. However, the conditions of greater security associated with developed nations can lead to a decline in religious participation. For many African Pentecostal migrants, Britain is an insecure environment despite its post-industrial status. While they hope for a better life, they often encounter difficulties, ranging from financial problems and unemployment to immigration difficulties and racial discrimination. In the case of Nigerian Pentecostals, they also have to contend with a perception of Nigerians by white Europeans as prone to corruption and criminality. One Nigerian pastor explained it thus:

The reason for that maybe where we are coming from and what we've gone through and why we've had to come closer to Christ.... It's almost like a home away from home, like a community away from home. Because once you find yourself here you don't have the support network that you once knew back at home. Therefore, the church becomes a form of support network.¹⁵

¹⁵ Interview, 16/02/08

In contrast to current religious trends in Britain, where there has been a marked decline in church attendance (Brierley 2014; Goodhew 2012), congregational life remains an important expression of African Christian faith in the diaspora, a means of offsetting the pressures of individualism and fragmentation in Western society. Thus, Grace Davie's (1994) portrayal of religious trends in Britain in terms of a persistence of religious belief over against a decline in religious belonging does not apply to Nigerian Pentecostals for whom believing and belonging generally go hand in hand. Churches provide contexts for communal worship and prayer as well as social interaction with those who share similar culture and customs, thus contributing to the stocks of social and cultural capital necessary for successful integration. African diasporic churches are places where vital information about travel, employment, education, housing, immigration, and healthcare is freely circulated (Adogame 2013: 117). Nigerian churches organise seminars on such topics as business management, investment, immigration issues, marriage, and health awareness. Prayer in particular is considered an important resource for Nigerian migrants. Most churches have regular prayer meetings, which provide opportunity for people to receive prayer for particular needs, whether immigration issues, financial and health problems, or family relationships.

Small groups are another feature of Nigerian churches in Britain. Studies suggest that small groups encourage greater levels of religious participation and enable megachurches to become embedded in local communities (Chong and Goh 2015; Dougherty and Whitehead 2011; Thumma and Bird 2015b). Many Nigerian congregations have cell groups to provide pastoral care for members. Some of the larger churches also have interest groups to cater for the needs of different categories of people. For example, Jesus House's interest groups include a women's ministry, a men's fellowship, a youth church, a lone parent fellowship, a parenting group, a dance club, a cooking club, a business fellowship, a civic awareness group, and a football club.¹⁶ It operates a 'free market system' that allows members to choose which groups to join or gives them the option to start new groups. This seems to support a cultural market explanation of megachurch growth, which explains the growth of megachurches in terms of their ability to cater for the interests of religious consumers (Ellingson 2016). Small groups also function as socialisation mechanisms, inculcating Christian virtues and protecting adherents from the corrosive effects of Western liberal values deemed responsible for such societal vices as family breakdown, domestic abuse, sexual promiscuity, and youth crime.

16 Jesus House, "Interest Groups", <http://jesushouse.org.uk/life-groups/interest-groups>.

Another characteristic of Nigerian Pentecostal churches is their holistic concept of salvation, which includes not only holiness, but healing, deliverance and prosperity. The appeal of these theologies is obvious in a hostile economic environment like Africa, where access to medical facilities and to state funds is severely restricted, and adverse circumstances are often blamed on the activities of malevolent spirits. They are also popular among African migrants in Britain, who sometimes find it difficult to support their families, especially if they are students or low-paid workers without recourse to public funds. As Ogbu Kalu (2008: 288) reminds us, immigrants retain the spiritual worldview of their indigenous cultures and find Pentecostal churches "attentive to their deeply felt needs". One Nigerian pastor put it like this:

We preach the whole gospel.... But at times African-based churches tend to sway towards success and prosperity because of our background ... maybe because we have been disadvantaged before; maybe because we have been poor before.... When you look at our congregations in the Western world, you discover the majority are migrants. So right now they are struggling, so they need faith for them to come up.¹⁷

Perhaps more surprising is the continuing appeal of deliverance theology. Despite the influence of secularisation, issues such as witchcraft continue to be a reality for Africans in the diaspora. Deliverance theology is popular because it is practical and progressive in orientation, enabling Africans to break free from social and religious ties considered a hindrance to personal development. African diasporic churches hold regular programmes, which provide ritual settings for the promotion of healing, deliverance and prosperity teaching. For example, MFM's holds a monthly deliverance programme called "Power Must Change Hands" and RCCG's Victory House in London hosts an annual "Healing and Deliverance Week". Often speakers from Africa and the USA are invited to these events, reflecting the transnational nature of African Pentecostal churches.

Nigerian Pentecostal churches are also committed to building members' capacity to influence society. This is reflected in some of the mottos adopted by individual congregations, such as "Empowering lives, influencing society for Christ" and "Manifesting expectations, impacting society", and their promotion of success-oriented theologies through sermons, conferences, magazines and electronic media (Bremner 2016; Burgess 2011). As well as providing contexts for spiritual empowerment, churches organise seminars on business

17 Interview, 30/09/10.

management, investment, marriage, job skills and British culture. One of the strengths of African Pentecostal churches is their internal organisation which is designed to mobilise the laity. Miller and Yamamori (2007: 184–186) refer to this as “giving ministry to the people” and suggest that it is a feature of the relatively flat organisational structure characteristic of many successful Pentecostal churches, where the role of the pastor and his or her associates is not to “do the ministry of the church, but to enable others to do this work”. The RCCG seems to fit this pattern, with its combination of strong leadership at the top and a highly active laity. Ukah (2005: 330) describes it as a “laity-driven church”, where individuals are empowered to pursue their vision without too much hindrance from bureaucracy. The RCCG’s creation of a category of lay leaders, called ‘workers’, is innovative in terms of African Pentecostal ecclesiology. ‘Workers’ are members who have undergone a four-month period of training, enabling them to fulfil various practical roles in the church while continuing in their secular occupations. For example, Jesus House London has a volunteer workforce of around 650 members, serving in various departments in the church as well as in the local community.¹⁸

6 Church Growth and Social Engagement

In terms of church growth, the statistics for Nigerian Pentecostal churches are impressive. The largest independent Nigerian megachurch is Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), which claimed a congregation of 12,000 until it was forced to relocate because of the planned redevelopments for the London 2012 Olympics (Garbin 2013). KICC was founded in 1992 by Matthew Ashimolowo, who was originally sent as a missionary to London in 1984 by the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria. In addition to its main congregation, which currently numbers 5,500, it has planted eight branch churches in the UK and eleven in Nigeria, as well as branches in Ireland and several African countries (Effa 2013).¹⁹ Victorious Pentecostal Assembly, founded in 2005 by Alex Omokudu, boasts a regular attendance of 5,000 in its London headquarters, with branches in Bradford, Luton, Manchester, Birmingham and Dublin.²⁰ Other independent Nigerian megachurches in London include Christ Faith Tabernacle (3,500 attendees), New Wine Church (2,000) and Glory House (2,000).

18 Jesus House 2010 Annual Report.

19 Kingsway International Christian Centre, “Branches”, <https://www.kicc.org.uk/branches/>.

20 Victorious Pentecostal Assembly, “Pastor Alex Okokudu”, <http://vpachurch.org/pastor-alex-omokudu/>.

Megachurch transplants from Nigeria have also experienced significant church growth. The fastest-growing Pentecostal denomination in Britain is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) which planted its first congregation in 1988. By 2010, there were over 440 branches, with approximately 85,000 members.²¹ By 2016, this had increased to over 700 branches, of which 266 (40 percent) were located in London (Adedibu 2016). RCCG's largest congregation (3,000) is Jesus House London.²² It was started in 1994 by Tony Rapu, senior pastor of RCCG's Apapa parish in Lagos, who was sent to London as a missionary (Burgess 2012). Other fast-growing RCCG congregations in London include Victory House which was attracting 700 attendees within 10 years of its inauguration,²³ and Trinity Chapel, whose average annual attendance grew from 245 to 889 between 1999 and 2006.²⁴ Some of the larger RCCG congregations have themselves planted multiple branches.²⁵ Other megachurch transplants from Nigeria have founded multiple congregations in Britain including Deeper Life Bible Church (66),²⁶ MFM (97),²⁷ Christ Embassy (20),²⁸ and Winners' Chapel (14).²⁹ Winners' Chapel London claimed a congregation of 3,000 before its relocation to Dartford, Kent, in 2011.

However, these statistics tell only part of the story. An important component of the reverse mission discourse is the ambition to win converts from the host society. This is seldom the reality, as researchers in different contexts have found (Freston 2010; Hanciles 2008; Währisch-Oblau 2009). While African diasporic churches might (re)present themselves as cosmopolitan Christians open to other ethnicities, and direct their activities accordingly, they frequently end up catering for their fellow Africans instead. As Garbin (2013: 680) notes, a tension exists among Afro-Christian churches "between the 'openness' of a 'cosmopolitan rhetoric' and the 'closure' of a tendency for ethnic encapsulation".

21 *The Redeemed Christian Church of God United Kingdom Directory of Parishes 2010*, London: The Redeemed Christian Church of God UK, 2010.

22 Figure supplied by the senior pastor of Jesus House during the church's Annual Review (26/04/09).

23 Interview, Pastor Leke Sanusi, Victory House, 12/10/08.

24 Information supplied by the administrator of Trinity Chapel, 26/05/11.

25 For example, Jesus House London has planted 18 churches in the UK and Royal Connections planted 24 branches in the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Finland (between 1997 and 2007). Jesus House. *The Journey So Far, Annual Report 2016*; Royal Connections magazine, *Special Anniversary Edition*, May 2007.

26 Deeper Life Bible Church, "Church Locations and Addresses", <http://dclm-liverpool.org.uk/DCLMUK/CHURCH%20LOCATIONS%20AND%20ADDRESSES.pdf>

27 <http://www.mountainoffire.org.uk/index.php/branches>.

28 <http://www.ceintl.org/locate-a-christ-embassy/>.

29 Winners' Chapel, European Church Network, <http://www.winners-chapel.org.uk/london/index.php>.

Despite their multicultural aspirations, the social composition of Nigerian Pentecostal churches in Britain has remained predominantly African. Afe Adogame (2005: 508) identifies a “lack of cross-cultural appeal” and the tendency of African migrants to interact mainly with fellow Africans as the main barriers towards the realisation of a multi-racial group. Nigeria’s global reputation for corruption and criminal activity, and the perception of African churches by white Europeans as institutions obsessed with money and the activities of evil spirits are also barriers to the formation of cosmopolitan congregations. To overcome this, some churches have intentionally adapted their theology and ritual practices in their host society, for example by adopting more Western styles of worship and toning down their emphasis on prosperity and deliverance (Burgess 2012).

Social action has also helped to overcome this barrier, enabling churches to make meaningful connections with local communities. As I have suggested, the reverse missionary agenda of Nigerian Pentecostals has driven some churches to engage in social initiatives in the wider society. Rather than reinforcing the image of Nigerians as economic migrants, or as prone to corruption and criminality, they are rebranding themselves as social campaigners contributing to the betterment of their neighbourhoods. There is considerable diversity among Nigerian Pentecostal churches in terms of social outreach. Many are minimally engaged, either due to a particular orientation that favours evangelism over social action or because they lack the necessary resources. Others are involved in a wide spectrum of social initiatives. One example is Jesus House London, whose social initiatives include the Novo Centre (a drop-in centre for residents of a local housing estate), Jesus House Prison Ministry, the Manna Project (a food distribution centre), Abigail’s Court (an outreach to the elderly), a Christians Against Poverty (CAP) debt counselling centre, and a Christmas homeless shelter (Burgess 2009).³⁰ Another example is KICC whose community initiatives include a befriending service to residents in homeless hostels, a prison ministry, and a food bank called ‘Noah’s Ark’ (Cartledge *et al* 2019).³¹ The majority Nigerian Pentecostal social initiatives are focused on social service provision rather than social justice issues such as racism and inequalities in the UK’s educational, health and prison systems. An exception is KICC’s “Breaking Educational Barriers” programme which partners with universities to address educational inequalities within the BAME community.³²

30 Ayo Adedoyin, “Impacting the Community”, Heart & Soul Conference, Jesus House, 6 July 2012; *Impact. Showing the Love of Christ in a Practical Way*, Issue 01, September 2010

31 “KICC Community Initiatives & Outreaches”, <https://www.kicc.org.uk/church/community-initiatives/>.

32 Elizabeth Pears, “Oxbridge calls: Breaking barriers in education”, *The Voice*, 9th February 2013, <http://www.voice-online.co.uk/article/oxbridge-calls-breaking-barriers-education>.

The focus on social engagement has partly been a response to the difficulties Nigerian Pentecostals have encountered in Britain, where people are increasingly unreceptive to traditional evangelistic techniques and reluctant to attend church (Davie 2015). It is also a response to the Charity Commission's public benefit test, which requires religious institutions to engage in social action if they are to receive the tax benefits of charitable status. The turn to social action has also coincided with a change in public policy. Since the mid-1990s, successive governments have recognised the potential of faith groups to contribute to social capital and welfare provision, especially in urban contexts. The significance of faith-based social action has increased since the climate of public sector austerity brought about by the economic downturn (Dinham and Jackson 2012; Dinham and Lowndes 2009; Furbey and Macey 2005). However, from the perspectives of Nigerian Pentecostals themselves, social action is an expression of the church's commitment to the biblical mandate to love one's neighbour by addressing the social needs of the wider society. For example, the senior pastor of Jesus House London refers to the church's duty "to show the love of God in a practical way" through prayer, charitable giving and participation in social welfare programmes.³³ Transnational connections have also influenced Nigerian Pentecostal social engagement in the diaspora, especially developments in Nigeria, where Pentecostal social action has expanded in response to neoliberal reforms and the withdrawal of the state from welfare provision (Burgess 2011). One example is the London Lighthouse, whose "Touching the Community" initiative includes a community youth club, a food bank, a CAP debt counselling service, and arts events open to the public.³⁴ The London Lighthouse is a church plant of House on the Rock, a megachurch in Lagos with a regular attendance of around 7,000. House on the Rock's core values, which include a commitment to 'social responsibility', are displayed on the websites of the London and Lagos congregations and in the London Lighthouse's foyer. Its social initiatives in Lagos, which include a mobile health clinic, a ministry to drug addicts and gang members, a prison ministry, and a feeding programme for the poor, come under the umbrella of the Rock Foundation, a faith-based NGO committed to 'social reformation' among the 'underprivileged'.³⁵

33 Agu Irukwu, "In the Crucible with Pastor Agu. Our Corporate Social Responsibility," *Outflow* (October 2008), 5.

34 London Lighthouse, "Touching the Community", <http://www.touchingthecommunity.org.uk/>.

35 "History Of The Rock Foundation – Paul Adefarasin", September 19, 2016, <https://believer-sportal.com/history-rock-foundation-paul-adefarasin/>.

7 Church Buildings, Religious Events, and the Media

This brings us to the final dimension of social force, the ‘de-privatisation’ of religion and its visibility in the public sphere. Social engagement has enabled some churches to gain public recognition at local and national levels, resulting in a number of high profile visits from politicians and royalty, the most famous being those of the Prince of Wales to the RCCG’s Jesus House in 2007 and of David Cameron, the former British Prime Minister to RCCG’s ‘Festival of Life’ prior to the 2015 general elections. Large religious events, such as the ‘Festival of Life’ and KICC’s ‘International Gathering of Champions’ (IGOC), both held at a major conference centre in London, have raised the public profile of Nigerian Pentecostals churches.

Church buildings also provide congregations with a measure of visibility in urban space. In some areas of London, the religious landscape is littered with Nigerian churches, occupying a variety of secular and religious spaces. Whilst many smaller congregations remain invisible to the public, others have acquired their own buildings and used the media to create publicity for themselves. These are usually those with large memberships or with strong transnational ties to Nigeria, enabling them to generate sufficient financial capital. In their search for a permanent place of worship, African diasporic churches often have to move from place to place, which seriously hampers their organisational structures, their numerical growth, and their capacity for community engagement (Burgess 2009; Krause 2008; Ter Haar 2001). One example is the London Lighthouse which relocated many times before eventually purchasing a former Church of England building, which it renamed the Rock Tower. Formerly invisible in the public sphere due to its mobile existence, the church’s acquisition of the Rock Tower has enabled it to reposition itself in relation to neighbouring churches as well as secular institutions and political actors. The church is now a recognised as an important ecumenical partner. The Rock Tower is also used to host political events, including Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters before and after his election as the Labour Party leader.³⁶

Nigerian Pentecostals have also gained public visibility by their use of mass media, and especially the worldwide web. Internet presence encourages organisational cohesion on a local, national and international level as well as recognition within the public sphere. Many congregations in the UK have their own websites, which often mirror the websites of their mother churches in Nigeria. These are used for evangelistic purposes to attract new converts, to

36 John Gulliver, “Jeremy Corbyn drew huge crowds to the Rock Tower”, *Camden New Journal*, 11 September, 2015, <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/johngcorbyn>.

propagate prosperity and deliverance doctrines, and to provide information for current and prospective members. The Internet is also used by churches to articulate their social vision and advertise their social ministries. Some of the larger megachurches, such as KICC and RCCG, have their own satellite television channels. Nigerian Pentecostal megachurches have been receiving attention, both positive and negative, in the national media. Nigerian Pentecostal churches have been commended as dynamic and fast-growing in a context where mainstream Christianity in Britain is declining.³⁷ But they have also been linked to financial misconduct, and human rights infringements connected with witchcraft accusations, deliverance practices, and so-called 'gay cure' therapies. KICC, Winners' Chapel and Christ Embassy have all been investigated by the Charity Commission for financial mismanagement.³⁸ In the wake of controversies over child witchcraft accusations involving African Pentecostal churches, MFM has received criticism in the media for its deliverance practices associated with witchcraft beliefs.³⁹ The quest for worship space by Nigerian megachurches in London has also attracted some negative publicity. Urban competition between religious and secular groups over scarce property and land resources in London has resulted in a number of high profile planning disputes being played out in the media. The most notable example is KICC, whose 2009 application for an 8,000-seat megachurch (inspired by American megachurch models) on an industrial estate in a predominantly white London suburb was refused on the grounds that the site was already allocated for industry (Garbin 2013; Greed 2016).

37 Damian Arnold, "African megachurch brings Gospel back to Britain with a dazzle", *The Times*, 21 November 2015, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/african-megachurch-brings-gospel-back-to-britain-with-a-dazzle-b8bhr8x23nk>.

38 L. Peek, "Prosperity is the Promise of God", *The Times*, 17 March, 2003; Robert Booth, "Preacher faces scrutiny from Charities Commission over church's finances", *Guardian*, 15 August 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/aug/15/bishop-oyedepo-church-charities-commission>; Olivia Goldhill, "Pentecostal church investigated by the Charity Commission", *The Telegraph*, 16 August 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10246767/Pentecostal-church-investigated-by-the-Charity-Commission.html>.

39 Josh Parry, "Who are the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries? Gay 'cure' church one of thousands", *Liverpool Echo*, 4 September 2017, <https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/who-mountain-fire-miracles-ministries-13468115>; Adam Barnett, "Campaigners against witchcraft-promoting preacher's ExCel Appearance", *Newham Recorder*, 16 September 2016, <http://www.newhamrecorder.co.uk/news/campaigners-against-witchcraft-promoting-preacher-s-excel-appearance-1-4699171>.

8 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the phenomenon of megachurches and ‘reverse mission’ with a particular focus on churches of Nigerian provenance. Nigeria hosts some of the largest Pentecostal churches in the world with multiple national and international branches. Nigerian Pentecostals have also founded some of the largest churches in Europe. Some are branches of churches that originated in Nigeria; others are independent churches planted by Nigerian missionaries. One feature that distinguishes Nigerian megachurches from their American counterparts is their involvement in transnational networks which seek to replicate the success of their mother churches (Richardson 2017). Nigerians make up one of the largest transnational African communities in Britain, mainly due to Nigeria’s status as Africa’s most populous nation and its historic links to Britain. This has facilitated the emergence and growth of Nigerian Pentecostal churches in Britain initially as a means of catering for their members who had migrated for economic reasons. Explaining the growth of megachurches is an important issue discussed in the literature (Ellingson 2016). The chapter has identified a number of factors which have contributed to the growth of Nigerian Pentecostal churches in Britain. These include their function as social and religious support networks for African migrants, their charismatic style of leadership, their emphasis on lay ministry, their employment of small groups, their affective worship styles, their promotion of healing and success-oriented theologies, their use of media technologies, and their holistic approach to mission, which includes evangelism, church-planting and social action.

As we have seen, the rhetoric of reverse mission employed by Nigerian Pentecostals is influenced by their experience of religious vitality back home and their location in Britain’s post-Christian urban spaces. The symbolic maps drawn by Nigerian Pentecostals, which depend upon a particular conception of Britain as a former missionary nation turned mission field, have driven them to embark on programmes of territorial expansion not only through evangelism and church-planting but also through social action. Thus, the adoption of a broader conception of mission, which includes social engagement, enables a more positive evaluation of the achievements of African diasporic churches than has generally been the case in studies of reverse mission.

Does the presence of Nigerian Pentecostal churches challenge the secularisation paradigm in Britain? This study can provide only a tentative answer to this question. However, I suggest that to some extent they are an indication of the re-emergence of religion as a social force. Their presence has raised levels of religious participation among Nigerian (and other African) Christians by providing contexts for worship, prayer and social interaction with those who share

similar culture and customs, thus assisting immigrants to negotiate the migration process and become incorporated into the host society. In some cases, their organisational structures and empowerment programmes have generated volunteers for community engagement. In terms of church growth, some of the largest congregations in Britain are led by Nigerians. Furthermore, churches such as the RCCG have been particularly successful in planting new congregations which has raised their visibility in Britain's urban spaces. However, despite their aspirations to build multi-ethnic congregations, Nigerian Pentecostals have generally failed to make converts from the indigenous British population or from other ethnic minority groups. Their focus on social engagement is to be commended, but further research is needed to assess the impact of these initiatives on the wider society. Currently, the majority of congregations are small which makes it difficult for them to engage in social action. However, some of the larger churches have gained public recognition for their work in the community. Their visibility has also been enhanced as they have acquired their own buildings and used the media to create publicity for themselves.

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Megachurches in Canada

Michael Wilkinson and Peter Schuurman

1 Introduction

In the Canadian Prairies, a large gathering of approximately 1,500 evangelicals gather for worship on a cold Sunday morning. This is the second of three weekend services which includes Saturday and Sunday evening worship gatherings. A full slate of programmes is in operation throughout the week aimed at the suburban and middle class families who make Prairie Alliance Church home.¹ The range of programmes is quite impressive with age related activities from childbirth through to youth, young adults, parents and seniors. The Church also operates the Alpha programme, a basic introduction to the Christian faith popularised through Holy Trinity Brompton Church in England. Volunteers are coordinated to work with staff offering activities that welcome new immigrants to Canada. Home groups allow members to meet in smaller groups for prayer, support and Bible study. Support groups focus on issues of addiction and recovery for people looking for assistance. Sermons are all available online in video and podcast form for those who want to revisit previous teachings or catch up on something they missed when absent for vacation or work (see Reimer and Wilkinson 2015).

Prairie Alliance Church has a staff of 15 pastors of which only 4 are women. Only one staff person is non-white. The white male dominated staff is not representative of the city they live in but is typical of many suburban conservative evangelical congregations. An Elder Board is responsible for the direction and operation of the church with its annual \$2.2 million budget.² The congregation is highly organised and focused on incorporating newcomers into the life of the church with small gifts in a welcome bag and coffee when they first attend through to a brief welcome class and later a four-week introduction to the church course. The church continues to add to its large facility with more space for family ministries and a general room for a range of activities that can seat about 400 people. Renovations and building projects cost nearly \$10 million and will be financed by traditional banking sources and congregational giving.

¹ The name of the congregation is changed for confidentiality and anonymity.

² 2016–2017 Annual Congregation Report.

The material resources of the congregation are all supported by an evangelical culture that focuses on loving God and loving others as expressed through regular worship activities, benevolent outreach ministries in the city and support of missionaries elsewhere in the world.

Prairie Alliance Church represents one example of the number of congregations in Canada that are considered large churches or megachurches. Furthermore, the small number of large churches in Canada are almost exclusively Protestant and evangelical. There are about 30,000 congregations in Canada with one third of them being evangelical (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Of those 11,000 evangelical congregations, there are about 150 Protestant churches with attendances of over 1,000. While the number of large churches is relatively small, the number of large congregations is growing and attracting growing numbers of participants. The megachurch phenomenon is especially of interest to scholars as religion in Canada continues to transform with ongoing immigration, growing numbers of people who say they have 'no religion' and the massive decline among the historic mainline Protestant churches. This chapter is fashioned around four threads that hold it together including an overview of religion in Canada with attention to evangelical congregations and the growth of megachurches, a summary of the Canadian Large Churches Study, a case study of a Canadian megachurch, and some theoretical reflections on megachurches in a changing Canadian society.

2 Religion in Canada and the Vitality of Evangelicalism

Religion in Canada has undergone substantial changes since the 1960s. The main story line roughly follows the following themes. First, Christianity has experienced a substantial decline on a number of measures including identification and attendance. The decline is not consistent among all branches equally. For example, the Roman Catholics have maintained relative stability for the overall number of Canadians who identify as Roman Catholic, around 12 million people or about 40 percent of the population in 2011 (National Household Survey). Attendance figures, however, vary across the country with low levels of participation especially in Quebec which has a long history of Roman Catholic presence in the Province. In the 1950s about 90 percent of Roman Catholics attended Church in Quebec dropping to 14 percent in 2005 (Bibby and Reid 2016; Bibby 2017).

Protestants have experienced the most dramatic decline especially among the historical mainline churches, namely, the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church of Canada (Bowen 2004; Clarke and Macdonald 2017).

Overall, Protestants represent about 25 percent of the population with 15 percent identifying with the historic churches and 10 percent with evangelical Protestant churches in 2011 (National Household Survey). The highest levels of participation, however, are among the evangelicals with some denominations like the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada serving slightly higher numbers of United Church of Canada people on a weekly basis (about 175,000 weekly attenders for the United Church and 200,000 for the PAOC). Weekly attendance for evangelicals was reported to be at 53 percent in 2005 and 12 percent for the historic churches.

Evangelicals value organised religion and congregational participation (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Not only do they attend weekly at rates higher than other Protestants, they also have many congregations and larger ones. There are about 30,000 congregations in Canada and 11,000 of them belong to evangelicals. The evangelical subculture and its congregational form is institutionally centred on a range of activities that support the vitality or resiliency of evangelicalism in a context of social change and decline in traditional Christianity. Evangelical congregations focus on clear views of who they are and the larger culture which is often in tension. Participants are highly involved and committed to the institutional goals and in turn are supported with a culture that is symbolically and ritually infused with worship, music, drama, dance, and activities which embody an evangelical ethos. Evangelical congregations are also replete with programmes that focus on families especially children and youth that are central for the socialisation of participants. Programmes for children and youth also serve to retain them as active participants in the church. Other organisational factors that account for evangelical vitality include ongoing leadership development and claims of high levels of pastoral well-being. Evangelical congregations are also well-financed which contributes to the ongoing support of programmes (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015).

The second theme revolves around immigration which has a number of implications for religion in Canada (Beaman and Beyer 2008; Beyer and Ramji 2013; Bramadat and Seljak 2005). Not only does it contribute to religious diversity, immigration also accounts for the stability of Roman Catholic numbers and the vitality of evangelicalism (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015: 85–89). In Vancouver, British Columbia, for example, there are a number of Korean large churches including one with over 2,000 weekly participants. One major implication of the migration of Christians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America is the growing de-Europeanisation of Christianity in Canada (Guenther 2008; Wilkinson 2006). New congregations are appearing in the major cities of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, key gateway cities of new immigrants. And much of the growth among evangelicals is due to immigration (Wilkinson 2006).

But immigrants also identify as Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh, which contributes to the overall population of 10 percent of Canadians who are non-Christian in 2011 (National Household Survey).

The third theme is the growing number of Canadians who say they have no religion which is about 25 percent of the population in 2011 (National Household Survey). The 'no religion' category is diverse and includes new immigrants, those who have disaffiliated from Christianity, as well as a growing segment who have never affiliated (Bibby 2017; Thiessen 2015; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017). What is important for understanding megachurches, especially those who are evangelical, is that all these larger themes in Canadian culture represent not only a tension with the evangelical subculture, but for congregations that value activism, evangelism, and outreach, new immigrants and people with no religion are considered possible sources of growth for megachurches (Bibby 2017; Guenther 2008; Reimer et al. 2016). Even if research continues to show that megachurches benefit from transfer growth, the conversion of new immigrants and the non-religious serve as powerful tropes.

3 Canadian Large Churches Study

The Canadian Large Churches Study (CLCS) is the first ever attempt to study large churches in Canada. The study was organised and funded by the US based Leadership Network along with a number of scholars and faith-based organisations in Canada who collaborated with the study. The sample was based on a snowball effect and came from the leaders of specific denominations, websites, those who reported to Revenue Canada a large income, and those who had reputations of being large. A total of 326 churches were contacted to participate in the survey. There were 55 large Protestant congregations that participated in the study in 2015, all with weekly attendances above 1,000 people. A staff person, preferably the lead pastor, was asked to respond to a series of questions for the purpose of understanding the demographics of the congregation, staffing, programmes, and self-understanding of its role and purpose.

The findings of the CLCS show that large churches are growing in number and size. Approximately 300,000 people attend large churches on a weekly basis. Between 2013 and 2014, 76 percent of the respondents indicated they had grown in this period, 5 percent remained the same, and 18 percent experienced a decline. The results were similar for growth patterns when asked about the previous 5-year period. The weekly attendance varies with these congregations with 63 percent serving between 1,000 and 1,999 worshippers, 18 percent in the

2,000–2,999 category, 11 percent between 3,000–3,999, 4 percent between 4,000–4,999, and 4 percent between 5,000–10,000 congregants.

When asked questions about sources of growth, the respondents indicated that 40 percent are transfer growth, 31 percent were from those born or raised in the church, and 29 percent was conversion. Among those who were counted in the conversion category, the group is mixed with just over half of the 29 percent representing new Christians and the remaining those who disaffiliated and then returned to faith. The pattern among the respondents varies from the ‘circulation of the saints’ research by Bibby that has continued to show a pattern over time of growth to be 70 percent transfer, 20 percent birth, and 10 percent conversion (Bibby 2003). Bibby has argued that evangelical churches are relatively stable largely due to their ability to retain youth and children over time, which is also indicated in the CLCS where growth was reported to be related to active youth and children’s ministries.

Among the respondents, 40 percent reported that they are multisite congregations where 22 percent have 3 or more campuses, 18 percent have 2 campuses, and 27 percent have 1 but are considering expanding. When asked questions about reaching out, 83 percent of the respondents reported that the congregation is somewhat or very effective at inviting others to consider faith in Jesus Christ. The most effective means of evangelism according to the respondents includes programmes aimed at families, especially children and youth (68 percent, the Alpha course (55 percent), evangelistic events (36 percent), community groups (32 percent), and classes or services oriented towards immigrants (28 percent)).

When asked questions about a range of denominational connections and identity, 77 percent reported they were evangelical, 37 percent denominational, 35 percent seeker sensitive, 33 percent charismatic or Pentecostal, 28 percent conservative, 18 percent non-denominational, and 12 percent fundamentalist. The majority of the respondents indicated they have a close tie with a denomination (48 percent). 26 percent said they have a tie but it’s not close, 14 percent said they have closer ties with other large churches than the denomination, and 12 percent indicated they are non-denominational.

The demographics of those who attend Canadian large churches according to the CLCS indicates that large churches have young attenders with about 19 percent being children up to age 13, 10 percent young teens aged 14–17, 26 percent young adults aged 18–40, 31 percent middle-aged adults, and 14 percent aged 65 and older. The marital status according to the respondents for those who are young adults and older is 16 percent never married, 56 percent married, 11 percent remarried, 11 percent divorced, and 6 percent widowed. Canadian large churches are also ethnically diverse and multi-ethnic with no more

than 80 percent of one ethnic/racial group representing the congregation. 62 percent of the respondents reported that the congregation was ethnically diverse or multicultural.

When asked a series of questions about the church leaders, respondents indicated that the leader of the staff is generally referred to as the senior pastor or lead pastor. These pastors have served in that role for a median of 11 years. The median age is 55 with 76 percent born in Canada. The respondents reported that 93 percent are white, 4 percent Chinese, 2 percent Japanese, and 1 percent Black. Among the staff of Canadian large churches 46 percent were hired from within the congregation. As evangelical pastors age, however, only 57 percent of the respondents indicated that they have a succession plan underway that they believe could be effective.

The respondents of the study indicated that about 46 percent of expenditures are used for staffing costs, 20 percent for facility and operational costs, 15 percent for mission and benevolence, 12 percent for programmes, and 7 percent for other expenditures. These figures are consistent for all other evangelical congregations in Canada (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). According to the CLCS the spending priorities of these large congregations is reflected in the values of conducting meaningful worship services, children's programmes, mission activities, music, Bible studies, offering a sense of community to members, activities for youth, serving the needy, strengthening the family, and good facilities. This too is consistent with the findings from a national evangelical churches study by Reimer and Wilkinson (2015). While the CLCS offers a small sample of general questions on large churches in Canada, there is a need for further studies on large churches that offer a theoretical framework for understanding the impact of megachurches, comparative studies with megachurches outside Canada, the role of leadership, communication strategies, leadership and management styles.

4 The Meeting House

The Meeting House (TMH) is a member of the Brethren in Christ (BIC – now understood in Canada as 'Be in Christ') denomination and one of Canada's largest megachurches, with approximately 5,500 attendees on a Sunday morning spread across 18 regional sites in southern Ontario, concentrating around the main warehouse site in Oakville, an exurb of Toronto. Most regional sites meet in rented movie theatres and watch a DVD of the teaching that took place in Oakville the previous week. Over 150 small groups called 'Home Churches' meet during the week in members' homes, reviewing the previous Sunday's teaching, sharing food, and praying together (Schuurman 2016).

TMH's celebrated pastor is Bruxy Cavey, who looks more like an overweight hippie rock star than the stereotypical evangelical preacher, complete with long hair, earrings, thumb rings, a T-shirt and jeans. His charismatic authority can be described as *ironically evangelical*, in the spirit of what has been called the Emerging Church movement (see Bielo 2011; and Ganiel 2014; Studebaker and Beach 2012). The TMH slogan is "a church for people not into church" and the tattoo on Cavey's forearm reads "Leviticus 19:28", a Bible verse which reads, "Do not.... put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD". As has been said of the wider Emerging Church movement, "Emergents would much rather be part of a megasubversion than a megachurch, for they are more interested in critiquing the status quo than reflecting it" (Snider and Bowen 2010: 109).

This kind of irony can be found beyond Canadian borders, but it comes with a particular Canadian evangelical strategy, as evangelicalism is not so warmly embraced in Canadian dominant culture and the irony creates a safe distance from the conservative American evangelical stereotype. Canadian evangelical religious studies professor John Stackhouse says evangelicals are viewed in Canada as "fast-talking, money-hustling television preachers. Pushy, simplistic proselytizers. Dogmatic, narrow-minded know-it-alls. Straight-laced, thin-lipped kill-joys" (Stackhouse 1995, n.d.). That is not the worst of it, either; evangelicals are perceived as "ignorant, right-wing, and – perhaps worst of all (in their opinion) – American" (Stackhouse 2005, n.d.). Evangelical convictions regarding public issues such as abortion and homosexuality foster a "chilly climate" for them in Canada (Stackhouse 2011).

This evangelical stigma has been intensified under the Presidency of Donald Trump, and it is important for Canadian evangelicals to distinguish themselves not only from American evangelicals, but to distance themselves from religion altogether (see Gerson 2018; Labberton 2018). One of the central themes of TMH vision is its focus on the 'irreligious' message of the gospel, which is that Jesus Christ's mission was to 'shut down religion' and replace it with himself. Cavey's first book entitled *The End of Religion: Encountering the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (2007) shared space on the bestselling non-fiction list in Canada that year with new atheist authors Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. Cavey used the new atheists in his teachings, agreeing that religions, as systems of rules for earning salvation, were often dangerous and violent. Jesus, by contrast, teaches pacifism, simplicity, and a generous grace, values which echo the Anabaptist tradition of TMH. There are many factors at play here to account for the growth of the Meeting House and the 'spiritual but not religious' character of those who say they have no religion is one of them.

The Anabaptist roots of TMH demonstrate two other Canadian megachurch themes. First, like many large churches in Canada, it remains connected to a

denominational network. Second, like many other megachurches in Canada, there is little effort to become visible, audible, or active in national or provincial politics. Cavey is quick to say, “The job of the church is not to run the country” and he has told his congregation that he does not vote come election time. Canadian religion is not generally divided along party lines and to avoid political references in church – and perhaps especially an evangelical church – is one way to challenge the stereotype of the angry, politicised evangelical and reinvent an “evangelicalism for those not into evangelicalism”. In Canada, megachurches represent a quieter ‘moral minority’ rather than a Moral Majority assumed in the United States (see Bean 2016; Reimer 2003).

Attendees are generally white, middle class educated Christians. About 35,000 Canadians have attended TMH sometime in the last 25 years, with about 8,000 Ontarians currently identifying it as their church home, even if they may not attend regularly. The turnover is high with a relatively stable core. About 45 percent of regular attendees in 2014 also attended a Home Church during the week. In-house surveys between 2011–2014 suggest somewhere between 5.2 and 14 percent of attendees have little or no previous Christian identity. Significantly, of those from church backgrounds, about 97 percent did not come from a BIC background. While socialised in church, interviews suggest many have some negative experience with church that the ‘spiritual but not religious’ vision of TMH addressed for them.

When asked about their faith, regular attendees consistently avoided not only the identity of ‘evangelical’ but also ‘Christian’ and most certainly ‘religious’. One young female attendee said she used to call herself an evangelical but then the term “apparently got a bad connotation” so she’s warming to the label ‘Christ follower’. Another young couple suggested the term ‘Jesus follower’ fit them best. A young male Home Church leader skirted the question of labels altogether; he said whenever he is asked about his faith, he asks the inquirer how they understand Jesus and then he would describe himself in relation to their answer.

When asked if they were ‘religious’, an older wealthy couple responded saying they were instead ‘full of grace’. They explained they had lived in the United States for a while and they had since distanced themselves from their evangelical Republican associations. Time with Cavey at TMH had transformed them. “We’re more interested in politicians and governments that take care of the poor”, they explained. “Christ talked far more about the poor than he did about abortions.... and I’m upset with evangelical Christians because they of all people should know better that Christ wants us to take care of the poor”.

One final example of the shame associated with conservative Christian identity came from a young real estate agent. She explained why it was such a

relief to walk into a movie theatre Sunday morning rather than a church building where people would be speaking ‘Christianese’. “It kinda keeps you normal if there is a kid sweeping up popcorn beside you”, she said. “You aren’t going to say weird stuff you don’t even know the meaning of”. Her husband then spoke of the trappings of “the Christian subculture, especially in the States”, and how it distracts them from more important things. The casual attitude fostered by TMH, the young woman repeated, “keeps you normal”.

TMH reflects all of Bebbington’s (1989) quadrilateral – biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism – for understanding evangelicalism, and yet it reflects a very Canadian “evangelicalism for those not into evangelicalism” when the latter is understood according to a right-wing American stereotype. TMH is only one megachurch in Canada, but it offers a window into some of the themes that characterise the broader evangelical landscape in Canada.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The recent attention given to megachurches among sociologists, scholars of religion, anthropologists, and theologians suggests that large churches are historically new and somehow represent a transformation of congregational life. David Eagle has addressed this question in an important article which historicises large churches, especially among Protestants. Eagle argues that, while megachurches came to dominate the American academy and public media in the 1980s, much of the discussion was historically disconnected. Further, Eagle demonstrates that among Protestants there is a longer history dating back to the eighteenth century of large churches that accommodated more than 5,000 worshippers (Eagle 2015: 592–593). Revivalism among Protestants also contributed to the construction of large buildings for worship. The revivalist Charles Haddon Spurgeon, for example, preached from the Metropolitan Tabernacle beginning in the 1860s where 6,000 people could listen to him speak. Eagle discusses other 19th and early twentieth century precedents of the contemporary megachurch. Often the buildings were constructed with some model of the Jewish Temple in mind and reflected a modern notion of the Tabernacle, the place of God’s presence. While Eagle’s historical argument contextualises the contemporary fascination with large churches, there is still the need to offer an explanation for the proliferation of megachurches not only in America but across Canada and throughout the world.

There are a number of explanations for the current prevalence of megachurches. This does not mean the explanations are exclusive of one another and some of them overlap with one another. These explanations include the

economic, the cultural, the geographic, the technological and the strategic. One explanation from religious economy theory argues that megachurches provide the most attractive and compelling form of religion. Lee and Sinitiere (2009) take this approach, building on the work of Stark and Finke (2005). There are a number of criticisms of a religious market analysis including the view that it is tautological: people are attracted to the churches that are most attractive, and we know which are most attractive by the vast numbers of people they attract. This does not explain why megachurches became a growing trend on the religious landscape since the 1970s in particular, except to say that they were responding to consumer demand with a compelling supply of religious goods and services. It could be argued that a consumer explanation can be supplemented with a cultural history interpretation where mass production leads to a surplus of goods that need to be marketed in order to be sold with the consumption of goods and services as the primary cultural emphasis. Canadian megachurches, therefore, are shaped by the spread of consumer culture, and more specifically, a 'big box store' consumer culture whereby they mimic a consumer way of life (see Thumma and Travis 2007).

Urban planning perspectives suggest that demographic shifts and infrastructure design are key causal forces in the development of megachurches. As middle class populations shift from the inner city to the suburbs, and as major highways shuttle commuters around the city, megachurches take advantage of the traffic flow becoming the quintessential automobile church, servicing not just a neighbourhood, but an entire geographic region (see Eiesland 1999; Wilford 2012). Somewhat related is a technological explanation where changes in architecture, sound, and lighting have enabled the development of large buildings that can accommodate thousands of people who can comfortably watch and listen to choirs, videos, and speakers with professional quality equipment (Loveland and Wheeler 2003). While these views discuss the conditions necessary for the development of megachurches, they are not sufficient to explain their proliferation.

Mark Chaves (2006) has raised a number of questions about megachurches including why some churches grow to become very large, what kinds of people are attracted to them, how they operate, how comparable megachurches are with each other, and how influential they are on American culture, socially, culturally, and politically. For example, Chaves combined the technological and the economic to discuss questions about competition with other organisations including rewards and technology. Generally, his argument is that in modern societies, technology caused productivity to increase along with an increase in efficiency where wages also increased simultaneously. Other sectors of society, where efficiency cannot be increased and wages do not follow

suit (like art galleries, churches, universities, theatre companies) lost prospective talent to those organisations that offered better salaries unless they responded with more competitive salaries. The way for churches to compete, argued Chaves, was to concentrate and centralise religious and artistic organisations, and thereby increase the ability to offer higher quality products and services along with competitive salaries. This is a rather complex argument that assumed megachurch pastor salaries are the reward that attracted the talent. However, this does not apply to tmh where the pastor's salary is comparable to other pastors' salaries in Canada.

Chaves focused on the question about size distribution of megachurches and the proliferation of large churches. Chaves attempted to address the question about why more people have moved from smaller congregations to larger ones. Following a detailed analysis of various denominations and large churches in the United States, Chaves concluded that the increasing concentration of people into a single large church form occurred at the expense of smaller churches. Chaves argued that the rising costs of operating a small church since the 1970s became onerous and that regardless of denomination or theological system, this made it very difficult for small churches to operate and facilitated the push of people into larger facilities. In other words, there may not be something unique about megachurches that is culturally different from smaller churches for attracting people to them. Rather, there is something economically problematic about smaller churches that pushes people out of them and into concentrated large forms.

The 'push and pull' debate raised by Chaves is an interesting discussion. However, what it also implicitly assumes is that the culture of small churches is similar to the culture of large churches. This is especially accurate for the evangelical Protestant churches and accounts for why the transition from smaller churches to larger churches may be relatively seamless. Evangelical churches, small and large, share a subculture that is based on a common theological framework that is expressed through beliefs, practices and sentiments (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Evangelicals are also committed to an institutional form of religion as evidenced in Canada by the sheer number of congregations relative to the number of evangelicals. Evangelical Protestants are committed to offering programmes for families, especially children and youth. They value music and worship in its contemporary form. As a consequence, people who attend evangelical churches financially support the organisation that meets their needs and represents the ethos of its participants. This generic evangelical subculture, however does not assume that all evangelical churches are identical. There is some variation as we see between Prairie Alliance Church and The Meeting House. And yet, we also see in Canada an evangelical

subculture that shares some characteristics with evangelicals south of the Canadian border. However, when it comes to political and social views, there are some differences between evangelicals in Canada and the United States.

The internal culture of evangelical congregations, however, can also be supplemented with further observations from related cultural analyses. For example, David Lyon (2000) used the metaphor of Disneyland to offer an explanation for understanding religion in postmodern society. Lyon argued that religion is Disneyised when it employs theming/branding practices, consumer norms, merchandising, and emotional labour from staff to maintain a particular atmosphere. However, Lyon also problematises Disneyland precisely because it functions as a cultural symbol, a trope for the democratisation and commercialisation of religious culture. With the commercialisation of Christianity there is also the blurring of the sacred and the secular, the market and religion. However, one observation we make is not whether megachurches simply reflect Disney through specific marketing practices but more interestingly how they appropriate them and contextualise them either through their embrace or even rejection. Furthermore, we question how megachurches employ playfulness as something more than simply consumer behaviour and whether or not it may be a constituent form of religion (see Bellah 2011; Durkheim 1995; Schuurman 2016). For example, Gerardo Marti's study of a Los Angeles megachurch explored this theme of playfulness building on Durkheim's observations about the ability of religious ritual to transport people through imagination, play, and fun (2008: 117). Althouse and Wilkinson (2011) have made similar observations about another Canadian megachurch, *Catch the Fire*, and the role of Pentecostalism as an example of religious imagination with eschatological dimensions that not only link participants through ritual to the sacred in playful ways but also transform them into social actors in everyday life.

The megachurch movement in Canada is mostly a phenomenon among evangelical Protestantism. Megachurches, in relation to the number of congregations across Canada, are something of a minor occurrence with most congregations in Canada remaining primarily small in the number of participants. While immigration and the growth of 'religious nones' is an important source of the changing narrative around religion in Canada, megachurches utilise these cultural shifts in the way they talk about new sources of growth. Megachurches share a similar evangelical culture that is uniquely Canadian. And while there is an array of explanations for understanding megachurches, we focus on the internal culture of megachurches along with the contextualisation of practices with contemporary culture that demonstrate the role of religious imagination and playfulness.

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Megachurches in Russia and other Parts of the Former Soviet Union

Torsten Löfstedt

1 Introduction

For most of the twentieth century Russia was part of the Soviet Union, an atheistic state that actively opposed religion. The situation changed abruptly under glasnost policies of Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, when Russians were allowed to again practice religion freely. In the late 1980s and early 1990s hundreds of Protestant congregations were established in areas that had largely lacked Christian presence for the greater part of the century. Instrumental in these successful church planting efforts were a few especially dynamic and rapidly growing congregations, many of which eventually became megachurches. There is little research on megachurches in Russia and exact numbers of worshippers are not available, but the atlases of religious life in Russia edited by Bourdeaux and Filatov (2005, 2006, 2009) and Filatov (2014, 2016) offer some indication of the most significant Protestant congregations in the country. The largest Protestant congregations in this area include: Good News Church (Moscow, 3,500 attend), Word of Life (Moscow, 4,000 members in 2012), New Testament (Perm, 3,750 members in 2012); Philadelphia (Izhevsk); Bethany (Krasnodar, 5,000 members in 2014); Hosanna Church (Makhachkala); Church of the Covenant (Novosibirsk, 2,000 worshippers in 1999); Grace of Jesus Christ (Volgograd); Church of God a.k.a. New Generation (Yaroslavl, 3,000 members 2012). In addition to these I refer to select megachurches in other former Soviet republics which are of particular interest. They are: Word of Life (Yerevan, Armenia, 10,000 members 2012); New Generation (Riga, Latvia); Word of Life (Donetsk, Ukraine; 5,000 members before the war in E. Ukraine 2014); Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God (Kiev, Ukraine, 25,000 members in 2010); Hillsong Church (Kiev, Ukraine, 3,000 attend); Victory Christian Church (Kiev, Ukraine, 3,000 attend). Some of these churches have recently seen significant loss of members for various reasons. Two especially significant examples of shrinking churches, Word of Life (Donetsk) and Hosanna (Makhachkala), will be discussed below. While not all congregations

necessarily serve a minimum of 2,000 people per week, these churches share a number of common features which set them apart from other churches in Russia and which merit their being studied together. They are all located in large metropolitan areas. Most were founded in the early 1990s, and are affiliated with one or the other of the two leading Pentecostal denominations. They have all been very active in church planting and support a wide range of ministries. Before looking at some of their characteristics, I will give a historical overview.

2 History

Most of the megachurches in Russia and other former Soviet states were established in the early 1990s, that is, at the time that the Soviet Union was coming to an end and shortly thereafter. This was a period when thousands of new congregations were established; most remained small, but some grew remarkably quickly.

The religious situation in the former Soviet Union is unique. The vast majority of the population was unchurched as a result of 70 years of Communist rule. While the majority of Russians today identify as Russian Orthodox, most are not active in any church and have very little knowledge of Christianity. Although their number has grown rapidly after the Soviet era, Protestants still form a small minority of the population of Russia. Lunkin (2014) estimated that there were three million Protestants in Russia in 2014 out of a population of 142.5 million; they make up a little more than 2 population of the population. This has consequences for their relationship to the state and thus their ability to build worship centres and develop ministries.

In the first decade of Soviet rule, Evangelical churches grew, but religious freedom came to be severely curtailed with the promulgation of the Laws on Religious Association in 8 April 1929, which were in force (with some modifications) until 1990 (Wanner 2007: 49). During most of the Soviet era there were considerable restrictions of the freedom of religion; churches were not allowed to own property (it was seized by the state) and unregistered religious activity was a criminal offence. Government officials arrested, imprisoned and even killed religious leaders (Franchuk 2001–2003). Only a few evangelical congregations could operate openly. These generally kept a low profile and did not engage in proselytism. Such congregations tended to isolate themselves as much as possible from others and developed sectarian tendencies; their members had strict moral codes on various issues. For example, Soviet evangelicals

refused armed service and sought alternative placements, such as in construction brigades (Wanner 2004: 750). In evangelical circles, smoking, drinking and dancing were considered sins. Those who smoked or drank alcohol risked being excluded from the church. Congregations had strict dress codes and clear gender roles; women were expected to cover their heads in church and could not serve as pastors (Löfstedt 2012).

Although there was widespread repression throughout the Soviet Union, in some parts of the country people enjoyed greater religious freedom. This was the case for the Ukrainian and Belarussian Republics. The western parts of these republics had been a part of Poland 1921–1940 and there Protestant churches had been able to develop in relative peace. Even under Soviet rule people in these regions were better able to maintain their religious practices. In consequence, as Wanner notes, at the time the Soviet Union came to an end, half of all of its registered Pentecostals, or 350,000 people, lived in Ukrainian SSR (Wanner 2009: 91).

In the waning years of the Soviet Union the religious situation in Russia changed rapidly. Mikhail Gorbachev, who was to be the last general secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, encouraged the celebration of a millennium of Russian Christianity in 1988. Sensing a change in attitude, religious organisations in Russia began to practice more openly. On 1 October 1990, two months before USSR was dissolved, the Soviet law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” was promulgated, replacing the laws of religious association from 1929. It now became legal to openly evangelise for the first time in over 60 years. When the Soviet Union was disbanded the same freedoms were guaranteed by newly established Russian laws, such as the law “On Freedom of Belief”, 25 October 1990. These rights were affirmed in the Russian Constitution (1993) (Knox 2005: 76–77). Hundreds of Ukrainian evangelicals (who spoke Russian fluently, as they had all learned it in school during the Soviet era, and were accustomed to reading scripture in church using the Russian Synodal Translation) were sent by local churches and mission organisations across the open border to Russia as missionaries to establish new churches. Missionaries came to Russia from abroad as well, including from the USA, Western Europe and Korea (Knox 2005: 86).

In the initial period of new religious freedom in Russia (1990–1994), there was great interest in Christianity and things western, and western missionaries had no trouble organising successful evangelistic campaigns (Knox 2005: 100). Established Pentecostal congregations and Pentecostal missionaries from Ukraine did much of the ground work and follow-up work connected to these campaigns. Many new congregations, including some that eventually developed into megachurches, were founded in the wake of these campaigns.

Missionaries from Ukraine were especially successful at founding congregations; founding pastors of the large Protestant congregations New Testament in Perm (Eduard Grabovenko and Pavel Khuda, founders 1991), Philadelphia in Izhevsk (Pavel Zhelnovakov, founder 1992), Church of the Covenant in Novosibirsk (Vitalii Maksimyuk, founder 1991), Grace of Jesus Christ in Volgograd (Alexei Rudenkii, founder 1991), Church of God in Yaroslavl (Viktor Tatch, founder 1991) were all born in what is now Ukraine. These pastors are all now firmly established in Russia and have trained Russians to serve with them in the ministry.

While western missionaries generally only served for short periods of time in Russia, in a few cases these missionaries stayed on as pastors of large congregations. One such example is the Norwegian-born Mats-Ola Ishoel who moved to Moscow in 1996 with the Swedish-based Russia Inland Mission and came to serve as head pastor of Word of Life (Moscow), replacing the Swedish missionary Christian Åkerhielm. Another example is Rick Renner who first moved to Latvia from Oklahoma in 1991 and founded Good News Church in Riga in 1992. He later moved to Moscow, where he founded another Good News congregation in 2000, and where he is still serving as head pastor.

At the same time as evangelicals from Ukraine moved to Russia to establish congregations, two especially dynamic congregations were founded in Ukraine by Africans, who had originally moved there to study at the universities: the Embassy of God (Kiev), founded in 1994 by Sunday Adelaja, originally from Nigeria, who had moved to the Soviet Union to study journalism, and Victory Christian Church, established in 1992 by Henry Madava, from Zimbabwe, who had studied civil aviation engineering in Ukraine. These two congregations developed into megachurches attracting thousands of Ukrainians with their positive message and charismatic worship.

A few large congregations established in the late 1980s and early 1990s played a key role in spreading Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Russia and neighbouring republics after the break-up of the Soviet Union. These congregations sponsored evangelistic campaigns and trained men to lead plant new congregations. (With very few exceptions, in the Russian Pentecostal tradition only men serve as pastors.) On its webpage New Testament Church (Perm) claims to have planted 200 congregations; some of these are in Perm region, others are in other Russian regions and republics including Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Komi republic, Chelyabinsk, Saratov, and St. Petersburg. New Generation (Riga) claims to be the home church for 200 congregations in 15 countries, including Latvia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Germany and USA. Embassy of God (Kiev) had 38 congregations in Ukraine and 18 in other countries, including four in Russia (Wanner 2010). Bethany (Krasnodar)

has more than 50 daughter churches. Word of Life (Nizhnevartovsk) has founded more than 30 daughter churches, not only in Western Siberia, but also in the central Volga region and even as far away as India. Word of Life (Yerevan) had 27 daughter churches in 2009. Philadelphia (Izhevsk) claims to have founded 32 daughter churches in a period of twenty years in Udmurtia and neighbouring regions.

The Russian Orthodox Church felt threatened by the rapid growth of non-Orthodox confessions, especially neo-Charismatic churches, and successfully lobbied the Russian government into restricting the freedom of religion. In 1997 the Russian law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” outlawed churches that had been established for less than 15 years, that is, all churches founded after 1983. Thousands of newly founded Protestant churches managed to keep operating legally by registering through a few denominations that has existed for 15 years (most are registered either through Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith (RCCEF), now headed by Bishop Eduard Grabovenko or Russian Association of Christians of Evangelical Faith (RACEF), headed by Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky) (Aronson 2012: 36). As a result, there are strictly speaking no non-denominational megachurches in Russia.

In practice, some of the most successful Russian congregations function as centres of their own denominations. These are registered in turn with the larger umbrella organisations for legal reasons. For example, Good News (Moscow) is the centre for the Good News Association of Pastors and Churches, to which more than 700 congregations belong, and which is affiliated with RACEF. Word of Life (Moscow) is centre for the Association of Churches of Faith in Russia; according to Aronson (2012: 36), 240 churches were affiliated with this association, which is also affiliated with RACEF. In addition to serving congregations in Russia, Word of Life (Moscow) also serves as organisational centre for congregations in Central Asia and Vietnam. The congregations founded by Philadelphia (Izhevsk) are part of the Regional Association of Philadelphia Churches, which in turn is part of the RCCEF. We find a similar development in Ukraine. Word of Life church in Donetsk became the centre for a new Pentecostal denomination, the Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church. According to the homepage for Word of Life (Donetsk), 370 churches and religious organisations are affiliated with the UCEC.

Church buildings that clearly mark the presence of the church in the city is something that characterises several (but not all) of Russia’s megachurches. Word of Life (Moscow) bought an old movie theater in 2006 which they have renovated, so that it seats 1,200. Good News (Moscow) inaugurated a new church building in 2014; it is the largest Protestant church complex in Moscow according to Lunkin (2017). These building projects are especially impressive

considering the climate in which they were undertaken. In some parts of Russia, Orthodox officials have influenced politicians to limit the operations of Pentecostal congregations. Building a new church is an arduous process, from purchasing the land to acquiring building permits, and when they are built, all too often authorities shut them down for alleged code violations. Philadelphia (Izhevsk) finally opened their new church building in 2013; the building had been finished already in 2009, but local building inspectors found various reasons not to let the congregation use it for several years. Some megachurches have nurtured dreams of their own building for years, but have not been able to see these dreams reach fruition because of opposition of local politicians. This is the case of the 5,000 member strong Bethany church in Krasnodar. In another case, a megachurch had its own building and had begun constructing an even greater building, only to lose them both. Word of Life (Donetsk), was able to purchase a movie theater in 2006 that seated 1,000 people. The building served as its centre for worship, elementary school, adult education and administration. In order to support its rapid growth of membership, the congregation bought a plot of land, and began construction on a new church building which was supposed to seat 7,000 people. That building has yet to be completed. The war in eastern Ukraine abruptly changed the prospects for this congregation in August 2014, when Russian rebels took over their existing building.

3 The Role of the Megachurch Pastors

As is the case in megachurches in other parts of the world, Russian megachurches are pastor-focused (Ellingson 2009: 21). While all Russian megachurches are formally part of a denomination, in practice denominational control over the megachurch pastors is not so strong. Real power in the two largest Russian Pentecostal denominations (RCCEF, RACEF) is on the level of senior presbyters, the head pastors of large congregations (Lunkin 2003: 271). The two leading Pentecostal denominations in Russia differ in how centralised they are. RACEF functions more like an umbrella organisation, making it possible for smaller denominations to be legally registered. RCCEF is more centralised. The RCCEF rewards especially successful senior pastors with the title of bishop, thereby giving them a stake in the larger organisation. It was earlier the rule that when a person became senior bishop of the RCCEF he stepped down from his position in the local church, but when Eduard Grabovenko became head of the RCCEF in 2009 he stayed on as senior pastor of New Testament Church (Perm), showing how important to him his role as head pastor in that congregation still is.

Church homepages relate stories of the church history which are largely the same as the story of the pastor's life. Typically the founding pastors in the megachurches continue to serve as senior pastor until they retire (two exceptions are Hillsong, Kiev and Word of Life, Moscow). Senior pastors are the authorities in their congregations. This is perhaps to be expected, considering that these pastors are usually also the ones who founded the congregation, and that they are the ones in the congregation that have been believers longest. This also fits Russian society, which is very hierarchical.

There are close connections between several of the pastors that head megachurches, even when they live in different countries. For example, Marsh and Tonoyan (2013: 190) note that Ledyayev (who heads a megachurch in Riga) and Adelaja (who headed one in Ukraine) were "close friends, exchanging visits to each other's churches quite frequently". The pastors in the Word of Life churches in Russia, Ukraine, and Armenia are in constant contact with their colleagues in Sweden. In the waning years of the Soviet Union and shortly after the various post-Soviet states became independent it was common for big name preachers (such as Lester Sumrall, Ulf Ekman, Benny Hinn) to visit congregations and to participate in large scale evangelistic events. These have become less common as Russia has become more restrictive in granting visas to westerners and as the novelty of Charismatic Christianity has worn off.

Russian megachurch pastors are visionary leaders. Miller writes that it is typical that Pentecostal megachurches have "what might even be perceived as completely unrealistic goals and ambitions"; "the charismatic leaders of large Pentecostal mega-churches tend to thrive on 'big ideas' related to building projects, saving 'unreached' peoples, and planting new churches" (Miller 2014: 5). The pastor's vision drives the congregation. Many of the visions of Russian and Ukrainian megachurch pastors have been connected with planting churches all over the former Soviet Union, trying to undo the results of 70 years of Communist anti-religious policies. The large networks of daughter churches point at their success. But visions do not only have to be connected to planting churches. Grabovenko (New Testament, Perm) explains in a web interview that he began developing a model for home groups for his church on the basis of revelation. In response to a question about whether he wanted to participate in a specific project directed at businessmen, Grabovenko explained he was not interested: "When there is no revelation, it is useless to do anything". Simonyan, senior pastor at Word of Life (Yerevan), has explained to his congregation that he started doing television broadcasts because God told him to do so (Ohanjanyan 2014: 111–112).

Seemingly unrealistic visions have characterised the work of future megachurch pastors from the beginning. They took considerable risks when they

first began their ministries. Several of these men did not seem adequately prepared for the job – Grabovenko and Rudenkii had attended Calvary Bible Institute in Jelgava, Latvia, for only half a year when they left to establish new congregations, but they were convinced they had a divine calling and that was motivation enough. Bishop Grabovenko, founder of the New Testament megachurch in Perm, relates that when he was finishing his studies in Jelgava, he prayed to be sent to a city in Russia that no one else wanted to go to. Perm was known as an especially inhospitable city; the Perm region hosted prisons and labour camps. Together with some fellow missionaries he moved to Perm, although he did not know anyone there, and started preaching the gospel. The congregation began as a home group, and expanded until they could afford to buy the local Palace of Culture. The congregations were expected to support themselves from the start.

While most Russian megachurches operate in areas where ethnic Russians are in the majority, Hosanna Church in Dagestan's capital Makhachkala ministered mainly to people of a nominally Muslim background. Islam also developed significantly after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and in some areas militant Islam has set root. In Dagestan (a republic in the Russian Federation located in the North Caucasus) 83 percent of the population identifies as Muslim. Artur Suleimanov, an Avar by ethnicity, founded Hosanna Church in 1994. Like many other megachurches it had ministries directed toward alcoholics and drug addicts and supported orphanages in the area. Unlike pastors of other churches, Suleimanov focused on evangelising nominal Muslims. He had considerable success; it has been estimated that his church had 2,000 members in 2010 and that 80 percent of the church members were of Muslim background.³² Suleimanov had been repeatedly threatened by militant Muslims, and on 15 July 2010 he was shot dead as he was leaving the church building. Although his murderer was never caught, it is thought that his murder was religiously motivated. While the church previously is said to have had 2,000 members, now services normally attract only about 600 people. According to Roshchin et al. (2014: 528), many who attend home groups do not attend the main services, because they fear the reaction of Muslim neighbours and family members.

On the whole, megachurch pastors in the former Soviet Union seem well disciplined and scandals have been few. There have been a couple economic scandals connected to megachurches here, however. The most notable case was that of Sunday Adelaja of The Embassy of God (Kiev) who was accused of running a Ponzi scheme called King's Capital that cheated people out of 100 million USD. He was later defrocked on other charges, having been accused of having affairs with several women in his congregation (Weber 2016). In the

case of Word of Life (Donetsk), the Swedish mother church and elders in the local congregation broke off contact with Pastor Leonid Padun in 2012 because of what they considered to be financial irregularities. Padun refused to step down from his post, instead leading a schism. Considering the power inherent in being senior pastor of a megachurch, it is noteworthy that there have not been more scandals. Unfortunately, the scandals that have occurred come in handy for members of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy that seek to portray Neo-Charismatic Christianity in the darkest of colours.

4 Doctrine

As is the case in other parts of the world, Russian megachurches are affiliated with evangelical denominations. They all consider the Bible to be the ultimate authority in questions of faith, and all teach that individuals must make conscious decisions to follow Christ and be baptised as believers. This is something that sets them apart from the dominant Russian Orthodox Church, which practices infant baptism and claims the Russian people as its own, whether they identify themselves as believers or not. The Russian Orthodox Church considers Russian people to belong to its 'canonical territory' because historically it was this form of Christianity that first reached them. They accuse other Christian denominations (both Catholic and Protestant) who work among Russians of proselytising (Fagan 2013: 110–122).

All the megachurches studied here would be classified as Pentecostal or Charismatic. They believe that the Holy Spirit is active in the church today just as he was in apostolic times. People are encouraged to seek to be baptised in the Holy Spirit. Spirit baptism is said to be manifested through speaking in tongues (Marsh and Tonoyan 2013: 183). Prayers for physical healing are commonplace.

Several megachurches have connections to the Faith movement. There is a greater expectation here that individuals can receive new revelation than is the case in traditional Pentecostal churches. There is also an understanding in the Faith movement that God wishes for people to flourish spiritually, physically and materially, and that these blessings are available to those who ask in faith (Coleman 2000). Three of the megachurches studied here (Word of Life Moscow, Donetsk and Yerevan) were founded by the Russian Inland Mission, a project of the Swedish Word of Life church in Uppsala. This mission was founded as the result of a vision its head pastor Ulf Ekman had, and which was related to his followers. The Russia Inland Mission contributed to the establishment of hundreds of congregations in Russia and the former Soviet Union, and spread Faith teaching throughout the country. In addition to

sending Scandinavian missionaries to Russia, Word of Life (Uppsala) provided theological education in Sweden for pastors from various parts of the Soviet Union, before establishing a Bible Institute in Moscow, which helped spread Faith teaching. Grabovenko (of New Testament, Perm) claims to have studied with Ulf Ekman, and Dirienko of Church of God (Yaroslavl) was inspired by Ekman to found his church.

When these Charismatic congregations were first being established, many pastors preached the prosperity gospel, including Renner of Good News, Moscow; Ledyaeв of New Generation, Riga; Dirienko of New Generation, Yaroslavl (Lunkin 2009: 856); and Adelaja of the Embassy of God (Wanner 2007: 235). For example, Good News (Moscow) professes, “we believe that God wants to and can bless you with material prosperity” (Lunkin 2017). Word of Life (Moscow) is centre for the Association of Christians of the Evangelical Faith “Churches of Faith”. The tenth article of its statement of faith spoke of full prosperity (“полное процветание”):

By his life, death and resurrection Jesus showed that God wants to save the individual in his spirit, soul and body, and that God’s will is this, that every person in his life would walk in Divine health, Divine prosperity, [and] that he through faith would be a victor in all areas of life: spiritually; in his soul, physically, economically, socially.

To people who had been raised in a Soviet system that only warned of the dangers of capitalism while failing to fulfill its own promises of the perfect life, this was a refreshing message. Over time, as the promises of worldly prosperity failed to come true for most people, and as their theological thinking matured, Russian megachurches have changed their message (Marsh and Tonoyan 2013: 190). Today Word of Life churches emphasise that wealth is not a goal in itself, but should be used to build spread the kingdom of God.

While the prosperity gospel is not central to Russian megachurches today, they still have a positive attitude toward wealth as an instrument of blessing. They maintain good ties to members of the business community and offer classes in leadership and entrepreneurship, to help people establish businesses (cf. Marsh and Tonoyan 2013: 190–191). For example, Grace of Jesus Christ (Volgograd) links to an interdenominational network for Christian businessmen in the city that is hosted by the congregation. Connections with local businesses increase the possibilities for these congregations to make a positive impact in their communities.

Congregations connected to the Faith movement put more emphasis on tithing than do other churches. While tithing is common among Evangelicals

in the West, it was something foreign to many in the former Soviet Union (Chervonenko 2017; Wanner 2007: 183). Pastors who successfully taught their congregation to tithe (by for example tying it to promises of future prosperity) had an advantage over traditional Pentecostal pastors, whose congregations could not afford to pay their salary. This contributed to their ability to grow, develop new ministries and plant new congregations. Since tithing has been a new thing for many Russians, some have looked at it with deep suspicion. For example, rebels in eastern Ukraine accused Protestants who advocate tithing of stealing money from people. The financial success of Charismatic megachurches contributes to the hostility shown by the Russian Orthodox Church, which had long charged that these ‘western’ churches enjoyed an unfair economic advantage.

5 Ministries

Megachurches in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union are all seeker-friendly. The congregations were established as missionary endeavors, with the goal of reaching as many people as possible with the Gospel. Word of Life (Yerevan) says on its homepage: “we accept all the <sic> visitors with an open heart and are always ready to answer all your questions and, in case of need, pray for you”. They are not bound by older evangelical traditions, but are heavily influenced by the worship style of western Charismatics. Informal dress is acceptable in Russian megachurches, and unlike what is the case in older Russian Pentecostal congregations and the Russian Orthodox Church, women are not expected to cover their heads in church (Marsh and Tonoyan 2013: 185).

Contemporary worship styles are the norm in Russian megachurches. Many of the same songs can be heard here as in Charismatic churches in the western world. This may have contributed to their popularity early on – the missionaries that founded the churches brought with them music styles inspired by popular culture from the West that allowed for a greater display of emotion than what was common in traditional Pentecostal churches. Worship leaders had a key role in establishing and growing new congregations. Some megachurch pastors had a background as worship leaders. This includes Alexei Le-dyaev who eventually became head pastor of New Generation (Riga, Latvia), and Leonid Padun, who headed Word of Life, Donetsk. For many churches, the music ministry is of central importance. As might be expected, this is the case with Hillsong, Kiev, just as it is to the mother congregation in Sydney, Australia. Although it initially met with some resistance among traditional Pentecostals in Russia, contemporary worship has become widely accepted today, and it is

used even in more traditional Pentecostal and Baptist congregations. This style of worship is completely unlike that found in Russian Orthodox Churches, however, whose leaders disparage it as a western import that is damaging to Russian culture.

Since the congregations are so large, megachurches offer several services on the weekends; in the case of New Testament, Perm, services are held every day of the week. Some also offer services in other languages, for immigrants or members of Russia's larger minority peoples. Word of Life (Moscow) offers four Russian-language services per weekend, in addition to an English language service, a Chinese service and a Vietnamese service, for example. They have also offered services in Armenian since 2013. Bethany (Krasnodar) has services in Russian and Armenian.

All Russian megachurches emphasise how important weekly small group meetings are to their overall ministry. Good News (Moscow) has more than 200 small groups in Moscow (Lunkin 2017). Grabovenko of New Testament Church (Perm) is inspired by the Korean pastor Yongghi Cho whose megachurch builds on small groups; Grabovenko's church included 170 small groups. In a web-interview on his church's homepage (February 2011) he explains that this method works for his congregation, but is not necessarily the right approach for all churches. For some congregations small groups are absolutely vital. Bethany (Krasnodar) had 5,000 members in 2014, but could not get access to a building where the congregation could gather for worship, instead its 300 home churches become the place where the church worships. Hosanna church in Makhachkala has also increasingly localised its work to home churches, as their members are freer to worship without being threatened by militant Islamists.

Most megachurches in Russia are involved in social ministries. A Pentecostal bishop explained that when he first established his congregation, social ministries were not what he had anticipated would come to define his church. But that was the reality that the congregation faced. In the waning years of the Soviet Union and the early days of independence, the state had little to offer those who were on the margins of society.

As these churches are all in the Pentecostal tradition, prayer for healing is normal. In the neo-charismatic megachurches prayers for healing are more dramatic than in traditional Pentecostal services, however. Russian neo-charismatic congregations have supported 'faith healing crusades', where people seek prayer for healing on stage in front of a large audience (cf. Marsh and Tonoyan 2013: 185).

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation is a central ministry for megachurches in Russia and other former Soviet republics. People with addiction problems

turned to the Pentecostals who welcomed them. Their conviction that people can start anew, that people can be rid of their addictions as they are born again was attractive. The strict moral rules of the Pentecostals, including complete prohibition on drinking alcohol, provided an atmosphere where people could be freed from their vices. These recovering alcoholics are strongly encouraged to stay active in the churches, and some have risen to leadership positions. Former alcoholics and drug addicts and their families were the core of the Embassy of God, for example. Half of its pastors used to be addicts (Wanner 2007: 212, 222).

Many of the Protestant megachurches in Russia and Ukraine are engaged in prison ministries; these include New Testament (Perm); Church of the Covenant (Novosibirsk); Grace of Jesus Christ (Volgograd). The prison population in Russia is large, and the Russian Orthodox Church had not showed much interest in serving this section of the population. New Testament Church in Perm had made this into one of their specialties; after all, in 2001 there were 100,000 convicts in the Perm region. The congregation supports evangelisation within the prisons as well as offering material and spiritual support for the families of inmates. Recently in some areas local government officials have restricted the possibilities of Protestant congregations to ministering to prisoners. Word of Life in Donetsk ran prison ministries, but were forced to cease operating in prisons when Russian rebels that identified as Orthodox took over the area in 2014. Hosanna church in Makhachkala had also been engaged in prison ministries with the approval of the local government in Dagestan since 2,000, but in 2010, even before Suleimanov was killed, government authorities abruptly prohibited them from making further prison visits (Fagan 2010; Roshchin et al. 2014: 528). Apparently these prison ministries were too successful in turning criminals into Protestants.

6 Bible Schools

The larger Word of Life congregations in the former Soviet Union hosted Bible Institutes, following the model of the Swedish mother church, to train new pastors, missionaries and congregational leaders. The Bible Center at Word of Life Moscow was established in 1994. In 2009 close to 6,000 students were said to have studied there. Word of Life Yerevan offers nine month and three month Bible schools, and also internet Bible school, Word of Life church in Donetsk ran a Bible Institute which was established in 1993. More than 4,600 students graduated from the Donetsk Bible School, and many went on to found and lead congregations. Because they had dynamic lecturers, and because there were

few theological seminaries to choose from, Bible schools run by Word of Life also attracted Christians who did not belong to the Faith tradition, including people who went on to serve as pastors in traditional Pentecostal congregations associated with RCCEF. New Testament (Perm), Grace of Jesus Christ (Volgograd), and Hillsong (Kiev) also run Bible schools. Unlike what is the case in megachurches elsewhere, Russian megachurch pastors are not prolific writers. The publication of books is not a central part of their ministry. Their emphasis is on evangelisation, social ministries and church planting. Because Russian Charismatic leaders have not focused on formulating theology, the theology that is taught in the Bible schools run by megachurches has mainly been developed in the West (Sawatsky 2010: 26).

Some churches have developed television ministries. These include Bethany (Krasnodar), New Generation, Embassy of God (Kiev), and Word of Life (Yerevan). The quality of the churches homepages vary. One congregation that has been especially successful in its internet ministry is Good News (Moscow), which according to Lunkin (2017) attracts more than 12,000 regular visitors. In some areas people gather together to watch live broadcasts of their services on the net, thus forming small satellite congregations.

7 Political Activity

In Ukraine most denominations with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) supported the Orange Revolution (2004–2005) (Wanner 2010). Local politicians have been active in megachurches in Kiev, at times using them as a power base. A notable example is Leonid Chernovetskyi, mayor of Kiev 2006–2012, who was a member of the Embassy of God and a supporter of the Orange Revolution. In an interview quoted by Wanner, Chernovetskyi says that his becoming a member of Embassy of God was conditional on the congregation helping him run for office (Fagan 2013: 107; Wanner 2007: 236–239). The Russian government does not wish to see anything comparable to the Orange Revolution happening in its country. In the wake of the Orange Revolution they became more restrictive in allowing foreign-based preachers work in Russia. Fagan reports that Adelaja of the Embassy of God was deported from Russia “in the interests of state security” in 2006. Ledyaevev of New Generation (Riga) who, like Adelaja, encouraged his parishioners to be politically active, was deported from Russia already in 2002 (Fagan 2013: 107–108). As a result, Russian megachurch pastors are less likely to openly support individual candidates or to criticise the Russian government than their counterparts elsewhere. They teach the importance of good morals and obeying the law. Their

emphasis on family values matches that of the Russian state and they seek to work together with the Russian Orthodox Church in this area. They encourage patriotism, and unlike what was the case among Pentecostals in the Soviet era, church members are not discouraged from doing armed service. They are still looked upon with distrust by government officials both on regional and central levels, however.

The low-grade war in eastern Ukraine has been problematic for Russian megachurches, as many pastors have relatives in Ukraine. They have been careful to explain that they do not side with Ukraine in that war. In spite of the diplomatic approach taken by most megachurches in Russia, hierarchs in the Russian Orthodox Church continue to paint neo-Charismatic churches as a dangerous foreign influence, however.

8 The Contemporary Situation

In preparing this chapter I contacted several Russian denominations and church leaders but received few answers. One reason for this is that Protestant churches have come under increasing pressure from the Russian government. The establishment religion in many of the post-Soviet states is Orthodox (in Russia and Belarus it is the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, and in Armenia, the Armenian Apostolic Church). Orthodox churches consider Protestant denominations, and Pentecostals in particular, to be sectarian, and they are often portrayed as foreign totalitarian sects (Fagan 2013: 96–111). This is the same propaganda as the Communist party had spread in the Soviet era. Many Russians put Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses in the same category; they know nothing about the denominations, but consider them foreign and dangerous (Kääriäinen and Furman 2000).

While there were few restrictions on religious freedom in the early 1990s, spokesmen for the Russian Orthodox Church have continually lobbied the Russian parliament to restrict activities of Protestant churches. In recent years these restrictions have become more serious. The so-called Yarovaya law (20 July 2016) restricted activities of missionaries and on practicing religion anywhere but in a formal place of worship. The laws are unclearly formulated and their application is not systematic. They may imply that home churches and even internet-based religious practices are now illegal. A strict interpretation of the laws would severely limit the possibility of all religious groups, including megachurches, to operate.

It is difficult to speculate regarding the future prospects of megachurches in Russia. Considering how few practicing Christians of any denomination there are in the country there is considerable room for growth. Megachurches in the

large cities are especially well positioned to tap into this growth potential, as they can employ teams of well-trained preachers and musicians who offer dynamic preaching and well-orchestrated worship. Congregational members are dependent on functioning home groups to have their private spiritual needs met, however, and recently passed laws seem to call the legality of such home groups into question. If it does become illegal to host homegroups, larger congregations will suffer.

In July 2017 the Russian Supreme Court found that Jehovah's Witnesses were an 'extremist' organisation, and upheld the Russian Parliament's decision to confiscate their property. Might the same thing happen to Pentecostals? The new buildings built by megachurches are a visible reminder of Protestant presence in Russian cities. Some might hope that if the congregations are large enough, the state will not interfere with their ministries. The fact that pro-Russian militants affiliated with Orthodox militias took over the Word of Life megachurch in Donetsk (eastern Ukraine) and converted it into military headquarters suggests size is no guarantee of safety (Mitrokhin 2015). The action may have been intended to send a message to neo-Charismatic megachurches in Russia proper. If the Orthodox Church continues to grow in influence in Russia, and if Russian nationalists continue to colour Church policies, megachurches may choose to keep a lower profile.

As was mentioned, Russian megachurches were influenced by the western world in their message, music, architecture and much more. Increasing tensions with the West may cause more Russians to look upon megachurches with distrust. On the other hand, young people who have grown up in the post-Soviet era may have fewer prejudices regarding religious organisations in general and regarding Evangelicals in particular. The Orthodox Church's quest for a religious monopoly is likely to backfire. As megachurches have over time become more Russian in terms of their leadership, message and music, and as they have been socially active, continually showing with concrete actions their love for people, especially for those on the margins of society, attempts to besmirch them are not likely to be as successful as the propaganda directed against Jehovah's Witnesses. Although individual congregations may face difficulties in the immediate future, it is likely that megachurches in Russia will generally experience continued growth and that new congregations will join their ranks.

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Global, ‘Glocal’ and Local Dynamics in Calvary Temple: India’s Fastest Growing Megachurch

Jonathan D. James

1 Introduction

Satish Kumar, the founder and senior pastor of Calvary Temple in Andhra Pradesh, India is primarily known for building a gigantic church in 52 days, thus emulating the feat of the Old Testament priest Nehemiah who built the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days (Nehemiah 6: 15). Calvary Temple was built in 2011 to seat 18,000 people (complete with overflow facilities); in 2018 it has close to 200,000 members who worship in four services in the Telugu language and one in English, all on Sunday. In addition to the church, Kumar has a Bible School, conference halls, and other state-of-the-art facilities at the 12-acre property in Hyderabad.

In this chapter, I describe how Calvary Temple (hereafter CT) was created, how it operates organisationally, and how the church undertakes its ministry in a nation that is not favourably disposed to Christianity. I also contemplate whether CT is navigating a new path, perhaps as a ‘trailblazer’ for the future of the Christian community in India.

Having acquired the status of a megachurch, a phenomenon that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century in the West (especially in the USA) (Thumma, Travis and Bird 2005), CT’s size is regarded as an indicator of success. But how did CT grow so big so quickly in a Hindu nation where there were and still are increasing tensions between *Hindutva* forces and minority religious groups?¹ I use the theoretical underpinnings of Robertson (1995) to frame my proposition that CT is a product of both globalisation and glocalisation – the latter being the connection and interplay between the global megachurch movement and the local forces at work in contemporary Indian society.

In my research, I use both primary and secondary sources: primarily, I interviewed six senior Christian leaders in India who are familiar with CT and the

1 *Hindutva* literally means *Hinduness* and it is generally associated with the ideology that seeks to relate and define Indian culture with Hindu religious values. The current BJP Party is the main instigator of this ideology, which taken to its extreme would mean an ‘India for Hindus only’ policy and practice.

church scene in India;² and I analysed several of Kumar's preaching videos to get an idea of the thrust and philosophy of his ministry. Secondly, I reviewed key texts and websites pertaining to CT and its senior pastor, Kumar.

I begin the chapter with a quick snapshot of the history of politics and Christianity in India, followed by background material on CT and its founder. I then outline the theoretical underpinnings of my study, followed by my analysis of CT from three standpoints: global, 'glocal' and local. I conclude with summative statements from my research and speculative questions about the future of CT.

2 The Politics of Conversion in India³

Britain colonised India for 250 years. Towards the end of this rule – from 1909–1935 the British categorised the Indian population into a general electorate of Hindus and electorates representing Dalits (the outcastes) and those from the minority religions (Christians, Muslims and Sikhs) (Sharma and Varshney 2014). Dalit Christians were included in the Christian electorate.

In 1935, the famous Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar urged Dalits to abandon Hinduism for a more impartial faith.⁴ At the same time, the noted nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi strongly criticised the various Christian efforts to convert the Dalits. He, however, proclaimed that Hinduism should be reformed so that the status of untouchability of the Dalits was negated (Harper 2000). In 1936, Christian Dalits were not entitled to receive government benefits (Webster 1992). And between the years 1936 and 1946, many states in northern India introduced anti-conversion laws (Kim 2003). Following independence from the British in 1948, debates raged on the issue of conversion. The main party in power – Indian National Congress (INC) was sympathetic to the minority religions – whereas the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) upheld a Hindu nationalist agenda. In 1950, the INC ratified the Constitution to ensure rights for

2 I interviewed leaders of three mainline churches, a leader of an interdenominational Christian organisation, a Christian social justice activist and a retired missionary who served in India.

3 I am grateful to the Pew Research Centre for the information provided in their website which enabled me to fill in the gaps for this section: <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/historical-overview-of-pentecostalism-in-india/>.

4 Dalit literally means 'trampled upon' and refers to people in low castes, who are treated as 'untouchables' in India. Dalits are a mixed population, living all over the country, speaking a variety of languages and practising different religions. Approximately two-thirds of India's Christian population, are Dalits. In many states, Dalits are not allowed to walk in upper-caste areas. In some restaurants, Dalits may be required to squat on the floor (rather than sit on chairs) and eat from separate dishes.

religious propagation. In the same year, a presidential order excluded non-Hindu Dalits from legislative, educational and professional positions, reserving these for Hindu Dalits. In 1956 and 1990 amendments were made to allow Sikh and Buddhist Dalits to be eligible for the same positions, but Christian Dalits were still exempted (Freston 2001).

In the 1960s, the growth of Christianity in north-eastern and central India generated tension among some Hindus. In 1964, the World Hindu Council was established in part to counter Christian conversions among tribal groups (Katju 2003). The state assemblies of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat passed anti-conversion laws in 2002 and 2003 respectively (Ram 2002). After a series of victories in several state elections and in the national elections, in 1996, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) became the largest party in parliament. However, due to its lack of representation in Parliament's lower house, the BJP government was in power for only 13 days.⁵

At the 1998 general election, the BJP-led coalition, known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), formed a government under Prime Minister Vajpayee but this coalition only lasted for one year. Then, after fresh elections, BJP lasted for a full term in office – the first non-Congress government to do so in India's history. During the 2004 elections, Sonia Gandhi, the then INC leader, a Catholic, campaigned against the maltreatment of Christians and Muslims under the BJP (Waldman 2004). The INC won the elections and Manmohan Singh – a Sikh became prime minister. He undertook the responsibility to curb violence against Christians (Waldman 2004). In the same year, State of Tamil Nadu's chief minister, J. Jayalithaa, repealed the state's anti-conversion law after her party, which formed a coalition with the BJP, lost all its seats in the national parliamentary elections (Lisa 2005). After 10 years of rule by the INC, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was elected into power in 2014 even though this meant the possible rise of Hindu Nationalist politics and violence against Christians and other minorities.

3 Calvary Temple and Its Founder

Satish Kumar was born in 1971 within a poor family in Hyderabad, India. Unfortunately, Kumar took to the streets at a young age and fell in with bad company.

⁵ A new party – The United Front party consisting of both non-Congress and non-BJP members was formed and secured support from the 332 members out of the 545 seats in Parliament, with H.D. Deve Gowda being installed as the Prime Minister. Parliament produced three Prime Ministers between 1996–1997 and forced the country back to the polls in 1998.

His parents were greatly concerned about his well-being and his future. One day, Kumar heard a street preacher say that Jesus could change people. Kumar contemplated that if Jesus could change him – that would be a miracle and it would attest to the reality of Jesus. So, he went forward in the ‘altar call’ and committed his life to Jesus Christ (Calvary Temple Website A; YouTube Kumar 2018).

Kumar joined a church and participated in various Christian activities, such as doing manual work for the conferences sponsored by the Indian Evangelical Mission (IEM) – a well-known indigenous, evangelical missionary organisation. At the age of 21, Kumar started a vibrant youth fellowship group – the Calvary Youth Mission (Field notes 2018).

In 1995, Kumar felt he received a call from God to build a very large church, but nothing significant materialised for the next 10 years (Brown 2015). Kumar also had a television ministry that he could not sustain financially. He therefore travelled to the USA to raise funds, but he was not successful in getting any appreciable and ongoing donations (NRB 2018). In 2005, Kumar started CT with 25 members. By 2015, the church grew to 130,000 members, adding 60,000 in the last three years alone (Brown 2015). The 2018 membership at CT stands at 195,000 people (Calvary Temple Website A).

Despite opposition from various groups, including agencies of the local government, Kumar urged his team of followers to build the afore-mentioned megachurch in a record time. One of my interview respondents, a Christian leader from a local church revealed that it was remarkable that Kumar himself participated in the building project, doing manual and other related work at times even in the rain (Field notes 2018). This involvement was a vital ingredient for the success of the building programme at CT (Field notes 2018). It should be noted that CT is a non-denominational, evangelical church, not associated with the classical Pentecostal or the recent neo-Pentecostal movement as are most megachurches in India and worldwide. Anderson (2004: 123) revealed that “at least a third” of Asia’s Christian population is now Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal, and that this figure is “steadily rising”.

4 Theoretical Underpinnings

Globalisation is defined variously: it is seen largely in political and economic terms as the movement of capitalism across the world, creating interdependent relationships (Ruggie 1998; Scholte 2000). Globalisation has made the world more interconnected, where the political, social, and economic events in one nation influence individuals and nations elsewhere (McCorquodale

and Fairbrother 1999). In a global world, Kinnvall (2004: 742) alluded, individuals may be more inclined to use religion as the integrating point in their lives because people “search for constant time and space-bounded identities”.

In his analysis of globalisation, sociologist Robertson (1995) invoked the subconcept of ‘glocalisation’ as the “simultaneous occurrence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies” in contemporary systems (Blatter 2013: para 1). Robertson (1995) argued that globalisation on its own was an over inflated reality and that the boundaries between the local and the global were connected. And Robertson conceived the local as a key facet of globalisation. Therefore, while acknowledging that global cultural links may be strong throughout the world, Robertson predicted that globalisation would not result in the formation of a united human culture (Robertson 1995). He argued that glocalisation has the impact of channelling global influences according to the local culture’s needs, structure and taste. Thus, the local processes meld with global processes and vice versa. In short, the term glocalisation means that trends of homogenisation and heterogenisation coexist throughout the modern age. Furthermore, glocalisation means that it is local culture which assigns meaning to global influences, and that the two are therefore interdependent and enable each other (Cultural Reader 2012 para 4).

In a similar vein to Robertson (1995), Hexham and Poewe (1997) took this concept into religion and argued that even though Pentecostal Christianity is a global faith with a global framework, it is grounded in a variety of local forms and logistics. In Asia, there is a long-held perception of Christians as ‘foreign’, ‘anti-national’ and ‘neo-colonial’, even more so than in Africa or Latin America (Jenkins 2002: 175–177, 182–185). Hence, the growth of Pentecostalism, especially through megachurches in Asia, must be understood in the context of these negative sentiments.

Considering the above, I assert that Christianity in India is more likely to see real growth and be sustained if the global Christian elements and fused with local components of language, culture, theology and the like (James 2010).

5 Key Elements of Calvary Temple

I examine CT from three strategic standpoints: *global*, *glocal* and *local*. The global features refer to attributes that are linked to the fraternity of megachurches worldwide, especially in relation to the theological construct of Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism. The glocal features refer to global aspects that have been fused with local issues to reflect unique sociocultural adaptations. The local refers to the features that have resisted global constructs (not become glocal) and remained unique to the Indian Christian context.

5.1 *Global*

As stated above, the term megachurch was popularised, especially in the USA in the early 1980s (Schaller 1980). Scholarship undertaken in the late 1990s and in early 2000 equated the term 'mega' with size – the number of attendees and, by extension, the facilities to accommodate the large number in the congregations (Thumma and Travis 2007).

Megachurches in India certainly have large and relatively magnificent buildings. Seen in the context of India's demographic, where poverty is rampant, these buildings appear luxurious.⁶ For example, the Mark Buntain Memorial Assembly of God Church in Kolkata is built as a large theatre where the seats are cushioned (Sungjemmeren 2011). CT and two other megachurches located in Bangalore – have chairs or pews for all who come to the worship service – unlike some churches in India, where the congregation sits on the floor according to gender, age, caste, or class⁷ (Sungjemmeren 2011). CT's auditorium is fully air-conditioned – therefore, this is a novelty for churches in India.

What is emphasised in CT's website through the promotional videos on YouTube and the interviews of Pastor Kumar, is the fact that the church was built in 52 days – alluding to the similarity between Kumar and Nehemiah, the Old Testament priest:

Is it possible to build a church with a capacity of nearly 18,000 in 52 days? This is a million-dollar question. Even many godly people thought that Bro. Satish Kumar made a wrong decision in announcing that the church will be built in 52 days. If the Church was not built in 52 days then whatever name he had earned during these years will be wiped out. But God was so good to Bro. Satish Kumar and his word. Though many problems and challenges were encountered during construction yet God kept HIS promise and helped build the church in 52 days. All the church members entered the new sanctuary on 1st January 2013.... celebrated God's victory and saw the work of His hand. Glory be to God!

Calvary Temple website A, para 14

A book entitled *52 Day Miracle* – written by USA author Peter Spencer, with a forward by bestselling author and US megachurch leader, Rick Warren – chronicles

6 According to World Bank data in 2011, the world had 872.3 million people living below the new poverty line, of whom 179.6 million people live in India. Therefore, India with 17.5 per cent of the total world's population, had 20.6 per cent share of the world's poorest in 2011 (Donnan 2014).

7 The other two churches are: Full Gospel AoG Church – a megachurch started by an Indian theological graduate in the 1980s and Bethel AoG Church which was started by Bible college teachers as a house church in the 1950s.

the amazing miracle of building CT in a short span of time (52DayMiracle.com). The book and CT's focus highlight the perception of the miraculous nature of the church. Other parts of the CT website refer to the church as "... the biggest church in India" and "the fastest growing church in the world" (Calvary website B). Dawn (1999: 29) reflected that such an emphasis on measurement is revealed by the "huge push for worship practices to be changed to attract large numbers". However, Dawn (1999: 52) also warned that when size is the main objective "... the danger to the church is enormous and, strangely, often not obvious.... Quality suffers when the main concern is quantity". The emphasis on size can be understood in relation to critical studies on American businesses and entities based on *Disneyfication* – a reference to the world-famous theme park, Disneyland. Rojek (1993) argued that the moral and political culture of entities that take on the Disney leisure industry act as a "mouthpiece of the American way" (Lyon 2000: 4). Furthermore, Rojek (1993) maintained that Disneyfication encourages people to relate to spectacle and passive consumption. Like most megachurches around the world, CT attracts the younger demographic – almost 70 percent of the congregation are between the ages of 25 and 45 (Reddy 2015). The spectacle and passivity of the above-mentioned theories may relate with the younger demographic at CT who share more readily with the global and Western culture.⁸

Perhaps surprisingly, Kumar does not share Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal beliefs unlike many megachurch pastors in India and the rest of the world. However, CT is consistent with the trend for most megachurches to downplay their denominational links (Thumma 1996). CT's website describes the church as 'evangelical' and 'non-denominational' (Calvary website B). However, Kumar has identified with the Yoido Assembly of God (AoG) church in Seoul Korea which is a Pentecostal church that is considered the largest church in the world with 800,000 members. Kumar has been a guest preacher at Yoido AoG several times. And Kumar has also been interviewed over TV networks owned and operated by neo-Pentecostal groups such as Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). Furthermore, he is featured regularly in *Charisma*, a neo-Pentecostal US publication.⁹

8 Mark Chaves argues that spectacle is part of the megachurch movement in "All Creatures Great and Small: Megachurches in Context," *Review of Religious Research* (2006). Jeanne Kilde also raises this perspective with the penetrating question, "Is Christianity, at some level, always about performance and spectacle?" See – *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 2005).

9 In *Transnational Religious Movements: Faith's Flows* (Sage, 2017), I argue that transnational religious groups aspire to go to the West and especially to the USA to start branches or minister

Kumar claimed that he does not resort to 'signs and wonders' in attracting people to his church (Day Star 52 Day Miracle 2018). People come to the church, according to Kumar, for the Word of God (TBN YouTube). However, Spencer (Day Star 52 Day Miracle, 2018), attested to healings, miracles and supernatural phenomena when he visited CT. Signs, wonders and healings are part of the teachings and manifestations of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements across the world. The CT motto reflected in the changing banner on the website says: "Be First, Be Best or Be Different" (Calvary website B). The church motto clearly resembles the prosperity, success and wellness gospel of the global Pentecostal movement. The motto appeals to the suburban, middle-class people (presumably the younger demographic) who would hear similar catch phrases from their workplaces and companies advertised on TV, radio and social media.

In a sermon given in 2016 (YouTube Kumar 2018), Kumar alluded to the fact that to fail examinations at school and college is a condition that brings shame to families and people in the community. Presumably, this reference to shame would gain traction in India where the culture puts a very high premium on education and success in academia. Kumar's comment is an indirect way of espousing the prosperity gospel, an offshoot of Pentecostal teaching. Kumar's comment also displays a lack of sensitivity to the number of suicides by youth in India after failing their examinations.¹⁰

CT follows the centripetal perspective of Christian ministry (with its emphasis on gathering adherents *to* the church), rather than the centrifugal perspective wherein Christians are encouraged in the New Testament to "go into all the world and make disciples...." (Matthew 28: 18–19; Clowney 1995; Miller 1996). Missiologists call CT's philosophy the 'attractional church' philosophy – where the focus is on people coming to the church as opposed to the 'missional church' philosophy where the focus lies in going out to the world to bring disciples into the faith:

Attractional church is a come-to-us mentality in which church revolves around the Sunday meeting.... This is the missiology of the Old Testament. Israel was to so live under God's reign expressed through his law that the nations would come to find out about Israel's God (Deuteronomy

to the diaspora population there. In this case, CT's leader seems to travel to the West more for the purposes of networking, publicity and political activism.

10 India has one of the world's highest suicide rates for youth aged 15 to 29 and student suicides are frequent enough that celebrities and policy makers have started to call for action (Saha 2017).

4: 5–8)... When we come to the church in the New Testament, people often assume a switch of direction from ‘drawing in’ to ‘going out’...

CHESTER 2008: para 6–8

Like many Pentecostal megachurches, CT depends heavily on its senior pastor. For example, the congregation looks to the senior pastor for all decisions. The preaching, charisma and strong leadership of the senior pastor all perpetuate the senior pastor’s power. When interviewed, one of the respondents asserted: “Kumar is not only the leader, he is the ‘brand’ of the church and without him the church will not move forward.... he is given celebrity status – he wears 5 different sets of clothing for each of the 5 services on Sunday” (Field notes 2018). Another leader extended this view to Kumar’s family: “Kumar’s wife and his brother are also key decision-makers and power sources at Calvary” (Field notes 2018). Kumar’s brother, a convert from the Hindu faith has quite a high profile in the ministry of the church (Reddy 2015). Kumar’s wife is currently the Sunday School Superintendent replacing the former superintendent because of the latter’s disagreement with the senior pastor (Field notes 2018). Kumar’s and his wife’s birthdays are mega events that are celebrated in the church. As a rule, no other birthdays are celebrated or acknowledged at CT (Field notes 2018).

Another interview respondent bemoaned the fact that whereas there is a ministry team led by the senior pastor there is no governing forum where decisions can be considered, drawing the expertise of the leadership team (Field notes 2018). This respondent explained why Kumar is the acknowledged, dominant leader of the congregation:

He [Kumar] started the church from scratch. He had the vision and he built the church in 52 days. This action therefore qualifies him to be the sole leader, decision maker and final arbiter of the church. The subtext of the promotions and public relations messages imply that the miraculous emergence of the leader and his ability to grow a church constitutes spiritual leadership and therefore demands the full allegiance of all the members....

Field notes 2018

The worldwide fraternity of megachurches focus on training volunteer leaders for their various church ministries (James 2010; Reddy 2015). Short-term courses enable church members to serve the church in a multiplicity of areas, including leading cell groups – a key component of CT’s ministry. Other volunteers are used in ministries ranging from music to providing car parking

assistance and to ministries for youth and senior citizens. Besides the full-time paid employees, called *Calvary Army*, Kumar has two types of volunteers – *Calvary Soldiers*, who are semi-employed volunteers and *Calvary Amateurs* – unpaid enthusiasts (Reddy 2015). In this way the whole congregation has the potential of being transformed into voluntary semi-paid or unpaid 'co-workers' (Reddy 2015: 159).

Professionalism, the use of technology, and mediatisation are yet other features of CT in line with the global megachurch movement. The worship services at CT reflect a Western bias with the use of guitars, drums and wide-screen projection facilities. The worship segment is performance-oriented; that is, the focus is on the worship team and their professional singing and playing. The congregational singing cannot be heard because it is overpowered by the sound of the accompanying music and the singers in the worship team (Field notes 2018).

Remarkably, all attendees have electronic cards that they swipe before entering the worship centre. The card records attendance and enables tithing to be given efficiently. Every member of CT gets a swipe card and anyone can become a member on their first visit with a short declaration of their intention to become a member. On the spot membership is made easier because most first-time visitors are already familiar with Kumar and CT through his nationwide television ministry (Brown 2015).

Kumar's messages air on 300 TV channels each month in several Indian languages (Brown 2015). It is estimated that the more than 5,000 new visitors come to CT each week because of this media exposure, and many of the newcomers become committed church members (Brown 2015). Kumar's TV reach is estimated to be 10 million viewers (TBN YouTube).

Like most megachurches, CT has a user-friendly website, a Facebook presence, and a YouTube channel which extend the church's scope. However, the most intriguing and noteworthy aspect of CT's global dimension is its growing transnational political activism. Kumar met with the USA Vice President Mike Pence in Washington D.C. in February 2018 while attending the National Religious Broadcasters Convention – where Kumar was their keynote speaker (NRB website 2018). The meeting Kumar had with Pence was considered major news at CT, and the Church website used this meeting to bolster Kumar's standing in the international scene. The talk with Pence was reported as a discussion about religious freedom – an obvious reference to the current Indian government's tardiness in handling the issue of the persecution of Christians in India by Hindu fundamentalist groups (NRB website 2018). Thus, Kumar has now been attributed with opening a global political platform to champion the

rights of the 30 million Christians in India.¹¹ Whether this engagement in the global field will be significant in advancing the cause of religious justice remains to be seen. But it certainly has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes for the Christian community in India.

Kumar's latest goal is to build another large church – a stadium-sized church edifice that will seat 60,000 people in another part of Andhra Pradesh – making it the largest church in the world (Calvary Temple website C). Clearly, Kumar's aspiration knows no bounds.

5.2 *Glocal*

At CT several innovations and cultural adaptations have evolved. The large buildings in the 12-acre property were built despite strenuous opposition from Hindu-inspired groups and local government agencies (Field notes 2018). In building CT, Kumar has successfully created an alternative space and imbued Christians with a sense of belonging. As mentioned above, CT provides seating for everyone, devoid of bias according to caste or class. Thus, the minority status of Christians in India is forgotten by worshippers when they gather at CT.

At CT, charity and meeting physical needs is a major component of the church ministry. Because of the electronic cards issued to all members, if anyone misses a service, they receive a telephone call the next day from a staff member, enquiring about their wellbeing and asking if prayer is needed (Field notes 2018). Brown (2015) explained this practice: "While this may seem overbearing for many Christians in the West, it is very meaningful to the Indian believers" (Brown, 2015 para 15). Amazingly, every member of the church gets a birthday cake delivered to their door on their birthday, which means CT hand delivers (through their network of volunteers) as many as 4,000 birthday cakes a day (Brown 2015; Field notes 2018). In the context of abject poverty amongst many in the church, and the fact that their families cannot celebrate their birthdays, it's not unusual to see recipients cry when their cake arrives (Brown 2015). CT also provides about 10,000 meals every Sunday for poor members and subsidises 50 percent of the cost of all medical prescriptions (Brown 2015).

The preaching and worship at CT also show glocal elements. There are five two-hour services every Sunday and Kumar preaches for 60–70 minutes at each service (Brown 2015). It is interesting to note that the first Sunday service commences at 6.00 am; and the last service concludes at 8.00 pm. Kumar also gives a 30-minute teaching session to 1,200 key church workers before one of

11 The 2011 Indian Census shows 2.3 per cent of the population as being Christians. Some Christian leaders think this figure is understated. See: http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/religion.aspx.

the late afternoon services (Brown 2015). As mentioned earlier, Kumar is not theologically linked with the Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal movement, so his sermons are biblically-based and free of calls to receive the second blessing, the gift of tongues and the like. Instead: "... he [Kumar] does not mince words, calling out sin, calling for repentance, and pointing to the cross. His goal in all his messages is that Jesus be exalted" (Brown 2015: para 11–12). Kumar's preaching content and delivery style display more of a Baptist and evangelical theological orientation than that of the Pentecostal tradition.

The respondents I interviewed all agreed that Kumar is not the best preacher, but he gives clear, biblical and easy-to-understand sermons (Field notes 2018). CT's website, with links to the church's YouTube channel, describe Kumar's preaching this way:

He adopted his preaching method from Jesus Christ, i.e. preaching the word with illustrations and parables. This greatly helps people to understand the word and apply it to their daily lives. His spirit filled sermons have attracted hundreds and thousands of people to Calvary Temple....

Calvary Temple website A

From my observation, Kumar's use of stories, folk tales, anecdotes and illustrations in his preaching bears similarity to the Hebrew method of parables used by Jesus Christ, and it resembles the style and presentation of the Indian folk teacher:

Since, Indian folk religion exists primarily in oracy [oral-based using communication by word of mouth], the concept of time and space within the narrative becomes cyclical.... the stories oscillate between the past and the present.... therefore the congregation relates to the narrative and applies it to everyday life.... pastors entitle the themes of their messages as *abundant life*, *successful life*.... and *victorious life*... every message is instructional, promise-filled and relevant....

REDDY 2015: 155–156

In my content analysis of Kumar's sermons on YouTube, I noticed that 18 out of the 20 sermons had titles such as: How to live an extraordinary life, how to get value from life, and how to be free from a sinful life. Furthermore, my content analysis revealed that Kumar's preaching method is to reduce biblical truth to 'bite size' pieces. He gives his listeners gems of truth in the form of easy-to-understand biblical principles. For example, in response to the issue of 'How to live an extraordinary life' Kumar exhorted: "Be prayerful, be peaceful,

be patient and be pure". And in a sermon, that resonated with the poor and marginalised titled: "There is hope for the useless and the hopeless", Kumar urged the congregation to take heart because, although the people of Israel were slaves for hundreds of years, they were eventually delivered by God's servant, Moses. Then, Kumar added: "Joseph was sold as a slave but he did not live as a slave". At this point, Kumar shared his own story of how at 12 years of age, he was thought to be useless by his family. He was engaged in smoking and gambling, all of which brought great shame to his family. But he was delivered (YouTube Kumar 2018).

Hence Kumar, like an Indian folk narrator applies the narrative of the bible to his own life and then, to the lives of the listeners, thereby connecting the past with the present and engaging with the congregation. Kumar's preaching method is not expository; he does not preach a passage of Scripture by explaining the language, history and context to draw out the meaning of the passage. Kumar's preaching method is topic based – on a single verse of Scripture or a short passage with a view to answering one of the issues outlined above. Considering the large number of worshippers in each service at CT, and the demographic of the congregation, Kumar's style of preaching is apt and effective.

As indicated above, the main thrust of CT is its worship services on Sunday. A large Sunday School ministry exists for young children and youth, but it seems that the Sunday School is considered more of an 'afterthought' – a convenient place for parents to leave their children with teachers while they attend worship in the main auditorium (Field notes 2018). There is no systematic curriculum for Sunday School, and not all the teachers are adequately equipped to handle the children of different ages (Field notes 2018). One of the interviewees explained: "It is a pity that Kumar has put so much emphasis on the worship services and the other ministries, but he has clearly neglected the ministry of the Sunday School" (Field notes 2018).

5.3 *Local*

CT has several local characteristics that are typical to the Indian context. The Indian church has a spirituality that is quite different from her counterpart in the West. For example, there is no secular-sacred divide: "In Indian epistemology *yoga* and *bhoga* are used as synonyms for the sacred and the secular – that is, spirituality and worldly happiness" (Chaudhuri, n.d.). Hence, even television becomes sacred when it relays a Christian message (James 2010). This explains why the actual worship centre and the recognition of leaders' birthdays have such great spiritual significance.

Indian churches accept a literal interpretation of the Bible and furthermore, whereas Christians in the West have downplayed the supernatural, Indian Christians embrace the supernatural and pray fervently against the forces of

spiritual darkness. When Kumar sensed the call of God to build CT in 52 days, he relied on the verse in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah: "... the Word gave me faith to repeat history..." (Daystar 52 Day Miracle 2018). Thus, Kumar staked his life and reputation on the bible and the literal meaning of the promise given to Nehemiah. He also chose the 11th of November – his birthday – as the starting day for the building programme for CT. This was the day that the foundation stone was laid. (Day Star 52 Day Miracle, 2018).

There is a very strong emphasis on prayer and fasting as part of the discipline of the life of a Christian in Indian churches. Brown illustrates this at CT:

The congregation always put a strong emphasis on prayer and fasting, but when they were about to embark on their building project, Pastor Satish [Kumar] called for 40 days of prayer and fasting, with believers fasting and joining together in corporate prayer as much as they could.

The problem was that he called for this during the rainy season, a time when it is unbearably hot and unbearably wet. Yet night after night crowds of thousands gathered on the empty property to join for hours, sitting with their umbrellas up as Satish preached in the pouring rain (without an umbrella). It made for quite a sight (Brown 2015; paras 6–9).

After the first 40-day period of prayer and fasting, Kumar called for another 40 days of prayer and fasting, and when that ended, he called for 40 days more – adding to a total of 120 consecutive days of corporate prayer and fasting (Brown, 2015).

Kumar preaches mostly in the Telugu language – the main language spoken in the State of Andhra Pradesh. All the services are in Telugu except one at 6.00 pm that is in English. Telugu worship songs are sung in the services. Although Kumar is a good communicator in the English language, when he preaches in Telugu, he does so with greater fluency and grace.

Kumar has claimed that the church was fully funded by local giving (Daystar TV YouTube 2017). However, Spencer (Daystar TV YouTube 2017), in the same video, alluded to the fact that when he met Kumar in the USA, Spencer promised to financially support Kumar before the building project was completed. We are not told whether funds eventually came from the USA or other foreign countries.

When Christianity came to India through Saint Thomas (as alluded to in rich historical traditions),¹² Thomas had a positive response in gospel witness

¹² The following works are used to support this tradition of St. Thomas' ministry in India: Mingana, A. *The Early Spread of Christianity in India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1926), 15–16. Also, *Acts of Thomas* 1 (c. AD 200–220); *Teachings of the Apostles* 3, (3rd.

from the cultured and wealthy Indians (Firth 1961; Philip 1950). However, with the entry of British and American missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Christian message was redirected toward the lower classes (Firth 1961; Philip 1950; Wolpert 1991). Christians – mostly from the lower rungs of society – are generally treated as second class citizens. Hence, the positive aspect of CT is that Kumar has managed to make the church a place where the various castes and classes can mingle without sociocultural and economic division.

Notwithstanding, CT and several other megachurches in India have tried to resolve the delicate issue of Christianity and sociopolitical acceptance. Baptism and communion are two sacraments that the Church worldwide has practised unequivocally. In India, baptism is a contentious issue because most Christian converts are from what is referred to as Scheduled Castes (SC). When a convert from a SC is baptised, he or she then goes on record as an Indian Christian. However, Indian Christians from SCs are treated as members of Backward Class (BC) and denied government benefits. Only Hindu SCs are granted government benefits.¹³ To deal with this matter, the sacrament of baptism is oftentimes bypassed at CT and other megachurches in India (Reddy 2015). Hence the Indian Christians from SCs enjoy membership at CT as well as benefits in society.

Whereas the various castes and classes can mingle, CT upholds gender segregation in the seating arrangement at the worship services – women and men are seated separately. This is in keeping with most denominational and non-denominational churches in the nation. At CT, Sunday School is for all children and youth but there are separate seating sections for boys and girls. At present, only male teachers can minister to the Sunday School children, to avoid male and female teachers fraternising (Field notes 2018). At one time all the teachers were women; however, that changed recently without much explanation. (Field notes 2018).

CT upholds the notion of the church as a family. The church caters for the whole family and there are activities beyond Sunday for various members. However, CT goes a step further than most churches regarding the issue of property ownership of its members: members must declare their assets and

century); *Hippolytus on the Twelve* (c. 3rd. cent.); Origen, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 3 (d. c. 254); *Clementine Recognitions* 9.29 (c AD 350); St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oration* 33.11 (c. AD 325–390).

13 The 1950 legislation listed Hindu Dalits as a “Scheduled Caste”, which made them eligible for free education with a quota of jobs made available to them in the government and seats in state legislatures – as a way of improving their status. The same privileges were extended to Sikh Dalits in 1956, and to Buddhist Dalits in 1990. However, similar preferences were not given to the Muslim and Christian Dalits.

make agreements in the presence of the church leaders as to how family property and assets will be divided (Reddy 2015). Kumar believes that this prevents family conflicts and avoids unnecessary litigation cases in courts (Reddy 2015). This is another instance of the infusion of Indian collectivistic culture in CT – as opposed to the situation in Western churches where individualism prevails.

6 Discussion

CT is characterised by its size and the amazing contribution of its senior pastor – Satish Kumar. There is no record of Kumar's training to become a pastor – except that he was ordained by an unnamed UK church and that he received an honorary doctorate from a University in the USA. Kumar is the acknowledged leader because of his stupendous accomplishment in building the church in 52 days – not because of his training or experience in ministry. Likewise, the church is considered outstanding not because of what it teaches but because of how it was conceived. And Kumar's goal to embark upon yet another building project – to build the largest church edifice in the world – is fascinating and yet disturbing. His innovative vision is exciting, but his motivation to have the biggest and the largest church in the world raises 'red flags'.

The focus of CT is based on the 'attractional church' model. This is the Old Testament approach to ministry. CT does not follow the 'missional church' model based on the New Testament approach of going into the world. The 'attractional model' seeks more and more people to come to the church and this would prove to be unsustainable in the long run as it would require bigger facilities and larger infrastructures.

The pastoral care, the feeding of people, and, subsidising the cost of medicines in a nation where many cannot afford any kind of health care is commendable. However, such a preponderance of welfare prompts the question: Are people coming to CT for their devotion to Jesus Christ, or are they merely 'rice Christians', as in the colonial days of missionary work when some conversions were induced by handouts from missionaries.

The focus on lay people participating in the church seems to be working well. It is an empowering exercise when people of various castes, classes and age groups are brought together for a common purpose and for the mission of the church. The division of the church into various cell groups is noteworthy. A sensitive cell group can be effective, even in a religiously-plural nation when adherents have a spiritual base, are needy and open for divine help and guidance.

Arguably, CT has created a counter-cultural community in urban Andhra Pradesh. The church has by its size and power provided a new sense of belonging to its members, but more importantly it has also established a new power base and a buffer for Christians from the Hindu-based national government.

CT's transnational political activism is something to watch closely. Kumar's links with USA's Vice President, and the ongoing discussions on Hindu India's issues pertaining to religious freedom may have interesting ramifications in the coming days. The Church's focus on Telugu-based services (sermons and music) and Kumar's preaching style – based on the Indian folk narrator tradition – are key factors in Kumar's engagement with his listeners, thereby ensuring the success of the widespread ministry of the church. However, the control and governance of the church leadership are significant issues for the church to consider as it endeavours to move forward.

My analysis of CT according to global, glocal and local indicators reveal that global factors seem to take prominence over the other issues. CT conforms to the ethos and logistics of the global megachurch movement especially in its obsession with size, church attendance and seating arrangements. Furthermore, it associates with other megachurches in Asia and the world. Nevertheless, the glocal and local aspects are strong and indicate that whereas CT is sustained mainly by its association with aspects connected with the global megachurch movement, the glocal and local factors are weighty enough and give CT its foundation and grounding as a church in India's Hindu-oriented society.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have situated CT's growth and ministry in the context of the cultural and religious landscape of India. The growth of CT is amazing considering the Indian government's chequered history with the Christian church. CT is India's largest megachurch and it is poised to become by far the largest church facility in the world. The church is clearly part of the global megachurch movement but it still maintains glocal and local elements that ensure a promising future. The chapter indicates that the global aspects of the megachurch movement are being assimilated within CT's Indian identity, tradition and aspirations. However, given the current trajectory of CT's alignment with conservative Christian politicians in the USA, the global elements may strengthen and upset this balance.

The Rev Satish Kumar is not known for his oratorical skills (although his preaching style which resembles the Indian folk narrator is effective for India), but his visionary leadership and organisational acumen are impressive. CT has

created an alternative space for marginalised and disenfranchised Christians – especially those from the lower echelons of Indian society. Kumar has managed to imbue Indian Christians in his church with the strength of collective identity.

Nevertheless, from an organisational point of view, there are some doubts surrounding CT: What will happen after Kumar leaves the scene? Also, will the church and its future projects be sustainable given the 'larger than life' goals of the current senior pastor?

But perhaps the most critical question is: Does CT exceed its remit as a Christian church? It is a socio-political entity boldly declaring to Indian Christians-at-large that there is potential for the disruption of the political status quo because Kumar has negotiated links with powerful Christian politicians in the USA, including the current Vice President, Mike Pence. From this larger, macro viewpoint two further questions emerge: Does CT reflect the changing fortunes of Christianity in India? Will the global aspect of CT become more pronounced as the church becomes the mouthpiece for the articulation of religious freedom in India?

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Sacred Surplus and Pentecostal Too-Muchness: The Salvation Economy of African Megachurches

Asonzeh Ukah

1 Introduction

[E]verything is plastic, even life itself

DAVID CHIDESTER 2018:178

The beginning of the Christian Church is usually associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the frightened followers of Jesus as narrated in Acts of the Apostle (Chapter 2). After Peter summoned courage to speak to the gathered “multitude”, the story concludes that many of those who heard the word, believed and were baptised and were added to the church numbered “about three thousand” (Acts 2:41). Were this base community to be meeting weekly for liturgical purposes, it would have constituted the first Christian megachurch. However, for many reasons, the early church grew only slowly and met in small groups in members’ homes and often clandestinely. The experience and the phenomenon which the concept of ‘megachurch’ encapsulates is as old as Christianity itself; nevertheless, the coinage of ‘megachurch’, like many other nomenclatures with the prefix ‘mega’ (such as megacity, megaton), is recent and of American provenance, and probably first used in a scholarly context in the late 1970s (Dubios 1978).

Mega – originally derived from the Greek *megas* meaning huge, and/or powerful – may have been the shortened form of one million (as a base of measurement), signifying an extremely large scale or excellent quality or sheer quantity. The megachurch denotes an excellent, great and successful church organisation or group. Its proliferation in Africa in recent decades signifies the appeal of its products to a large section of the African Christian population; its practices and organisational structure revolve around a principal charismatic figure believed to be a supplier of sacred or salvation goods who is cast in the mould of a profit-driven spiritual entrepreneur. In the context “of poverty amidst of plenitude at many levels” (Acolatse 2018: ix), the African megachurches – exclusively based in cities – sacralise the urban

landscape by producing a sacred surplus – excesses and exaggerations of spiritual power and promises disseminated through modern mass media and commercial culture. Megachurches exemplify wealth and material success; however, paradoxically in Africa, they have blossomed in the context “where suffering, poverty and hopelessness is the order of the day” (James 2015: 12). This mix of wealth amid crushing misery adds to the complexity and contradiction of the megachurch phenomenon in the continent.

The megachurch is an organisational type rather than a theological category, although there is a dogmatic pattern of teachings and rituals of practice undergirding many of them. The religious and spiritual quest, which drives the appeal of megachurches, is intricately interwoven with certain organisational structure that enable them to reach and sustain the interest of many urban residents. Frequently defined as a Protestant congregation that averages about two thousand or more worshippers – men, women and children – meeting weekly for liturgical purposes (Ellington 2010: 247; 2013: 59), megachurches have evolved into their contemporary forms as a unique phenomenon of the modern, neoliberal era; they are exemplars of organisational complexity, resource concentration, network density, socioeconomic strength and religiopolitical power. Among evangelical and conservative Christians (which includes some types of Pentecostal-charismatic ministries and churches), the megachurch represents the ultimate gold standard for success, influence and material grace in the Christian salvation economy. Since there is nothing intrinsically ‘Protestant’ about megachurches, Jonathan James (2015) extends the concept to include some Catholic parishes or Charismatic groups. This conceptual extension illustrates how dynamic, permeable and shifting the megachurch concept is. Similarly, in the African religious landscape, the megachurch experience may be extended to the indigenous Christian revivals of the early 20th century. In the history of African Christian enterprise, the Zionist churches of southern Africa, the Aladura movement in West Africa and the Bakuzufu revivals in east and central Africa were the engines of Christian conversion and expansion (Kalu 2008: 26–39). Scale, size and prophetic magnetism were not just the driving force of these movements but the power of Christianity as a hugely popular and transformative socioreligious and cultural and geopolitical movement (Cox 2001 [1995]: 243–262; Peel 1968; Sithole 2016). Many of the revivals and the institutions they produced averaged well over the 2,000 worshipper benchmark of the megachurch. These revivals demonstrate how indigenous Christians rejected the received missionary model of Christianity and evangelism and evolved a culturally relevant, homegrown model of being Christian and building Christian institutions.

2 Origins and Beginnings

In the last 150 years, no continent has changed in so short a time and so radically as Africa in terms of its religious demography. Religious transformation accounts for much of the speed and spread of social transformation in Africa. Writing for the Pew Trust in 2016 on “How Africa is Changing Faith Around the World”, Philip Jenkins argues that Africa represents an ever-expanding demographics, a trend that will continue into the foreseeable future, and when combined with Africa’s famed religiosity, will have radical consequences for the outward spread of both Christianity and Islam to other parts of the world, especially Europe. Europe’s increasing secularisation throws into bold relief Africans’ increasing religious significance because of increasing African migration, which coincides with the establishment of religious organisations by Africans in the diaspora. According to Jenkins, in Sub-Saharan Africa, Africans “favoured Christianity over Islam by a rate of 4-to-1”. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the twentieth-first century, “Africa is home to some of the world’s largest Christian.... communities” (Jenkins 2016). Many of Africa’s largest Christian communities are organised as megachurches. These organisations are found in South Africa, Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria (as well as across sub-Saharan Africa generally), where their presence continues to produce city-wide spatial and ritual shocks. According to some scholars, these organisations are in the forefront of socio-religious change through their practices, rituals, social engagement and political activism (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015; Frahm-Arp 2016; Gitau 2018). For some of these congregations, “even the term ‘megachurch’ seems an understatement” (Jenkins 2006: 91).

As the study of Tomas Sundnes Drønen (2013) in northern Cameroon illustrates, Pentecostal churches in Africa usually start as prayer meetings of a few persons but with the intention of expanding to become megachurches. The intention and aspiration to have received a “sacred mandate” to disseminate the gospel to the entire world impregnate their activities and provide a rationale for the engagement of strategies of growth and expansion such as revival and evangelisation enterprise, mass media, market strategies and commercial practices (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015; Ukah 2016a: 665–683). Few achieve that aspiration, many remain mid-sized and modest. Within African Pentecostalism, size and scale – that is, becoming a megachurch – is a definitional feature of Pentecostal success. Therefore, for many church founders and owners, mass appeal defines and reinforces the truth of the message preached, and is the material proof of divine approval. Frequently, African Pentecostal leaders and church founders look towards American religious life and culture for examples

to emulate in church building, organisation and the modelling of salvation goods.

However, while some African megachurches emerged as a direct contact and assimilation of the North American model of church growth or new paradigm churches, some are home-grown and nurtured. As indicated above, the 1920s and 1930s were the decades that the seeds of megachurches were sown in Africa; the 1970s and 1980s were decades when they blossomed under the contexts of extreme economic challenges and political instability. This period also coincided with the expansion in literacy through the establishment of formal education infrastructures such as universities, teacher training institutes and polytechnics. The increase in transnational travels and mass communication system facilitated the interpenetration of religio-cultural influences and other foreign ideas and lifestyles. In Nigeria, which has been described as “the Pentecostal locomotive” in Africa (Drønen 2013: 3), Immanuel Olufunmilayo Odu-muso (1915–1988; also, popularly called *Jesu Oyingbo* by his followers) established the first megachurch, Universal College of Regeneration, in Lagos in 1950s (Onishi 1998). He built an expansive commune or religious enclave where nearly a thousand of his followers lived and worked in supporting industries he owned such as bakeries, restaurants, real estate companies and barber shops. At the peak of his organisation, he had more than 2,000 followers and seekers of spiritual favours who congregated weekly at this commune at Manor Street in Lagos for religious activities. Apart from teaching his followers his own interpretation of the Bible which he claimed he received through direct revelation from God, he developed his sacred industry and empire to become the first pastorpreneur and manager of the first megachurch in Nigeria. Trained as a carpenter and worked in the Department of Post and Telecommunication, Lagos, Odumusu declared himself to be Jesus-come-back-to-life in June 1959:

I am He. I am Jesus Christ, the very one whose second coming was foretold in the New Testament. I have come, and those who believe in me will have an everlasting life and joy. I am the missing of the trinity. I have come to prepare the faithful for the judgment day.¹

What is important in this historical origin is that what developed as megachurches in Yorubaland of Nigeria often involve what JDY Peel (2016: 214) describes as the three circles of Yoruba religion: the diffused strands of Yoruba

1 Austin Oyibode, “How Jesu Oyingbo, a Self-Acclaimed Jesus in 1970s, Raised his empire and died in 1988 in Lagos”, <https://www.naija.ng/1106645-how-jesu-oyingbo-a-acclaimed-jesus-1970s-raised-empire-died-1988-lagos.html#1106645>. Accessed 07/07/18.

traditional religion, the strands of Christianity and Islam practised by many Yoruba and religion of Yoruba origin practised outside Yorubaland “by people who are not Yoruba” (2016: 215). The circles that Peel identifies may be likened to phases and layers of translation of religion from one culture to another, from one epoch to another.

African Megachurches often develop from the African Independent Churches (AICs).² The AICs initiated the processes of cultural appropriation and adaptation of the gospel to local needs and desires. They also produced the personalities and ideas which have been of interest to megachurch founders. In some historical instances, some AICs morphed and transformed into Pentecostal churches before expanding and diversifying into megachurches. The megachurch phenomenon in Africa, therefore, represent a phase of translation of Christianity, first from mission Christianity into African indigenous Christianity and then into Pentecostalism. Once this final stage is achieved, the popularity of sacred goods and services (doctrines, miracles, personalities and rituals) and the aggressive use of media technologies frequently produce megachurches. As a translation phase, African megachurches can be conceived along many dimensions of translation: the first being from the AICs to the more contemporary form of organisational style, and the second is translating global Pentecostal new paradigm organisational culture and objective to local-cultural context and desires. Megachurches become what they are because they creatively respond to local religious desires and tastes.

3 Plastic Spirituality

African megachurches represent the plasticity of the religious worldview and practices that characterise contemporary modernity and culture. According to Virginia Gerrard-Burnett (2015: xii), megachurches are imbued with “theological plasticity [which] allows for considerable innovation and cultural adaptation from one place to another”. African megachurches exhibit more than theological plasticity; they embrace historical, structural and strategic plasticity. Recognising that “plasticity signified everything important in the imagination of matter in the twentieth century [because it] seem to define the contours of a religious world” (Chidester 2018: 177; 178), this feature more than aptly captures a fundamental aspect of the social worlds of megachurches, especially as they manifest in the African lifeworld where the dynamics of rapid social transformation compel organisations to respond quickly or whither ultimately.

² The “I” in AICs would also mean Instituted, Indigenous, Independent or Initiated.

David Chidester (2018:178) relates the interpenetration and borrowing between religious groups and popular culture, arguing that “religious groupings seek to mold the plasticity of ...popular culture in the service of their own religious interests”. As a new form of organisation style, the African megachurch converts rigid ecclesiastical and administrative structures into fluid and permeable, even protean, network. Ecclesiastical plasticity allows church founders to morph into religious entrepreneurs and innovators, to translate and transform religious and cultural ideas and habitus and imbue them with the aura of the sacred. Religious plasticity accounts for how older spirit-led churches transformed over time into large Pentecostal organisations by incorporating aspects of corporate, financial, economic and social features they consider useful for their survival and flourishing. There are many examples of these organisations in Africa; one will be discussed in some detail to illustrate their strategies of expansion and elasticity.

Arguably the largest megachurch in Africa is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). It is an organisation that perfectly fits into the prosperity, miracle-producing church. Founded in Lagos in 1952 by Josiah Akindayomi, a prophet of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S), one of the main Aladura churches originally established in 1925, the RCCG has morphed into a religio-economic and a quasi-political organisation. Akindayomi was a prophet-healer and the organisation he founded was in the tradition of “spirit churches”, small-scale spiritual enclaves that believe in mobilising the power of the Holy Spirit in solving quotidian human problems, especially those concerned with bearing children and dealing with negative mystical forces (such as witchcraft and sorcery), etc. Within a decade of its founding, the RCCG started shedding its Aladura cloak and aura by adopting the doctrines from Four Square Gospel Church and using the Sunday School Manual of the Assemblies of God Church. The urgency to drastically but spectacularly separate itself from its past led the group to affiliate to the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of South Africa, one of the earliest (and mega) Pentecostal churches in Africa. The AFM has a direct missionary root that leads to the Azusa Street revival of 1906 (Frahm-Arp 2016: 262). By the late 1960s, the RCCG had fully pentecostalised and disaffiliated from the AFM. In the post-war era of 1970s, the church had become a world-rejecting, pietistically strict, holiness type of organisation. When Akindayomi died in November 1980, the RCCG was still small and provincial, mainly found in the suburbs of Ebute-Metta, a backwater area next to the Lagos lagoon, and far from being a megachurch.

Transmuting the RCCG into a megachurch was the responsibility of Enoch Adejare Adeboye, a senior lecturer with a doctorate degree in mathematics at the University of Lagos, and later at the University of Ilorin. To lure urban,

upwardly mobile and educated youth into the church, Adeboye converted the rigidity of Akindayomi's holiness ethos into the plasticity and elasticity of neopentecostal prosperity doctrines, practices and structure. His first step in this direction was to jettison the Sunday School Manual inherited from the Assemblies of God, crafting a new one for the church imbued with the new spirit of elasticity and malleability of prosperity Pentecostalism and its propositional attitude. New structures of ritual, administration, attitude to money, acquisition, business, politics and the state were the areas that the new leader, like an alchemist, (re)instituted in the RCCG. By the 1990s, and at the peak of the harshest and most brutal military dictatorship in the history of Nigeria, the RCCG blossomed into a megachurch as politicians and business people seeking both personal safety, financial security and political relevance flocked into the church. By the 2000s, the RCCG has become the most important, the most populous and the wealthiest religio-economic corporation in Nigeria, owning "the largest private estate in Nigeria" and "arguably the largest Christian Estate in the World" (Bible-Davids 2009: 147; 146). In 2018, the 2,800-hectare Redemption Camp is home to the largest ritual infrastructure in Africa, an auditorium measuring three square kilometres, proudly called "Heaven-on-Earth" auditorium by officials and with a sitting capacity estimated at 3 million worshippers.³ The Camp, which hosts three important activities for the church (monthly Holy Ghost Service, annual Holy Ghost Congress, and Annual Convention), has a permanent residential population of about 30,000 believers. To grow into a megachurch, the RCCG under Adeboye invented new rituals, modified doctrines and incorporated practices from the United States, South Korea and the corporate culture of commercial advertising and marketing. It also changed its attitude towards money, conspicuous consumption, ostentatious display of wealth, acquisitiveness, politics and the state. With separate congregations in more than 192 countries in 2016, the RCCG is redefining the meaning of a megachurch, and transcending boundaries to become a metachurch: a massively convoluted and byzantine sacred corporation that blurs the boundaries between religion, politics and economics in its attempts to meet popular desires and provide personal and corporate care and nurture for individuals and groups. In Africa, the RCCG in its ginormous global self-positioning defines and spectacularises (through mega-sized projects and gathering of *multitudes* for worship, etc.) the new paradigm of Pentecostal megachurch success, demographically, economically, and politically (Ukah 2018).

³ Information sourced from the Director of Physical Planning at the Redemption Camp (19/07/16).

The history and trajectory of the RCCG capture a fundamental thrust of many African megachurches. They start as small house fellowships, and each decade they morph into a different organisation, theologically, administratively and behaviourally. The Living Faith Church Worldwide, (A.K.A. Winners' Chapel) started in similar circumstances in 1983. The founder, David Oyedepo, was born into Cherubim and Seraphim church. He got exposed to Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality and practices as a student in a polytechnic. He layered his experience with American prosperity doctrines claiming that "In the summer of 1987, I was in far away in the United States of America.... when I had a unique encounter with God.... saying: 'Arise, get back home and make my people rich'" (Oyedepo 1997: 14; 2008: 7). Interpreting 'home' as not Nigeria but Africa "where most people live below the poverty line" (Oyedepo 2008: 7), Oyedepo made prosperity the undeniable proof of his mandate, legitimacy and authority. While the RCCG is the wealthiest religious organisation in Africa, Oyedepo is the wealthiest Pentecostal pastor in Africa, according to a recent Forbes publication, with an estimated personal worth of US\$150million.⁴ Temitope Balogun Joshua, founder-owner of the Synagogue, Church of All Nations (SCOAN) is by far the most controversial megachurch prophet in Africa. While he was born into an Anglican family, as he grew, he became involved in the Aladura spirituality before establishing his own church in 1986 (Ukah 2016b: 220–222). As the foremost supplier of spiritual healing and prophecy in Africa, T.B. Joshua's SCOAN is a massive, media-embedded megachurch with average weekly ritual attendance of 15,000–20,000 (Ihejirika and Okon 2015: 68). Joshua is the greatest personality at the centre of the largest religious tourism industry in Africa, attracting more than half a million miracle-seekers to SCOAN's Lagos headquarters each year. In these examples, African megachurches' plastic features enable them to migrate from one church type to another, each time maximising the advantage of numbers as an index of legitimacy, popularity, power and authority.

4 Producing Popularity: Types of African Megachurches

Megachurches are religious organisations that have successfully mobilised and accumulated resources from its environment. The extent that a religious group is able to do this determines whether it grows or stagnates (Innaccone et

4 <https://web.codedwap.co/2018/01/06/see-forbes-richest-pastors-africa-2017-2018-see-list.html>. Accessed 11/07/18.

al. 1995). In many African societies, religion is recognised as a 'public good', an institution and practice of common purpose and good free from taxation and government interference. Typically, megachurches strive on the assumption of creating a public good – goods that supposedly help build individuals, and in so doing, develop communities and advance the public cause. Producing salvation goods of public interest makes a religious organisation a popular social institution. According to Martin Riesebrodt (2010: xii), the foundational meaning and purpose of religion are to be found in its promises and concerns "with warding off misfortune, coping with crisis, and laying the foundation for salvation". For Riesebrodt, "Religions promise to ward off misfortune, to help cope with crisis, and to provide salvation", and so are less about the sacred or holy and more about "the providers and mediators of salvation" (Riesebrodt 2010: xiii). The provision of these religious goods is the means through which megachurch leaders engage with the public, a method of being in the world, and in many instances, of the world. The way that charismatic figures and spiritual entrepreneurs provide these goods of salvation make them and their institutional frameworks for the dissemination of these goods popular. Megachurches emerge through the production of popular religious cultural materials and services. Innovation and consistency in such production and distribution of religious goods enable them to achieve a statistical weight of popularity.

African megachurches resolve around a charismatic figure or centre, a person who claims an above-normal endowment of sacred power that warrants her/him to be a powerful, privileged and, therefore, regarded as 'bigman' or 'bigwoman' of a 'big God'; with a guaranteed access to the goods of salvation. Charismatic power, as Max Weber (1992[1922]: 47) makes clear, demands constant "charismatic authentication" and "validation" which comes through the performance of "miracles or magic". Creating goods and services of salvation that appeals to a large number of people is necessary for the construction of megachurches. Such goods and services (mainly, healing, deliverance, miracles of prosperity, religious knowledge) are frequently construed as the credentials that guarantee credibility and legitimacy of the megachurch pastors. These goods have reputational function for the producers; they create a market niche for each producer and cultivate such a clientele over time. A viable market niche creates a population concentration in the religious market where choice and options, like desires and tastes, proliferate. While not discounting the evangelistic zeal frequently framed as a global enterprise, specific strategies and stratagems cannot be ignored in understanding patterns of growth and branding among African megachurches. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015: 58), writing about the reasons for growing a megachurch in Ghana says that "many of the reasons are simply for practical, financial, and other material resources", in

addition to the socially worthy reason of saving the unsaved, bringing in sinners into the kingdom of God.

African megachurches produce goods and services that many urban dwellers consider desirable. Depending on what goods of salvation these organisations produce and disseminate, they can be broadly divided into four types, namely: (i) Prosperity Megachurches, (ii) Healing and Deliverance Megachurches, (iii) Personal Empowerment and Apostolic teaching Megachurches, and (iv) Prophetic-Healing Megachurches. These divisions are ideal types and in many cases, there are overlaps among them. For example, there are some megachurches, such as the RCCG, that combine many of the features of some or all four aspects or qualities of these sacred corporations. In practice, it is safe to hold that different megachurches manifest different traits or combination of traits to a lesser or greater extent.

i) *Prosperity Megachurches*

Prosperity Pentecostalism which emphasises the importance of personal success in the life of a born-again Christian is by far the most popular Pentecostal tradition in Africa. Prosperity megachurches premise their popularity on the claim and promise to produce financial and material success – construed variously as dominion, promotion, wellbeing – for their members. Winners Chapel, for example, falls into this category. As the single most important exponent of this type of teaching, David Oyedepo, the founder of Winners Chapel, often self-identifies as a prosperity teacher; sometimes, however, he prefers calling himself a ‘prophet’ with a prosperity message. He founded Winners Chapel on 23 September 1983 as a fellowship group (named Faith Liberation Fellowship Hour) in Ilorin, Nigeria. In September 1985, the fellowship was relocated to Kaduna, where Sunday services were introduced as well as the new name of Living Faith Church Worldwide. There was an initiate growth which resulted in Oyedepo being consecrated a Pentecostal bishop of Northern Nigeria by Archbishop Benson Idahosa and other leaders of the Nigerian Pentecostal Fellowship in 1988. After 1992, further expansion was stymied forcing the founder to relocate the headquarters to Sango Ota in Ogun State, neighbouring Lagos. The church soon experienced a runaway expansion and in 1998 opened a ritual facility, Faith Tabernacle, originally on a 560-acre property, which has since expanded to measure about 5,000 acres. The Faith Tabernacle has a capacity of accommodating 50,000 worshippers and was advertised to be the largest ritual facility in the world at the time. Winners Chapel has branches in more than 65 countries mainly in Africa, Europe, North America and Asia. Oyedepo runs Winners Chapel as a sacred corporation and positions himself as a Chief Executive Officer – and his wife, Faith Oyedepo, as company secretary – of his

religio-economic empire. Members of his corporation are obligated to buy his books and sermons each week as a material sign of being in fellowship with him. Oyedepo is at the head of a massive self-publishing media empire, Dominion Books, as well as Bible Schools and three universities (and plans to establish four more in different parts of Africa) (Ojo 2006: 164–167). Covenant University, owned by Oyedepo, charges the highest tuition fee, second only to the Baptist-owned Bowen University, in Nigeria. Dominion Publishers has also printed and marketed more than 4 million copies of books written by Oyedepo. Each week, Oyedepo identifies three of his books and instructs his followers to buy and read them as a way of remaining in a divinely-assured prosperity network. To underscore his special claim to divine intention, he recommends his publications as more powerful than the Bible: “You can read the Bible from now till Jesus comes, and still not get a light from it! But locate a man whom God has sent, camp around him, begin to swallow his words and you will soon find something that will loose you from the chain of poverty” (Oyedepo 1997: 154). The church is also an active player in the real estate sector in Lagos and Abuja where cumulatively it is building more than 200,000 housing units of various sizes for sale to rich members of the church. As the wealthiest of all Pentecostal pastors in Africa, Oyedepo owns four private jets as a validation of his gospel of wealth and health, a symbol that appeals to many people who view him as a role model for achieving prosperity and so join the church.

ii) *Healing and Deliverance Megachurches*

The second subtype, healing and deliverance megachurches, is also very popular because through their practices, they aspire, even claim, to reconstruct religion as a technology that responds to the daily needs and experiences of spiritual and physical insecurity which many Africans confront on a daily basis. Culturally, healing is a key aspect, and function, of religion in the African worldview. Liberty Gospel Church (LGC), founded by a self-acclaimed former witch, Helen Ukpabio, in 1990 has as its special focus, the deliverance of those who are under the bondage and torment of witchcraft possession. With more than 80 separate congregations in five countries and with its international headquarters in Calabar, Cross River State of Nigeria, LGC specialises in the production and dissemination of witchcraft deliverance services through mass, trans-denominational events held in sports stadia as well as popular video-films (Ukah 2012; Ukah and Ehtler 2009; Ukpabio 1999). Better known for her movies and books on witchcraft than for her status as a megachurch founder, Ukpabio is constantly embroiled in controversies surrounding the social implications of her teachings on witchcraft which many social activists link to instances of child abuse based on accusations of occult power. The

Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which is very popular in southern Africa (Van Wyk 2014; Frahm-Arp 2016: 275–279) (and has spread to Lagos in recent years), and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles, with headquarters in Lagos, are some of African megachurches whose special brand of product is the provision of interventionist services and practices (Riesebrodt 2010: 92–117) which promise to avert misfortune believed to be caused by malignant spirits. Part of the success of this group of megachurches is the relentless scrutiny of the indigenous religious worldview where negative forces are challenged and purportedly deconstructed with the power of the Holy Spirit or the “Blood of Jesus”. The strength and popularity of these churches are in the diverse ways in which they engage with indigenous African spiritual epistemology and agency, making them relevant for contemporary life situations.

iii) *Personal Empowerment and Apostolic Teaching*

Pentecostalism is a power religion. It makes huge claims to empower the believer through the actions and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which enable the believer to “do greater things” in this world (John 14:12). Especially in the fraught and disempowering circumstances in which many Africans live, churches and religious leaders who promise to reverse the trend and provide a relevant religion, usually secure a market niche for their goods. Some churches that claim to provide such services of empowerment through teaching *correct* doctrine (as against performing or producing miraculous interventions) and so brand their goods have achieved success in mobilising social resources, mainly numbers: consumers, clients and patrons. The youth, who may be struggling to define a path for their future and generate social networks, often find this type of organisations very appealing. Worship Harvest Ministries (WHM) in Kampala, Uganda, represents this group of megachurches in Africa. The WHM claims to provide a *relevant religion* that retools the youth with a purpose in trying urban spaces where they struggle to make a living and achieve a sense of personal meaning.

Founded in 2005 by a musician and professional architect, Moses Mukisa⁵ and some of his fellow musician-friends, the WHM started off as a religious popular cultural space where young people hungry for something unlike institutionalised religion could experiment with being religious according to their aspirations. Accordingly, the first meetings of the group started in a drinking

5 Like David Oyedepo of Winners’ Chapel, Musika studied architecture at the Makerere University on a government scholarship. Before founding WHM, Musika worked with Kiggundu and Partners (later known as Arch Forum Ltd.). He later founded his own company called Living Space which specialised on Innovative Designs.

bar, a secular and entertainment environment, where young people could be themselves and relate to the supernatural as they were rather than as prescribed by some religious elite according to some ritual, coercive orthodoxy. With eight branches, called 'locations', and an average cumulative membership of more than 2,500 *bona fide* members, the WHM is under the youthful leadership of Moses and Sarah Mukisa, supported by seven other couples. The WHM does not call itself 'church' but as "a movement of the Gospel, discipleship and mission, catalysing spiritual, social and economic renewal in our immediate communities and as a result the world".⁶

Music is a strong resource and appeal of the WHM that has enabled the group to achieve social visibility, popularity and viability; its theology of a fluid, relevant religion – devoid of coercive structures and theologies – that repurposes the youth to engage with spiritual, social and economic renewal in their immediate surrounding has found resonance among the young people of Kampala and its satellite towns. The reinterpretation of salvation into leadership renewal for urban redevelopment has been a strong pillar of attraction and success of the WHM, according to the vision of its founder. Mukisa's experience of growing up as the last child in a large family of six siblings and brought up by a single mother on a teacher's salary in rural Uganda serves as the usual staple of 'from grass to riches' that attracts young people hungry for success. Musika's special prayer before sitting for his exam symbolises the yearnings of many young persons who feel helpless (although hopeful and spiritually restless) but crave to be enrolled on "God's scholarship" for a successful adult life:

God help me, because my mum is now out of the picture. If I don't pass, I don't know anyone who is going to take care of me. If I don't go to the university on [a] government scholarship, this is the end.⁷

The entire church serves as an academy for a new type of leadership for the youth to redefine and remake their destiny and future (through acquiring the proper religious truths). The importance of leadership training and modelling in WHM is the founder's belief that the African continent's singular predicament is related squarely to its leadership deficiency, a problem that afflicts and is manifested in all strata of society, government, religious organisations and the economy. According to a middle-aged female member of WHM, "I attend

⁶ <http://www.worshipharvest.org/> (14/07/18).

⁷ "An Architect, a Pastor, and a Gospel Artiste", *Daily Monitor* (Kampala), 04/12/10, <http://www.monitor.co.ug/SpecialReports/success/859508-897336-m8gx93z/index.html> (14/07/18).

WHM because it isn't too structured and conventional. Rules are made up as [we] go along. [The church] accepts people for who they are, and they accept people as they come".⁸ Although megachurches symbolise strength and sturdiness, these features are balanced with and by flexibility and structural plasticity as indicated by this worshipper.

iv) *Prophetic-Healing Megachurches*

The last group of megachurches is those that focus on the delivery of prophecies as an important but scarce service in contemporary Africa. In recent years in Africa, a new prophetic elite has emerged whose activities straddle the religious and political domains because of the nature of the followership and the goods of salvation they claim to offer politically exposed and powerful people. Even when they disavow any direct involvement in politics, they are political prophets in more ways than one: they service political actors, supply prophecies with direct political significance and consequences, mobilise resources (mystical and human) for political participation and intervention. The search for insights into the future is strong among contemporary Africans who increasingly grapple with existential uncertainty and vulnerability caused by, among other factors, rapid social change and structural weakness of the post-colonial African state. Prophecy delivers a degree of confidence and certainty to confront and navigate myriad of existential instabilities and muddles. Prophets who claim divinatory powers of searching the mind of deity for sure-footed directions for practical action often attract large followings from all strata of society. The preeminent prophetic megachurch in Africa is SCOAN (mentioned earlier), whose ever-controversial prophet, T.B. Joshua, has elevated global prophecies to a never-before seen level. With the power of modern communication technologies such as the Internet and satellite television broadcasting, Joshua and his Ikotu, Lagos-based church provide services that are in demand all cross Africa and Asia. These services are frequently broadcast live to different global locations through Emmanuel Television, the satellite broadcasting network founded and owned by Prophet Joshua, reaching several million viewers weekly. Joshua's influence is felt in east and southern Africa when many church founders model their self-image and products after their virtual mentor (Joshua).

Unarguably the largest megachurch in Kenya is the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness (MRH) established by Prophet David Edward Owour in 2005.⁹ Born in 1966 in Goma village in Bondo District, Owour was the second of six

⁸ Personal interview with WHM member, Kampala, 29/07/17.

⁹ In his scholarly publications, he uses the name Edward D. Owour. It is not clear why he adopted for "David Owour" as his prophetic name other than David is a powerful biblical figure,

children (three girls and three boys). His parents, Hezekiah and Margaret Ochieng, were devout Christians. He started his tertiary education at the University of Makerere in Kampala but later changed to the University of Nairobi where he obtained his Bachelor of Science degree in 1988. He proceeded to Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Israel in 1992 where he obtained his master's degree and later to University of Haifa, on Mount Carmel, where he graduated with a doctorate in molecular genetics. His academic credentials include a postdoctoral fellowship at the Centre for Pharmacological Biotechnology at the College of Pharmacy at the University of Illinois, USA, and later worked as a professor of medicine at the University of Oklahoma. From 2003, he claimed to have had his inaugural vision and prophetic mandate in a series of special visions of God in the company of Daniel, Elijah and Moses (as witnesses) and receiving a mandate to be the "Hand of God on Earth". He further claimed that in a vision witnessed by John the Baptist in 2004, God appeared to him and handed him the Rod of Moses so he could preach repentance to all the world and prepare humankind for the Parousia. He is both respected and feared by ordinary Kenyans and politicians alike who accord him utmost respect and dread. He criticises established Christianity, especially the Prosperity Pentecostal variant; he, therefore, fails or refuses, to establish any cooperation or network with other major churches. He also has a "love-and-hate" relationship with Kenya's political elite whom he accuses of every known sin; yet, he blackmails them to participate in his city holiness revival or risk being voted out of office during elections. His primary products are holiness or repentance, prophecy, and healing. The MRH is as unusual as its founder. It is not called a church as Owour is hugely antagonistic to established religion and religious nomenclatures; it is called "tent" and so, is technically a 'megatent', rather than a megachurch. Owour's symbolic white suits and white limousines, characteristic prophecies of darkness, gloom and doom and the unparalleled capacity to mobilise multitudes of people to shut down different parts of Nairobi set this 'megatent' and its founder apart from other megachurches. His 'radical Otherness' and promises of healing and holiness draw many to his services.

5 Enchanted Imagination

In building a robust organisation, expanding membership is key. However, even for Pentecostal groups that claim to open their doors to anyone and everyone, it is only a matter of time before they become strategic in deliberately

a builder of God's temple and a prophet, see: <http://www.repentandpreparetheway.org/> (14/07/18). It is also unclear how Owour recognised these biblical personages.

targeting the wealthy and upwardly mobile segments of a society. While the poor may constitute the numerical base and strength, the wealthy and educated form the financial backbone and intelligentsia. The demographic and quantitative definition of the megachurch highlights its implication on the popular religion as popular culture (Chidester 2018: 166–173). A megachurch is a popular religion, an organisation that prides itself on producing and marketing services, goods and ideologies that many people like and consume. It produces salvation goods on a large scale, creates complex networks and channels to distribute these to a large religious consumer market; its economy of scale activities means that its products are “regularly consumed by large numbers of people” (Chidester 2018:167). African Megachurches are deeply embedded in the production and consumption of religious popular cultures such as religious movies, sermons encoded on DVDs and CDs, books and pamphlets, SMS and daily devotionals (Ukah 2008: 150–151). They engage in relentless exchange processes whereby they borrow technology forms and cultural formations from the larger society while (re)encoding these with their own contents and interests. Their media production includes radio and television stations especially satellite and Internet broadcasting where their major products are miracles of healings, testimonies, and teachings or motivation talks (Ihejirika and Okon 2015). Through these means, they (re)enchant the large society.

Therefore, the different types of megachurches as discussed above are spaces of, and for, public enchantment. According to the art historian, David Morgan, although enchantment comes from the Latin *cantere*, to sing, its meaning revolves around being spell-bound and rooted like a marble statue (Morgan 2018: 1–3). It is “the subordination of a network to a focal object” (Morgan 2018: 78). Megachurches are possible because of their power to subordinate a large network of persons to a core sacred focus or object, the charismatic figure, who is the supplier of goods of salvation: healing, repentance, prophecy, empowerment, enlightenment, prosperity and success. Through their activities, or rather, products, which may take place all week-long and may cover different aspects of life, megachurches sacralise urban centres where their influence and power are focused and intensely felt. Rituals are special structures of enchantment; they are performative practices that are moulded towards approaching the sacred and at the same time resacrelising the self in the process. African megachurches’ strategies of expansion include the restructuring of (urban) space and time. For example, the construction of prayer retreat sites, popularly called Prayer Camps, is one of these strategies. The RCCG, for example, holds its most important trans-denominational event monthly; the first Friday of each month is when the Holy Ghost Service, an all-night prayer and miracle service holds. The HGS gathers together more than 200,000 worshippers at the

Redemption Camp for prayers and miracles. The first weekend, unlike other weekends of the months, is unusually sacred. Enoch Adebeye, who is the inventor of this ritual, claims the choice of the first weekend was informed by divine instruction: this is when God wants to perform miracles and answers the deepest yearnings and desires of worshippers. It has to be a night vigil because God is keener to hearkening to the prayer requests of people during the stillness of the night. However, Friday night is important because many people will be free from working on Saturday morning; likewise, first Friday of the month is important because salaries and wages are paid during the last week of the month, just days away from the first Friday of the month. Staging this event in this way better maximises both attendance and fiscal extraction. This event restructures this time of the month and ritualises the site where it is held.

Because the RCCG has chosen the first weekend of the month for its event, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles (founded by Daniel Olukoya in 1989), another megachurch, which runs a sprawling prayer camp just 20 kilometres away from the Redemption Camp, holds its version of monthly night vigil, called “Power Must Change Hands” (PMCH), every first Saturday of the month at its ritual camp, the Prayer City. This camp is described as a site where “aggressive prayer goes on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, non-stop”.¹⁰ PMCH, like HGS, is broadcast live on YouTube and satellite Television channels.¹¹ Similarly, the Christ Embassy, another ‘super-megachurch’ with headquarters in Lagos holds its monthly vigil on the last Friday of the month. To maximise both influence and extractive capacity, these monthly events are also conducted at all branches of the megachurches outside their national headquarters or Camp. Furthermore, they have been exported aboard wherever the organisation has a congregation. Monthly night vigil has proliferated among megachurches as both a pillar in their salvation economy and a structure in the enchantment of urban space, time and imagination. Further, it is a means of exercising spiritual influence among believers, for those able to attend as well as those who are unable to attend but are advised to watch them live online, on satellite television channels and on their mobile phones. Undeniably, these events, which indicate excess of sacred goods, constitute a veritable means of foisting and fostering an enchanted imagination on religious and urban publics.

African megachurches use technologies to produce and sustain urban enchantment. These organisations, like other Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, are savvy users of modern communications technology as instruments of

10 <https://www.mountainoffire.org/about> (15/07/18). In addition to the monthly vigil, the MFM holds “Prayer Rain” event every Friday from 08hoo.

11 <https://www.mountainoffire.org/pmch> (15/07/18).

enchantment. As described in the four types of African megachurches, each of the founders has used technology in a specific way to shape and influence the public in a way that supports his or her interpretation of the scriptures and charismata. The scriptures as power instruments are technologies that extend the influence, power, authority and legitimacy of religious entrepreneurs. As Joyce Smith (2008: 151) makes clear, media producers have both good and greedy reasons for the way they use media to influence specific publics. For the managers of megachurches, the media work in diverse ways to keep their audiences, customers, consumers and clientele enchanted so that numbers do not drop, and influence or finances do not shrink.

6 Conclusion

African megachurches are not modern innovations; they have been in existence for decades although their forms have been changing from decade to decade. They are characterised by the feature of adopting a complex range of theologies and structures as a strategic self-positioning relative to the larger society and the religious or spiritual desires of segments of society. This complex range of social and theological positions within the production, circulation and consumption of religion has become necessary in attaining and maintaining their mega-status and withstanding stiff competition in an increasingly crowded sacred (and entertainment) market. Megachurches are structures of materialising power. They constitute a social aspect of Pentecostal too-muchness, the desire, and greed as some scholars may prefer to regard it, to accumulate and manifest material excess of charismata, organisational structure, possession, wealth and influence. The grandiose promises and expectations, the hyperboles and extremes of thriving for everything are materialised and spectacularised in megachurches and megatents. Megachurches are paradoxical organisations in the African socio-economic and political landscape: As Africa experiences too-muchness of poverty and deficiencies of social infrastructure, the continent is likewise experiencing the emergence of Pentecostal too-muchness, increase in mega-sized churches with a dizzying accumulation of wealth, power and property. As Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:58) contends, African megachurches are frequently motivated by greed for finances and fame. In this regards, money, as a system of storing, recording and calculating value,¹² is the fuel of megachurches; chronicling their emergence and

¹² Megachurches also recognise that money is a system of value transfer and evaluation; hence, the stress on money-making, donation, tithing and giving, etc.

performance, as this chapter has attempted to do, is a way of scrutinising the nature and performance of power. In diverse ways, all megachurches are performers of power and money. They are entrepreneurial powerhouse organisations where religion, entertainment, popular culture is legitimated, reinforced and fused with for-profit discourses and practices. Even here, as in its theology and biblical interpretations, the plasticity and fluidity of African megachurches is very evident.

For megachurches, number is sacred; it is more than destiny: it is (organisational or institutional) salvation. In the democratising countries of Africa, the numbers that megachurches can generate has afforded them tremendous political attention, attraction and power. With only a few exceptions, almost all African megachurches play direct and indirect political roles. The political behaviour of these churches indicates that they exchange sacred bonds with the political class who use the platforms of mass ritual events as strategies of image laundering in exchange for political patronage. Owour of Kenya receives political and diplomatic privileges from the Kenyan State which includes money; the RCCG is beholden to the political elite of Nigeria and has received import tax waivers amounting to several million United States dollars; SCOAN is host to several high-ranking politicians from several African countries including Zambia, South Africa, and Ghana. Founders of some of Ghana's megachurches are appointed into boards of government establishments including universities in exchange or as a reward for their support of government policies and practices. Across Africa, therefore, the general trend is that the megachurches are pro-state establishments from where they receive massive financial and symbolic supports; they frequently host political and state actors. This alignment to the status-quo and support for oppressive, extractive and sometimes predatory postcolonial structures and actors not only dent the social image of these megachurches and embroil them in political controversies, it also vitiates the often-vaunted capacity to introduce sustainable and long-lasting social change in their immediate societies. Furthermore, because megachurches are not democratic, transparent and publicly accounting and accountable organisations, they lack the culture that inculcates in their members democratic values of demanding for political and ethical accountability from politicians, public officials and the state. Consequently, they are hardly suitable spaces for members' training for citizenship rights, political responsibilities and obligations. While the African megachurch republics have built impressive religioeconomic corporations, they are yet to translate such feats into constructing critical political culture and strategies in the production of "common goods" for the entire society rather than for an exclusive privileged Pentecostal class, a situation that mitigates against

their narratives of effectiveness as instruments and institutions of social reform and transformation.

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