Megachurch Success in the Age of Radical Modernity:

An Analysis of the Role of Co-Sanctified Lexicons in Three American Cities

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DEDICATION

For Jake
First. Last. Forever.
My life partner, who walked with me a long way down this PhD. road,
with blessing, pride, and generosity.
A man like no other.
1960-2017

For my family extraordinaire.
For my friends, wisdom personified.
Who literally and metaphorically held me together
in the face of unbearable loss.

For Nora, our granddaughter.
Whose wild and joyous spirit re-awakened my own.

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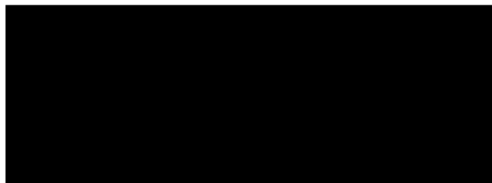
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



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ABSTRACT

There has been a sharp decline in Christian church attendance in the past two decades, while at the same time megachurches are growing and thriving. This thesis examines the significant success of three megachurches in the United States: Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles, California, and Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Joining the more recent qualitative research of megachurches (survey, case study, and focus-group interviews), the thesis adopts an in-depth qualitative and processual approach to the examination of the success of these three megachurches. The strengths of this approach are contrasted with the quantitative and abstracted approaches of much of the earlier dominant research within the existing literature on megachurches. The qualitative analysis is informed and guided by five general themes that have emerged from the existing academic literature on megachurches: individualism, consumerism, therapeutic comfort, anti-establishment, and cultural relevance. The focus on three different megachurches in this study also allows comparative insights to be developed, drawing attention both to the similarities of success across cases and also to significant differences in the forms taken by success in each of the three churches. This comparative perspective gives rise to the emergence of a further general theme, one based on the similarities between the otherwise significantly different churches. It is argued that this additional general theme - low commitment, high-security belonging - sheds light on a significant, hitherto neglected, dimension of the success of the megachurches. The overall perspective of the research investigation is informed by i) the theoretical explications of the vagaries of radical modernity, as articulated separately by Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman; ii) the meta-theoretical sociological themes of social construction, structure, agency, and habitus; and iii) sociological theories of language and religion. At the empirical heart of the study, the methodological tools of discourse analysis and website analysis are employed to conduct a thorough linguistic analysis of each of the three church websites. The website data upon which the analysis is based was accessed during the years of September 2013 – January 2014 (Lakewood Church), July 2015 (West Angeles Church of God in Christ), and February – April 2016 (Mars Hill Bible Church). The data includes all page links on the main page, and every link within each of the subsequent pages. Essentially, every link was captured and analyzed. This resulted in hundreds of pages for each megachurch. The resulting linguistic ethnography shows that though their social locations, ideologies, and theologies were significantly different from each other, each megachurch's sacred lexicon was permeated by selected aspects of vernacular lexicons to the degree that the vernacular elements had also become part of the sacred. This resulted in co-sanctified lexicons that appeared to function to establish a habitus of safety and security for the megachurch attendees, despite the uneasy liminalities of radical modernity. The combination of theoretical perspective and empirical evidence provides strong grounds for suggesting that the co-sanctified lexicons enabled each megachurch to uniquely thrive, even while their surrounding culture was abandoning formal religious beliefs and practices.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Megachurch Success in an Inhospitable Landscape: Researching the Incongruity of Current Trends in Religious Attendance and Adherence

In the U.S. market of religion, megachurches are thriving. We live in an era where "americans are asserting their ability as consumers of religious products to engage in religious switching" (von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012:57). At the same time, we are also observing a significantly steady rise of religious 'nones' in America - those raised in religious families who are walking away from formal religious belief, experience, and expression (Drescher 2016; Bass 2012; Lim, Putnam, and MacGregor 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). According to Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz of the Pew Research Centre, "nones"[1] are people who self-identify as no longer participating in formal religion, and in 2014 they made up 23% of U.S. adults, up significantly from 16% in 2007. The "spiritual but not religious" category rose further to 27% of U.S. adults in 2017 making it an 11% rise from 2007 – 2017. Diana Butler Bass, also working with research data from the Pew Research Centre, points out that "in the half century since 1960, the number of Americans claiming belief in God went from a "most emphatic 97 percent to 71 percent – a 26 point drop" (Bass 2012:45). The Barna research group has documented a

[1] "Nones" and "somes" are terms now regularly used in the research on religious change. But it is worth noting that "nones" has an inherently pejorative connotative meaning. Simply because someone does not adhere to some type of religious or spiritual belief does not automatically lead to believing nothing, as the term "none" seems to imply. For example, atheism and agnosticism would currently inaccurately fall into the category of "none", and yet it functions judgmentally to label these beliefs as "none".

significant increase in what they are labeling as "post-Christians,"[2] with a rise of 7% between 2013 to 2015, hence 44% of U.S. adults are now in this category (Barna 2015). This "exodus is most pronounced among Protestants" (Drescher 2016:16). Interestingly, upon closer examination some of the "nones" are in reality "somes" – those who have removed themselves from religious contexts but continue to maintain spiritual practices. This is a landscape in which there is a high degree of liminality (betwixt and between), of significant religious switching, and in many cases deserting.

Megachurches draw approximately 1,500 - 2,000 attendees or more, "employing large numbers of staff and occupying substantial sites" (Percy 2020:107) and are typically Protestant. They are "the very largest of the large" churches (Eagle 2020:46). The striking success of megachurches within the landscape described above would seem on the face of it to be a conundrum, a puzzle, or at the very least to pose a challenge to social research and analysis. The general aim of the current thesis is to contribute additional, distinctive, research to the literature that has begun to rise to this challenge. It aims, for example, to go beyond, the important and influential work carried out by Thumma and Travis 2007; Thumma and Bird 2009, 2015; and Bird and Thumma 2011, which produced typologies based on quantitative analyses of the characteristics of a large sample of megachurches. By way of contrast, the more

[2] To qualify as post-Christian, individuals had to meet nine or more of the following: 1) Do not believe in God, 2) Identify as Atheist or Agnostic, 3) Disagree that faith is important in their lives, 4) Have not prayed to God (in the last year), 5) Have not made a commitment to Jesus, 6) Disagree the Bible is accurate, 7) Have not donated money to a church (in the last year), 8) Have not attended a Christian church (in the last year), 9) Agree that Jesus committed sins, 10) Do not feel a responsibility to "share their faith", 11) Have not read the Bible (in the last week), 12) Have not volunteered at church (in the last week), 13) Have not attended Sunday School (in the last week), 14) Have not attended religious small group (in the last week), and 15) Do not participate in a house church (in the last year).

focused aim of the current investigation is to produce a more qualitative analysis of three particular megachurches, engaging in the detailed empirical exploration and analysis of these churches. This follows in the footsteps of other more recent qualitative work examining megachurch success, notably that of Wellman, Corcoran and Stockly (2020), Corcoran and Wellman (2016), and Wellman, Corcoran, Stockly-Meyerdirk (2014), which analyzed focus group interviews, and conducted congregational surveys, as well as Multer and Marti's (2020) case study of the Crystal Cathedral, Barnes' (2010), and Tucker-Worgs' (2011) largely interview and attendance based examinations of Black Megachurches. The advantage of this research in looking at the characteristics of a small number of particular churches is not only that the key characteristics can be studied in great detail, but also that they can be considered in context, and thus in a more embedded, holistic and relational manner. Even more specifically, the investigation is original in its aim to analyze the language and discourse employed by each church, and to do so on the basis of the sociology of language and religion. A significant underlying theoretical concern of the sociology of language and religion is to draw attention to the structural power of language to shape institutions and experience, and the current investigation aimed to further this objective by in-depth content analyses of the websites of each of the three megachurches, a primary means by which they address and communicate with their attendees.

The empirical aspects of the research focus, primarily, on the micro-discursive processes embedded within the websites, through which the three megachurches palpably aim to produce – to construct – aspects of their relationship with their attendees, a relationship that

has been so successful despite the seemingly inhospitable social landscape for recruitment. The emphasis on the ‘production’ or ‘construction’ of this relationship is framed by a combination of two additional theoretical frames to the theoretical apparatus of the sociology of language and religion. These are: i) meta-theory, primarily in the form of insights taken from symbolic interactionism, and from theories of structure, agency and habitus; and ii) the macro theory of radicalized modernity. The emphasis on radicalized modernity allows the research into the micro-processes of meaning and communication to be embedded within, and positioned in relation to, the powerful, large-scale, macro-processes that characterize the social world of late modernity. Each set of theories will be seen to play a part in analyzing how the three megachurches have been shaped by, have interacted with, and have adapted to, the current cultural ethos in America. The combination enables the thesis to examine the relationship *between* these processes of embeddedness and adaptation, *and* the striking success of megachurches.

In the process of the research *investigation*, or what C. Wright Mills famously calls the ‘context of discovery’ in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959:222), the combination of the three theoretical influences come together to form a theoretical ‘perspective’ which informed the empirical exploration and analysis. The *argument* of the thesis emerged from the combination of this theoretical perspective and empirical exploration, and gradually took shape on the basis of the linguistic ethnography resulting from this investigation. The actual formation of the final version of the argument was therefore subsequent to the empirical research, as new ideas formed and were modified throughout the empirical research collection stages (Mills 1959:22).

However, for purposes of clarity in the order and sequencing of the thesis, or what Mills calls the 'context of presentation' of the research (1959:222), key aspects of the argument will be outlined in the thesis before many elements of the empirical investigation are introduced. All empirical claims based on the linguistic ethnography, however, will be substantiated and/or appropriately qualified at the appropriate points in the presentation of the thesis (primarily chapters 4, 5 and 6).

Finally, there is an important comparative dimension to the objectives of the thesis, one that builds upon the aims already outlined. Significant insights are produced by looking in-depth at the *similarities* between the ways the three megachurches construct their discourses, and also at the profound *differences* between them in this regard. Through the comparative method it is, first, possible to detect and highlight general characteristics shared by megachurches that are otherwise very different, so addressing for example why megachurches in general are so successful in what initially looks like an inhospitable climate. But, secondly, it is also possible to identify and highlight characteristics that are specific to particular churches, who address their attendees in quite distinctive ways, so highlighting the very different characteristics and strategies of different megachurches appealing to different kinds of addressees in distinct locations.

The primary *argument* of the thesis, one that emerges from the interweaving of the prior aims and objectives of the investigation, is that the in-depth analysis of the websites provides strong evidence to support the proposition that the success of megachurches in the United States is best explained and understood when placed against the backdrop of the

powerful macro structural forces of radical modernity. The theories of radicalized modernity contend that the dynamic character of these objective macro structures are the source of profound subjective feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety. These subjective consequences of radical modernity gather together in what the thesis characterizes as - adapting Victor Turner's fertile and flexible concept - a 'liminal' space (Turner 2008). The thesis argues that the ability to allay the dis-ease of liminality by speaking into the subjective experiences of liminality could account in great part for the success of the megachurches. Through close analysis of the symbolic and linguistic discourses deployed within the public presentation of three different megachurches the thesis reveals the mechanisms through which – it can plausibly be argued – the megachurches skillfully achieve this connection.

The three megachurches - Lakewood Church, West Angeles Church of God in Christ, and Mars Hill Bible Church - were selected on the basis of having as much variety as possible. Their founding dates are 1943, 1959, and 1999. Two are non-denominational and one is denominational. Lakewood is located in Houston, Texas, the Bible belt of the deep south, West Angeles is located on what has historically been understood as the main street of black Los Angeles, California, and Mars Hill is located in one of the oldest suburbs of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Lakewood meets in what was previously the multi-sport Compaq Centre of Houston and is known for its prosperity gospel preaching, West Angeles is a predominantly African-American church steeped in the traditions of Pentecostalism and social activism, meeting in a church with a 103 foot stained glass tower, and Mars Hill meets in the unadorned old anchor store of an abandoned mall, and is known for its "hipster" vibe. Their histories, ideologies-

theologies, geographical locations, and surrounding cultural milieus are each significantly different from the other two. Further demographic details are provided in each chapter, and also in the methodology section below (pp. 117).

Outline of Chapters

The sequence and content of each chapter will provide a greater provisional and cumulative sense of the structure of the overall argument, as outlined in the following chapter summaries.

Chapter 2 explores Anthony Giddens's conception of 'radical modernity', focusing particularly on his concepts of *distanciation, disembedding*, and *reflexivity* (Giddens 1991), which provide the backdrop and context for an understanding of the current cultural ethos. This analysis is complemented by reference to Zygmunt Bauman's (2013) metaphor of "fluidity" for our current era – it is not easy to put a stop to fluids, and when fluids encounter something solid it is more likely that what is solid is changed in some way than that the fluid is changed. The chapter also briefly contrasts the idea of radical modernity with conceptions of post-modernity, indicating why the explanatory power of the former is to be preferred as a means of grasping the current socio-cultural ethos. As conceptualized by theorists such as Giddens and Bauman, the consequences of radical modernity (also often referred to as 'late modernity', and accordingly the thesis will use the two terms interchangeably) have resulted in the wide-spread understanding that there is no stable truth to be known. This has caused deep and distressing disequilibrium for many. Yet the human need to be able to commit to some kind of truth in

order to make our way in this world, and with each other, remains as potent as it has in all the previous eras of human history. While many no longer feel confident in any of the metanarratives we construct, and more importantly in the construction process itself, the impulse to construct remains. The result is the experience of an individual and collective sense of liminality that permeates both individual and collective life. This research will explore the types of metanarratives that megachurches have constructed, that appear to effectively draw in religious shoppers and keep potential deserters in their pews, despite the decline in evangelical attendance more generally, seemingly holding at bay the existential unease caused by the experience of liminality.

The discussion then moves to an examination of increasing megachurch success, and the megachurch themes identified in the substantive literature on megachurches. Given that this substantive literature on megachurches incorporates aspects of the sociology of religion, identifying particularities and realities of megachurches at present, this was the most effective entry point for this research. Stephen Ellingson (2010) and Bryan D. Spinks (2010) each identify *consumerism* as central to the success of many megachurches because of the multiplicity of ways in which megachurches mimic the appearance and ideology of the modern mall, paired with the powerful prosperity gospel theology which suggests that believing in, and obeying, God results in being wealthy. To the theme of *consumerism* is married that of *individualism,* typified by the figure of the rugged spiritual individualist that many megachurches valorize (Bowler 2013). The theological assumption these two themes rest upon produces a third theme, that of *therapeutic comfort,* as megachurch pastor personalities preach of all that God

will do to free the individual from troubling circumstances. Recognizing the baby boomer resistance to controlling bureaucratic hierarchies that traditional churches are known for, megachurches typically present themselves as non-denominational (even when they are not) and self-contained resulting in an *anti-establishment* theme. Like the rugged individualist ideology they often encourage in their attendees, American megachurches are themselves rugged individualists (Carney 2012). The final dominant megachurch theme is that of *cultural relevance*. Generally large and wealthy, their worship includes many elements of pop culture in their music, drama, and dance, all of which is mediated using highly sophisticated videos, broadcasting, and lighting. Once placed within the framework of radical modernity, the emergence and prominence of these themes can be understood as a logical response to the consequences of radical modernity.

Chapter 3 moves its direct focus away from the macro level of radical modernity, and from the academic literature's broad characterization of the dominant substantive themes at work within megachurches in current American society. Whilst framed by these wider concerns, the focus now moves to the theoretical tools required to examine *the micro level* of the use of language and symbolism within particular megachurches. The chapter provides a description of the theory of sociology and anthropology of language as well as the newer work being developed in the emerging subdiscipline of the sociology of language and religion. These posit that all constructions of reality (i.e., all narratives) ultimately rest on the foundation of our language capacities and use. This research focuses on the nature and nuance of the realities constructed by specific types of language use on the very large websites of three very

successful U.S. megachurches. Each megachurch has developed a highly sophisticated co-sanctified lexicon (defined in detail below) which upon careful examination indicates much about the specific nature of the adaptations each respective church has made to the unique conditions of radical modernity, and which, it is argued, are highly likely to have played a significant role in their high degree of success. The work of Joshua Fishman (2006) is discussed, particularly the power of co-sanctified lexicons to construct realities, and their capacity for shaping and creating habitus (Bourdieu 2007) is noted. The approach of the thesis pairs this more abstract theorizing by Fishman (2006), and its role in the formation of habitus, with the methodology of discourse analysis, which is equipped with the tools to illuminate the profound within the "everyday-ishness" of language. Each megachurch is a discourse community whose practices within their shared co-sanctified lexicons establish expectations and norms and perspectives of the world and themselves, i.e., habitus. The sheer size of each megachurch combined with their extensive and influential co-sanctified lexicons can readily function hegemonically. Incorporated into this pairing of the sociology of language and religion, and discourse analysis, is the fledgling work being done in website analysis, which is exploring the ways that websites are performance spaces in which self-directed organizational identity construction happens, revealing the priorities of an organization. This new field is recognizing the value of decoding organizational culture based on the language used, the visuals, and the design.

Given that the subjects of this study are specifically evangelical megachurch websites, it is, of course, important to examine what evangelicals themselves have been saying, or not

saying, regarding their own discourse patterns and language use. Chapter 3, accordingly, includes an examination of publicly available sources on this theme. While this research is 'outsider' knowledge, recognizing the knowledge of the 'insider' is both a matter of respect and potential usefulness. The chapter concludes with a detailed overview of the specific processes this research has undertaken in gathering together a survey of the ethnographic landscape of each of the three megachurches. The thesis can claim originality, too, in this aspect of the research, for while the relationship between language and identity has previously been explored through various disciplinary intersections, there is no other research that I am aware of examining religious, or more specifically Christian, language as it relates to identity construction and habitus building, and *a fortiori*, with respect to megachurches.

It should be noted at this point that the decision to focus on the analysis of language, discourse, and the text of the websites means that the research has not involved a first-hand analysis of the viewpoints and self-understandings of the members themselves using interviews, focus groups or other forms of in situ fieldwork. As with any approach, it is inevitable that such selection of emphasis means that there is an in-depth exploration of certain parts of the causal process but not of other parts. This, in turn, means that when claims are made in the thesis about, for example, how attendees are likely to 'internalize' or 'receive' the messages from the websites, these claims should be understood as having a provisional status, one that requires additional, hermeneutic, emic, fieldwork in order for them to be further tested, substantiated and consolidated. The same is the case for any claims about the intentions of those involved in producing the websites and their messages. Having said this,

however, the combined theoretical perspectives that frame the analysis, together with the evidence base of chapters 4,5 and 6, provide a robust theoretical-empirical basis for making many highly plausible empirical claims.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 assume and deploy the framework of late or radical modernity discussed in detail in chapter 2, and employ the methodological and theoretical tools discussed in chapter 3 to explore the primary data collected from the three megachurches chosen for this research– Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles, California, and Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. These megachurches are distributed across the United States, with Lakewood Church in the southern region of the United States, Mars Hill Bible Church in the northern region of the United States, and Los Angeles Church of God in Christ in the western region of the United States. Lakewood Church in Texas is an area known for its political affiliations with the Republican Party, Los Angeles Church of God in Christ in California is in an area known for its political affiliations with the Democratic Party, and Mars Hill Bible Church is in an area known as a “swing state”, meaning it supports both Democrats and Republicans, hence in each election it is uncertain which way the votes will “swing.” Los Angeles Church of God in Christ is a predominantly African American congregation with deep roots in their slave histories, Lakewood Church is anchored in a prosperity gospel theology, and Mars Hill Bible Church is a leader in the emergent church movement. It is because of these strong differences, geographically, ideologically, and theologically, that these three churches were chosen. Rather than choosing churches that fit the majority of megachurch typologies or stereotypes, the focus of this research was to employ

the robustness of a comparative approach in order to identify commonality in the midst of these strong differences, and vice-versa. Despite the many ways in which these megachurches are different from each other, they are nevertheless each the same in that they are all very large, well-known, and highly influential megachurches. Their distinct differences, couched as they are within the highly successful nature of each, creates a challenging and robust research context for comparison.

The co-sanctified lexicon of the Lakewood Church, examined in chapter 4, draws heavily on ideologies of the American dream, pairing it with linguistic constructions of a God whose primary task is to make the individual healthy, wealthy, and successful – blessed in every way. Essentially, a religious version of the American Dream. One need merely boldly claim these blessings and God will grant them. Their co-sanctified lexicon constructs Joel Osteen, Lakewood's figurehead, as the ultimate Christian source of truth and success, vested in powerful religious authority, and at times almost God-like in how he is presented relative to Christian concepts of salvation. Ultimately, Lakewood offers all of this as a part of belonging to Lakewood, encompassing the attendee with the very stylish, successful, and extravagant Lakewood surroundings that they are encouraged to claim for their personal lives. This functions to offer security and safety from the buffeting winds of radical modernity. And all of this 'soon-to-be' prosperity (which functions as reassurance of security in this life, and hence proof of one's positive place in the next life), success, and belonging, can be consumed without any requirement or social pressure to commit to the tasks that keep Lakewood going. One can

reap all the benefits of belonging while also maintaining minimal commitment and participation.

Chapter 5 focuses on West Angeles Church of God in Christ, which is primarily an African-American church whose uniquely bi-partite co-sanctified lexicon draws heavily on its slave history. This is examined in the first part of the chapter, and the current cultural civic-minded discourse of the church is examined in the second part, which includes sensitivity to the great weight of the historical experience of slavery in the culture of its present, and in its orientation to the future. Layered with the emotive and psychologically sustaining discourse of collective charisma, their co-sanctified lexicon is steeped in the language of bondage, freedom, and salvation. This is coupled with their civic discourse focused on racial equality, social activism, and creative social programming to increase the socio-economic status of those within the church as well as those who live in the neighbourhood. The West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon is steeped in a sense of belonging that is pragmatic, and described in visceral terms, created by their shared charismatic religious expressions (visceral), as well as their very practical ways of helping their members and neighbourhood achieve a good education, good jobs, and good housing (pragmatic). Like Lakewood, all this belonging and safety, within the disequilibrium of radical modernity plus the continuing racial inequality within the U.S., is available without needing to commit to the work of West Angeles, opening up significant possibilities for a *low commitment – high securit*y form of belonging.

The subject of chapter 6, Mars Hill Bible church, Grandville, Michigan, frames its entire co-sanctified lexicon so as to be palatable to the church refugee – the 'somes' and 'nones' who

are weary and cynical, potentially post-Christian, and bearing the scars of late/radical modern evangelical religiosity. Yet, the language of the websites suggest, they attend because they still feel the impulse to find an anchor point in the seas of radical modernity, and the particular character of the Mars Hill co-sanctified discourse, centered on journey and story is sufficiently malleable to allow them to enter without feeling that they will be required to be theological gate-keepers, but rather pilgrims on a journey, writing their own story. Hence the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon seems to practice a sophisticated linguistic convergence between the elements of evangelical Christianity with a perception of the deep frustrations and suspicions of church refugees. Unlike Lakewood and West Angeles whose sense of belonging, as we shall see, is anchored in taking up what they purport as irrevocable truth (though the form and content are vastly different in these two megachurches), the Mars Hill sense of belonging, as detailed on their website, is anchored in the promise of journeying together as one explores the possibilities of what might be truth. The highly tentative nature of the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon creates a distinctive kind of environment that is particularly open to the phenomenon of low commitment on the part of its attendees, while at the same time there is the possibility of high security amidst the uncertainties of radical modernity. As discussed below, security is understood here as a strong sense of belonging and care in a context where the *distanciation* and *disembedding* within radical modernity has produced many forms of social isolation for many. This has the capacity to produce a sense of safety, an antidote to the disequilibrium of radical modernity.

Co-Sanctified Lexicons as Habitus Creation

At this point it will be helpful to say more about the meta-theory of structures, agency, and meaning that underpins the approach of the thesis. The most general macro-level structures at work in the thesis, those of radical modernity, appear as 'external structures' (Stones 2005) to both the megachurches and their congregations. The disembedding systems of symbolic tokens and expert systems (Giddens 1991) are external structures that powerfully shape the objective reality and the experiences of late modernity. Using a careful conceptual vocabulary of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) were pioneers in the attempt to give due weight to the subjectivity in the social processes by which such external (objective) structures become *internalized* in the phenomenology and experience of those who lived within and amongst them. Mediated through subjectivity, external structures have had a profound effect on human beings' experience and sense of themselves. Combining this with the later theorizing of Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 2007), one can think of the resulting phenomenology (internalization) as becoming embedded within the habitus of actors (Bourdieu 2007). Once internalized and sedimented, the 'phenomenology within the habitus of actors' then becomes the lens or frame through which individuals see and experience each new moment of late-modernity's external structures and dynamics.[3] This process is ongoing in a continuous process of structuration (Giddens 1984; Giddens 1991; Stones 2005). That is, the overarching processes of radical modernity build up over time, becoming condensed or crystallized within habitus. The moments in this continuous

[3] These meta-theoretical concepts will be discussed in detail below.

process, which are experienced at the level of conjuncturally-specific (or situationally specific) contexts, situations, events, elements, and so on (Stones 2005, 2009), can create –by means of individuals' experiences of external structures in the form of disembedding, distanciation, and systemic power – feelings of powerlessness, anonymity, impersonality, uncertainty, and so on, within the conscious and unconscious aspects of habitus. This process has a powerful tendency to subvert and undermine any solid sense of meaningfulness, trust, security, enduring care and intimacy, durable and shared norms that people believe in and will abide by and will securely and confidently commit to through thick and thin (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2007, 2013). It is this lack of safety and life-giving meaning that the megachurch co-sanctified lexicons are speaking into.

It would also, at this point, be useful to specifically define the term, co-sanctified lexicon. All religions typically have vocabulary or terminology that is specific to their religious tradition and its history. As it becomes 'taken-for-granted' it makes sense to refer to such language as 'the vernacular' of a particular religion at any one time. These lexicons (a compilation of their vocabulary and terminology) are sacred to their particular religious tradition and expression, hence are set apart and sanctified. As religious theologies and their surrounding cultural landscapes change, the traditional, sanctified lexicon of any one religious tradition may be challenged by these new ideas and contexts and new forms of expression evolve and emerge. Sometimes, the new ideas or ways of expressing them become equally, or more, predominant in day-to-day use in a specific religious tradition, i.e. in an odd juxtaposition, these newly sacred forms of expression become the vernacular. When this

happens there is a blending of the old sanctified lexicon with the new and increasingly sanctified ways of talking, resulting in a co-sanctified lexicon.

Each of the three mega-churches in this research are responding to the challenges of late modernity in their own ways, embedded as they are in different specific histories, traditions, and milieus. Hence, they are different from each other even as they are in other ways the same. From the perspective of their members, their internal discourses (co-sanctified lexicons[4]) are an additional set of external structures now inhabiting their lives. This structuration-construction process within late modernity can be understood, in part, "in terms of how it comes about that social activities become 'stretched' across wide spans of time-space" (Giddens 1984:21). The megachurches attempt to be the kind of external structure that is missing from their members lives but that – it is supposed - they yearn for, and that would make their lives more bearable, fulfilling, and safe. The supposition is that each megachurches' objective existence, their discourses, and their practices, are internalized to a significant degree by their members, and in doing so enter into the texture and values of their habitus. These shared phenomenologies within the context of each megachurch promise to be enduring, and represent a significant degree of certainty, sincerity, and commitment to their members. Language and communication (the particular complexion of their community of discourse) are key aspects of the structuration-construction process through which the churches position themselves to function as harbours of safety and rest for attendees. Hence their co-sanctified lexicons are the key manifestation of this – each in their own way provides some kind of refuge

[4] This concept is discussed thoroughly below.

for people facing the challenges of late modernity. The creation of these co-sanctified lexicons is among the primary foci and purposes of each megachurch. These co-sanctified lexicons, each in their own very unique way[5], provide their members with ways of improving their sense of well-being, sense of safety, worthy achievement, and belonging, leaving the habitus of members within each megachurch more securely protected from the scourges of late modernity than they would otherwise be. Analyzing the micro-processes within each co-sanctified lexicon can provide great sociological insight into what the megachurches become, how they do so, and the ways in which they support their members. As already noted, the analysis of the micro-processes evident on their websites, is sharpened and contextualized by i) exploring an understanding of how the linguistic and visual processes are part of a broader process of structuration and, ii) situating them within the socio-historical challenges of radical modernity. As is generally the case in ethnographic work (in this case linguistic ethnographies) various substantive theories and sociological and historical insights are drawn upon in the process of presenting the primary data, in chapters 4, 5 and 6, in order to illuminate and enrich the analysis of each particular focus of investigation and the issues and questions it raises.

The distinctive ways in which each megachurch appears to provide some kind of refuge from the challenges of radical modernity is by way of the construction of their co-sanctified lexicons. These discourses, potentially and likely internalized, more or less, by actors within the megachurch context, have specific characteristics, sometimes those of the nation, as with the American Dream in chapter 4, or historically specific discourses within the nation, such as those

[5] The advantages of this comparative approach will be discussed in chapter 2.

associated with slavery in chapter 5, or the contemporary conjunctural preoccupations of the growing movement of church refugees in chapter 6. Each of these is, nevertheless, overlaid by, and combined with, the more generalized discourses of late modernity. But a commonality that they share in terms of what the megachurches' co-sanctified lexicons "deliver" is their seeming capacity to usher individuals out of the "in and out" (Turner 2008:96) state of liminality, defying the authority and power (structure) of radical modernity, and offering "positive anti-structural activities" (Bigger 2009:210), ways of thinking, and being, as will be thoroughly discussed in each of the megachurch chapters below. Ironically, in the process, the hegemonic power of these megachurches' co-sanctified lexicons becomes, potentially, a new form of authority and power (structure). But this is an attenuated, adaptive, structure providing individual congregation members with an answer – an answer that is different in each of the research's three megachurches – to the conundrum of being alone, unsure, and adrift within the structures of late modernity.

In each of the three case studies, the abstract sociological meta-theory of Berger and Luckmann, of forms of structuration theory, and of Bourdieu, together with the historically periodized (radical modernity) meta-theory of Giddens, and to a lesser extent Bauman, provides a broad contextualizing frame. It can be suggested that each of the megachurches is responding to the existential challenges posed to the habitus of individuals formed within the current epoch of late modernity, and they do so through creating their own specific sub-cultural ethos by means of co-sanctified lexicons, lexicons that are appear intended to help their members to cope with the radical disequilibrium and dis-ease of late modernity.

Chapter 2

Radical Modernity, Troubled Liminality, and Megachurch Success

The Double-Edged Nature of Radical Modernity

A closer examination of the characteristics of modernity and radical modernity provide a description of the current cultural ethos of dis-ease and dis-equilibrium into which the primary themes of megachurches appear to speak so effectively. Theorists such as Giddens and Bauman (Bauman 2013; Giddens 1991; Ritzer 2014) suggest that "we are moving into [a period] in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than before" (Giddens 1991:3). Both place great emphasis on the intensification of the forces of rational, means-end (instrumental) calculation in contemporary social life, with bureaucratic, market and military forces at the very heart of this intensification. Zygmunt Bauman offers "'fluidity' as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era" (Bauman 2013:2), which he refers to as *Liquid Modernity*. Fluids "are not easily stopped" (Bauman 2013:2) and when "meeting with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed" (Bauman 2013:2). Modernity, Bauman suggests, is an increasing "process of 'liquefaction' (Bauman 2013:2). The fluid tenets of modernity have been, and are, altering the solids of tradition, loyalties, customary rights, and irrelevant obligations that were "standing in the way of rational calculation" (Bauman 2013:4). Eventually, this "laid the field open to the invasion of domination of (as Weber put it) instrumental rationality" which "led to the progressive untying of economy from its traditional political, ethical and cultural

arrangements" (Bauman 2013:4). Hence the "present day situation emerged out of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act" (Bauman 2013:5). Particularly important in the theorizing of Bauman is the observation that the project of modernity was not, and is not an attempt to "do away with solids once and for all and make the brave new world free of them forever, but to *clear the site for new and improved solids*" (italics added) (Bauman 2013:3).

Writing in the early 1990s, Giddens agreed with others that modernity had improved human existence for many[6], but he was equally intent on emphasizing 'the double-edged nature of modernity'. Modernity, he wrote, "also has a somber side which has become very apparent in the present century" (Giddens 1991:7), and Giddens illuminates the structural sources of these dark consequences in his theorizing of radical modernity. This somber side includes: the threat to the environment that has resulted from modern industrial work; the despotisms of pre-modernity which modernity was to have abolished have found expression in totalitarian institutions not the least of which were the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, and Stalinism – "we can see that totalitarian possibilities are contained within the institutional parameters of modernity rather than being foreclosed by them" (Giddens 1991:8); military power and the industrialization of war; and nuclear power as a result of the marriage of industrial power and military power. Hence the "world in which we live today is a fraught and dangerous one" (Giddens 1991:10).

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[6] One could certainly question the "many" based on global wealth disparities.

According to Giddens, whilst overarching theories of capitalism and bureaucracy have drawn attention to many of the core substantive features of modernity, much of the energy that historically and currently drives modernity can be characterized in three key concepts: 1) *distanciation*, 2) *disembedding*, and 3) *reflexivity*. The three are closely interwoven. In the premodern world both “space” and “place” are a particular physical location of social activity, but in the modern world “space” has been separated from “place” as a result of “relationships between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction” (Giddens 1991:19). Local “places” are now “thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (Giddens 1991:19). The result of this *distanciation* is that it “cut[s] through the connections between social activity and its ‘embedding’ in the particularities of contexts of presence” (Giddens 1991:20) which results in further social separation. This social separation or *disembedding* is enabled through *symbolic tokens*, the most significant being money whereby “we are able to engage in transactions with others who are widely separated from us by time and/or space” (Ritzer 2014:544) resulting in the transactions taking on an “absolute freedom from everything personal” (Simmel [1907]1978:256), and also through *expert systems*, which are “systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today” (Giddens 1991:27). From lawyers and doctors to transportation and communication systems, in the modern world we can no longer function without *symbolic tokens* and *expert systems.* We clearly do not have the necessary knowledge ourselves to fully understand the inner workings of the tokens and systems we rely on in a

single day, and actually having the skills to run them all is entirely out of the question for any single individual. In the context of so much risk (not having independent knowledge or skills for daily survival), we have virtually no choice but to trust in this multiplicity of tokens and systems in order to function in the modern world. The alternative to trust, in this context, is to "live in a state of permanent uncertainty" (Giddens 1991:31). When the "claims of reason replaced those of tradition" (Giddens 1991:39), ushering in the enlightenment and the modern era, this was initially experienced as offering a "sense of certitude greater than that provided by preexisting dogma" (Giddens 1991:39), but the privileging of reason that has characterized modernity has ultimately resulted in "the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens 1991:38). This has produced a profound form of continuous *reflexivity*, a dynamic Giddens describes as constantly taking in new information, reassessing what we thought we knew, and changing in some way as a result. The loss of capacity to readily make static irrefutable truth claims means that through this reflexive process – and because of it - we can never be sure when the knowledge we have might or will be revised – the "question of knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived" (Giddens 1991:39).

These three dynamisms – *distanciation, disembedding, and reflexivity* – have come to bear in the modern world at a pace and scope that is unprecedented in human history, and there have been many unintended consequences such as those discussed above. If, as had been assumed by many, "our knowledge of the social world simply got better and better, the scope of unintended consequences might become more and more confined and unwanted

consequences rare" (Giddens 1991:44), but the reality of *reflexivity* has resulted in the unintended consequence of there being "no stable social world to know…because that knowledge of that world contributes to its unstable or mutable character" (Giddens 1991:45). The "discovery" that nothing can be known with certainty, and that history has no inbuilt and inexorable tendency to "progress" is, according to Giddens a product of the full ripening of the unintended consequences of modernity, which he calls radical modernity. While many postmodern theorists suggest that the world is currently "so different that it requires entirely new ways of thinking" (Ritzer 2014:227), Giddens suggests that the current era is nothing more, and nothing *less*, than the full consequences of modernity coming to bear in our current age. Pauline Rosenau points out that among postmodern theorists themselves there is considerable disagreement to the point of contradiction regarding what postmodernism actually is, noting that there are "probably as many forms of postmodernism as there are postmodernists" (Rosenau 1992:15; Ritzer 2014). *Skeptical* post-modernists, according to Pauline Rosenau, argue that the postmodern age "is one of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, a vagueness or even absence of moral parameters and societal chaos" (Rosenau 1992:15). Theirs is an orientation of complete despair. *Affirmative* postmodernists, on the other hand, "agree with the skeptical post modernists' critique of modernity…[but] they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the post-modern age, …seeking a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological…[they] do not shy away from affirming an ethic, making normative choices, and striving to build issue-specific political coalitions" (Rosenau 1992:16). One could make the argument that *Affirmative* postmodernists

are, in essence, radical modernists aligned with much of Giddens theorizing. Harbouring suspicion and doubt about the veracity of various current meta-narratives – Jean-Francois Lyotard's "incredulity to meta-narratives" (2003:27) is not necessarily to have concluded that viable meta-narratives do not exist at all. Rather, it is the logical out-workings of *reflexivity* as outlined by Giddens. *Affirming* postmodernists do affirm ethics and make normative choices, but, as noted, they do so in a non-dogmatic and more tentative way. Hence radical modernity is "modernity coming to understand itself" (Giddens 1991:48), and "we are [now] left with questions where once there appeared to be answers" (Giddens 1991:49). Knowledge is now held tentatively and perhaps also anxiously, but the impulse to make meaning continues to be present and pursued.

The overall unintended consequence of modernity as identified by Giddens is that of "being onboard a careening juggernaut" (Giddens 1991:53). This juggernaut is a "runaway engine of enormous power…. which crushes those who resist it …. and there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee" (Giddens 1991:139). "The high consequence global risks which we all now run are key elements of the runaway juggernaut character of modernity, and no specific individuals or groups are responsible for them or can be constrained to 'set things right'" (Giddens 1991:131). As a result, we will "never be able to feel entirely secure" as "feelings of ontological security and existential anxiety will co-exist in ambivalence" (Giddens 1991:139), because "a general awareness of the phenomenon [of radical modernity] filters into anxieties which press in on everyone" (Giddens 1991:50). Hence,

in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Giddens suggests that "the self in modern society is frail, brittle, fractured, [and] fragmented" (Giddens 1991:170).

According to Giddens, "in premodern times religious beliefs and practices both provided a refuge from the tribulations of day-to-day life" (Giddens 1991:107), and were a source of existential anxiety causing apprehensions and fear, though Giddens gives considerably more attention to exploring religion as a refuge in his examination of premodern times than he does its potentially angst-producing capacities. Giddens further observes that during much of the modern era religion has been deeply threatened by *reflexivity* along with a world in which empirical observation and rationality have become the dominant way of knowing. He argues that most of the contexts of modern life are "manifestly incompatible with religion as a pervasive influence upon day-to-day life" (Giddens 1990:109), leading the plethora of secularization theorists to observe and predict the terminal decline of religion. However, the era of radical modernity that Giddens convincingly argues we are now in is collectively disillusioned with the failures of the modern project of certainty, and is steeped in "anxieties that [now] press in on everyone" (Giddens 1990:50). Reason, Giddens argues, "proves unable to provide an ultimate justification of itself" (Giddens 1990:17). Having rejected "naïve" pre-modern notions of religious certainty, yet facing the failure of the certainties and securities promised by modernity, and with global threats all around, we are riding a careening out of control juggernaut with no one to "set things right" (Giddens 1990:131). Echoing the sentiments of Max Weber regarding salvation religions as both producing and alleviating angst in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958) and *The Sociology of Religion*

(1963), Giddens is clear that the appeal of religion was always bound up with its purchase upon life's great existential questions and potential sources of "anxiety and mental apprehension," including those created by religion itself, "given their [religions] propensity to infect daily life with existential fears" (Giddens 1991:107-108). Hence, it is hardly surprising that, notwithstanding the secularization theorists, religion should continue to speak to very many of the individuals and communities swept along on the juggernaut of radical modernity (Giddens 1990:107-109). We continue to be meaning-making creatures, and continue to reach for religion to do so.

The current thesis endorses descriptions of the postmodern characterization of culture and subjectivity. However, rather than focusing just on the terrain of culture and subjectivity – the internalized experience of fragmentation, uprootedness, uncertainty, and meaninglessness - it anchors these 'ways of seeing' in the deep structures of radical modernity. In other words, it sees the cultural malaise, the sense of societal chaos and moral insecurity, the pessimism, as well as the more hopeful, creative, responses, as all consequences of the era of radical modernity and the structural dynamics it has set in play. It is only with an awareness of the structures of radical modernity that one can grasp the roots of postmodern culture with its sense of fragmentation, the proliferation of images and symbols, the anxiety caused by constant change and the absence of moorings, the accompanying loss of fixed meanings and values, the widespread frustration and despair, and the retreat into a fragile individualism. The 'active agency' of the megachurches, which functions as a response to these cultural subjectivities and experiences, can only be properly understood once these experiences are

seen as the result of the structurally driven dynamics of radical modernity. Though Giddens does not employ the term liminality, he does observe that modernity has been “cut loose from its moorings” (Giddens 1991:176). His theoretical and historical observations seem to suggest that the consequences of modernity have produced a collective liminal state of unease and uncertainty, a “neither here nor there…betwixt and between” (Turner 2008:95). In their research exploring the polarization and pluralism that has developed in American religion over the past 50 years, Putnam and Campbell (2010) identify a significant number of current Americans who “seem to be standing at the edge of a religious tradition, half in and half out” (Putnam and Campbell 2010:135), which they call “liminals” (Putnam and Campbell 2010:136).

Megachurches: Organized Religious Responses to the Liminality of Radical Modernity

Liminality

The Latin term *limes* denotes threshold, and the Latin word *limen* means boundary or limit, both of which originate from the Latin root *limus* (Wels, van der Wall, Spiegel, and Kamsteeg 2011:34). The French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep first introduced the term *liminality* as part of his ethnographic work in *The Rites of Passage* (1960), naming it as the centre of three stages in typical rites of passage processes such a puberty, marriage, and childbirth. But the term and concept became part of the stock of knowledge of anthropology through Turner’s use and expansion of it, particularly in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969). Liminality, according to Turner, is “a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner 2008:94). It “is frequently likened to death,

to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness….to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (Turner 2008:95). It is a "moment in and out of time and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals…a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (Turner 2008:96). Turner was much less precise with the concept than Van Gennep, which frustrates some theorists, but "for others it is what makes it an endearing concept – precisely because of its possibilities for flexible adaption and application" (Wels, van der Waal, Spiegel and Kamsteeg 2011:1). It can be readily "re-deployed" (Human and Robins 2011:38). Hence, Turner's somewhat malleable concept of *liminality* has recently regained academic interest. In 2009 a two-day workshop was hosted at Stellenbosch University in South Africa by a group of colleagues working in the field of organizational anthropology and South African ethnography. Their purpose was to explore how the concept of *liminality* could shed new light on their ongoing fieldwork (Wels, van der Waal, Spiegel and Kamsteeg 2011). This resulted in nine articles published in the peer-reviewed journal *Anthropology Southern Africa.* A seventeen chapter anthology of Turner's work, *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, was published by New York and Oxford, Berghahn books in 2008. The *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* dedicated a number of articles in its 2008 journal to Turner and liminality. The *International Political Anthropology Journal* dedicated an issue to Turner in 2009. Turner's *liminality* has recently been "re-deployed" to study religion, social movements, tourism, sociality of cyberspace, identity, and ageing, to name but a few (Wels, Waal, Spiegel and Kamsteeg 2011).

Turner juxtaposes Structure and Anti-structure, with Structure being social status, authority, and power and Anti-structure being the felt pressure to change and the creative responses to those pressures to change. The liminal space is a space that allows Anti-structure and "the greater the powerlessness, the greater the need for positive anti-structural activities" (Bigger 2009:210). According to Kapferer's reading of Turner (2008), it is from the "creative and generative moments outside social orders, systems and structures, from which new orientations and structures of life emerge" (Kapferer 2008:6).

It is the contention of this research that the liminal space/place created by radical modernity that we find ourselves in has within it the conditions for religion, with its claims of being able to "set things right" (Giddens 1991:131), to re-emerge as a significant influence in the cultural landscape, particularly among the liminals that Putnam and Campbell identify. Megachurches embody one type of "creative and generative moment" (Kapferer 2008:6) which allows liminals caught in the juggernaut of radical modernity to create an orientation to life that alleviates their overall sense of dis-ease. This is due in part to the fact that religion provides "moral and practical interpretations of personal and social life, as well as the natural world, which represent an environment of security for the believer" (Giddens 1991:103). Religion tends to claim that it knows what the problem is, and what the solution is, both of which are currently unclear in the era of radical modernity, and it is this uncertainty that has produced our current collective liminal state, and which megachurches intentionally, or unintentionally, address.

In speculating about what the era beyond the threshold might look like, Giddens briefly explores the notion of utopian realism, which “combines ‘opening of windows’ upon the future with the analysis of ongoing institutional trends whereby political futures are immanent in the present” (Giddens 1991:178). The paragraph that follows, which concludes *The Consequences of Modernity* (1991) is cryptic in its further exploration of where ‘utopian realism’ might take us, but Giddens does end by speculating about “whether this would imply a resurgence of religion in some form or another” (Giddens 1991:178). It is within this liminal threshold space/place (a consequence of radical modernity) that there has indeed been a “resurgence of religion in some form or another,” and one very significant form is megachurches which have found themselves in conditions in which to thrive. This research explores how different megachurches provide different variations of adaptation to the conditions and consequences of radical modernity.

The Rise of U.S. Megachurches

While the “modern megachurch movement of the 1970s and 1980s has roots that tap deep into the soil of Protestant religion” (Eagle 2020:45), going back as far as the sixteenth century, the current social phenomenon of megachurches in the United States first gained significant media attention “as a distinctive form of religious organization” (Eagle 2020:61) in the 1970’s and 80’s (Thumma and Travis 2007; Ellingson 2010), as the numbers of megachurches increased from 50 in 1970 to more than 1,200 by 2005 (Thumma and Travis 2007). Since then there have been intermittent news reports that these large churches are in decline. However, a 2015 survey of 209 megachurches conducted by leading megachurch

researchers, Leadership Network and Hartford Institute (2015), indicates that “rapid growth remains a hallmark of very large congregations” (Thumma and Bird 2015:2) with a median growth rate of 26% over five years, and “nearly three-quarters (70%) of them increas[ing] by 10% or more in the past five years” (Thumma and Bird 2015:2). Further, the “median founding date has increased from 1972 to 1977; thus, what is now “commonly termed the ‘Megachurch Movement’ (Hunt 2020:1) hasn’t waned; newer and younger churches are regularly growing to megachurch size” (Thumma and Bird 2015:3), and it is the younger megachurches, founded since 1990, that are growing at the fastest rate - 91% after 1990 vs. 39% prior to 1990 (Thumma and Bird 2015:4). A 2012 study reported that in one week in America, five million people will attend a service in a megachurch (Roberts and Yamane, 2012). Of these, approximately “a quarter haven’t been in any church for a long time before coming to a megachurch” (Thumma and Bird 2009:1). In looking at attendance distribution in 2006, Mark Chaves’ observes that “among all Protestant churches…the biggest one percent of churches have approximately 15 percent of all the people, money, and full-time staff. The biggest 20 percent of churches have between 60 and 65 percent of all the people, money, and full-time staff” (Chaves 2006:333). In short, “most churches are small, but most people are in large churches” (Chaves 2006:333). Based on these research findings, it seems reasonable for Thumma and Travis to suggest that “beyond the raw number and power of these churches, we believe that megachurches, their practices, and their leaders are the most influential contemporary dynamic in American religion” (Thumma and Travis 2007:2).

Observing this phenomenon in the mid 1990's, Donald E. Miller (1997) labeled these churches "new paradigm churches," believing that "these religious organizations are so significant that they represent the first wave of a new reformation that will shake the foundations of religion as we know it" (Roberts and Yamane 2012:207) because they are "transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium" (Miller 1999:1250). Modernity has produced, according to Miller, a "hope deficit" (Miller 1999:1253) which megachurches have found a way to fill. Though Miller comes from a very different standpoint than Giddens, and lacks the theoretical apparatus to enable the analysis of the deep structural dynamics of radical modernity, he has reached much the same conclusion as Giddens regarding the subjective consequences of the current age. For Giddens, there is radical ontological uncertainty and the threat of meaninglessness, whilst for Miller the unintended consequence of modernity is a radical modernity of hopelessness. As cryptically suggested by Giddens, the hopelessness of radical modernity lays open the possibility of religious resurgence. As far as Miller is concerned, that resurgence has begun and is most notably observed in the megachurch movement.

Dominant Themes Emerging from the Literature on Megachurches

Writing in 2010, the sociologist Stephen Ellingson notes that despite the remarkable growth of the megachurch movement, the current research is limited (Ellingson 2009, Ellingson 2010, Ellingson 2013) and an increasingly important challenge "for scholars of contemporary religion is to explain the emergence and growth of megachurches" (Ellingson 2010:248). Nevertheless, a number of themes have already been identified in the research literature to

explain the megachurch phenomenon. Most of these centre around the "cultural affinity between what megachurches offer and what contemporary churchgoers want" (Chaves 2006:341). Megachurches have become quite adept at "modifying aspects of the faith to meet consumer demands" (Roberts and Yamane 2012:207). The *dominant themes* in the emerging literature are best thought of as core aspects of how the megachurches have responded to the subjective experiences of liminality produced in prospective congregations by radical modernity. Fitting with the flexibility of liminality, the themes are general and broadly recurrent across mega-churches at the same time as the treatment of them by particular megachurches is flexible and variable. They are: i) *consumerism*; ii) *individualism*; iii) the provision of *therapeutic comfort*; iv) engagement with *anti-establishment sentiments*; and v) the *cultural relevance* of megachurch practices, and it will be useful to say something about each in turn.

C*onsumerism*, a dominant organizing principle of thought and behavior within North America (and arguably also globally), is the worldview out of which megachurches frequently frame their discourse. Mike Featherstone (2007) identifies three salient features which together define consumer culture as: 1) a capitalist economy that produces excessive goods whose distribution has interfered with healthy social relations, 2) the zero-sum accessibility of consumer goods which has resulted in them being used to "create social bonds or distinctions" (Featherstone 2007:13) at all levels of social relations, and 3) the "emotional pleasures of consumption" (Featherstone 2007:13) which has become a central feature of consumerism. Organized around consumption rather than production, the cultural ethos of consumerism is such that we are living to consume rather than consuming to live, observed most readily in the

everyday life of North Americans for whom a purchasing visit to the local mall has become a social event, or retail therapy, i.e., "I've had a hard day, so I deserve to buy myself something."

Beginning with the first highly successful megachurches of Saddleback and Willow Creek, which intentionally created architectural designs that mimicked the mall or corporate atmospheres (Ellingson 2010; Roberts and Yamane 2012; Spinks 2010) "megachurche[s] closely mirror the consumer culture of the American, suburban middle class" (Twitchell 2004:76) both in appearance and ideology. As the pastor of Radiant church put it in *New York Time Magazine*, "We want the church to look like a mall. We want you to come in here and say, 'Dude, where's the cinema?'" (Mahler, 2005). As will be discussed later, these are a distinctive type of megachurch, known as prosperity megachurches, and also referred to as "seeker sensitive"[7] churches. They embody a deeply entrepreneurial spirit, "adopting market-driven features to make their services visitor friendly" (Bowler 2013:102). Minimizing typical religious symbols such as crosses, steeples, and stained-glass windows, their churches look like corporate headquarters, and "Senior pastors [take] on the title of chief executive officer (CEO)" (Bowler 2013:103). Their ministries include both non-profit and profit organizations, and these pastors argue that "kingdom principles [are], in fact, business principles. They call it kingdom business" (Bowler 2013:103). And the gospel they sell has a very simple bottom line – people of God are people of health, wealth, and success. The discourse analysis employed in this research (below) indicates that this is very much the flavor of discourse employed by Lakewood Church, and is

[7] Seeker sensitive churches are ones which tailor their buildings, programs, music, sermons, and services to attract those who do not currently attend church.

examined and explored in Chapter 3. Von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012) suggest that seeker churches design their services to appeal to religious immigrants[8], who initially want anonymity, by offering low entry costs that nevertheless appeal to individual needs. This price is increased after the individual is convinced of the high quality of the religious product being offered (i.e., it meets his or her personal needs). Seeker churches, in contrast to traditional churches, specifically tailor their services to create a low cost and commitment form of engagement for their attendees (von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012). It is for this reason that many see megachurches as "religion-lite" (von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012:366), as megachurches "have literally steered religion into behaving like for-profit businesses as they build brand identities and sell their goods and services in pursuit of a market share" (Ellingson 2013:74).

But the consumerist logic goes much deeper than the mere appearances of physical space and church services - rather, "Christian freedom or being 'true to yourself,' in the idiom of the church, is commonly framed in terms of consumption, lifestyle and personal appearance" (Ellingson 2010:255), with the prosperity gospel mantra often playing a central role (Bowler 2013). To be Christian is to be blessed emotionally, physically, and financially. Not only does God want *you,* God's faithful follower, to have plenty of money, but in your hands that money is blessed in a way that it isn't in the hands of the unfaithful. Speaking into the intense uncertainties produced by radical modernity, such a theology works in perfect tandem with the consumer culture of its time, creating the "social bonds of distinction" (Featherstone 2007:13)

[8] Religious refugees are those who are not affiliated with any particular religion or denomination, or who claim an affiliation but no longer participate (von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012).

and “emotional pleasures of consumption” (Featherstone 2007:13) that Featherstone defines as central to consumer culture. This type of theological discourse thus interpolates members of the congregation within a community that aligns itself with the juggernaut of radical modernity. Though a bumpy ride in which risk is always present, they are gaining the strength and protection of the powerful forces of radical modernity, they are not resisting, and thus less likely to be crushed. Moreover, as Kate Bowler observes in *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013), at a fundamental level this “gospel cultivate[s] and sanctifie[s] desire” (Bowler 2013:234), “articulating a language of aspiration that [speaks] of materialism and transcendence in a single breath” (Bowler 2013:234). It is an “acquisitive theology [that frames] acquisition as godly good” (Carney 2012:67).

Both the manifest and latent functions of a capitalist economy are focused around competition, the pressures of which Featherstone describes in the language of a zero-sum game (Featherstone 2007:42). Hence marketing becomes a necessity, and this too is evident in megachurch success. Each church has its own particular brand of salvation that it is selling in the “battle for converts” (Twitchell 2004:56), including their own particular books, music, magazines, and live entertainment. This market approach to filling the pews is perhaps most pointedly observed by the sign hanging outside the office of Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of the megachurch Willow Creek, whose approach to “doing church” arguably launched the megachurch era of evangelicalism. The sign reads: “What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?” (Twitchell 2004:104). Pastors and

churches must pay attention to nurturing and protecting their brand identity or they will lose business – tend your flock has been replaced by tend your brand (Twitchell 2004).

Further to this, the relationship of megachurches with consumerism is also developed at a more subconscious level. Kilbourne observes that "both advertising and religion share a belief in transformation" (Kilbourne 2006:12). Historically, the transformation required by religion has most often been overt, intensive, and often all encompassing. But such is not the case in the prosperity gospel religion of Lakewood. Just make a few Joel Osteen (Lakewood Church pastor) style "positive confessions"[9] and next thing you know you'll have that promotion you've been wanting, or you will have lost the 15 lbs. that have been sticking, or your child will no longer be bullied in school. Just put your "I believe" dollar bill on the counter, and satisfaction is guaranteed. Mara Einstein further notes this "symbiotic relationship between religion and marketing" (Einstein 2008:14) pointing out that they are both "meaning making" and they are both "part of identity creation" (Einstein 2008:14). Recognizing this "magical thinking…at the heart of religion and branding" (Twitchell 2004:65) helps us to see how seemingly naturally the two merge. Hence, despite the precarious ethos produced by radical modernity, a God who wants to make you prosperous is deeply re-assuring.

Consumerism is one of the social phenomena Bauman turns his attention to in exploring the core characteristics of liquid modernity, suggesting that "the transformation of consumers into commodities" (Bauman 2007:12) is one of those characteristics. This recasting of the self

[9] Joel Osteen is the Pastor of Lakewood Church, and his positive thinking preaching will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

is, as we will see when examining Lakewood Church's re-lexicalizing habits, a process that allows individuals to acquire the social prizes they come to desire (Bauman 2007). First the consumer comes "shopping" at church to buy health, wealth, and happiness, and once those goods have been purchased, they are internalized and become the example of what a successful Christian looks like. As Bauman suggests, when we are "pressed to consume more…on the way, we become ourselves commodities" (Bauman 2008:62). With wealth and the conspicuous consumption that generally accompanies it, Lakewood attendees now appear as the commodity (the rich, blessed, affluent Christian) that others are consuming on their way to becoming that very commodity themselves.

Given that churches are deeply saturated by the cultural ethos of consumerism, and that consumerism predisposes and assumes individualism, it thus comes as no surprise that *individualism* is also a theme of many megachurches. With the exception of John Calvin, the fathers[10] of the Protestant Reformation believed that human choice and individual will could be consequential in the human relationship to or with the Divine, in direct contrast with the predestination that was taught by Calvin.[11] This aspect of individualism was further validated and entrenched two centuries later by John Wesley, an Anglican cleric and theologian. Wesley's focus on individual will, discipleship, and personal responsibility "transformed into Methodism, which had a startling impact on the democratization of religion" (Twitchell

[10] The gender exclusive language is intentional as the historic church forbade female voices in formulating theology and creed.

[11] Classic Calvinist theology teaches that God has pre-determined who will be saved (i.e., received into heaven). It came to be understood that a sign one had been chosen by God was success in business and the accompanying accumulation of wealth. This concept is thoroughly explored by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958:3-5).

2004:73). According to Wesley, furthering the theological direction set in place by the Protestant Reformation, no translator or mediator was necessary between a person and God. As James Twitchell puts it in *Branded Nation: The Making of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museum World*, "after Wesley there was a free-for-all. The consumer was King" (Twitchell 2004:73). While much of this democratization of religion manifest itself in Protestant traditions focused intensely on personal righteousness and holiness, the prosperity gospel of the megachurch added a new element to the mix – no longer was it simply that you were personally responsible to God, rather now God was also personally responsible to you, provided you demonstrated appropriate faith in God's ability to make you prosperous. Moreover, "the prosperity gospel's emphasis on the individual's responsibility for his or her own fate resonated strongly with the American tradition of rugged self-reliance" (Bowler 2013:227), presupposing God could and would respond on cue.[12] And in an observation that dovetails with the deeper, structural thesis regarding the shaping effects of radical modernity, Ellingson writes that the practices of teaching attendees how to be victorious and hence prosperous "help[s] individuals overcome the loss of identity and sense of belonging created by modernization" (Ellingson 2010:252). Megachurches offer the resources to construct a sturdy self in a world deeply destabilized by the juggernaut of modernity, "a tool in the individual's quest to develop the self" (Ellingson 2010:253). And perhaps more pointedly, in a world swirling in myriad forms of social isolation resulting from the *distanciation* and *disembedding* processes of radical modernity, the megachurch theme of *individualism* communicates to the individual in the pew

[12] This insight from Bellah is explored more thoroughly in the Lakewood chapter (3).

that they matter. Wellman et al. (2020) observe that this ability to "*exert the ego"* (19) is accomplished in megachurches through "uplift[ing] the uniqueness of each individual, highlight[ing] the importance of using personal spiritual gift(s)….and hav[ing] their sights set on the mission for each individual to become a better person and experience more fulfillment and love" (19). They further point out that the degree to which this is effective is directly related to the sheer number of attendees present because "humans are energized by each other" (20). So the "bigger" the collective feels, the more the individual ego is served. This paradox is discussed further in Chapter 7 below.

Hand in hand with the individualism that most megachurches offer is the theme of *therapeutic comfort*[13] which also contributes to identity construction (Miller 1997; Ellingson 2010; Roberts and Yamane 2012), as "God becomes the means toward our fulfillment, rather than the end toward whom we owe our allegiance" (Sargeant 2000:121). "What God can do for you" is frequently the subtext of megachurch messages and programming, as they "aim to provide therapeutic help for the daily problems confronting middle-class attendees" (Ellingson 2013:67). Megachurches provide "a superior religious product – namely a profound experience of the transcendent" (Ellingson 2010:356) that is focused on the psychological and emotional experience of the individual worshipper, designed to make them feel better about themselves and their circumstances. The theme of *individualism* that results in the priority of offering *therapeutic comfort* functions to assuage a deeply seeded fear in the individual psyche of the average American. *Social* justice issues and public or global causes can often fade into the

[13] Therapeutic comfort is also a latent function of the logic of capitalism and resulting consumerism.

background because most "messages focus on personal and private issues, [and so] the church becomes a place for therapeutic comfort or for maximizing one's full potential. God is *immanent* (a nearby source of comfort) but not a *transcendent* being who sets standards for a life lived in covenant with the divine" (Roberts and Yamane 2012:210). Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005), in their study of teenage religion and spirituality in the United States, refer to this phenomenon as *moralistic therapeutic deism* (Smith and Lundquist 2005), which they outline as follows:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die. (Smith and Lundquist 2005:162-163)

In summarizing their research, Smith and Lundquist conclude "with some confidence [that] a significant part of Christianity in the United States has …. significantly morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step cousin, *Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*" (Smith and Lundquist 2005:171). This, they claim, has happened among individual Christians as well as among a number of Christian institutions and organizations. *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism* is "colonizing" (Smith and Lundquist 2005:171) Christianity. Of particular interest to this discussion is their third point (above). One can readily substantiate this claim when observing the colonization effect in the predominance of megachurches who populate the American landscape, many of whom preach precisely that the "central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself" (Smith and Lundquist 2005:171). Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly's

(2020) examination of focus group interviews of megachurch attendees also highlights the success of megachurches in answering “the desires of the human heart and generat[ing] emotional energy that is both powerful and satisfying” (2020:152). Creatively adapting the systematic insights of Randall Collins’ original theory, they analyse the formation of these effects through identifying a unique four phase set of processual *interactional ritual chains* “that produce and evoke deep desires as well as …emotional energy” (2020:80; see Collins, 2004). The first stage in this “Megachurch Ritual Cycle” (2020:159) is a welcome that is experienced so profoundly that it is likened to “coming into a womb” (159) – a place that is fully and fundamentally “*their* place” (160). This is followed by a worship phase where “people feel and express joy and want to share that mood of uplift with one another” (160). The “production of high levels of *emotional energy*”(161) in this phase are likened by Wellman et al. to that of the effects of a drug high. The mutual focus (and often fixation) of attention on the pastor who is the “energy star” of this drug high is the third phase, which is followed by the culminating phase of the altar call which functions subtly as a barrier excluding outsiders – “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” (165). Altar calls are focused not so much on “conversion” specifically (a traditional evangelical term not typically in use in megachurches) as they are on inviting renewal, which is a significantly broader concept, and results in many who are already “converted” responding again and again to altar calls. These four phases, constantly on repeat, are the “ingredients [that] produce a powerful emotional [hence therapeutic] experience for participants” (165). In the focus group interviews, many participants spoke of

the sense of addiction to the megachurch service experience, needing to come back again and again, to feel the high.

Megachurch preachers, as *energy stars*, have "developed a smooth new language and style of persuasion that admirably fit the times. It [is] therapeutic and emotive, a way of speaking that sheds its Pentecostal accent for a sweeter and secular tone" (Bowler 2012:125) with "an air of invincibility so audacious that it compel[s] an audience" (Bowler, 2012:237), as evidenced in the highly emotive and confident sermons of Bishop E. Blake of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ. In the case of Joel Osteen, which will be discussed in depth in Chapter 3, he "combines psychological tactics like positive thinking and self-actualization with neo-Pentecostal theology about the blessings of the Holy Spirit" (Carney 2012:67) to powerful effect, strongly echoing both the concepts and successes of Robert Schuller's *Possibility Thinking* and *Self-Esteem Theology* teachings (discussed more fully in the Lakewood chapter below).

Wellman et al. further suggest that through *interaction ritual chains* "megachurches create and optimize total environments" (152), which they define as "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" (152). These "stable, confident, and encompassing sacred canopies" (152) function as all-encompassing systems offering the protection of "a comforting and nourishing sacred cocoon" (152). In the creation of this total environment "there is really no way to underestimate the impact of the senior pastor on the vitality of these churches" (163). The ultimate promise of

the megachurch experience is that the pastor, as the voice of God, knows that one will be rescued from whatever it is that one needs rescuing from (Twitchell 2004), kept safe, cocooned away from the threatening aspects of radical modernity.

When the baby boomers were in their 20's and 30's, *anti-establishment* sentiments ran high in the United States (and have continued to do so), and with that came significant "suspicion of organized religion with its hierarchical authority and inherited traditions" (Sargeant 2000; Miller 1997, 1999; Ellingson 2010). Within megachurches "this ethos is manifest in a rejection of inherited or historic traditions and alignments with denominations" (Ellingson 2013:69), and this *anti-establishment* attitude is the fourth theme. Well established denominations have (within them not between them) religious pecking orders, conditions of membership, rights of judgment and influence over personal lifestyles of members, specific rituals and liturgical traditions required in their services, specific truth claims that cannot be challenged by laity, and only the religious elites of any given denomination make decisions about all of these processes and dynamics (Swenson 2009; Roberts and Yamane 2016). These institutionalized denominations claimed the right to control the thinking and behavior of their congregants. Many grew disillusioned.

Megachurches, with "more emphasis on energetic activity than on hierarchy – more characterized by networking than by formal structures that control people's behaviors within the organization" (Roberts and Yamane 2012:207) created a more "bureaucratically lean, lay-oriented organizational structure" (Miller 1997:182) that brought many of the baby boomers back into the church. At the same time these same baby boomers who had become spiritual

wanderers found “comfort in big box establishments – university classrooms, corporate cubicles, and Walmart aisles [which] predisposed them to church models that resembled large institutional forms” (Bowler 2012:102). In her monograph, *Searcher Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Non-Traditional Way*, Kimon Howland Sargeant identifies the ways in which megachurch leaders deliberately remove more traditional worship practices of various denominations in order to capture the attention of the religious sensibilities of baby boomers (Sargeant 2000). Keith Roberts and David Yamane (2012) point out that modern technology has allowed for megachurches to develop their own educational curricula, videos, and other tailor-made materials, further reinforcing their freedom from the need for traditional denominational support of any kind. They also facilitate the training of their own future leaders, a task once carried out by traditional denominational organizations. They are a “self-contained and self-sustaining environment creat[ing] a utopian experience for [their] congregants” (Carney 2012:61).

For all the reasons just discussed in the previous paragraph, it is widely understood that most megachurches are non-denominational. Yet Melton, in working out a typology of megachurches, notes that “about two thirds of all the 1600+ megachurches [in the United States] are denominationally aligned” (Melton 2020:68). According to Melton, many megachurches do, indeed, i) quietly maintain their denominational affiliations, ii) operate out of theological frameworks that are often typically Charismatic Baptist denominationally, or iii) have extensive “multi-site” churches which are, functionally, new denominations. Yet typically, in order to maintain their anti-establishment personae, megachurch denominational affiliations

do not appear on any of their materials, buildings, or advertising (von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012; Ellingson 2010). Just as the megachurch encourages attendees to continue to live out of the rugged individualist ideology that so thoroughly permeates the American landscape, megachurches themselves wish to brand themselves as rugged individualists, each carving out their own unique brand of church. And it is this very sense of the megachurch as the rugged individualist that inspires confidence that in the midst of the uncertainties of radical modernity, they (the megachurch) are able to "set things right" (Giddens 1991:131), restoring balance and equilibrium in a social world that feels unstable and unsafe.

Or so it would seem. Ironically, in the case of the fifth theme, just like individuals use fashion to create their own "look" or "brand" as part of their identity construction yet are seemingly limited to whatever fashion has to offer out of which to build their identity, so too megachurches all attend carefully to being *culturally relevant* in developing their particular and unique "brand," yet all are referencing elements of the same cultural ethos when they do so. The entire concept of the seeker church is premised on the notion of creating a religious experience which the average American can recognize, and which recognizes the average American life experience and interests. Much of this attends to elements of pop culture. Their worship music is high energy and upbeat in keeping with current musical styles, and they incorporate elements of contemporary drama and dance into their worship. They use sophisticated media equipment for imaging, videos, broadcasting, and lighting. Involvement of lay members in leadership is encouraged and "pastors are understated in their leadership styles (even though they may be very much in charge behind the scenes)" (Roberts and Yamane

2012:209). Religious symbols are scarce in order to avoid making attendees uncomfortable with "throwback" religious paraphernalia and a "surprisingly high number of these evangelical churches do not even have a cross in the worship auditorium or in any prominent place" (Sargeant 2000:61). Services are "often designed to surprise and intrigue attendees" (Roberts and Yamane 2012:210). Often the messages are motivational and inspirational, seldom complex or challenging, steadfastly avoiding discussions of the impact of consumer lifestyle on the environment, or of global or social issues which might require substantial life-style changes. Megachurches also offer a plethora of social opportunities and various forms of entertainment from movie nights, bowling allies, and retreats to sports leagues, cafes, concerts, and kids fairs. According to the website of T.J. Jakes, lead pastor of the megachurch The Potter's House, his mission is to "educate, empower, and entertain." Coleman and Chattoo observe that while megachurches work hard to create what they term "enclaves" which draw "a moral boundary *around* different practices" (2020:85), they work equally hard at "encroachment" which is the "explicit attempt to move into and aggressively (re-)moralise secular realms, seeking fresh markets" (85) for proselytizing. This requires high levels of "carefully calibrated balance" in cultural relevance, "retaining proximity to and yet ethical distance from unredeemed forms of popular culture" (93). This balancing act effectively sums up much of the focus on which many megachurches concentrate their energy in order to bring people through the doors. And if "what you sell is the perception that *whatever* it is you are selling is certainly in demand" (Twitchell 2004:83), you will have effectively established your church brand, and in corporate consumerist North America, little else could be more culturally relevant. The *cultural relevance*

of megachurches significantly augments the authority granted to them by the average lay person. They are clearly “with it”, aware and influential, hence what they have to say about God serving your needs is a truth that can be irrefutably trusted, irrespective of the challenges to truth that the *reflexivity* of radical modernity has produced. Their *cultural relevance*, and the resulting power granted to them, directly challenges Giddens observation that there is “no stable social world to know” (Giddens 1991:45), given that megachurch pastors and their websites so clearly claim the truths that can be known and trusted about the individual’s social world and well-being (provided they approach God as instructed by the megachurch). The world is, according to many megachurches, neither unstable nor mutable (Giddens 1991:45).

Megachurch Offerings: New and Improved Solids in the Face of Radical Modernity

It seems both reasonable and fruitful to postulate that these megachurch themes speak (whether intentionally or otherwise), in some cases quite directly, to the angst and disequilibrium produced by radical modernity. The “fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, [and] meaninglessness” (Rosenau 1992:15) of radical modernity as an overarching condition of current times is reframed in the discourse of some megachurches as a spiritual challenge that can be conquered. Challenges to personal financial stability need not require one to rethink one’s consumption habits or the overall ethics of the economy. Rather, wealth is good and God-given, and one should continue to pursue exactly what one has been pursuing to this point, only now one has God on their side. The comforts and soothing familiarity which consumerism promises, and which radical modernity threatens, can continue to be yours. The opulent facilities and sophisticated technologies of the typical megachurch regularly surround

the megachurch attendee, functioning as physical evidence of God's blessing. The megachurches provide reassuring responses to the overwhelming complexity and sense of risk that is experienced by individuals as they are caught up in the multiplicity of tokens and systems of radical modernity. The sense of rootlessness, fragmentation, dispersal, and threat created by the *distanciation, disembedding* and uncertainty intrinsic to radical modernity (Giddens 1991:27) is potentially alleviated by the encapsulated experience of the mega-church. The megachurch offers a "self-contained and self-sustaining environment" (Carney 2012:61), seemingly a utopia created by God for God's faithful. One need not grapple with the complex social, political, and economic issues of the day – one need only "buy into" the basic formula of You + God = Blessed.

This straightforward type of theological math can serve to eliminate the dis-ease produced by the *reflexivity* that drives much of the discourse within radical modernity. Rather than a lack of "knowledge with certainty" (Giddens 1991:39), many megachurch preachers make indisputable claims about the nature of God and God's desire to increase one's wealth, health, and status. While the *reflexivity* of radical modernity leaves one adrift in a sea of ideas, the comfort of certain truth delivered by a mega-successful religious authority figure goes a long way toward easing that dis-ease. In the experience of the attendee, many megachurches manage to exist co-operatively with the "careening juggernaut" (Giddens 1991:53), and so provide a sense that they may be able, at least some of the time, to "set things right" (Giddens 1991:131). Ontological insecurities and existential anxieties are (supposedly) experienced as alleviated (Giddens 1991:50). Promises of financial security and blessing such as those offered

by Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church resonate deeply when sounded in the chambers of permanent uncertainty that radical modernity finds us all in. The particular brand of cultural relevancy that some megachurches strive for (i.e., technologically savvy, upbeat and trendy worship music, architecture resembling the biggest malls) along with their absence of traditional physical religious symbols dovetails well with the consumerist themes of prosperity gospel preaching. The individualistic-therapeutic comfort that some megachurches offer assures the attendee that "I matter" in a swirl of radical modernity that has left most of us feeling not only that we do *not* matter, but that the nature of our very personhood is of little consequence as we are nothing more than the product and the object of our environments. The anti-establishment themes of some megachurches also address a vulnerability produced by radical modernity – the optimism of social engineering that characterized modernity has been gutted by the actual consequences of modernity – social institutions have not only failed to offer security, safety, and peace, but have also been the bearers of impersonal and seemingly ubiquitous forms of social control. Thus, in a rather ironic twist, the institution of religion is re-invented by the megachurches as being anti-establishment by presenting themselves as non-denominational, stripped of specific rituals, liturgical traditions and any visible signs that might imply an attempt to control their attendees or members. Here is what appears to be a fresh new, non-institutionalized form of religion in which, in yet a further ironic twist, you can be virtually anonymous all the while receiving the message that God is here to engage your individual needs and wants.

Perceived from the vantage point of Bauman's concept of *liquid modernity*, one might think that megachurches have turned away from the solidity of Christian "tradition, loyalties, customary rights and irrelevant obligations" (Bauman 2013:4). In reality, they have provided a response to the liminality and uprootedness of radical modernity that offers, instead, a very creative and effective "new and improved solid" (Bauman 2013:3).

Common Threads and Differences within the Variety of Megachurches: The Strengths of a Qualitative, Processual, Analysis.

Though the stereotypical view of megachurches most frequently perpetuated by media is that they are all the same, the research of Warren Bird, Scott Thumma, and Dave Travis (Thumma and Travis 2007; Thumma and Bird 2009, 2015; Bird and Thumma 2011), arguably the most prolific quantitative researchers of megachurches in the U.S., suggests that summative depictions of megachurches are "impressionistic at best and [do] not accurately describe more than a handful of megachurches" (Thumma and Travis 2007:21). Working for The Leadership Network[14] and The Hartford Institute for Religion Research,[15] these primarily quantitative researchers have undertaken numerous megachurch research projects and co-authored as many reports, launching a total of 5 intensive surveys since 2000, and maintaining a database of U.S. megachurches of approximately 1600. Their most recent 2015 survey was sent to all

[14] Leadership Network is a large nonprofit organization based in Texas, USA and founded in 1984 that provides resources to Christian leaders in hopes of increasing their impact. Sometimes referred to as a church think-tank, it has a membership of approximately 200,000.
[15] Founded in 1982, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research describes itself as having "an international reputation as an important bridge between the scholarly community and the practice of faith" (Thumma and Bird, 2015:19).

megachurches in their database, receiving completed responses from 209 megachurches which was a response rate of 13%. What their megachurch research has consistently shown throughout the five surveys over 15 years is that there are in reality “significant differences among them” (Thumma and Travis 2007:21). Based on their quantitative survey approach, Thumma and Travis (2007) identify four distinctive streams of megachurches.

30% of megachurches are *Old Line Program Based*. These are among the oldest of the megachurches, are predominantly either Anglo or African-American, and are most likely to be part of a denomination. *Old Line* churches are characterized by formality and liturgy, use piano, organ, and choirs in their services, and their primary educational offerings come in the form of Sunday morning Bible classes. Their congregations are generally somewhat older and their worship is reverent rather than exuberant. Another 30% of megachurches are *Seeker* focused. Their leadership is more broadly based with multiple levels of decision making in their organization, and they are often tied to a denomination but do not include their denominational affiliation in any of their public materials. *Seeker* churches practice a contemporary, hip worship style, include drama in their worship, have very little visual religious symbolism in their sanctuaries, and have an emphasis on small group meetings in homes. They have more emphasis on the roles of staff rather than a focus on the pastor and tend to use current business practices as a way of growing their ‘business.’ They have a strong evangelism focus and place significant emphasis on their evangelical mission statement. 25% of megachurches are *Charismatic/Pastor-Focused*. These churches revolve around the charismatic power and presence of the lead pastor, and often the pastor’s family as well. They are

generally multi-racial congregations, and there is a significant emphasis on experiencing God through worship, speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing from God, and lively singing and dancing. 15% of megachurches are *New Wave/Re-Envisioned*. These churches have a teaching team approach, all of whom tend to be under the age of thirty-five, embrace Christian symbols and traditional language, and encourage social engagement and activism. They encourage the practices of meditation, journaling, and fasting. They tend to be predominantly Anglo, call for a high-commitment Christianity, function in buildings that are much simpler than most megachurches, but use cutting edge technology in their services, and are generally both multi-leader and multi-site, with numerous locations in a particular geographic area.

Despite the useful identification of these four types of megachurches identified in Thumma et al.'s research, Stephen Ellingson (2010) points out that "the field currently lacks an integrated theory to explain the rise and development of megachurches" (Ellingson 2010:258). This is in no small part because very few megachurches fit neatly into one of these four types, encompassing all the characteristics said to exemplify that particular type, and said to be the reasons for their enormous success. Further, the analysis of Thumma and Travis is significantly focused on aspects of the structures of respective megachurches that can be quantitatively measured, to the exclusion of other qualitative, processual dimensions. Also, each of the individual characteristics within each type can also be found in non-megachurches. Accordingly, the argument of this current thesis is that, rather, one must begin to look more closely at the specific combinations and configurations of characteristics within *particular* megachurches, such as some of the more recent qualitative research noted above. It is held that the qualitative

exploration of aspects within the fine-grained processes at work within particular cases can provide a firmer basis on which to develop an adequate characterization of the megachurches, their practices, and their success. A more qualitative approach also allows us to look *across* different individual megachurches to ascertain whether something deeper and more general is going on that can be characterized as a response to the liminality of radical modernity – a megachurch tap root, as it were, that if identified could help us to understand the root of megachurch successes, despite the great variance among them.

Notwithstanding the variety of megachurch types, the thesis argues that a significant part of the "integrated theory" (Ellingson 2010:258) for which Ellingson calls can be provided through linking the themes and dynamics of *consumerism, therapeutic comfort, anti-establishment, and cultural relevance* to the deep structures of radical modernity. At the same time, the approach of the thesis can account for the variety of megachurches. For whilst the five themes may be present in any particular megachurch, they are not constants that are present in nearly all megachurches, and when they are present, they will usually not be combined and configured in the same ways. The character of the organizational and cultural structures and social norms vary greatly from one megachurch to the next (Thumma and Travis 2007). Hence, we must look more closely in order to respect the variation between megachurches, and to also distill the commonality within this variety. Both are important in the creation of the "self-contained and self-sustaining environment" (Carney 2012:61) that seemingly speaks into the deep disequilibrium created by radical modernity. By pursuing this agenda, it is possible to examine the specific forms and processes by which the "new and

improved solid(s)" (Bauman 2013:3) of megachurches have been created, and sustained. Each megachurch in this study has provided their own response to the general challenges of radical modernity, resulting in both differences and commonalities between megachurches. The qualitative approach to the three different megachurches undertaken in this research allows a further layer of exploration that is comparative, able to examine both similarities and differences.

A dictum frequently attributed to Max Muller, professor of comparative philology at Oxford from 1868–1875, is that "[those][16] who know one, know none." The capacity for both sameness and difference to reveal unique social realities through the comparative approach has a long history, dating back to Aristotle and his study of Greek city-states, and has been "employed by a long range of theorists, from the fifteenth-century Florentine political advisor and historian Niccolo Machiavelli to some of sociology's founding figures, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber" (Olsen 2002:7). Like sociology, anthropology also has a long history of cross-cultural study, and now more recently the emergence of multi-sited ethnography in which "the field" in which ethnography would historically have been conducted has been reconceptualized to mean a "political location rather than a locality" (Fedorak 2017:11) – the "field" is now a conceptual space (Fedorak 2017:153), as it also is, of course, for Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu 1993:72-77). Forced by the cultural pluralism of transnational mobility, anthropology is moving "out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-

[16] transposed to include gender inclusive language

space" (Marcus 1995:96). Rather than using a *quantitative* approach in search of answers, this research project will apply the theories of the sociology of language and the methodology of discourse analysis to employ a *qualitative* language content analysis approach, producing multi-sited linguistic analysis.

Previous interview and survey based qualitative megachurch research, such as that conducted by Wellman Jr., Corcoran and Stockly (2020), Tucker-Worgs (2011), Corcoran and Wellman (2016), Wellman, Corcoran, Stockly-Meyerdirk (2014), Wellman (2008), and Barnes (2010,) provides (among other things) a useful understanding of what megachurch attendees internalize through the co-sanctified lexicons that will be examined in this research. Their research provides a strong indication that the co-sanctified lexicons of large and successful megachurches have a powerful influence in shaping the individual habitus of their attendees and participants. As will be demonstrated, an examination of the unique characteristics of each megachurch co-sanctified lexicon dovetails with and complements what the qualitative interviews and surveys show us about megachurch success.

The multi-sited analysis of the present study will be conducted from within the combined frame of radical modernity and the five dominant themes extracted from the academic literature on megachurches. In doing so it will attempt to respect and examine the particular combinations and configurations of characteristics within each of the three different megachurches, whilst also looking to distill the "something deeper" – the something deeper in common – that megachurches provide which help to ease the disequilibrium grounded in the ethos of radical modernity.

Chapter 3

Language Use, Discourse, and Religion: The Literature, Concepts, and Methodology

Language stands at the centre of all human creativity and reality construction. With it "immense edifices of symbolic representation that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world" (Berger 1967:54) can be, and are, constructed. Communities of discourse are capable of creating "self-contained and self-sustaining environment[s]" (Carney 2012:61), hence one way of gaining more nuanced understandings of megachurch success in constructing bulwarks of protection for navigating the stormy seas of radical modernity is a detailed analysis of their language use, which reveals the particular character of the reality that is constructed through that language use, i.e., their unique total environment as described by Wellman et al. The phenomenological consequences of radical modernity produce, according to Giddens, a number of somewhat paradoxical pairings, particularly that of "displacement and reembedding" along with "intimacy and impersonality" (Giddens 1991:141). Through the processes of distanciation, "localized influences drain away into the more impersonalized relations of abstract systems" (Giddens 1991:141) resulting in displacement in the experiences of each individual as distance is placed between the daily activities of life and the source of resources and skills to complete those activities. But this same process is, according to Giddens, "double-layered, or ambivalent….rather than simply a loss of community" (Giddens 1991:141), resulting in "the very tissue of spatial experience alter[ing], conjoining proximity and distance in ways that have few close parallels in prior ages"

(Giddens 1991:141). What is now familiar in day-to-day interactions, and thus reassuring, is "placed into" (Giddens 1991:141) those same day-to-day activities from distant places, rather than originating organically from within the physical place in which the individual is present. Hence there is a "reembedding" that occurs. *Intimacy* and *impersonality* share a parallel process to that of *displacement* and *reembedding*, according to Giddens (Giddens 1991:142). The impersonality of the world of the market and the streets – the strangers that are now a regular part of the context of radical modernity – nevertheless presents the need to trust these strangers for day-to-day survival and relationship, forging an ambivalent intimacy despite the reality that the "possibility of severance is more or less ever present" (Giddens 1991:143).

Rather than quantitative examination of programs, structures, or a variety of attendance demographics (such as those offered by Thumma, Bird, and Travis) in an attempt to distill the nature and characteristics of megachurch adaptations to the particular struggles created by radical modernity identified in Chapter 1, this research has chosen the qualitative approach of language use as the focus of analyses because it is language, specifically the powerful co-sanctified lexicons (explained and explored below) that each megachurch creates and employs to develops its particular total environment that functions to create embeddedness along with a sense of intimacy within the displacement and impersonality which are the consequences of radical modernity. The methodologies of discourse analysis along with the Sociology of the Language of religion are the tools used to distill the unique co-sanctified lexicons of each megachurch. Doing so allows an examination of the objective relations and processes in context and in detail, as they are internalized by the individual.

"We are verbivores", claims Harvard psycholinguist Steven Pinker, a "species that lives on words" (Pinker 2007:24), and in observing the magnificently complex and nuanced capacities of the human mind, "pride of place must go to language - ubiquitous across the species, unique in the animal kingdom, inextricable from social life and from the mastery of civilization and technology, [and] devastating when lost or impaired" (Pinker 2007:28). Many, from a multiplicity of standpoints, would agree. It is therefore no surprise to find a rich history of various disciplinary intersections of language and culture studies examining the social markers and identities of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, media, politics, and social class (Mooney, et al. 2011; Johnstone 2008). Religion, however, is a fresher face on the scene of interdisciplinary language research and analysis. Given the unique challenge of "outfitting other-worldly ideals in [the] mundane clothing" (Edwards 2009:99) of everyday language use in social and religious life, religion is a particularly challenging and potentially rich site for language analysis. Within this newer field of research, the unique contours of evangelical Christian discourse and the resulting manifest and latent functions of language use have thus far gone largely unexamined, particularly as pertains to megachurches. Before moving on to outline the research process and sites of analyses, which will be the focus of the second part of this chapter, it is first both useful and necessary to understand more fully the centrality of language to the overall experience of being human, both individually and collectively. Hence a foundational grasp of *sociological and anthropological theories of language,* the emerging sub-discipline of the *sociology of language and religion*, and the theories and methods of *discourse analysis* are necessary.

What has become evident through the grounded research of this project examining discourse on megachurch websites is that each of the megachurches chosen has developed a highly complex, unique, and sophisticated co-sanctified lexicon[17] which functions to create a worldview that allows those inside that language worldview to cope with the challenges of radical modernity.

Language and Reality Construction: Classic Sociological and Anthropological Theory

Within the domain of the social sciences, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf are frequently deemed the pioneers of language and culture studies. Sapir, a student of the cultural determinist Franz Boas, and Whorf, a student of Sapir, are cultural anthropologists who contributed significantly to the early development of anthropological linguistics. According to Sapir,

> the fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group….We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Carroll 1964:134)

It is in this sense that Elaine Chaika employs the metaphor of a mirror – any particular language is a mirror which reflects the social realities of that language group (Chaika 2008). Whorf takes the ideas of his teacher, Sapir, further, suggesting that

> the linguistic system of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity. (Wardhaugh 1992:219)

[17] Fishman's concept of co-sanctified lexicons will be described further on in this chapter.

While recognizing the nuanced theoretical differences between the two, with Sapir suggesting that language *predisposes* choices of interpretation, and Whorf suggesting that language *determines* choices of interpretation, what becomes clear through their theorizing is that language has a powerful influence in shaping and creating our understandings of reality, as in the case of the megachurches that are the focus of this research, and the realities that they have created through their language choices and use. Sapir and Whorf's work is commonly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In Whorf's theoretical perspective we find strong echoes of Wittgenstein's now famous phrase, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 2001:68).

Grouped within the traditions of phenomenology (Stones 2009; Ritzer 2009) and ethnomethodology, which Ritzer categorizes as "Sociologies of Everyday Life" (Ritzer 2008:218), one of the most incisive theoretical approaches to language comes from Berger and Luckmann's sociological classic, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1966), which framed Berger's subsequent analysis in *The Sacred Canopy* (Berger 1967). Their central thesis proposes that the construction of reality results from the social processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Unlike animals who are born into the world with "highly specialized and firmly directed drives" (Berger 1967:5), humans are born into the world with an instinctual structure that is "both under-specialized and undirected toward a species-specific environment" (Berger 1967:5). The human world must be created by humanity's own activities in that world. Hence "the 'stuff' out of which society and all its formations are made is human meanings externalized in human activity" (Berger 1967:8), and

not only do humans produce *a* world, but they also produce *themselves* in that world – *externalization*. Once constructed, this human social and material world stands outside of the individual and the collective, attaining facticity and objective reality – *objectivation*. When this objective facticity is reabsorbed into individual consciousness "in such a way that the structures of this world come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself", (Berger 1967:15) *internalization* has occurred. One no longer merely possesses these meanings, but rather comes to "represent and express them….drawing them into oneself and mak[ing] them one's own" (Berger 1967:15). Thus, we both possess and are possessed by our meanings. Once internalized, the objective facticity that functions as reality – which, within the macro frame of our argument so far, includes the whole careening juggernaut of radical modernity – has the capacity to facilitate and free, or control and condemn. According to Berger and Luckmann, the human symbol system of language is primary to the three-part process of reality construction they advance. Language is the core facticity external to us that is irrefutably necessary to the creation of all that is externalized, objectivated, and subsequently internalized. With it, "an entire world can be actualized at any moment" (Berger 1967:54), constructing "immense edifices of symbolic representation that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world" (Berger 1967:55). Without language, the worlds we create, objectify, and internalize eventually cease to exist.[18]

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[18] One finds considerable overlap between the classic Berger and Luckmann concept of externalization-objectivation-internalization and Bourdieu's theory developing the concept of habitus, which "involves the internalization of external structures…[and] the externalization of things internal to the individual" (Ritzer 2010:184). Bourdieu does not focus on the objectivation process as explicitly as do Berger and Luckmann, and Berger and Luckmann do not explore the existence of a variety of habitus which the individual actors draw from as Bourdieu does. While there are significant differences between the two theories, there is also significant overlap.

As we will see in chapters 3-5, this three-part dynamic (externalization, objectivation, internalization) is highly evident in the language creation and use of the megachurches in this study. A particular way of naming and categorizing the world (externalization) in order to provide safe harbours and identities in the tempest of radical modernity (objectivation) comes to function as meanings by which attendees are in significant part possessed even whilst they understand themselves to be possessing them (internalization).

While Sapir and Whorf's theory of language in the social sciences is the most pioneering, and Berger and Luckmann arguably the most incisive, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism is perhaps the most eloquent. According to symbolic interactionism, "all that humans are can be traced to their symbolic nature" (Charon 2004:60). "A person learns a new language, and as we say, gets a new soul….[They] become in that sense a different individual" (Mead 1934:283). Language capacity transforms a "weak, helpless, unintelligent, simple organism to one whose complexity, flexibility and intelligence brings about a uniqueness in nature" (Charon 2004:64). This transformation is enabled by the following functions of language. It allows us to mark and store all that we encounter. It alerts us to some parts of the environment and not others. It facilitates symbolic interaction with oneself, i.e., thinking,

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One of the differences is an attempt at more intentional acknowledgement of individual agency in the work of Bourdieu *relative to* the work of Berger and Luckmann. This project will work with a greater assumption of agency than is often present in the work of Berger and Luckmann, especially through the implicit reference to the element of intentionality in the design of websites. In terms of similarities, Berger and Luckmann's emphasis on the centrality of language in their discussions parallels a similar stress in the work of Bourdieu, which makes both theories a theoretical fit for this research project. Regarding actors, it should be noted that Bourdieu is by no means free of the charge of determinism due to his "tendency to overemphasize the inherited and enduring dispositions (habitus) at the expense of their contingent and potentially creative articulation with the relatively autonomous, variable, concerns an actor has with the specific contours of the immediate situation" (Stones 2009: 94).

including the conscious self-communication of problem solving. It allows us to transcend the immediate – all of history, conceptualizations of the future, and even a simple reference to what happened one moment prior, require language. It makes it possible to access the thoughts and feelings of an Other, and communicate one's own thoughts and feelings to an Other, allowing transcendence of Self. Ultimately, it allows us to conceptualize a reality beyond the tangible – concepts such as love, peace, freedom, and even God are all only possible through language (Charon 2004). When we fully recognize that conceptualizations of even the most metaphysical of concepts – which deal with that which is presumably in some sense *beyond* language — can only be conceptualized and activated *by* language, is when we begin to understand the true depth of our vulnerability *to* language.

The following paraphrase of Ritzer and Stepnisky's basic principles of symbolic interactionism provides an excellent synthesis of the totalizing nature of language in the human experience:

1. Human beings, unlike lower animals, are endowed with a capacity for thought, which facilitates symboling.
2. Social interaction is only possible with symboling capacity.
3. People only learn symboling within social interaction.
4. Animals cannot symbol. Our capacity for it makes humans distinct.
5. We are constantly re-creating our symbols.
6. Re-creating symbols can only be done within social interaction.
7. Creating and re-creating symbols creates us and our realities.

(Ritzer and Stepnisky 2018: 341)

Just as the physical ecosystem is sustained by the circle of life, so too the human *social* ecosystem is sustained by the symboling circle of life, as evidenced by these summative

principles. Is it any wonder that when Helen Keller, deaf, blind and animal-like (according to her autobiography) first connected the strange lines her teacher repeatedly drew on her palm – W A T E R – with the cool fresh liquid running over her palm, it was, in her own words "the day of my soul's sudden awakening" (Keller 1990:17)? Her lack of symboling capacity had prevented Helen from accessing her own humanity, and the human community. Language gave her soul "light, hope, joy, set it free!" (Keller 1990:16). All humans "are curiously unfinished at birth" (Berger 1967:4). Language is necessary to actualizing our humanness. For better *and* worse. Ironically, despite the near totalizing power of language in reality construction, "language is arguably the dimension of social life that is least well understood by its practitioners" (Coupland 2001:19). This taken-for-granted nature of language results in augmenting its power further. It is our symbolling capacity that gives us the ability to conceptualize a Divine in all religious systems. Yet the taken-for-granted nature of that Divine as *non-constructed via symbolling* is unseen precisely because, like the moon on the tides, the power of language is virtually unseen. As we will see in the chapters ahead, when megachurches re-construct the "immense edifices of symbolic representation" (Berger 1967:55) by enacting the awe-some power of symbolling in order to adapt religion to the context of radical modernity (rather than the previous era of modernity), these edifices do indeed appear to "tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world" (Berger 1967:55).

The Sociology of Language and Religion

While sociology as an entire discipline has had a longer pedigree of focusing attention on theorizing the centrality of language to reality construction, recently the sub-discipline of the sociology of language and religion has begun to focus attention not only on theorizing about the interfaces between language and religion, but has also developed exploratory empirical research around these. Tope Omoniyi, a prominent scholar in this emerging sub-discipline, refers to Marx' description of religion as the opium of the people suggesting that "it is in this vein that establishing how language may serve as a tool in the manufacture and distribution of this 'drug' and characterizing religion in the process becomes legitimized scholarship" (Omoniyi and Fishman 2006:1). According to Bernard Spolsky (2006), the first formal disciplinary recognition of this new area of scholarship was in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion* (Sawyer and Simpson 2001), which included numerous recently published articles as well as some written as much as fifteen years ago. Omoniyi and Fishman's edited collection, *The Sociology of Language and Religion* (2006), is the first systematic attempt to provide an overview of the intersections of the sociology of language and religion. In the opening Chapters of Part I and Part II of the volume, Fishman and Omoniyi, respectively, each provide thought-provoking general explorations of the topic, while the rest of the book offers a rich variety of research projects ranging from language and world order in Baha'i faith, to the Jewish discourse of prayer, to liturgical literacy in UK Muslim communities (Omoniyi and Fishman 2006). Fishman, a linguistics scholar whose specializations included the sociology of language, was Distinguished University Research Professor of Social Sciences in the Ferkauf

Graduate School, Yeshiva University, New York, and subsequently Professor Emeritus until his death in 2015. He was also Visiting Professor and Scholar of numerous academic institutions, including the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences, Stanford, and is hailed by most as the pioneer of the sociology of language and religion.

It is from the work of Fishman that the concept of co-sanctified lexicons is drawn, applied, and expanded in this research. Hence given the centrality of the concept to this research it bears repeating the expanded definition already offered in chapter 1. All religions typically have vocabulary or terminology that is specific to their religious tradition and its history. These lexicons (a compilation of their vocabulary and their typical and distinctive forms and uses of language) are sacred to their particular religious tradition and expression, hence are set apart and sanctified. As religious theologies and their surrounding cultural landscapes change, the traditional, sanctified lexicon of any one religious tradition may be challenged by these new ideas and contexts and new forms of expression evolve and emerge. Sometimes, the new ideas or ways of expressing them become equal to the old forms, or become even more predominant, in day-to-day use in a specific religious tradition. When this happens there is *a blending of the old sanctified lexicon with the new and increasingly sanctified ways of talking, resulting in a combined, mixed, or 'co-sanctified' lexicon*. As this research examines how megachurches achieve their success within a climate of either indifference or hostility toward religion, identifying and tracking their language evolution (which highlights the evolution of

their theological-ideological-worldview) provides a window into the particular process and nature of that success.

Fishman offers the following decalogue as a “theoretical parental home” (Fishman 2006:13) for the emerging discipline of sociology of language and religion, and aspects of this decalogue play a key role in the theoretical underpinnings for the current research, and provide the fuller context for Fishman’s original conceptualization of co-sanctified lexicons.

1. The language of religion always functions in a larger language context.

As a result, the language of religion is “not the only one available to its members” (Fishman 2006:14). Speakers of religious language choose, either consciously or otherwise, to participate in both religious language and non-religious language. The culture any given religious language is situated in will have a variety of “role and domain repertoires” (Fishman 2006:14) that are engaged to varying degrees. Hence the religious and non-religious languages permeate each other to varying degrees, making it a diverse site of analysis for sociology of language and religion research.

2. The above observation regarding language repertoires is operative both between and within societies.

As noted above, the degree and type of variation between a religious and a non-religious language will vary *within* any one particular sociocultural context (intra societal). This is equally true *between* various sociocultural contexts (inter societal), such as the secular subculture of market-based language and the religious subculture of

the prosperity gospel. An inter-societal variation may be further modified by intra-societal variation such as the variation in degree and type of speech networks ranging from French Canadian Catholics to German Mennonites, for example. Fishman's use of the term "societies" here, is intended to be understood as a "socio-cultural" sub-world (Fishman 2006:15), rather than the typical more macro sense in which a sociologist might use the term society. The history of any one socio-cultural entity, the degree of politicization of their language habits, and the degree of government support or opposition to a particular language community (i.e., socio-cultural entity or sub-world) are among the more prominent modifying factors regarding the degree and type of the language habits of a socio-cultural entity.

3. Religious languages are more stable than secular ones, and have greater influence on secular languages than vice versa.

Most religious speech communities function with some type of diglossia, in which both a "high" and a "low", or formal and vernacular form of speech is used, depending on the context. All diglossic contexts have some leakage, whereby the language "varieties involved influence each other" (Fishman 2006:15). In religious contexts, this is most evident in the influence of classical languages upon the vernacular, for example, the effect of Latin on the languages of Western Christianity, or Classical Hebrew on vernacular Hebrew. The reverse (the vernacular influencing the classical) is much less common. This is due to the "hallowed status of eternal and immutable [religious] texts" (Fishman 2006:16), and the difficulty of recent translations retaining religious authority.

4. Longstanding vernacular translations have acquired a degree of sanctity due to their historical longevity.

The "partial use of varieties of vernaculars for sanctified purposes" (Fishman 2006:17) results in them being associated with Holy Liturgies, and these newly sanctified varieties may come to be viewed as co-sanctified over a period of time and increased use. As this process of the permeation of a holy liturgy with more vernacular language use moves forward, certain parts of this hybrid of a language lexicon (sacred religious mixed with secular vernacular) are "deemed worthy of a higher level of lay understanding or of more active parishioner participation" (Fishman 2006:17). The "vernacular-ness" is now considered sacred. The holy liturgy of any particular religious tradition is left behind in terms of use (sometimes reserved only for special occasions) as the more accessible and vernacular lexicon is increasingly adopted and used, becoming the primary lexicon. This joining of holy liturgy with secular vernacular is what Fishman has termed a "co-sanctified" lexicon.

5. Newly (co)sanctified languages in a speech community make their repertoire more complex and functionally differentiated.

When a new vernacular is introduced into a religious speech network it also introduces the possibility of disagreement and conflict, determined, at least in part by the degree of utilization or rejection. The source of the language shift (whether that be broader

secular language contexts or internal or other religious contexts) characterizes the functions and type of complexity of the new vernacular.

6. Factors that cause sociocultural change also cause changes in language, including religious language and religious change per se.

This is due to the fact that “language spread itself is, of course, the most common carrier of sociocultural change” (Fishman 2006:18). The ‘willingness’ to accept a new language into religious use is often facilitated by “the underlying dynamic of modernization under Western auspices, via economic penetration or invasion (colonization)” (Fishman 2006:19).

7. There are a variety of reasons for the existence of multiple linguistic varieties in the same religious community.

Social Change is generally a slow and somewhat sporadic process, and there are variables to take account of within this, with, for example, rural areas being less accessible to outside forces, making change there even slower. Instantaneous, across the board, language change is very rare, resulting in multiple linguistic varieties being practiced in the same community at the same time throughout the evolution of change. As the newer religious linguistic variety gains credence (e.g., language used for special audiences such as youth services or young marrieds), the more traditional variety is employed with decreasing frequency resulting in the co-sanctification of more than one linguistic variety within the same speech network. In some cases, “a functional reversal

even occurs and the hitherto “special purposes” or “special audiences” varieties become the normal variety while the normal variety becomes the (“sometimes”) special one” (Fishman 2006:20) Applying the example above, in order to retain the presence of the youth in the congregation (thus securing the future of the church and their religious community in this example), the language of the youth generation may be employed to varying degrees by the pastor/priest/rabbi and perhaps also the leaders of communal, participatory acts of worship within the main service, perhaps in the sermons of the pastor or the lyrics of the music. Over time, if the practice continues or increases, this can become a co-sanctified lexicon, recognized as a legitimate way of expressing and exploring their particular religion or faith. It may even gain so much popularity and use that it begins to replace the more traditional language that the older generation has typically used and felt comfortable with. In the process, the actual content of religious expression, experience, and belief may quite possibly change along with the changing language choices. There is a large range of what co-sanctified lexicons might contain and how they function, as we will see in our analysis of the unique forms of the co-sanctified lexicons of the megachurches in this study.

8. Sanctified languages bring considerable conservative influence to bear on corpus planning that is seeking to modernize.

Hence, frequently the goal is to attain “modernization of the language but [to do] so along traditional lines” (Fishman 2006:22).

9. Yet sanctified and co-sanctified languages are not as static as their keepers often imply.

Despite resistance, religious language does change, as in the case of the King James Bible which has a variety of English translations. This may be self-defeating in terms of its sacred authority, "rendering mysteries more understandable [which] demystifies and desanctifies them" (Fishman 2006:22). This, in turn, may fuel a desire to return to "old fashioned religion" (Fishman 2006:22). There is challenge here in maintaining the fine balance between communicating more effectively and demystifying in a way that is not also de-sanctifying. The need to be ultra-sensitive to the *geist* and its structural conditions (even if only intuitively, and without explicit theorization) is beneficial, and this is what we will see in the active – if often intuitive – creation of the co-sanctified lexicons of the megachurches that will be analyzed below.

10. Variance in religious emphases also produces linguistic variance. This impacts non-religious usage and non-religious usage impacts religious varieties as well.

Thus "different social groups within any speech community will differ from each other" (Fishman 2006:23). Whether it is resistance to or advocacy of fundamentalism or modernization, it is inevitable that these social patterns will be reflected in everyday speech, and the task of the sociology of language and religion is "to reveal both the linguistic patterns and the societal patterns that ubiquitously accompany one another" (Fishman 2006:24).

Fishman's decalogue shares several central points and processes with Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *habitus*. The *field,* comprised of "agents and institutions …engaged in struggle, with unequal strengths, and in accordance with the rules constituting that field of play, to appropriate the specific profits at stake in that game" (Bourdieu 2007:430), functions readily as a description of key aspects of the "larger language context[s]" (Fishman 2006:14) in which religious language is situated, in Fishman's account. These *fields* may, and often do, function as competition for religious languages both within the religious contexts themselves, as well as outside of them, particularly in "modern societies with a larger role and domain repertoires [than pre- and anti-modern societies], and with the peripheralization or ("cornerization") of religion that tend to obtain in such societies" (Fishman 2006:14).

Bourdieu describes *habitus* as habits that one has acquired which are "durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions" (Bourdieu 2007:30). This "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu 2008:435) results in a "universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less "sensible" and "reasonable"" (Bourdieu 2008:436). This "genesis amnesia" (Bourdieu 2008:436) results in actions motivated by objective, unrecognized intentions which outrun conscious intentions. Yet despite this imposing sense of structure controlling the individual actor, *habitus*, asserts Bourdieu, is also "something powerfully generative" (Bourdieu 2008:428) that has the capacity to "reproduce the objective logic of those conditionings while transforming [them]" (Bourdieu 2008:429). This paradoxical nature of *habitus* as "structured but not structuring" (Allen 2007:419) – with the

structured habitus able to react creatively, generatively, to the demands and challenges of present moments - that Bourdieu seeks to illuminate is also present in Fishman's decalogue, particularly in his discussions of sanctified and co-sanctified religious language. And it is exactly this capacity to transform at the same time that things appear to remain the same that is examined and identified as processually present in the co-sanctified lexicons of the megachurches examined in this research. While religious identities have effectively been re-invented, as adaptations to the pressures of radical modernity, they are nevertheless experienced as remaining nested in the tradition of faithful Christianity. Fishman points out that though longstanding vernacular translations are understood and experienced as sanctified (that which is structured in Bourdieu's *habitus*), the resolute encroachment of new religious vernaculars, such as those examined in this research, acquire a co-sanctified status. At times, the advance of their popular usage can be such as to rival the sanctified status of pre-existing sanctified lexicons (the process of structuring in Bourdieu's *habitus*). Fishman further suggests that both sanctified and co-sanctified religious languages are not as stable as their keepers suggest that they are. This seemingly concurs with Bourdieu's position that there are "adjustments that are constantly required by the necessities of adaptation to new and unforeseen situations [which] may bring about durable transformations of the *habitus*" (Bourdieu 2007:429). The "regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu 2008:435) within *habitus* are the improvisations within the regulated sanctified lexicons of religious tradition. The co-sanctified religious lexicons described by Fishman add to, and in the process transform, the "something powerfully generative" (Bourdieu 2008:428) that Bourdieu identifies. They have the

capacity to transform the taken-for-granted traditional sanctified lexicon. In some cases, moreover, they do not merely generate a co-sanctified lexicon alongside the traditional lexicon, but rival to more radically challenge or even overtake the traditional sanctified lexicon, replacing it as the dominant discourse of a particular religious community (as with megachurch communities of discourse as adaptations to radical modernity). This process of evolving toward a co-sanctified lexicon, or possibly a newly sanctified lexicon can be further understood through the lens of Stones' (2005) strong structuration theory, which operates out of a greater sense of the recursive relationship between structure and agency, exploring elements of the 'duality' whereby external structures are internalized by actors, and are also the outcome of actors' subsequent practices. Stones, rather than offering yet another theory which dangles a tentative rope bridge between the structures that control us and our worlds and the individual and collective agency to recreate our worlds (such as Bourdieu does), offers a sturdy path that welcomes travel by way of his "quadrapartite cycle of structuration" (Ritzer 2007:85). Stones proposes that one can employ "four analytically distinct components of this duality to be studied empirically" (Greenhalgh and Stones 2010:1288). These are:

> (a) external structures (conditions of action); (b) internal structures within the agent (how and what individuals 'know'), themselves divided into habitus (i.e., general and transposable cultural schemas, dispositions and knowledge) and more situationally-specific knowledge; (c) active agency (in which agents draw, routinely or strategically, on their internal structures); and (d) outcomes (in which both external and internal structures are either reproduced or changed) (1288)

Examining these four components in a particular *conjuncture* entails recognizing that the ever changing "critical combination of events or circumstances" (Stones 2010:1288) is *key* to re-

conceiving what has frequently been perceived as a *dichotomy* of structure versus agency as, rather, *co-creation* that exists in a mutually recursive relationship. Perhaps the real key for researchers in grappling with how to employ this structure-agency *co-creation* is in recognizing that information needs to be accessed through understanding the *cyclical and interwoven nature* of structure and agency as constituents of a process, rather than in merely grasping the *elements themselves* in isolation from each other. Stones offers a fruitful way forward in such an endeavor. Fishman does not explicitly discuss the issues in these terms, but his decalogue pre-supposes the recursive relationship between structure and agency that Stones proposes, and we will that see this recursive process is present in the co-sanctified lexicons of megachurches that will be examined in chapters 4 to 6.

Fishman's decalogue also pre-supposes the everyday lived experience within language that Berger so eloquently describes, but Fishman's research foci are more on the collective rather than the individual experiences of language. The research collected in the Omoniyi and Fishman edited volume (2006) in which Fishman's decalogue appears indicates that his guiding principles have been applied primarily at a macro-analytical level. Typical examples include language policy challenges, sacred text translations as tools of power, and intersections of language, religion, and science. Rich in analyzing the role of religious language in such broad social contexts and often in the midst of significant social change, the research also offers a few studies that explore the role of language in religious identity construction. In his examination of the shifting role of identities based on language choice (English vs. French) among Lebanese

Christians and Muslims, John E. Joseph highlights the salience of language to religious identity formation:

> Religious identities are like ethnic ones in that they concern where we come from and where we are going – our entire existence, not just the moment-to-moment. It is these identities above all that, for most people, give profound meaning to the names we identify ourselves by, both as individuals and as groups. (Joseph 2006:165)

Annabelle Mooney's contribution to the volume, which focuses on marginal movements in UK law, explores how "the language of marginal religious movements is constitutive of community and identity" (Mooney 2006:292), and the struggle for identity when these marginal speech communities are "re-lexicalized" (Mooney 2006:301) in the discourse of the law. To lexicalize is to add words or phrases to a language's lexicon. To *re-lexicalize* is to replace an established meaning or association of a word with a new meaning. In the process of altering the meaning and association one also alters the identity of the entity the word is semantically *naming* or describing. The association of currently understood objects, including understandings of self, with a new word changes the meanings associated with the object the word denotes. Alterations in words can thus create new identities. As a case study to elaborate her theoretical discussion, Mooney documents the legal treatment of a 15-year-old UK male, Andrew (pseudonym), who had leukemia and whose family was refusing the blood transfusions which are a standard part of treatment, and without which death is likely. Andrew and his parents were Jehovah's Witnesses (a marginal religious group), the tenets of which forbid the 'eating of blood'. While Andrew and his parents *named* the refusal of blood transfusions as obedience to his parents and faithfulness to God, the court assumed "conventional medical (scientific) and legal values" (Mooney 2006:301) to label the parameters of the case, determining against the

parents. The court re-lexicalized Andrew's identity by referring to him as an infant, and termed his potential death a martyrdom, thus constructing a very different type of identity through language choices than the one being claimed by Andrew and his parents. According to the Law, Andrew is *not* a religious adherent who cannot 'eat blood' due to his religious convictions. Rather, Andrew is an 'infant' (though in reality he is 15 years old). The Law has re-lexicalized Andrew's identity – he is not who his parents claim him to be, rather he is who the law claims him to be. In the process Andrew now has a new identity and that identity legally obligates his parents to keep him alive. Mooney (2006) points out that, while the law recognized Andrew as an individual in keeping with contemporary liberal philosophers for whom "claims upon a person in the name of community are… considered a violation of the individual" (Etzioni 1989:171), communitarian philosophers would argue that there is a "common good" to be found "as members of a distinct moral order" (Etzioni 1989:172). Mooney (2006) further notes that included in such a community is "a common vocabulary of discourse…and implicit practices" (Sandel 1984:172) such as those Andrew and his family sought to employ, even to the point of death. In each of the megachurches included in this research, re-lexicalization has been an influential element of their newly co-sanctified lexicons.

The type of interest that Joseph and Mooney demonstrate in the link between religion, language, and identity is also present in a second volume edited by Omoniyi, *The Sociology of Language and Religion: Change, Conflict and Accommodation* (Omoniyi, ed. 2010). This research continues the trend of more macro focused research on language and religion, particularly on social change, as indicated most obviously by the title of the book itself, with the

link between the macro level and the processes of change signaled by Omoniyi's introductory observation that "the new discipline's interest and focus are on languages as *systems* [italics added] and the purposes and rationale advanced for choices made in language behavior" (Omoniyi 2010:4). Here again there remains some interest in language and identity, particularly in Rajah-Carrim's examination of Muslims using language to negotiate identity changes in Mauritius (Rajah-Carrim 2010). The two main groups of Mauritian Muslims (Ahle-Sunnah and Deobandis) are divided by differing theologies. The primary expression of their differences is based on linguistic choices surrounding whether vernacular languages challenging for co-sanctified status should be embraced or rejected, and the degree to which existing sanctified languages should be retained and employed. Hence, the religious identity of Muslims in Mauritius is very directly linked to linguistic choices. While the line between the individual and the collective is always somewhat blurry, the starting point of this research is collective linguistic expression.

The sociology of language and religion offers some valuable examples of religious language and identity construction research, revealing the centrality of language for identity construction whether on the macro or micro level. In the case of Andrew and his parents, the identities created through re-lexicalizing had deep and far-reaching impacts. So too, we will see, does the re-lexicalizing that megachurches practice that create identities for the particular megachurch at the macro level and offer identities for the individual attendee at the micro level. The re-lexicalizing offers ways of seeing and inhabiting the world that lodge within the cultural schemas in the total environment of megachurch organizations and the habitus of the

individuals within them. In doing so, they mitigate the disequilibrium created by radical modernity. For the purposes of this research, the principles of Fishman's decalogue have proven to be erudite, subtle, resources for exploring in detail the processes of structure and agency within the reality construction of the discourse communities of megachurches.

Discourse Analysis

> The world is built up in the consciousness of the individual by conversation with significant others…. The world is maintained as a subjective reality by the same sort of conversation…. [therefore] the subjective reality of the world hangs on the thin thread of conversation. (Berger 1967:17-18)

As illuminated by Berger, and by the theory of symbolic interactionism, language is a necessary component to actualizing our humanness. And it is within the context of language employed, whether oral or written, that our individual and collective identities are constantly in the process of construction, de-construction, and reconstruction. The externalization, objectification, and internalization of words, phrases, sentences within systems of discourse are all components of identity construction. To access this process by which the "everyday-ishness" of language in the everyday world is constructed and reconstructed, this research project will also employ tools from the field of discourse analysis. The methodological tools of discourse analysis, when combined with concepts already discussed from the sociology of language and religion – with its emphasis on co-sanctified lexicons – can facilitate a close and careful analysis of how megachurches speak to the anxieties and liminalities produced by radical modernity.

The most common sites of research in discourse analysis are *speech communities*, also referred to in the research literature as *discourse communities* or *communities of practice*,

which are understood to be any “human group, defined either geographically or socially, whose members share a common language variety and a set of linguistic norms” (Thomas, et al. 2005:219). In this study, the communities of discourse are those of megachurches. Of particular interest is the continually overlapping process of individual and collective identity construction in speech communities whereby there is an ongoing “process of interacting, via discourse moves that make claims to equality, inequality, solidarity, or detachment” (Johnstone 2009:139). The methodological tools of discourse analysis provide insight into the ways in which leaders and members of megachurches are hailed or positioned within their respective speech communities. They allow one to identify who claims and is granted the right to make truth claims offering the new improved solids designed as a balm for the ills of radical modernity.

Discourse analysis, as the study of everyday language use and its effects, has given considerable research attention to the linkages between language use and reality construction. This is something brought out by Barbara Johnstone, Professor of Rhetoric and Linguistics at Carnegie Mellon University, in *Discourse Analysis* (2008), her widely used presentation and survey of this everyday, linguistic approach to discourse. She writes that in this disciplinary context discourse is not understood as an abstract system, but rather is

> what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language, knowledge based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before, to do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happen, create beauty, entertain themselves and others, and so on. (Johnstone 2008:3)

Discourse here is not language per se, it is language *in use*. Materials for this kind of analysis "consist of words alone and sometimes includes pictures, gestures, gaze, and other modalities" (Johnstone 2008:9). In the case of this particular research analysis, both words and pictures on the websites of the megachurches being studied are part of the analysis.

The "claims to equality, inequality, solidarity, or detachment" (Johnstone 2009:139) by means of language in use happen: i) between community members as formal positions and informal social roles are negotiated; and ii) between the community as a whole and those outside its linguistic boundaries. In both situations, whether creating identity *within* the group or creating identity *for* the group, identity "refers to the outcome of processes by which people index their similarity to and difference from others, sometimes self-consciously and strategically and sometimes as a matter of habit" (Johnstone 2008:151). What has not yet been explored in a focused or systematic way in speech communities is which aspects of language use are manifest functions and which are latent functions. Which functions have intended results, and which have unintended results of which the discourse community is unaware. Here is where Bourdieu's emphasis on "inherited and enduring dispositions" (Stones 2009:94) of habitus potentially facilitates exploration of the pre-reflexive nature of any particular language symbol system as a worldview ambit.

On the *individual* level, we are, to a great extent, what we are labeled by significant others to be, and thus we come to label ourselves. "[T]he individual becomes that which [they are] addressed as by others…. [and] appropriates the world in conversation with others" (Berger 1967:17-18). At the *collective* level we "use language to locate ourselves and others in

the world" (LaBelle 2011:291), and others assess our language use to locate us in the world and ourselves relative to them. While the distinction being made here between *individual* and *collective* construction can be articulated in theory, in the everyday world of language practice there is "no strongly logical dividing line [that] can be drawn between the individual and the social [because] the most cursory attention reveals that the course of human history, and its implications for every *individual,* is by and large fueled by perceptions of *groups*" (Edward 2009:22). For example, a young girl develops a particular type of feminine identity when her father calls her "princess," gives her instructions in a gentle non-direct way whereas he speaks forthrightly with her older brother, and most terms used to describe her person emphasize her appearance. This is language use in the service of identity construction on an individual level. Yet this scenario serves just as well as an example of language use in the service of identity construction at the collective level if one focuses on the father rather than the daughter. The assumptions out of which the father parents are the result of a powerful macro societal discourse regarding gender that has already resulted in deeply held, and often fiercely protected, social folkways and mores of femininity (and masculinity) held by the father.

Creating an identity *within* a group involves learning to understand and internalize within habitus the unique (externalized and objectified) linguistic norms of that particular group. In creating an identity *for* a group, the way in which a group chooses to reference itself is, at the most obvious level, an indication of the type of identity they wish to claim. In the case of the megachurches being examined, each one has crafted a unique linguistic identity which can be identified and analyzed with considerable nuance using discourse analysis methodology.

It is plausible then, to suggest that this identity is then internalized to varying degrees by its members in a recursive relationship which continues to reinforce both the micro and macro identities. In each case, as discussed below, these internalized identities offer their "owners" stable selves with which to absorb the buffeting winds of radical modernity.

Unlike the somewhat more esoteric theorizing about language that symbolic interactionism pursues so eloquently, discourse analysis has a more practical orientation due to a strong methodological focus. Edwards refers to it as linguistic ethnography (Edwards 2009). It is focused on "examining aspects of the structure and function of language *in use* [italics added]" (Johnstone 2008:4). It offers a useful array of micro-concepts that have been developed via disciplinary research which now enable and enrich further research projects. *Systems of Address* frequently function to establish identity as determined by degree of formality, relative status of speakers, and degree of intimacy between speakers. Power differences can frequently be observed based on *asymmetrical naming*. Intimacy, status, and power are evident in each of the megachurch websites analyzed by employing these micro-concepts. The ability to employ successfully the linguistic norms of more than one group is referred to as *code-switching*, or *speech mobility*. *Style-shifting* happens within a speech community that has different linguistic norms for various contexts or people, such as the complex use of both sanctified and co-sanctified lexicons in each megachurch. This is closely related to *audience design*, which suggests that speakers adjust their style based on who they are talking to, and in cases where they wish to indicate solidarity they will attempt *linguistic convergence*, which is a skill that we will see in the discussion below is particularly well nuanced

in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon. The *strategic* use of the linguistic norms of another group is referred to as *crossing***.**

While each of the above (which is a selective list) is a useful starting point in examining language use and identity construction, the greatest strength of discourse analysis remains the grounded research nature of its methodology which allows, and requires, that the researcher remain open to new insights emerging from the process of the research itself. As a result of its focus on *use,* its potential uses are flexible and broad. Barbara Johnstone, offers the following heuristic as a systematic guide to develop questions asked of any discourse examined in ethnographic research:

- Discourse is shaped by the world, and discourse shapes the world.
- Discourse is shaped by language, and discourse shapes language.
- Discourse is shaped by participants, and discourse shapes participants.
- Discourse is shaped by prior discourse, and discourse shapes the possibilities for future discourse.
- Discourse is shaped by its medium, and discourse shapes the possibilities of its medium.
- Discourse is shaped by purpose, and discourse shapes possible purposes. (Johnstone 2008:10).

Note the many echoes here of the cyclical nature of the human social ecosystem that was evident above in the summative statements of Berger and Luckmann's phenomenology, of symbolic interactionism, and of structuration theory.

The Methodology of Website Analysis: A Reading for the Purposes of Exploring Processes of Discourse Construction

Life online is an ever-increasing reality in the 21st century. The world of commerce quickly gravitated to the potentials of the World Wide Web when it first emerged, and while early organizational websites were focused on the practicalities of accessibility and use, organizations and brands now routinely create their identities through websites. "Websites are on-stage work areas where a performance is given to an actual or implied audience" (Winter, Saunders and Hart 2003:311), and the "analysis of Websites provides new and useful form[s] of data about an organization's identity and priorities because, unlike media representations of the group, it is self-directed….provid[ing] an open space for self-presentation to the rest of the world" (Pudrovska and Feree 2004:118). As in other aspects of the social world (as discussed above), megachurches have taken their leads from the marketplace, and are also now using their websites to present identities (Baab 2008) – the "public face of the church is the church's website" (Codone 2012:1). In his comparison of Evangelical vs. Liberal churches, which included some examination of church websites, Wellman (2008) observes that church websites are "an electronic representation of how the church imagines itself and how it relates itself to the lived world of its members and potential visitors…..that shapes and guides thoughts, feelings, and actions" (147). Church websites are a window into the worldview of the churches they represent, and much of what follows in the examination of the three megachurches chosen for this study provides nuanced detail regarding each of their worldviews, as encapsulated by their co-sanctified lexicons. Wellman goes on to suggest that these church websites go "beyond the *description* of reality to *construct* it [italics added], and directs what

one sees and how it is seen" (147). As a "medium of communal networks, ideological guidance, and ritual activity" (Wellman 2008:152), he suggests that routine interaction with these websites "habituates" interactants to the "imagined world" they present, making them real. Hiring professionally trained website designers, many megachurches have very large websites, hence large amounts of rich and unmined data for those of us interested in analyzing their discourse.

Academic research focused on the world wide web began in the early 1990's. Research focused specifically on websites came later when websites began to gain in their capacities and influence. Much of that influence was initially in the world of marketing and consumerism, hence the early research was market based, and outside much of the realm of academic motivations and immediate interests (Bauer and Scharl 2012; Pauwels 2012). This has now changed with academic research turning its attention to websites and market success or failure (Andrews, Nonnecke and Preece 2003; Bauer and Scharl 2000; Djonov 2007; Gevorgyan and Manucharova 2009, Pauwels 2005; Rossler 2002; Wakeford 2000; Weare and Lin 2000), with a good deal of the interest lying in "how to decode/disclose the cultural information that resides both in the form and content" (Pauwels 2012:248) rather than in its commercial persuasiveness. Much of the more recent academic research has also been focused on the user interactive characteristics of websites, the multiple modes available, and the structures employed. Among the first to systematically explore a concept of multimodality to capture these elements were G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen (1996), who suggest that multimodality "has, by and large, been ignored" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:41), and offer the introductory

observation of “a rapidly growing realization that representation is always multiple” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996:vii).[19] They highlight the need to recognize the power and importance of images, suggesting that “images can be read as ‘text’, and so the metaphor of ‘grammar’ can be fruitfully applied to the study of images” (Durie 1997:93). Models of analysis focused on the written content of websites had been rare, but in the past decade or two academic research has turned its attention to analyzing the *content* of websites along with structure and interactivity and website content analysis is a field that is now burgeoning. One can find content analysis of websites on topics ranging from environmental policies of global corporations (Anita Jose Shang-Mei Lee 2015) to the persuasiveness of anti-vaccine websites (Meghan Bridgid Moran, Melissa Lucas, Kristen Everhart, Ashley Morgan & Erin Prickett 2016), to impression management on gay racist websites (Lisa K. Waldner 2015). Luc Pauwels (2012), a Professor of Social Sciences in the Department of Communication Studies at Antwerp University in Belgium, provides a multimodal framework for analyzing the multimodal nature of websites which includes an examination of website content in its framework, and is among the first to attend to website content in a significant way. Pauwels’ later work nuances the definition of multimodality suggesting that “whenever at least two input (senses) or output (medium/device) modes (or submodes) are involved, one could speak about multimodality” (Pauwels 2012:250). He further points out that while all senses are “modes” (auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory, visual), currently the multimodal nature of websites merely utilizes two of them – auditory and visual. Given the scope of the research undertaken here, only the visual

[19] Their work is now considered a standard/classic reference point in the field of multimodal analysis.

has been analyzed. Megachurch websites typically publish the sermons of their pastor on their websites, with as many as a couple of years' worth of audio sermon files available. Transcribing and analyzing hundreds of hours of audio files would require an entire research team, involving an enormous amount of time and energy, and is beyond the scope of this current research, hence the choice to analyze only the visual elements of megachurch websites.

Pauwels outlines three different approaches for analyzing the visual: 1) the snapshot approach which focuses on a static slice taken at a particular point in time, 2) a diachronic approach "in the form of a longitudinal study that consists of different snapshot data at certain time intervals" (Pauwels 2012:251), and 3) a dynamic diachronic approach which is "focused on examining changes (actions and reactions) in a short period of time (key transitions, events). This research has employed the first of these, the snapshot approach. Because the focus of this research is to compare three very large megachurch websites, "capturing" each of their large and complex lexicons and discourse patterns[20] at a certain point in time allows for robust comparison of each to the other. While the diachronic approach of a longitudinal study would no doubt add to what we could learn about megachurch success, the first step is the three "snapshots" examined comparatively that this study has completed. To follow this study with the diachronic approach of "re-capturing" their lexicons and discourse multiple times to i) compare each to itself in terms of how each particular megachurch has changed, and ii) compare the discourse changes over time within an individual megachurch to the discourse changes over time within other megachurches, is potentially fruitful work for future research.

[20] In some cases the discourse is paired with images, which are then also included in the analysis.

And though beyond the scope of this research, qualitative interview and focus group studies specifically exploring audience reception of the kinds of discourses being analyzed here would in important ways "complete the circle" of what can be learned about how the co-sanctified lexicons function for and within the habitus of individual attendees of megachurches. In full alignment with the content analysis approach of discourse analysis, this website research approach

> does not seek to take a predetermined (based on standard or "universal" cultural indicators), predictive ("what works best") or normative ("how should it be done") stand, but advocates a rather explorative, descriptive ("what is there to be found") and interpretative ("what could it possibly tell us about aspects of culture") approach. (Pauwels 2012:251)

This allows for "unraveling their intended and even unintended meanings" (Pauwels 2012:252). Much of the content analysis of this research has explored both the intended and unintended meanings of the co-sanctified lexicons of the megachurches chosen for this study. From a six-part framework developed by Pauwels, setting out key foci for analysis, his sections 3 and 4 attend specifically to website content analysis, as outlined here:

3. In-Depth Analysis of Content and Formal Choices

3.1 Intra-Modal Analysis (fixed/static and moving/dynamic elements)

- Verbal/Written signifiers
- Typographic signifiers
- Visual representational signifiers
- Sonic signifiers
- Lay out & Design signifiers

3.2 Analysis of Cross-Modal Interplay

- Image/Written Text relations and typography-written text relations
- Sound/image-relations

- Overall design/linguistic, visual and auditory interplay

3.3 In-depth ‘negative’ analysis

4. **Embedded Point(s) of View or “Voice’ (POV) and Implied Audience(s) and Purposes**
    - Analysis of POV’s and constructed personae
    - Analysis of intended/implied primary and secondary audiences(s)
    - Analysis of embedded goals and purposes (Pauwels 2012:252)

Verbal/written signifiers carry “specific meanings that reside in the explicit and implicit content of the written utterances” (Pauwels 2012:253), while the *typographic signifiers* “reside in the visual properties of the text” (Pauwels 2012:254) as relates to font style and colour choices. *Visual signifiers* overlap somewhat with typographic signifiers but are much more focused on symbols, icons, and photographs. Here Pauwels draws on the ground-breaking work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), among the first to draw focused attention to the power of images as texts, introducing the concept that the visual is a form of grammar and that visual grammar is a “set of resources…for construction or meaning” (Durie 1997:93). *Lay-out design signifiers* are “essentially tools to attract, direct and invoke the desired effect on…. website visitors” (Durie 1997:255). *Sonic signifiers* includes all vocal and non-vocal sounds, and is the only one of the category *Intra-model* analysis types that is not employed by this research, which is focused on written and visual content only.

From the category *Cross-Modal Interplay*, the relationship between the image and written text is employed in this research, but the interaction between sound, image, and written text (the other two in this category) are not. The “inverted” (Durie 1997:256) nature of

negative analysis is also employed in this research in that it includes an attempt to distill what is *not* present, and provides interpretations of the significance of these absences.

The entire category of *Embedded Points of View* (POV's) overlaps in significant ways with discourse analysis, which is the primary theoretical framework used in this research to analyze content, asking "'who' is really saying… 'what' to 'whom' with what 'purpose'?" (Durie 1997:257). Gathering all the substantive content analysis together, the distillation of the dominant voices or "master narrative" (Durie 1997:257) is Pauwels goal. In this research, the co-sanctified lexicons distilled by the substantive content analysis reveal to us the dominant voices and master narratives.

Insider and Outsider Accounts of Evangelical Christian Discourse

Insider Accounts: Evangelical Christian Discourse about Evangelical Christian Discourse

Before moving on to close the chapter with an account of the specific methodological process of this research as it has employed the above theories, frameworks, and approaches, it will be informative to explore what evangelical Christians themselves have said and sought to understand about their own linguistic patterns and communities of discourse norms. The research analysis in chapters 4 to 6 will be an outsider's interpretation of the website texts produced and received by those immersed in, and practicing in, the hermeneutic worlds of the megachurches. This 'external' character of website analysis will limit the extent to which that analysis is able to access the thought processes, reflections, and intentions of those producing those texts. It will be useful in this section, therefore, to preface and complement that analysis

with a brief exploration of the interpretive deliberations of evangelical Christian authors who explicitly reflect on issues of intention and hermeneutic interpretation within church language-use from an 'insider' perspective. This, in turn, will be complemented with a subsequent focus on authors who focus closely on issues of church language-use from an 'outsider' perspective.

In typologies identifying branches and movements within Christianity, almost without exception U.S. megachurches fall within the category of the evangelical. Such is the case for the megachurches examined in this research, therefore it is best to be clear about what is meant by the term "evangelical". Understood as a historical authority on evangelicals and evangelicalism, David Bebbington, Professor of History at the University of Sterling, Scotland, whose definition of evangelicalism is overwhelmingly accepted by those working in the field (Bebbington 1992), uses the broad twin criteria of theology and behavior to determine an evangelical person or church. The most important identifying features for Bebbington are "conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism" (Bebbington 1992:271). That is, an evangelical has a specific type of conversion experience, expresses the authenticity of that conversion through proselytizing and social reform work, engages the Bible as the source of truth and guidance, and understands the historical figure of Jesus Christ as the divine representation of God come to earth as the Savior of humanity. Due to the somewhat functionally amorphous nature of evangelicalism, understood more as a movement than a strictly defined branch of Christianity, Putnam and Campbell's *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* augments Bebbington's definition to include "people who attend a nondenominational church, since, in recent years, a large number of nondenominational

churches are evangelically inclined (e.g., the typical megachurch is both evangelical and nondenominational)" (Putnam and Campbell 2010:14).

Discussion examining evangelical Christian *language use* by evangelical Christians themselves reveals it to be both limited and eclectic. Most of these voices, though not all, are evangelical Christians who understand themselves to be attending in some way to problems they observe in their Christian contexts because of general lack of awareness and attention to language use and function. These writers observe protagonists engaging in practices that they themselves show little awareness of doing, but appear to be doing nonetheless. These writers indicate that there are further linguistic changes taking place to the already crystallising co-sanctified lexicons of current evangelical linguistic discourse, changes which are responses and adaptations to the current conditions of radical modernity. They are seeking a form of evangelical discourse that, like the *affirmative postmodernists* discussed by Rosenau in chapter 1, is "nondogmatic, tentative…..and [does] not shy away from affirming an ethic [and] making normative choices" (Rosenau 1992:16). Sensing that the deep state of "permanent uncertainty" (Giddens 1991:31) of the current cultural ethos is deeply threatening to evangelical truth claims, their response to the *reflexivity* produced by modernity, with its recognition that "knowledge with certitude has turned out to be misconceived" (Giddens 1991:39), is to suggest new ways of talking. They recommend a subtle re-construction of the "immense edifices" (Berger 1967:54) of religious realities so they are perceived and experienced as less dogmatic and inflexible, yet still offer some normative anchoring. Most of these writers are attempting to re-engage the religious liminals produced by radical modernity,

in hopes that they will not step over the threshold into non-attendance or non-belief. As we will see when we examine the lexicons of the megachurches that are the primary focus of this research, the evangelical writers and researchers discussed here display a particularly high degree of self-awareness and intentionality. This is manifest in their direct call for evangelicals (and in some cases Christians more generally) to establish new ways of talking (and thus thinking) than is present in many, although not all, of the megachurches studied.

In Ruth C. Duck's *Finding Words for Worship: A Guide for Leaders* (1995) and Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra's *Worship Words: Disciplining Language for Faithful Ministry* (2009) – both clearly oriented towards practical 'insider' engagement – they focus their attention on the use of words in the worship context of evangelical Christianity. Both demonstrate nuanced sensitivity and care to the importance of words within the group. Rienstra and Rienstra suggest that

> The challenge of working toward good worship words, in essence, is that language in worship operates on many levels at once. Language helps us perform certain actions in worship, actions that include praising, interceding, confessing, listening, celebrating, and thanking. But as we experience those actions, the language with which we experience them simultaneously works on us to form our spiritual and devotional life, our patterns of thought and feeling. In a fundamental sense, worship language, like all of worship, is *formative*. (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:28)

Though not overtly present in their text, the acknowledgement of the reality construction – and, in effect, of individual habitus and total environment construction capacities of language is present in their subtext. One hears in their discussion of the *formative* power of language the echoes of linguist Barbara Johnstone's description of discourse as the use of language to "do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happen, create

beauty, entertain themselves and others, and so on" (Johnstone 2008:3), along with J.L. Austin's perlocutionary speech acts, to be discussed further below. In discussing inclusive language, Duck suggests honoring all people by avoiding gender exclusive terms, the association of sin with blackness or blindness, of salvation with sight, and "images that reinforce prejudices about childhood, youth, and age" (Duck 1995:31), all of which are part of the original sanctified lexicon of evangelicalism, and which reflect the categorical thinking of modernity.

Though there appears to be no social scientific theory of language informing their ideas, or any overt theoretical discussion of the relationship of language and identity construction, their subtext indicates an intuition about the power of language to shape how Christians think about themselves. Debra Rienstra[21], Assistant Professor of English at Calvin College, offers four dimensions of language at work in worship: expressive, aesthetic, instructive, and memorial (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009). Authentic worship, according to Rienstra, demands *expressive* language that "reflect[s] who and where and when we are" (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:29). Yet each congregation has a range of everyday language from teens to seniors to history professors to electricians. Therefore, the challenge becomes willingness to engage in the process of creating a shared communal language, which is the call away from the traditional sanctified lexicon to a co-sanctified lexicon which is more fluid and inclusive, hence less dogmatic. Because words have *aesthetic* qualities, it is important to attend to the range of

[21] Though *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* is the result of a collaborative effort, the main text of the book is in Debra Rienstra's voice.

aesthetic expression that words and phrases offer. In some contexts, “smooth, decorous rhythmically pleasing” (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:32) words are the most fitting, while in other contexts rough-edged language may be best suited. Rienstra further points out that *instructive* words are also important because it is necessary to “understand a whole range of facts and ideas in order to believe and practice our faith well” (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:34). Specific words and phrases, along with the careful balancing of those semantic choices, should reflect the overall range of who God is, and who his followers are in relation to him.[22] Finally, Rienstra points to the important reality that “language itself, in fact, always carries memories with it” (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:37). Intentionally accessing the *memorial* dimension of language is to be “placing our stories into the larger story of God’s purposes [through certain language choices] (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:37), and this process “welcome[s] those meanings into our midst” (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:39).

Rienstra encourages congregations to include all four dimensions of language in their worship, in order to maintain a rich and balanced worship experience. Her discussion reveals an appreciation for the acuity of experience facilitated by richly informed language choice and use, and one hears faint echoes of both Fishman and Berger in her multiple recognitions of the formative power of language. Yet there remains a sense in which each of these writers (Duck 1995; Rienstra and Rienstra 2009) presumes that their specific definition of what qualifies as rich language use is normative, that there is “what could be called bad worship as well

[22] The gendering of God as male in this dialogue is one of the ‘facts’ generally taught, and is not a reflection of the understanding of the author of this Literature Review.

as….what we might consider good worship" (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:12). Notwithstanding their desire to be flexible, inclusive, and unifying, their conception of good worship can become overly narrow and at odds with their apparent aims. Citing lyrics from a popular worship song – *When He rolls up His sleeves He ain't just puttin' on the Ritz, our God is an awesome God* - Rienstra observes that "we cannot rightly speak of God's majesty in silly, sloppy, or stupid words" (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:33). Originally the name of a luxury hotel (The Ritz), the phrase "putting on the Ritz" suggests that one is "mak[ing] a show of luxury or extravagance" (Oxford Dictionary 2013), and "assum[ing] an air of superiority" (Etymology Dictionary 2013). Popularized in the song "Puttin' on the Ritz" by the famous Broadway and film music composer Irving Berlin in 1930, it has long been recognized in popular parlance as pithy. To suggest that its use in a worship song is categorically "silly, sloppy, or stupid" is to do so without taking into consideration the linguistic norms of the speech community in which it is used (which is exactly what Rienstra ultimately cautions against), and would be considered by many language and culture specialists as a form of linguistic prejudice. That is, while calling for a changed lexicon Rienstra and Rienstra are nevertheless still wanting to establish some normative boundaries. Ironically, one could perceive Debra Rienstra herself as "puttin' on the Ritz' (assuming an air of superiority) in her assessment of the phrase as stupid. One could also perceive Rienstra as attempting to preserve the intended sacred nature of the worship experience. Both texts (Duck and Rienstra and Rienstra) are written by in-group members writing to other in-group members. Neither of their texts demonstrates awareness of how evangelical linguistic norms, which they label as carefully selected worship words, might be perceived outside of the express

purpose of worship. Their normative conception of rich language. And to be fair to them, this was not their goal in writing. Nevertheless, the argument of this thesis suggests their normative conception of rich worship language is too narrow to allow the forms of co-sanctified language required to re-engage the religious liminals.

In a small booklet entitled *No More Christianese* Doug Addison laments that "insider language" (Addison 2004:2) i) prevents Christians wishing to proselytize from communicating effectively to out-group individuals, and ii) makes new converts feel like outsiders. Formatted as a dictionary, Doug Addison provides ninety-three "Christianese" terms which he defines in "regular language" (Addison 2004:4-5). Ironically, among the ninety-three are many of the carefully chosen worship words employed by Duck (1995) and Rienstra and Rienstra (2009) above. Thus, while Rienstra and Rienstra refer to the careless use of words in a worship service as "chatter and patter" (Rienstra and Rienstra 2009:61), others experience the *lack* of everyday language in worship as chatter and patter. Addison concludes his booklet with a brief guide suggesting ways in which the reader could build their own non-exclusionary religious vocabulary. Here again we see the call to move away from the traditional sanctified lexicon to more welcoming, culturally engaged ways of speaking about evangelical religious experience.

Gordon T. Smith's witty double entendre title, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (2010) offers a fruitful discussion surrounding his observation regarding the congregation that, "the language of conversion that permeates the public life, worship, and witness of the church does not reflect their own experience" (Smith 2010:2). The linguistic norms of their community employed in discussions of conversion is

ineffectual in describing their conversion, which leaves them feeling “distant or alienated” (Smith 2010:2) from their own conversion experience, and doubting its legitimacy. The linguistic norms of the community require an experience other than the one they had. Here we see the long shadows of radical modernity, as the individual’s search for religious truth, and their experience of conversion, would be best described using a religious lexicon more attuned to the phenomenology of radical modernity (less dogmatic, more fluid) rather than the sanctified lexicon of traditional evangelicalism (more dogmatic, less fluid). Thus, Smith suggests that there is an urgent need to re-think the language of how people come to faith. This, he suggests, will have a significant effect on how people “speak about the church, about what it means to be a community of faith, and it will have a substantial impact on how we speak and think about evangelism” (Smith 2010:17). He highlights the importance of language use to the evangelical mandate of proselytization, as well as the power of language for evangelical individual identity construction when he observes that the conversion narrative “give[s] meaning and clarity, confirming the contours and elements of an experience, establishing identity” (Smith 2010:157). The centrality of the conversion narrative to evangelical identity (recall Bebbington’s definition) is the reason for Smith’s sense of urgency in wanting to offer a vocabulary of faith that resonates with the religious adherents’ actual experience. If the entry point into evangelical Christianity insists on the use of a traditional sanctified lexicon, then the possibility of desiring entry will be much less. Hence Smith advocates for a co-sanctified lexicon which recognizes that a spiritual experience need not be an “I’ve seen the light and now know all truth” experience. Rather, it may already include adaptations to the ambivalences of radical

modernity, in which seeking involves a recognition that there is little that can be known with certainty, but that such awareness need not nullify all semblance of a meaningful quest.

Like Smith, Marcus J. Borg's *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words have Lost their Meaning and Power and How they can be Restored* (2011), also expresses concern about Christian vocabulary, which, he contends, is "seriously misunderstood by Christians and non-Christians alike" because of the ways in which its language has been literalized. Borg understands well enough that "to be part of a religion means being able to speak and understand its language" (Borg 2011:1), thus "being Christian means speaking Christian" (Borg 2011:18). He argues that 'speaking Christian' has been deeply distorted because the meanings of Christianity's most significant words (e.g., Salvation, God, Mercy, Sin, Righteousness, etc.) have been either misunderstood, diminished, or distorted by insisting on literalized meanings of them. Much of evangelical Christianity is now built on these disconcerting distortions (though they are largely unaware of them), which claim black and white forms of biblical clarity and truth. Borg feels that this literalism is a "public relations problem" (Borg 2011:26) that needs to be solved. Here again we see how the arguments of evangelical academics implicitly recognize what we have identified as the consequences of early and middle modernity on language and language use, which is the increasing focus on rationality, settled black and white categories, disenchantment and accompanying literalism, and the absence of paradox. More importantly, these academic evangelicals are pointing out the need to create a new lexicon which reflects, and engages, the current cultural ethos of radical modernity complete with all its ambiguity and dissonance. Without such a response, the "public relations problem" (Borg 2011:26) will

increase as the perception of evangelical fundamentalism as inflexible increases. Borg is suggesting that evangelical fundamentalist need to "clear the site for new and improved solids" more appropriate to the times (Bauman 2013:2). Literalism functions to diminish and distort because it is almost like speaking an unrecognizable language within the broader culture. But like Gordon T. Smith, who focuses his discussion on changing language about conversion in the narrow terms of a strictly theological enterprise, so too Borg systematically goes through the process of theologically redeeming each of the twenty-two words he has identified, but spends no time discussing how such a redemption might address the public relations problem he identifies.

Moving away from the more semantically focused discussions above, Christian Smith (2011) offers a sophisticated critique of evangelical Christian language use as it relates to biblical hermeneutics and current literal interpretations by the fundamental religious right in the United States (who he labels "Biblicists"). Smith provides a parsimonious summary of the linguistic concepts of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts first conceptualized by the philosopher of language, J. L. Austin:

> Locutionary acts utter or inscribe words, illocutionary acts use uttered or inscribed words to perform communications concerning the purpose or disposition of the speaker or writer, and perlocutionary acts rely on uttered or inscribed words to accomplish a particular effect in the hearer or speaker. (Smith 2011:157)

The words "I do" as characterized by syntax, phonetic, and semantic features, are a locutionary act. As a commitment on the part of the speaker who intends to communicate that they will complete said task, "I do" is an illocutionary act. As a binding vow of marriage, "I do" is a perlocutionary act that has accomplished a particular effect, in this case in both the hearer and

the speaker (though it need only achieve an effect in either the speaker *or* the hearer). An illocutionary act is what one *does* when saying something whereas a perlocutionary act is the consequence or effect of that same speech act. Smith points out three relevant dynamics of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech acts as related to interpreting the biblical text. First, "individual locutionary acts can perform different illocutionary actions" (Smith 2011:157). "I do" can be an illocutionary act that reassures, informs, promises, or threatens, along with numerous other possibilities. Without context, the illocutionary intent of "I do" is not possible to determine, and "can be badly misunderstood" (Smith 2011:57). Second, "no given locutionary act automatically determines one and only one possible meaning as an illocutionary act" (Smith 2010:58). Third, "unconnected locutions can all perform the same perlocutionary outcome" (Smith 2011:58) of provoking the same reaction or consequence. From this Smith argues the necessity of considering the intended illocutionary and perlocutionary purposes of the original writers of the biblical text in their locutionary acts. Lack of awareness among bible readers, teachers, and leaders, of this linguistic complexity of speech acts has resulted in "interpretive mistakes in Biblicism…which come in the form of texts having perlocutionary effects on Biblicist readers that were not intended by the biblical authors or perhaps the God who inspired them" (Smith 2011:161). A classic example would be the interpretation of the writings of the Apostle Paul on the silencing of women within marriages and churches, which have historically been taken quasi-literally, i.e., women should *always* submit to men in all matters within the home and the church. Both an illocutionary and perlocutionary reading of those same writings produce a very different interpretation, which

recognizes specific context and culture, resulting in an interpretation in which the literal meaning cannot be generalized beyond the time and place in which it was written. Smith's concern with the evangelical misreading of the intended meaning of the text is, like Borg (above) and Frye (below), concerned with the challenge of literal language use and understanding. Exclusively perlocutionary readings of the Biblical text are more often than not rendered through a naïve literalist reading of the text, with little or no sensitivity to the context of utterance. The implication is that biblical interpretations need to develop a more sophisticated grasp of the challenging, complex, question of how to interpret the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of biblical authors. For the current thesis, Smith's argument can be extended to suggest that it is only with this more sophisticated grasp of interpretation as needing to be embedded in historical and cultural context that one can begin to reinterpret and translate biblical speech acts for the age of radical modernity. More than this, as we shall see, the specific contexts of different megachurches *within* radical modernity vary with their particular historical, social and cultural positionings. Here again, in Smith's interpretation, we find yet another evangelical academic wrestling with the linguistic norms of the community, calling it away from a linear lexicon of rationality to a more fluid, complex, less dogmatic approach to reading the biblical text. In the current cultural context and ethos of radical modernity, fixed black and white, literalist readings and interpretations – at odds with the erosion of certainty and the loss of faith in the idea of secure, self-evident, points of reference – are more likely than ever to lose traction among existing religious Christian adherents, and will, likewise, fail to draw new adherents to Christianity.

The influential Canadian literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, in his now classic *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (1995), expresses a broadly related but additional and distinct concern about what he calls the linguistic fallacy of that which is 'literally true; that which is descriptively accurate and self-evident, and encompassing all that there is to say. This kind of literalism "in the area of the spiritual instantly becomes what Paul calls the letter that kills" (Frye 1995:14). Literalism, according to Frye, birthed modern Christian linear rationality which resulted in the exclusion of "the language of myth and metaphor" (Frye 1995:16) and thus has become a "compelling dialectic based on the excluding of opposites [which] is a militant use of words" (Frye 1995:15). The biblical text is not a historical document or a 'how-to' manual; it is myth, a truth-telling story. Myth, in this sense, is neither historical nor anti-historical, but rather counter-historical, allowing for paradox, and "only in paradox are words doing the best they can for us" (Frye 1995:17). Like all great literature, it seeks to know and understand the human and divine conditions. When a narrow rationality functions as the trump card of truth, when all language is literal in this sense, truth itself becomes only that which is literal, only that which is "verbally rational" (Frye 1995:15). Frye warns that it is only the language of the mythical and metaphorical that has the "power to detach us from the world of facts and demonstrations and reasonings, which are excellent things as tools, but are merely idols as objects of trust and reverence" (Frye 1995:18). If we remain only within the language of literalism we cannot dialogue in good faith with, "say, a Buddhist, a Jew, a Confucian, or an atheist…despite the fact that there is plenty of room in the mind of God for us both" (Frye 1995:18). The consequence of employing verbal rationality that overstretches itself is to

"pretend to know what nobody 'knows' anyway" (Frye 1995:20), and this fails to produce conviction and conversion for some (perhaps a silent many). Frye, first exploring these ideas in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), verges on being prophetic in his description of what the consequences of literalism will be for Christianity in what at the time of writing was only the very early stages of radical modernity. His courage in so boldly stating that a literal mis-reading of the bible will result in religious pretense about a truth which cannot be claimed in such a fashion is admirable. Words having thus failed, the next step in historical Christianity (and the present) has often been to demonize those who will not accept the products of verbal literalism as ultimate truth, and "from there it was an easy step to the psychosis of heresy-hunting" (Frye 1995:15). Frye's deep dis-ease with what he considers the misappropriation of language in the world of Christianity is almost palpable.[23]

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[23] Christian Smith and Northrop Frye both provide among the most eloquent explorations of language use in evangelical Christianity, but neither of them ultimately rivals the humility or artistry of C.S. Lewis' *Footnote to All Prayers*:

Footnote to All Prayers

[You] to whom I bow only knows to whom I bow
when I attempt the ineffable Name, murmuring *Thou*
and dream of Pheidian fancies and embrace in heart
Symbols (I know) which cannot be the thing Thou art.
Thus always, taken at their word, all prayers blaspheme
Worshipping with frail images a folk-lore dream
And all [of us] in our praying, self-deceived,
address the coinage of [our own] unquiet thoughts,
unless …. Thou in magnetic mercy
to Thyself divert our arrows,
aimed unskillfully, beyond desert;
And all [of us] are idolators,
crying unheard to a deaf idol, if Thou take [us] at [our] word.
Take not, oh Lord, our literal sense.
Lord, in Thy great, Unbroken speech
our limping metaphor translate.

C.S. Lewis. *Poems.* Edited by Walter Hooper. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964. p 129.
Adapted format, inclusive language: Val Hiebert

Outsiders on Evangelical Christian Discourse

While the above texts are in-group members discussing in-group linguistic norms and consequences, there are also a few research projects framed from an out-group perspective which provide valuable insights, with the strengths, and the weaknesses, of their greater existential distance from the subject matter. Lessons from this standpoint are equally valuable in informing the analysis of megachurch websites that follows in subsequent chapters. In her case study, *Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion*, the anthropologist Susan Harding explores how "the language and performance of fundamental Baptist witnessing convict and convert the unsaved listener" (Harding 1987:167). She focuses most of her article on an interview she conducted with Reverend Cantrell, an elderly Baptist Minister. Reverend Cantrell approached the interview as a witness opportunity in which he presumed that "lostness is a position from which you *listen*, and salvation is one from which you *speak* [italics added]" (Harding 1987:171). Despite casting herself as an interviewer, Harding was nevertheless altercast as someone who was lost. Through his language choices Reverend Cantrell continually placed Harding within his own personal narrative of conversion by using what Harding termed as the "royal we" (Harding 1987:172). In her own words, recounting the experience, Harding says that "he was refashioning me….I am emptied, stripped of all vestiges of personality and uniqueness….primarily distinguished by what I lack" (Harding 1987:173). Witnessing, according to Harding, is "language…intensified, focused, and virtually shot at the unwashed listener" (Harding 1987:169). Terms such as the Holy Spirit is "dealing with me", "speaking to my heart", "bringing me under conviction" in order to complete being

“saved”, “born again”, “re-generated”, and “washed in the blood” are examples of this ‘shooting’ of the unwashed (Harding 1987). While this study is well over 20 years old, one can continue to observe evangelical Christian discourse in which the master status of out-group members is determined by what they lack. In discussing the language of “born-again” Christianity, Linda Coleman notes that various forms of semantic and conversational norms function to create a particular religious speech community. She further observes that “Evangelical grammar…seems designed to avoid reference to human beings as primary agents and to introduce God as the moving force behind all good actions” (Coleman 1980:136). In forming individual identity within the group, this linguistic practice functions to count as a “more holy” way to talk (Coleman 1980:136). She concludes with the observation that even though “evangelicalism is a strongly proselytizing religion…we can ask why Evangelicals allow their language to remain so different from the standard and hence so opaque to the very people they are [apparently] trying to reach” (Coleman 1980:140).

The most extensive research to date on evangelicals and language use is an ethnography of the Bible studies of five American congregations over a nineteen month period, conducted by the linguistic anthropologist James S. Bielo (2009). Building on the theoretical traditions of symbolic interactionism, and employing the methodology of discourse analysis, Bielo recognizes institutions to be “constituted by their semiotic, linguistic, and interactional features, …. [t]hus to study an institution necessarily entails the study of its discourse” (Bielo 2009:14). Bielo concluded (among other things) that evangelical Bible studies frequently function as backstage rehearsals for witnessing (i.e., attempting to lead a “non-Christian” to the Lord), because

"witnessing is closely bound to their sense of identity and purpose" (Bielo 2009:115). Hence this collective rehearsing of illocutionary speech acts (borrowing from Smith, above) in hopes that they will have perlocutionary effects or affects also serves as identity creation and presentation. In this sense, Bible studies can be seen to have both manifest and latent functions. He further noted that identity construction in Bible study contexts is the oppositional relationship of "well-formed ideas about collective belonging with abstract and concrete descriptions of out-group representatives" whereby "identity is constituted not by essential characteristics but instead by a set of relationships to the Other, or whatever is *not* the Self" (Bielo 2009:137). Of further interest to Bielo are the type of Others who are selected for this oppositional identity construction work.

In the case of the grounded research of both Bielo and Harding surrounding 'witnessing' we see the harsh and inflexible boundaries around evangelical discourse, steeped as it has been in the broader cultural norms of early modernity, that is, an ethos of achieving certainty (through the rationality of apologetics). Among evangelicals, historically, the greatest energy is most often given to the boundaries of membership identity, created by insisting on a specific type of "salvation experience" as an identity marker of group membership on earth, and eternal membership in heaven. This 'certainty' for in-group members ("'knowing' what nobody 'knows' anyway" (Frye 1995:20), quickly translates into a moral obligation for them to proselytize. And it is exactly the type of data that Harding and Bielo have identified that the previous evangelical writers discussed above (Duck; Rienstra and Rienstra; Addison; Smith; Borg; Smith; and Frye) are concerned with, and are responding to, regarding the nature of

realities constructed by such Christian (in this case evangelical) discourse. Their growing concern, in effect, with the misalignment between evangelical discourse (i.e., their sanctified lexicon) and a more complex appreciation of lived experience is revealing. It is not difficult to anchor their interpretations in the current structural conditions of late modernity. Situating their work against the backdrop of these structural conditions provides an illuminating interpretative context for the distinct common thread in their assorted and various beliefs, which is that evangelicals must adapt their lexicons to allow more fluid, thoughtful, and permeable ways of expressing faith and being a faith community.

As has been demonstrated in the above discussion, while the relationship of language and identity has been explored employing various disciplinary intersections, very little actual research has been done in examining evangelical Christian language use as it relates to identity construction. No qualitative research has been done of which this author is aware that examines the identity of megachurches as discourse communities. To understand the internal logic of megachurch success in current conditions it is necessary to understand the social and religious norms and identities, both individual and collective, that are established by their linguistic norms.

Methodology: Surveying the Linguistic Ethnographic Landscape

Identifying the Focus of Primary Empirical Research and the Megachurch Research Locations

The "immense edifices" (Berger 1967:54) that the co-sanctified lexicons of megachurches have constructed appear to have successfully alleviated some of the anxieties

and needs produced in their adherents by the conditions of radical modernity. Religions are aptly described by David Tracy as “cultural-linguistic traditions” (Borg 2011:6), and as such, being religious is like being French – one of the criteria for being French (or Turkish or Korean) is the ability to understand and speak French (Borg 2011). So too a necessary though not sufficient condition for being an evangelical Christian is speaking some version of “Christianese.” Membership in a community is “about more than language, *but not less*” (Borg 2011:7 italics added). Hence it is no surprise that the internalized sanctified and co-sanctified lexicons of megachurches have the capacity to function very powerfully, within the megachurch collective and within the phenomenology of individual attendees, to potentially construct bulwarks against the disequilibrium of radical modernity. While evangelical Christianity at large is declining in its number of adherents, megachurch attendance continues to grow. That growth is not driven primarily by conversion of the unchurched, but rather, by what Sargeant (2000) terms “circulation of the saints” (30). His Seeker Church Pastor survey of Willow Creek Association churches (462 of 600 pastors completed the survey) revealed that “attenders with a history of church involvement make up the largest segment of visitors to seeker churches, [and] individuals without any recent religious participation make up the smallest” (30). While altar calls are, as Wellman et al. (2020) indicate in their qualitative analysis, an important part of the ritual cycle that megachurches enact to powerful effect, the altar call is framed as a transformative moment that can be repeated (the high that many attendees speak of) rather than a conversion which most attendees have already experienced in previous church environments.

It is in this context that the current research has drawn on Sociological and Anthropological language theory, discourse analysis, and website analysis tools to conduct content analysis of the large websites of three megachurches. Applying the methodology of discourse analysis, discourse communities can be examined using fieldwork (e.g. interviews, or observational recordings) within the community of users, the results of which are then transcribed and analyzed. Or discourse communities can be examined using content analysis of their written materials such as, in the case of this research, websites. The large and elaborate websites of megachurches typically seek to claim an identity with insiders (current attendees) as well as outsiders (which are potential attendees), and such is the case with the three megachurch websites chosen for this study. In his qualitative examination of liberal vs. evangelical websites Wellman (2016) notes that highly successful evangelical megachurches have websites that "deliver information, but also become a medium of communal networks, ideological guidance, and ritual activity" (153) while also "opening avenues of communication to newcomers" (153). Hence there is a vast amount of rich linguistic data readily available for analysis regarding its social reality constructing possibilities, as well as for "listening in", i.e. witnessing the ongoing networking and ritual activity forms of communication that are happening on these large megachurch websites. Linguistic identity profiles have been created for each church, with the aim of distilling the specific nature of their linguistic adaptations (particularly their co-sanctified lexicons) as successful responses to the challenges of radical modernity. These linguistic identity profiles are best understood as dovetailing with the existing face-to-face qualitative megachurch research (mentioned above) that indicates the

charismatic power of the pastor to create in attendees a sense of meaningful relationship with their pastor, their *energy star.* This relational dynamic is present despite attendees rarely if ever interacting with their pastor personally (Corcoran and Wellman 2016) and is directly linked to the co-sanctified lexicons that the pastor creates and employs within the lived experiences of the church, and that create attendees' sense of authentic relationship with, and loyalty to, their pastor. These co-sanctified lexicons, which are available for in-depth study on their extensive, sophisticated, and highly interactive websites allow us to distill "who" each of these churches is in their public presentation of self to each other during their weekly services, and also to outsiders. That is, analysis can be based on the written speech habits and discourse patterns on their websites. The emphasis on discourse means that the analysis has not sought to directly measure belief or internalization as such, which would require the other complementary kinds of qualitative research discussed above, but "the *practices* by which individuals [and collectives] occupy a position within a religious field" (Turner 2011:232), in this case linguistic practices. This research self-consciously assumes that the co-sanctified lexicons created, activated, and deployed on megachurch websites are a window into their internal discourses during their Sunday services and weekly events. Given that the most featured portions of what is present on the megachurch websites studied here are direct quotes from the *energy star* pastors who lead their churches (particularly in the case of Lakewood and West Angeles), this would seem to be a reasonable and plausible assumption. As will be explicated below, this research suggests that the co-sanctified lexicons of the megachurches are playing a major role in re-creating evangelical religious discourse.

The flexible and broad nature of discourse analysis typical of almost all qualitative research, paired with the descriptive and explorative approach advocated by Pauwels in website analysis is the immediate methodology employed in the empirical aspects of this research. Pauwels notes that, though the process of website content research is "very demanding" (Pauwels 2012:261), this is well compensated by the "unmatched data richness and availability of websites, which can be regarded as true multicultural vaults of largely untapped information" (Pauwels 2012:261), as has been the case in this research. Notwithstanding the demanding nature of this type of analysis, yet sensing the value of being able to undertake comparative analysis of differing megachurch adaptations to radical modernity, the research examines three megachurch websites. On first impression, the three sites are all distinctly different from each other in their identity presentations as depicted by their websites. Chosen to represent as much range within the units of analysis as possible, their founding dates range from 1943 to 1959 to 1999, two are non-denominational and one is denominational, their membership ranges from 12,000 to 24,000 to 43,500, and they are reasonably well spaced geographically with Lakewood Church located in south central United States (Houston, Texas), West Angeles Church of God in Christ located on the west coast of the United States (Los Angeles, California), and Mars Hill Bible Church is located in the north east of the United States (Grand Ville, Michigan):

Lakewood Church
Denomination: non-denominational
Membership: 43,500
Location: Houston, Texas
Founded: 1959

West Angeles Church of God in Christ
Denomination: Church of God in Christ
Membership: 24,000
Location: Los Angeles, California
Founded: 1943

Mars Hill Bible Church
Denomination: non-denominational
Membership: 12,000
Location: Grand Ville, Michigan
Founded: 1999

Data Collection and Substantive Content Analysis

As noted above, the intent of the research was to take a snapshot approach. Because website content and structure are constantly changing (in some cases daily and even hourly) it was important to capture a literal snapshot of each website for content analysis. Printed website pages do not display on paper the way they do on the screen. Often the images are not present in the printed version, it is not unusual for some content to be excluded, and the layout is seldom the same as the printed version. Hence it was necessary to use a Microsoft word "snipping tool" which allowed the researcher to permanently capture and catalogue as e-files the website image on the computer screen at the chosen point of analysis. This could then be used in the analysis of the following phases of the research. This laborious process involved: i) scrolling down on each single website page and capturing multiple snapshots in order to secure the entire page; ii) opening each hyperlink on each website page and carrying out the same procedure for each of those pages; and iii) establishing an e-file organizational system which retained the various home page hyperlinks, sub-hyperlinks within those pages, the sub sub-hyperlinks in each of those pages, etc., and their organizational relation to each other. This

process more often than not resulted in capturing a trail of as many as 10 hyper-links and sub-links. These were then printed and organized in physical form to reflect the way the website was presented in virtual form at the time of the snapshot (Figure 3:1). The printed pages of each website were then numbered (beginning with 1) for ease of reference and citation purposes (Figure 3:2). It was not possible to use hyperlinks to each website page for citation purposes because, as noted above, time has passed since the data was captured and website page content is always changing, hence a web address for data collected in 2013, 2014, 2015, or 2016 (the years the data was collected) would now in all likelihood have different content, or no longer be a functional hyperlink. For this reason it was crucial that stable images of the data were secured for analysis. The web address for each megachurch is included in footnotes 23-25 below.

Using the above described method for data collection, the Lakewood website[24] is 207 pages in length, the West Angeles Church of God in Christ website[25] is 555 pages, and the Mars Hill Bible Church[26] website is 559 pages[27].

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[24] https://www.lakewoodchurch.com
[25] Home | West Angeles COGIC
[26] https://marshill.org
[27] It should be noted that the Lakewood website page amount is less than the other two churches because each individual virtual page was significantly longer than was the case for both the Mars Hill and West Angeles individual webpages, which resulted in less page numbers, but much lengthier pages when printed.

Figure 3.1: Data Binders

Printed website of each megachurch

Figure 3.2: Website Structure

Each coloured tab is a hyperlink on the homepage

All the material analyzed was publicly accessible. No one was directly interviewed, and no behaviour of individuals was observed. Hence none of the data acquisition required informed consent.

In the case of each printed megachurch website, the first phase of analysis involved a very close reading, with pen in hand marking the literal page, to identify and track themes that emerged (see footnote 14). The discourse lexicons of each of the three megachurches employ a considerable amount of metaphor, hence using qualitative software to track themes, embedded as they were in metaphorical contexts, would have missed much of the richness that was unearthed through a manual reading. As already indicated, this close reading was anchored and framed by meta-theories of structure and agency, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism, and informed more substantively by the five themes identified in chapter 2 that emerged from a reading of the literature on megachurches based on a structural analysis of radical modernity. This substantive literature on megachurches has attempted to explain the phenomenon of their huge success, but, the thesis argues, it is better able to do this when its

insights are integrated into the more complex frame provided here. Furthermore, this theoretical frame needs to be combined with the further *methodological* tools outlined here to *empirically analyze* the micro-processes at work in the construction of megachurch success. For this purpose, the initial theoretical and substantive framing is thus complemented by insights and tools taken from anthropological and sociological theories of language, and from the sociology of language and religion. Through the subsequent empirical analyses of chapters 4 to 6, the thesis seeks to show that, each in their own particular way, Lakewood Church, West Angeles Church of God in Christ, and Mars Hill Bible Church, created meanings that appear to be responsive to the liminal psychic states (internalization) produced by the objective, externalized structures of radical modernity, with the evidence suggesting success in forging a powerful "cultural affinity between what megachurches offer and what contemporary churchgoers want" (Chaves 2006:341).

As mentioned above, though the focus of this research on discourse analysis of three extensive megachurch websites necessarily limits any interview or ethnographic in situ exploration, the results of this research dovetails well with what recent qualitative megachurch research has shown us. Predominant among these, the work of Wellman (2008), Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk (2014), Wellman, Corocoran and Stockly (2020), Hunt (2020), and Mulder and Marti (2020), indicate considerable thematic overlap between what megachurch attendees experience (as assessed via self-report surveys and focus group interviews) and the dominant themes of the megachurch co-sanctified lexicons examined in this research. The specific focus and nuanced nature of discourse analysis allows us to home in on,

and to see more systematically and in greater detail, the discursive mechanisms of reality construction that produce the type of experiences that megachurch attendees report.

In the empirical analysis, the conceptual and methodological tools dovetailed with the "what is there to be found?" (Pauwels 2012:251) approach to website content analysis advocated by Pauwels. They informed interpretations in a structured but open-ended, ethnographic, manner. The first reading repaid this approach, yielding many themes and sub-themes, some quite complex and nuanced, some fairly obvious, and some rather unexpected, all of which are explored in chapters 4-6. It is in this phase where the *adaptations* to the discourse of radical modernity evidenced themselves: in the co-sanctified lexicons of each megachurch website; in the cyclical, structuration-style, pattern of 'discourse shaping participants shaping discourse' that is identified in Johnstone's (2008) heuristic of discourse analysis; and in the creating and re-creating of symbols within particular organizations – particular megachurches in this case – in response to the social structurings of radical modernity, thereby creating and re-creating our realities (Ritzer 2008; Giddens 1991; Bauman 2013).

Having identified the broad landscape of the linguistic ethnography (Edwards 2009) of each megachurch in phase one of the analysis, a second close reading was then conducted, again with pen in hand marking the literal page. This second close reading identified and catalogued in detail all forms of discourse which fell into the categories developed out of the themes that emerged in phase one. This second reading also clarified a number of sub-themes that had emerged only vaguely in the first reading. More elaborate and detailed themes,

categories and processes result from this second phase of more contextualized interpretation. It is ultimately this second phase that is the basis for the substantive analysis of the three individual megachurches that is presented in chapters 4-6. It is to these analyses that we now turn.

Chapter 4

The Comforting Discourse of Lakewood Church: Charismatic Authority, Consumerism, and a Preoccupation with the Self

Introduction

Having explored the effects of radical modernity on religion, liminality, and the emergence and steady rise of religious "nones" on the social landscape (Drescher 2016; Butler Bass 2012; Lim, Putnam, and MacGregor 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010), and having outlined a conceptual and methodological approach, we can now turn to an examination of what many have found to be the somewhat mystifying success of megachurches (Thumma and Travis 2007; Chaves 2006; Roberts and Yamane 2012; Thumma and Bird 2015): the conundrum of megachurch success in the midst of the steady decline in overall church attendance. This conundrum is made more complex by the further observation that there is a significant variety of megachurches, so their reasons for success do not share a readily evident commonality. Yet while traditional evangelical church offerings claiming reliable and rational truths amid the uncertainty of radical modernity are falling on increasingly deaf ears, this same basic category of truths, also claimed by megachurches, is not only being heard but enthusiastically embraced. Megachurches are offering some type of new and improved solid (Bauman 2013) that speaks to the disequilibrium and dis-ease produced by radical modernity that traditional evangelical churches are not. Many "nones" are choosing to move past the liminal threshold space constructed by radical modernity by stepping across the threshold into a megachurch. The application of the lenses of i) sociology of language theory, and ii) discourse analysis, in an

examination of the speech communities of three very different megachurches – Lakewood Church, West Angeles Church of God in Christ, Mars Hill Bible Church – reveals a fascinating evolution of language use within specific encapsulated megachurch discourse communities resulting in the co-sanctified lexicons that Fishman (2013) describes. Each of these three megachurches is examined as a discourse community in the following three chapters, distilling discourse analysis identity profiles for each, beginning with Lakewood Church, in Dallas, Texas.

This chapter begins with a short review of the megachurch phenomenon and the role that language plays in it, along with a brief overview of demographic information about Lakewood Bible Church, to provide greater context. To demonstrate the collective reassurance the language use at Lakewood appears to generate within the individual habitus and total environment of its congregants and congregation, one must begin by examining how that very language use claims a status of spiritual royalty for the Osteen family within this megachurch. Further to this, a hierarchy constructed and maintained employing asymmetrical naming functions to reinforce the preeminence of Pastor Joel Osteen in particular. The discussion then moves to an exploration of the particular character of the co-sanctified lexicon that is created and sustained by the sacred status of the language use accorded to Joel Osteen, resulting in the high possibility of his listeners believing that, despite the current ethos of incredulity toward metanarratives, there *are* truths to be known. The focus group interviews analyzed by Wellman et al. (2020) indicate exactly this type of phenomenon – the energy star pastor as the arbiter and teller of big "T" truth. This includes an examination of how much of his success rests in his ability to re-lexicalize his listener, a process in which he invokes notions of personal victory,

boldness and a positive future, blessing, success, and healing on their behalf. It is here that the pre-eminence of a preoccupation with the self, or the ‘self motif’, is most readily apparent. The chapter then goes on to examine how the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood constructs Lakewood as a place of power, fashioning this on the basis of its size, influence, and ‘busyness’. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a thematic thread woven throughout the entire Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon – the moral imperative to flourish.

Located in the city of Houston, within the Bible Belt of the deep south (west to east from Texas to North Carolina, and south to north from Louisiana to Missouri), this region is “associated with fundamentalist Protestantism, puritanical mores, social conservatism, and a belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible” (South and McDowell 2018:5). Led by the globally recognized Pastor Joel Osteen, it is well known for its prosperity gospel perspectives. Meeting in what was previously the multi-sport Compaq Centre in downtown Houston, it has the largest number of physical attendees of any church in America, ranging between 44,000 – 53,000 weekly, with four English language, and two Spanish language services per week (approx. 4,000 attendees weekly in the two Spanish services combined, led by Pastor Marcos Witt[28]). Known for its sophisticated IT technologies and television ministry Lakewood broadcasts its services into major U.S. markets, as well as over 100 countries. Lakewood’s “visual, auditory, spiritual, and sensual dynamics are extraordinarily memorable and impactful” (Mittelstadt 2016:361).

[28] This research examines only the English speaking aspect of Lakewood Church.

The Osteens: The Spiritual Royals of Lakewood Church

Much of the research that explores megachurches in the United States indicates that these churches are often led by a senior pastor who is charismatic, visionary, authoritative, male, and middle-aged (Thumma and Travis 2007; Spinks 2011; Bird and Thumma 2011). This is certainly the case with Lakewood Church, pastored by Joel Osteen. But the language use employed by Osteen, and to describe Osteen, on the Lakewood Church website, provides a much more nuanced picture of him than can be gained merely from a basic profiling. More importantly, while it is certainly true that Joel Osteen claims and is granted the pinnacle role at Lakewood Church, it is equally apparent that he does so within the nexus of the Osteen family at large. Therefore, I will begin the analysis by examining the language use that creates and claims a very particular type of identity for the Osteen family as the spiritual royals of Lakewood Church. It is important to understand the degree to which understandings of reality are focused around this identity, produced through a particular type of discourse, to understand the manner in which, and the degree to which, Joel Osteen, and the Osteen family, hold power in Lakewood Church. At the same time, the relationship *between* the discursive construction of the constructed identity *and* the power that is derived from it is recursive and mutually reinforcing. For the discourse both frames the hierarchical structures of Lakewood and, in turn, receives validation and symbolic support – a reinforcing solidity – from the hierarchical structures it has created. It is through understanding the force of the discourse and the identities that one can fully recognize the potential power they hold within the Lakewood Church.

Building on this latter point, it is revealing to examine in detail how the presentation of the leadership structure within Lakewood church is intricately and indelibly interwoven into the symbolic presentation of the church. For while the church has a very large staff of pastors and support workers, the webpage that introduces the "Leadership Team" of Lakewood Church includes only members of the Osteen family: Joel Osteen – Pastor (son of the founding pastor, the late John Osteen,); Victoria Osteen – Co-Pastor (wife of Joel Osteen); Paul Osteen - provides oversight to all pastoral ministries (brother of Joel Osteen); Dodie Osteen - helps Lakewood focus on the needs of the entire body of Christ (mother of Joel Osteen, wife of founding pastor, the late John Osteen); and Lisa Osteen Comes – Associate Pastor (sister of Joel Osteen, daughter of the pastor who founded Lakewood in 1959, the late John Osteen) (p. 13).

The Lakewood website has a total of 207 pages, depicting 260 facial images. Of those 260 images, 48% of them (125 images) are members of the Osteen family. Of those, 61% (76 images) are of Joel Osteen, 16% (20 images) are of Victoria Osteen, 11% (14 images) are of Lisa Osteen Comes, 8% (10 images) are of Paul Osteen, 1.6% (2 images) are of John Osteen, and 2.4% (3 images) are of Dodie Osteen. What is of particular importance to note is that of the remaining 135 images (of the 260), virtually none of them are of individuals involved in leadership as pastors or staff at Lakewood Church. They are generic images of anonymous individuals. The visual dominance of the Osteen family on the Lakewood website communicates a very clear message that Lakewood is about the Osteens. Whenever truth claims are being made, they are being made by an Osteen. This is further undergirded by the number of times one sees their names in the written text of the website. Joel Osteen is

mentioned by name a total of 470 times, Victoria Osteen 405 times, Lisa Osteen Comes 131 times, Paul Osteen 35 times, John Osteen 19 times, Dodie Osteen 21 times.

The extra-ordinariness of the Osteen family is further solidified by their repeated claims of having personally experienced miraculous healing. Dodie Osteen speaks of a "dramatic and miraculous healing" (p.13) from terminal cancer, and Lisa Comes Osteen claims she was "miraculously healed as a child" (p. 13) from a "crippling birth defect that doctors said might keep her from walking" (p, 13). God also "spared her life when a pipe bomb sent through the mail exploded in her lap" (p. 13). The website makes repeated references to the miraculous healings and rescue of these two members of the Osteen family (p. 7, 13, 15, 23, 32, 47, 126, 186, 192, 200). Further, Dodie Osteen's miraculous healing is used on the website to construct an identity of her as being closer to God than the average person, and able to help others receive the healing power of God. You are welcomed to attend "Dodie's Prayer and Healing Services" (p. 13, 21, 23, 126) which are offered on a regular basis. At these meetings she will "personally pray over you and believe God for healing in your life" (p. 23, 47, 126). The most subtle, thus arguably most powerful, identity claim regarding Dodie Osteen's special healing powers is in the description of her on the "Leadership Team" page of the Lakewood website, in which the reader is welcomed to "Download Dodie's Healing Scriptures" (p. 13, 200). It is inferred that these particular passages of scripture (which function as the sacred text at Lakewood Church) that speak about healing belong specifically to Dodie Osteen. Not to God, conventionally understood to be the ultimate author of the biblical text, but rather, to Dodie Osteen. Joel Osteen's identity is also constructed as having the capacity to invoke the power of

God in an exclusive way. The “History of Lakewood” page offers testimonies of various individuals who have in some way been saved, redeemed, through Joel Osteen. We are told that “I saw Pastor Joel, was free; the heavy chains were lifted off of me,” “[I] turned on the TV and saw Joel for the first time……it was the beginning of a new life,” “Pastor Joel prayed with me, and I know God healed my wounded heart” (p. 32). These types of claims to special favour from God are among the foundation stones laid, and continually reinforced, that result in their (the Osteens) further claims about God (discussed below) that listeners experience as being authoritative. A direct line of communication to God, evidenced through miracles, indicates to their audience that the bold claims and reassurances that God will make everyone prosperous (examined below) can indeed be believed (that is, everyone who thinks and speaks appropriately, invoking the Lakewood co-sanctified Lexicon), in spite of the deep disequilibrium produced by reliance on *symbolic tokens* and *expert systems* (Giddens 1991) that has left us all so vulnerable to uncontrollable forces in our lives. Focus group interviews exploring how attendees internalize and experience these Osteen claims to miraculous healing powers would helpfully augment, and potentially enrich and complexify, the testimonies noted above.

Like the Royal Family of Great Britain, the Royal Osteen Family of Lakewood are “constituted as public figures” (Chaney 1991:793) on their website. But rather than being civic public figures, the Lakewood Osteens are spiritual public figures. Michael Billig (1991), using a rhetorical approach to social psychology, studied the conversations about the royal family recorded in sixty-three English households in an attempt to understand the British fascination and attachment to the royal family. In his conclusions, he argues that there is “a ‘banal

nationalism', which ensures that established nation-states are daily reproduced; through this banal nationalism citizens are continually reminded in barely conscious ways that they are members of the nation-state", and the "constant news about royalty provides inhabitants of the United Kingdom with banal reminders of nationhood, for it informs them regularly about the family which symbolically represents that nationhood" (Billig 1991:13).[29] Summarizing Billig's work, Chaney quotes his observation that the English people believe that "the British Royal Family is unique and that its uniqueness is bound up with a distinctive claim to privilege by the nation" (Billig 1991:794). The Royal Family is, therefore, "clung onto as the core of the claim to greatness in one of the names of the nation" (Chaney 1992:794). There are significant parallels between the way in which the Royal Family functions for the United Kingdom and the way in which the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood functions for their large membership. As discussed above, the Lakewood website is filled with images of, messages from, and powerful claims about, all members of Osteen Royalty, particularly Joel and Victoria Osteen. Just as the British feel a sense of privilege because they have the Royal Family, so too the presence of the Royal Spiritual Family of Osteens functions to make Lakewood members feel a sense of spiritual privilege, because their 'royals' claim, and are ascribed, special and privileged connections to God. This spiritual greatness and privilege of the Osteens is seen to be, and experienced as, refracted onto them as members of Lakewood Church. If anyone has the capacity and power to

[29] It should be noted that Billig also offers several positive functions of British Royalty in Great Britain, as observed by his research. And though he uses the term 'banal' to discuss one of his research conclusions, his subsequent discussion of it indicates that this is not intended to be a negative qualifier.

speak against the forces of radical modernity, it's the Osteens. The "imagined continuance of [British Royalty] provides reassurance at a personal level through the projection of a familiar future" (Rowbottom, 1992:510), and in the same way Joel and Victoria Osteen, in particular, constantly reassure their members of a familiar (and glorious) future by means of how they are depicted, and by what they say, on the Lakewood Church website. The insightful idea of "imagined" communities conceptualized by Benedict Anderson, emphasizes that whilst from the onset of modernity there can be very little and often no face-to-face interaction at all between members of a community, "yet [nevertheless] in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991:5). The emotional pull and inspiration of such a community is wrought within the Lakewood church by the individual and collective conceptualizations of the Osteen family (particularly Joel and Victoria Osteen). They are presented as the royalty who benevolently watch over their people, offer the same types of reassurance based on an imagined royalty as those offered to scattered, individual British citizens who have an "imagined" royalty uniting them symbolically with other members of the community. As with the British royals for British citizens, the Lakewood congregants need their royalty to act and behave in a certain way to reassure them that all is well in the world. The particular theme of a glorious future, noted above as a promise the Osteens make, will be explored further below in discussions of co-sanctified language, and re-lexicalizing language.

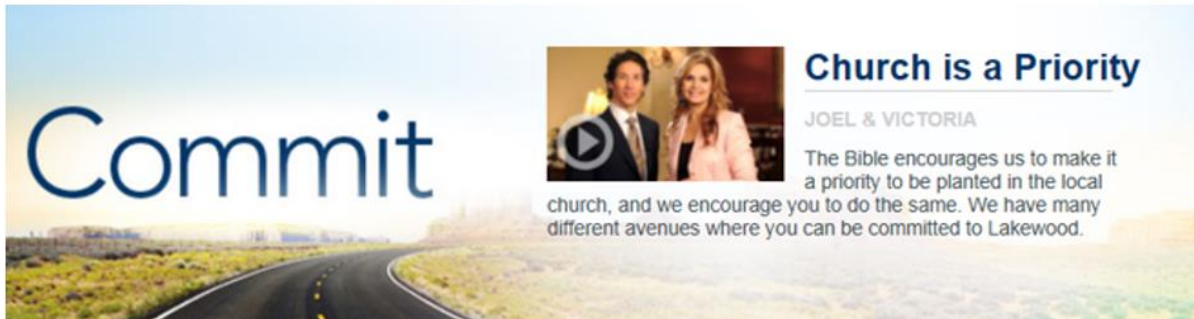
Joel and Victoria Osteen are the beloved royal couple of the Lakewood church, just as Prince Charles and Lady Diana were the darlings of Britain for many years, replaced by Prince William and Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge and more recently by Prince Harry and

Meghan Markle and the newest royal baby, Archie Harrison (though this royal couple is currently not embracing the role as traditionally expected). Employing the *Image/Written Text Relations* of website analysis (Pauwels 2012) illuminates a further dimension of the profoundly prominent role of the Osteens at Lakewood. The lead banner on the "Who is Jesus?" page presents an image of Joel and Victoria Osteen along with the caption "Our Best Friend" (Figure 4:1). The accompanying text then goes on to speak of Jesus as a "friend that sticks closer than a brother" (p. 37). The picture is larger than the text, and on first visual glance you see the Osteens and the words "Our Best Friend" (p.37) paired together. No matter what the manifest function of this layout might be, the latent function suggests and potentially reinforces notions of the Osteens as the best friend of the reader.

Figure 4.1: Lakewood "Our Best Friend"

The lead banner on the "Commit" page of the Lakewood website states that "Church is a Priority" (p. 38), followed by suggesting to attendees of Lakewood that "the Bible encourages us to make it a priority to be planted in the local church, and we encourage you to do the same" (Figure 4:2).

Figure 4.2: Lakewood Image "Church is a Priority"



On the left side of this text, larger than the text and title itself, is an image of Joel and Victoria Osteen, and on the left side of the text, larger than all the other text, it reads "Commit," thus suggesting fairly strongly that to commit to Lakewood is to commit to Joel and Victoria Osteen. Right below this image and text is another title which reads "Join the Family" (Figure 4:3) in which the accompanying text encourages "connecting with other believers" (p.38).

Figure 4.3: Lakewood "Join The Family"

In this case an image of Joel Osteen and an anonymous female are paired with the text, again larger than the title and text, thus suggesting that to "join the family" is to be part of Joel

Osteen's family. Given the ultimate preeminence of Joel Osteen (to be discussed below) in the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood, this particular pairing of text and image may further suggest Joel as the father, father-god, ultimate patriarch of Lakewood Church. Also advertised repeatedly on the Lakewood website is "A Night of Hope with Joel & Victoria" (p. 10). This event toured across various states, hosted in large arenas. It is not advertised merely as a night of hope, in which something hope-filled will presumably be discussed. Rather it is a night of hope with Joel & Victoria, because presumably their presence is integral to the supply of hope. On four of the Lakewood Church webpages the lead banner advertises the "Hope for Today Bible featuring notes and encouragement from Joel and Victoria Osteen" (p. 9a, 25, 28, 40). The association of hope with Joel and Victoria becomes a powerful and influential force. Publishing a "hope" Bible with notes and encouragement also allows them to control how the Bible is read and interpreted, further entrenching their special spiritual authority as seemingly granted by God. Joel and Victoria's words can now be found alongside and among the words of the Bible.

Victoria is referred to as "Lakewood's beloved Pastor Victoria" (p. 29, 70) who is "an inspiration and mentor to women everywhere" (p. 11). She has written and published several children's books, the latest of which is advertised on each of the 207 pages of the Lakewood website. She has also published *Love Your Life*, which "offers today's busy modern woman a simple and practical plan to help them embrace joy and live life to the fullest. She speaks directly to women harried by the pressures" (p. 11). She has an independent website linked from the main Lakewood Church website, and we are told that we should "let Victoria's passion

for life, family and relationships keep [us] encouraged as [we] journey through her personal website and videos" (p.11). Here again we find references to the spiritual power of one of the Osteens, as it is "Victoria's passion" that it to encourage us, rather than God or God's Word. The focus of attention is shifted from God to an Osteen. She also hosts a blog on the Lakewood website, and readers are told to "let Victoria's day to day insight and wisdom strengthen [their] daily walk with God as she shares with you her personal experiences and insights from God's Word" (p.11). Again we find the subtle implication that Victoria's insights will strengthen your walk with God, rather than your own insights, or communication with God. What is being nurtured here is not just help but dependency. She becomes an intermediary, through whom members must go, because they cannot really connect with God on their own.

The assumption of privilege and spiritual ownership of Lakewood by the Osteen family is made apparent in their use of the royal "we." The text/image relationship discussed above (Figure 4:2) is one in which the "we" that is Joel and Victoria Osteen (and the Osteen family at large), is saying that "*we* [italics added] encourage you" to be planted in the local church, and that "*we* [italics added] have many different avenues where you can be committed to Lakewood" (p. 38). The "we" is clearly defined as belonging to Joel and Victoria by the image of Joel and Victoria adjacent to the text. This same collective identity of ownership is used in various other places as well. On one of the Lisa Osteen Comes pages of the Lakewood website, she refers to "our family friend Israel Houghton" (p. 17), without further explanation of the identity of the family she is referencing. It could in principle be her spouse and children, or her spouse's extended family. But she assumes, and rightly so, that all her readers will likely

assume that the "our" is the Royal Spiritual Osteen Family. In the numerous instances in which the work, goals and ministry of Lakewood Church are discussed there are similar references to the collective identity of the Osteens. When appealing to their members to donate to a Thanksgiving meal drive, they attempt to motivate participation by saying "help *us* [italics added] make the difference!" (p. 47). This same refrain is used again in an appeal for participation in local missions (p. 106). In a discussion of the year that has just passed, Joel and Victoria reflect on "all that God has done in this year and in *our* [italics added] lifetime. Through your faithful support of *this* [italics added] ministry countless lives have been touched and changed all over the world" (p. 166). In the context of the chains of connotation and association established by the website, the use of "our" to discuss all that God has done implies that it is the work of Joel and Victoria, thus "this" ministry is their ministry. They thank their members for supporting work that all are directed to assume is both their (Joel and Victoria) responsibility and to their credit.

In short, whatever Lakewood Church accomplishes is ultimately the accomplishments of Joel and Victoria and the rest of the Osteen family. The invitation for a Christmas Celebration in honor of all Lakewood volunteers opens with "Pastors Joel and Victoria and the Osteen family invite you to join them and the Lakewood staff for a special church-wide volunteer appreciation celebration" (p. 95). In a celebration intended to express appreciation and foster motivation for volunteers to continue to participate, the first (thus most important) thing the reader must know is that the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood will all be in attendance. This indicates the high level of prestige of the event, and the generosity of the Osteens in wanting to be present

at an event where every Lakewood volunteer is present.   At a smaller event in which volunteers put together “baskets of love” for mothers in need in the Houston area, more text is given to noting that Dodie Osteen was present to thank the volunteers, going into detail about what she said and did (p. 107).

Just as the Royal Family of Britain is expected to express appreciation and a certain type of affection for the citizens of Great Britain, so too the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood expresses sentiments of affection for the members of Lakewood Church, only using more extreme language to do so. While British Royalty speak in dignified and reserved terms of their appreciation for Britain and its citizens, the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood, particularly Joel and Victoria Osteen, express their affection in terms that in other contexts would be seen as gushing and extreme, exceeding the cultural boundaries of everyday realism. Embedded in a discourse of religion, power and friendship, the expressiveness performs a symbolic function, providing the emotional glue that unifies the imagined community, providing warmth and security in the face of the chill winds of radical modernity’s impersonal and unnerving social forces. The reader is told repeatedly that “Victoria and I love you so much and pray for you every day” (p. 49, 50, 41), “we [Joel &Victoria] love you and pray for you every single day” (p. 52, 54, 134), “Victoria and I want you to know how much we love and appreciate you” (p. 65), “please know that we love you so much and thank you for being part of this ministry” (p. 166), and “we love you” (p. 166). Given that it is simply not possible for two people (spiritual royals though they may be) to love in any personally meaningful way (no matter what definition of the word is used) approximately 43,000 people (average weekly attendance of Lakewood Church),

one is left to ponder the nature of such statements given that they are routinely offered. Corcoran and Wellman's qualitative analysis of focus group interviews with megachurch attendees (2016) indicates that while those who are outside megachurches would likely find such declarations of love disingenuous, those who are members of megachurches report feeling authentically loved by their pastor. This is in no small part because when megachurch pastors preach using everyday language and humanize themselves through talking about their own flaws, and when everyone appears to share this perception of the pastor as an everyday guy who is also truly extra-ordinary, deep bonds of trust, and love, develop. Despite having virtually no direct contact with the pastor, this sense of feeling loved by the pastor "seems to be a by-product of the pastor's highly relatable sermons" (Corcoran and Wellman Jr. 2016:325), and results in an "emotional connection [that] is bidirectional; the attendees feel love *from* their senior pastor and they in turn feel love *towards* him" (325) further strengthening the charismatic power of the pastor, heightening the sense of loyalty and belonging experienced by attendees.

Asymmetrical Naming

One of the ways in which we lay claim to a status in the social world is through how we name ourselves. This is equally true on each of the micro, meso, and macro levels – whether within familial relationships, with a peer or colleague, or within the broader framework of a social institution. Forms of address (naming ourselves or naming others) "are important ways of showing how you situate yourself in relation to others, of creating social distance or intimacy, of marking deference, condescension or insult through the conventions of the address

system of a language" (Thornborrow 2005:164). Forms of address "may be asymmetrical when those involved want to make power relationships obvious" (Labelle 2011:178). Several status hierarchies within Lakewood church can be observed when examining asymmetrical naming patterns, which further illuminate the preeminent role of Joel Osteen, and, secondarily, the Osteen family more generally. One is the asymmetry between the use of "leadership team" and "leadership staff". The Osteens are referred to as the "Leadership Team" (p.13), whereas other individuals working in leadership at Lakewood Church are referred to as "leadership staff" (p.7, 8). The word "Team" implies connection and synergy of some sort, whereas the term "staff" connotes a function slightly more clinical and impersonal, and offering support services instead of central services. This functions to draw positive attention to the Osteen family. Further asymmetry can be observed in the select use of the term "Pastor". Only members of the Osteen family are described as pastors, and only a select few of them are given the title of "Pastor". Throughout the entire 207 pages of the website the only exception to this is Pastor Craig Johnson and Pastor Darius Trainer (p. 109), who were guest speakers who do not work at Lakewood Church. In the "Lakewood Church Wedding Guidelines" one is informed that all weddings at Lakewood must be performed by "a staff minister" (p. 147). Because it is a staff person, they are referred to as "minister" rather than "pastor", preserving the esteemed title of "pastor" for only select members of the Osteen family.

On the Lakewood Church website speaking schedule one occasionally finds John Gray listed to preach during weekend services. Though information about his role at Lakewood Church cannot be found on the Lakewood Church website, John Gray hosts an independent

website entitled “John Gray World”. On it we are told that “John currently serves as an Associate Pastor at Lakewood Church in Houston” (John Gray World). Evidently, though John Gray publicly claims his role as Associate Pastor at Lakewood, he can only do so on an independent website that is in no way linked to Lakewood Church. This further identifies the degree to which asymmetrical naming patterns are employed on the Lakewood Church website. The use of asymmetrical titles clearly delineates various categories of prestige, and the accompanying social distance produced by their use.

Within the Leadership Team itself (the Osteens), there are also several asymmetrical naming patterns. Only Joel and Victoria are referred to by the title of “Pastor.” Dodie Osteen is referred to as “Mrs.” or “Dodie.” Paul Osteen is referred to as “one of the teaching pastors” (p. 13), but the term pastor is never used as a title before his name, only as a description of his role. He is a medical doctor, and is referred to as Dr. Paul Osteen on the website (p. 5, 13, 111, 112), unless he is signing a post, in which case he simply writes Paul Osteen. Lisa Osteen Comes is referred to as an “associate pastor under the leadership of her brother”. Here again, as with her brother Paul, the term associate pastor is never used as a title before her name, only as a description of her role.

The most complex asymmetrical naming pattern is between Joel & Victoria Osteen. When her name is listed together with his, the title of Pastor is placed directly before Joel’s name, which is always listed first, and the Pastor status is inferred secondarily on Victoria because it is not used directly before her name, i.e., Pastors Joel and Victoria Osteen. When she is mentioned in the context of the women’s ministry at Lakewood Church, she is given the

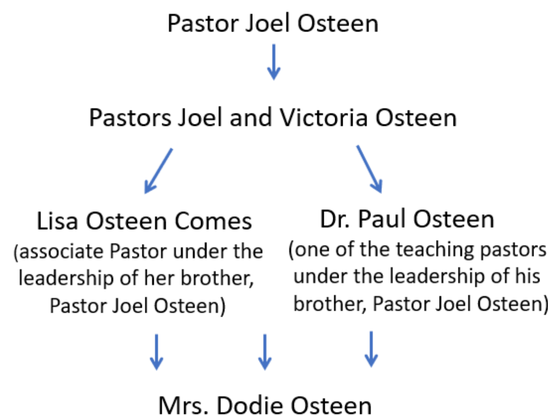
title of Pastor Victoria (p. 29, 47). In all other contexts she is referred to as Victoria or Victoria Osteen. We see here a delicate balancing act as the naming patterns navigate the need to retain the male headship-female submission model typical of traditional evangelicals while at the same time taking advantage of the immense appeal garnered by Joel and Victoria as the royal spiritual couple of Lakewood. This is achieved by allowing her the clear title of Pastor when she is addressing only women, the secondarily inferred title of Pastor in relation to Joel which keeps her under male headship, and simply Victoria in all other contexts.

With the exception of Jesus and the subsequent early church of Christianity (Matthews 2017; Tidball & Tidball 2012; Bailey 2008; Stark 1997; Wahlberg 1975), traditional Christianity in all its forms has conceived and enforced strong dualistic constructions of gender; women are to be silent, submissive followers, and men are to be strong, aggressive leaders. It is only in the last two decades that this stronghold has been breached, and only within a minority of progressive evangelical churches and denominations. Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Barbara Townsend-Fisher (2008) observe that one of the "Evangelical narratives of modernity has been to lament the attacks on the family all around it in culture, identifying the "outside world" as the enemy" (Kroeger, Nason-Clark, Townsend-Fisher 2008:31). The culture produced by radical modernity has, according to traditional evangelicals, brought chaos to the well-ordered roles of men and women. It is the enemy of all that is right and good and safe in the world of marriage and family. It follows from this perspective that family breakdown and divorce are inevitable when Christians give in to this attack by the enemy. The 'enemy' here consists of a dispersed and disparate array of contemporary actors, beliefs and practices

considered to be subversive of evangelical narratives. For example, the suggestion that the LGBTQI community be welcomed into the church is held as evidence of the disturbing levels to which cultural breakdown has now descended. Lakewood's careful balancing act of making sure that women are always under the authority of men, yet allowing Victoria to speak to men as long as it is with Joel at her side ("under his wing") facilitates a sense of comfort and familiarity in the midst of the chaos that is radical modernity without feeling like they are a cultural throwback or outdated because Victoria does, after all, speak publicly. This aspect of the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon is buried so deeply that, like the moon on the tides, it is virtually invisible. Yet it is powerfully present.

The asymmetrical naming patterns reveal a hierarchy which places Joel Osteen alone at the top, his wife Victoria beneath him, Lisa Osteen Comes and Paul Osteen beneath both Joel and Victoria, and Dodie Osteen beneath all of them, as follows (Figure 4:4):

Figure 4.4: Lakewood Church Leadership Team (status as determined by asymmetrical naming patterns)



We find, in the above naming patterns, an interesting conundrum. While Mrs. Dodie Osteen has the least status within the Royal Lakewood family based on naming patterns, her healing services are a central aspect in the identity construction of Lakewood Church. A brief historical look at her role at Lakewood may shed some light on this. In an 80th birthday video produced by Joel Osteen Media, we are told that "not only was she [Dodie Osteen] a model wife and mother, but after a dramatic and miraculous healing from terminal cancer in 1981 [at age 48] she began a new phase of ministry, calling Christians worldwide to discover the power and promise of prayer" (Joel Osteen Media). The John and Dodie Osteen marriage worked within the male headship-female submission model typical of traditional evangelicals (which was the model for Joel and Victoria Osteen). This is evidenced, for example, by Dodie's own words in reflecting on a time when her husband asked her to pray for healing for their daughter. She remarks, "I didn't know what I was doing, but I was being obedient to my husband" (Think Natural. The Dr. Ward Bond Show, 2015), spoken with a smile and a laugh. Her role was that of a supportive mother and wife, as ordained by the Bible. Her "miraculous healing" gave Dodie an authority that allowed her to take on a less-traditional role, independent of her husband. Now she was not merely part of a "Ministry Team" with her husband, as she was described previous to her healing, but rather she now had a status independent of her husband, as a prayer warrior and faith healer.[30] Here again we see a delicate balancing act in granting her authority as an expert on prayer and healing, yet never

[30] Almost all videos of Dodie hosted on the Lakewood website, and YouTube, are focused on her healing from cancer and her subsequent power as one who prays effectively for healing.

giving her a formal title because, as a female in the evangelical tradition, she must remain under the headship of a male when she 'instructs' men about prayer and healing. Hence she is named as *Mrs.* Dodie Osteen, which infers her attachment to a male, is respectful to her, but avoids giving her a formal title. The asymmetrical naming patterns are thus powerfully present even within the Osteen familial orbit as a subtle means of identifying degrees of status and authority.

The Preeminence of Joel Osteen: The Symbolic Invocation of Charisma and Authority

As noted earlier, firmly nested within the nexus of the Royal Spiritual Family of Osteens, Joel Osteen holds the preeminent place at Lakewood Church. It is his image (76 images) and name (mentioned 470 times) that dominates the website more than any other. We are told on the Lakewood website that "Joel's insights will help you grow your faith and equip you to be everything God intends" (p. 8), that he "delivers God message" (p. 8, 13), and that "to keep your faith strong and your hope lifted" you should "visit Joel's site" (p. 8). Along with the "Hope Bible" co-published by Joel and Victoria Osteen (discussed above), which reinforces their privileged spiritual status alongside God, Joel Osteen leads his congregation in the following recitation every time he preaches:

> This is *my* Bible. I am what it says I am. I can do what it says I can do. Today, I will be taught the Word of God. I boldly confess: My mind is alert, My heart is receptive. I will never be the same. I am about to receive The incorruptible, indestructible, Ever-living seed of the Word of God. I will never be the same. Never, never, never. I will never be the same. In Jesus name. Amen. (p. 198).

He holds up the Bible above his head as he leads the recitation, and in the middle of it are two premonitory phrases, "Today, I will be taught the Word of God", and "I am about to receive the

incorruptible, indestructible, ever-living seed of the Word of God." Taught by whom? Receive from whom? From Joel Osteen. Functionally, whatever Joel Osteen says the Bible says *is* what the Bible says. This is inferred in both the visual process (Joel holding up his Bible), the physical process (everyone also lifting their Bibles with him and reciting with him), and the content of the recitation (the words themselves). To hear from Joel Osteen is to hear from God. This less than subtle and powerful collapsing of Joel Osteen and God is also present in the "Pathway" section of the Lakewood website which is intended to offer the reader the opportunity to become a Christian through accepting Christ as their savior. If the reader wishes to take this offer, there is a "Ready to Accept Christ?" (p. 37) link that can be selected. Above this title, and much larger than the title, is a picture of Joel Osteen (Figure 4:5). Here we find subtle but powerful associations, this time between salvation, Christ, and Joel Osteen.

Figure 4.5: Lakewood "Ready to Accept Christ?"

To serve as a volunteer at Lakewood Church one must fill in an application form and sign a pledge in which the applicant promises to "accept the authority of Pastor Joel Osteen" (p.

145). Given that Joel Osteen is constructed as having the authority of God it is not surprising that thousands of volunteers at Lakewood willingly sign this form. As already mentioned, John Gray occasionally preaches at Lakewood Church. Though information about his role at Lakewood Church cannot be found on the Lakewood Church website, his independent website (discussed above) tells us that "John currently serves as an Associate Pastor at Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas *under the leadership of Pastor Joel Osteen* [italics added]" (John Gray World). On this website John Gray advertises himself as a speaker, comedian, playwright, and musician who is available for bookings. Even on a website not linked to Lakewood Church in any way, the superior status of Joel Osteen over John Gray is mentioned.

The Lakewood Church website offers many resources to its readers. This includes an online bookstore from which books, CD's, DVD's, and calendars can be purchased. With the exception of one book written by Craig Johnson, the Senior Director of Family Ministries at Lakewood Church, every book advertisement on the Lakewood Church website main pages is a book authored by a member of the Osteen family. Of a total of 64 Osteen book advertisements, 51 of these advertise books authored by Joel Osteen. Every CD and DVD advertised on the Lakewood Church website features either Joel Osteen (21) or Lisa Osteen Comes (14). Lakewood Church also offers free podcasts of their sermons. While Joel Osteen does most of the weekend service preaching, on approximately every fifth Sunday Lakewood Church hosts an alternate speaker. Yet the only podcasts made available are of Joel Osteen's messages. Again, his spiritual preeminence is reinforced, both within the Lakewood Church at large, and also within the Osteen family. Virtually all the website resources offering spiritual

guidance are written or spoken by a member of the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood, most frequently Joel Osteen. This functions to insulate Lakewood church members from alternate, outside understandings of the biblical text, and nurtures a context in which Joel Osteen in particular has a great deal of influence in establishing the identity construction of what a Lakewood Christian should look like. Based on how Joel Osteen's identity is constructed on the Lakewood Church website, one can legitimately suggest that he functions as, and is understood as being, quasi-God. Wellman, Corcoran and Stockly's (2020) focus group interview analysis resulted in their coining of the term "energy star" for the magnitude of charisma granted to a megachurch pastor, such as in the case of Joel Osteen as the ultimate royal "monarch" Lakewood Church. While Lakewood has clearly established traditions and rule-based hierarchies surrounding Joel Osteen, his foundational source of authority, applying Max Weber's typology, is that of *Charisma*. His identity as constructed on the Lakewood website depicts him in a manner fitting Weber's category, which is for those of "exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character." From this base of authority, according to Weber, such figures are able to establish "normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (sic)" (Weber 1978:215). These normative patterns are then "transformed into 'rational' rule-governed routines" (Scaff 2008:71) of discourse such as will be discussed below in examining the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood Church.

As we can see, structurally (by way of leadership roles), linguistically (by way of discourse patterns and semantic choices), and visually (by way of images) Joel Osteen in particular, and the Osteen family more generally, are ascribed deep and profound religious

prestige and power. This prestige and power appears to go well beyond the 50,000 congregants who are physically present every weekend at the renovated stadium of the NBA Houston Rockets basketball team that Lakewood Church now calls home. With seven *New York Times* bestsellers, his sermons broadcast to millions on religious, secular, and international television channels, a *Joel Osteen* program which has the highest ratings for a religious show in American history, and preaching tours that regularly sell out nationwide (Rakow 2014), for many situated well beyond the physical pews of Lakewood Church, “Pastor Joel is hypnotic” (Lee and Sinitiere 2009:26).

This veneration of Joel Osteen, and by extension the Osteen family, is the mechanism by which power and authority is handed to Pastor Joel to create, invoke, and enforce a particular and distinctive co-sanctified lexicon (discussed in detail in the next section). The profound form of *reflexivity* produced by modernity, whereby knowledge once understood as static has now become fluid because we never know when it might be revised (Giddens 1991), is particularly troubling for those with religious sensibilities. Religion, in this case evangelical Christianity, has historically been understood by its adherents as the arbiter of Truth. As the world around it swirls with competing notions of truth, Lakewood Church adherents come to trust that they have the actual truth because their pastor is invested with unshakeable power and authority. The entire Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon is constantly reminding its’ adherents of the pre-eminent spiritual authority of the Osteen family, and of Joel Osteen in particular. This is deeply reassuring within the whirlwind of radical modernity. “Knowledge with certitude” (Giddens 1991:39) has not, it would appear, been lost within Lakewood - Pastor Joel Osteen holds the

truth of God, and disseminates it. If Joel Osteen's authority is challenged, all Truth is challenged inside the world of Lakewood Church. This is why it is important that Victoria Osteen not be seen to challenge her husband's power – female submission is one of the foundational Truths of evangelical Christianity. The asymmetrical naming patterns which place Joel Osteen at their pinnacle serve a powerful essential function – they offer reassurance that Joel Osteen is qualified to be the arbiter of Truth, and hence what he speaks is indeed Truth. This offers a galvanizing reassurance that truth is not fluid, rather it is static and hence reliable and trustworthy. Just like Joel Osteen.

As noted previously, like the power of the moon on the tides this unseen force of asymmetrical naming has hegemonic power to create and sustain a reassuring worldview by way of new linguistic norms, and this is just what it appears to do. It is important to note that it is not Joel Osteen's charisma itself that independently creates Lakewood's success (the other two megachurches in this study are not driven by this mechanism of charisma to nearly the same degree, yet are highly successful as well). Rather, the charisma provides one of the conditions of possibility within this church for the creation of a particular co-sanctified lexicon. It is this co-sanctified lexicon, created, enabled, and deployed via Joel Osteen, that offers what many appear to experience, probably for the most part subconsciously, as a broader meaningful response to the disorientation, discouragement, and disequilibrium of radical modernity. Joel Osteen's charisma is inter-implicated with the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon. His own sacred status undergirds this co-sanctified lexicon. It is to the unique components of the Lakewood Church co-sanctified lexicon that we now turn our attention.

Lakewood Church's Co-Sanctified Lexicon

Re-lexicalizing "You" through Inferred Contrastive Sets

Having examined and recognized the overarching and penetrating presence of the Osteen family, and of Joel Osteen in particular, on the Lakewood Church website, we now have greater insight into how best to contextualize what the reader 'sees' and 'hears' when they read the Lakewood website. The dominance of the Osteen presence i) conditions the reader to 'hear' through the voice of Joel Osteen most pervasively, along with the voices of Victoria Osteen and Lisa Osteen Comes, and ii) functions to give Joel Osteen's quasi-God voice significant authority in their own lives. As noted earlier, in Chapter 2, to re-lexicalize is to alter the meaning of a word in such a way that a new identity is formed, such as was the case with Andrew (a Jehovah's witness), whose identity under the Law was altered from religious adherent to infant, thus requiring his parents to facilitate the blood transfusions that would save his life. We can now look at this re-lexicalization process at work through the use of inferred contrastive sets by Joel Osteen, which, it seems not unreasonable to postulate, possess a strong potential to function in a way that re-lexicalizes the reader or church member.

On the page which lists the upcoming services for the next month, Joel Osteen's sermons are entitled "Just Do It,"[31] and "Moving Forward" (p. 5). Inferred is the assumption that you are currently not "doing it" or "moving forward." The titles assume a contrast or dichotomy – you are either 'doing it' or you are not, and you are either moving forward or

[31] "Just Do It" is also a well known slogan of Nike – one of the most dominant sporting wear and equipment brands on the glove.

backward. These phrases can only make sense to the reader if the inferred contrasting reference point is employed in interpreting the meaning of the title. This type of inferred contrastive set is present with considerable frequency on the Lakewood website. Free articles are offered as resources, such as the following by Joel Osteen: "You can Live Your Best Life Now" (implying you are not currently living a 'best' life); "Do it Now" (implying you are either a procrastinator or not doing it at all); "Dare to Dream" (implying you have not yet had the courage to dream); "Understanding Your Value" (implying you don't understand your value); and "Preparing for Promotion" (implying that you are currently unable to achieve a promotion) (p. 5). Lisa Osteen Comes offers the following: "Listen to God's Voice Today" (implying that you have, to this point, not listened to God's voice); "Digging Deeper" (implying shallowness); "Can you Perceive it?" (implying lack of perception) (p. 5). But it is Joel Osteen's book titles that perhaps infer the greatest contrasts:[32] "Break Out: 5 Keys to Go Beyond Your Barriers and Live an Extraordinary Life" (implying you are trapped, and living an ordinary life, which is seemingly not good); "I Declare: 31 Promises to Speak Over Your Life" (implying a lack of ability to know or declare); "You are Destined: Embracing God's Purposes for You" (implying that you are not embracing God's purposes for you); "Everyday Favor: God's Best for You" (implying that you do not yet have God's best for you); and "Every Day a Friday: How to be Happier" (implying you are currently not very happy) (p. 159). Like many self-help books, each of these titles, to varying degrees, assumes some type of lack of competence or success on the part of the reader. But in a unique, paradoxical twist, these Lakewood titles are framed in welcoming and positive

[32] Most of Joel Osteen's articles and books are an expansion of a sermon series he has previously preached.

language, which re-lexicalizes their intended reader. The reader is not an unhappy failure without the confidence to take the best that God has to offer and get that promotion. Instead, the reader is cast as one who soon will have all these things and is thus welcomed to reconstruct their own identities into the Lakewood version of what a successful Christian should look like, in order to actually become that promised person. Given that the average weekly physical attendance at Lakewood Church is 43,000, clearly this approach is highly effective. Combining this discursive analysis with the qualitative research discussed above would suggest that this relexicalization is part of the "high" that attendees report experiencing (Wellman, Corcoran and Stockly 2020, Corcoran and Wellman 2016, Wellman, Corcoran, Stockly-Meyerdirk 2014), an experience that functions therapeutically.

The history page of the Lakewood website concludes that Joel and Victoria Osteen are "leading this generation [with the] message that you can live the abundant life God is calling you to" and that you "can discover the champion in you!" (p. 7). "Each of us is uniquely shaped for the incredible plans God has in store for us" (p.56), and God can take you from "ordinary to legendary!" (p. 57). Joel Osteen tells his readers and listeners that you can choose "a shift into greater blessing" (p. 10). Lisa Osteen Comes tells her readers that "God has a bright destiny for you to walk in right now" (p. 15). On the "Give" page of the website,[33] readers and congregants are encouraged to give money to Lakewood Church via a "Donate Now" hyperlink where you can choose various amounts listed as a one time or monthly donation. Lisa Osteen Comes tells

[33] The "Give" website page offers the chance to donate immediately by i) selecting the category you wish to donate to, ii) the amount you would like to donate (options range from $25.00 - $500.00 plus an 'other' amount) and iii) the frequency of your donation (options are one time, or monthly).

her readers that this bright destiny she has mentioned previously can be achieved through giving because giving produces a “rich harvest!” in our lives…. “not just of financial blessings……He’ll [God will] make sure the right doors open, the right people come into your life, and the right breaks are received” (p. 26, 127). She reinforces these claims by asking “Do you need a miracle in your life? A breakthrough? A financial need? Try giving” (p. 26, 27). Readers are also welcomed to participate in ongoing free workshops at Lakewood on “Winning at Home and Work,” and “Discover the Financial Champion in You!” (p. 21). This is further reinforced by a single page document offered as a resource to all who visit the Lakewood website entitled “Biblical Confessions for Financial Prosperity” (p. 168). This document makes the following claims about financial prosperity, each one supported by references to various scripture passages:

1. The favor of God surrounds me and precedes me.
2. The blessings of God are chasing me and overtaking me.
3. Whatever I set my hand to shall prosper.
4. My Heavenly Father gives me power to get wealth.
5. God is liberally supplying all my needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.
6. I no longer live under the curse of poverty. The windows of heaven are open to me, and God rebukes the devourer for my sake.
7. The Lord has commanded me to be blessed; therefore, I am blessed and cannot be cursed. I am the head and not the tail. I am above only and not beneath. I will lend and not borrow.

All the above serve to construct and reinforce a very particular type of successful Christian, one who has great financial success, and is also successful in relationships, influence, and happiness. All these attributes are implied through the types of contrastive set inferences described above. Your future will no longer be one of unhappiness, failure, financial stress, and relational struggle. Instead, you will be a Lakewood type of Christian, and that means financial,

personal, spiritual, and relational success. This positive thinking approach employed by Joel Osteen bears a strong resemblance to the mechanisms by which Robert Schuller, megachurch founder and pastor of the Crystal Cathedral, established his extensive charismatic power. Schuller's teachings about *Possibility Thinking,* which is a Christian version "of the power of the mind to change personal circumstances" (Mulder and Marti 2020:6) combined with his *Theology of Self-Esteem,* which holds firmly to the "understanding that humans needed affirmation in their dignity rather than criticisms for their sins" (6), were the foundation stones for the charisma and influence attributed to him in his long "reign" as a mega-pastor superstar. Joel Osteen's overall approach follows closely in the footsteps of Schuller's positive thinking approaches, and his resulting reliance on "the power of individual charisma…..to attract constituents while motivating them to provide the capital required for attracting future ones" (62). If the reader is drawn into the power of this type of promised identity and life (and based on the 40,000 plus attendees it is plausible to suggest that they are), influenced by the spiritual authority granted to the Osteens and by the positive nature of the promises for personal success being made, they are effectively re-lexicalized into financially wealthy, healthy, happy, and successful 'soon-to-be's'. Having just described the re-lexicalization process that is part of the Lakewood experience, it is revealing to find Pastor Joel Osteen saying much the same thing: "our words literally have the power to change our circumstances…. we should use our words not to describe our situation but to change it" (p. 10). Though not employing the theoretical language of discourse analysis and identity construction, it would appear that Joel Osteen

himself recognizes the power of words to "change our circumstances", that is, to re-lexicalize one's identity.[34]

Speaking in a New "Tongue": The Co-Sanctified Lexicon and the American Dream

In the course of the re-lexicalization process, a new holy lexicon of co-sanctified language has been added to the traditional Christian lexicon of Lakewood Church. This new lexicon borrows significantly from a non-religious lexicon of the United States of America, frequently referred to as The American Dream, a now familiar concept first introduced by James Truslow Adams in his historical classic, *The Epic of America* (1931). According to Adams, the epitome of the American Dream is "a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world" (Adams 1931:xx). He goes on to suggest that one of the challenges for Americans going forward is to save that dream by "hold[ing] fast to those rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' which were vouchsafed to us" (Adams 1931:xx). Howard Schneiderman, in his introduction to a recent reprint, notes that Adam's conceptualization of the American Dream has become "a powerful metaphor of core American values" (Adams 1931:xx).

In a 2014 study, *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes*, which uses individual interviews and focus groups alongside of longitudinal measures which highlight the economic risks and challenges facing Americans, leading social scientists Mark Rank, Thomas Hirschl, and Kirk Foster explore current understandings of the American

[34] Though likely also not intentional, Joel Osteen echoes Marx' observation that "philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx, 1978, 145).

Dream among American citizens. Their research reveals that, notwithstanding the social and economic turmoil experienced by many, the American Dream continues to capture "the imagination of people from all walks of life and represents the heart of the country" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:7) despite recent income disparities which have shaken "the overall confidence level in the American Dream" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:9). They identify three central themes common among the American people: i) "the freedom to pursue your passions in order to reach your potential" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:27), which rewards "self-reliance, rugged individualism and determination" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:8) and progress; ii) passion and potential can only be achieved if there is "a foundation of economic security and well-being" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:30), which includes "acquiring of economic riches…[that has] long been part of the rags to riches story" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:44); and iii) the "importance of hopes, challenges, and personal progress" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:50) because "the sense that our best days are yet to come is a central component of the American Dream" (Rank, Hirschl, and Foster 2014:51).

Lakewood's lexicon of co-sanctified language, as employed on their website, clearly draws on the themes identified by Rank, Hirschl, and Foster's research that continue to encapsulate the American dream. These themes, which by now have acquired a quasi-sacred status within American society, are transformed and given particular meanings within the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood, taking on a deep association with God's mission. The specificity of this lexicon is illuminating, and will be explored in some detail in this chapter. It can be broken down into the following constitutive categories: *Victory, Boldness, Visioning a Positive*

Future, Blessing, Financial Success, and Healing. These themes should be understood within the frame of the American Dream, but with an American Dream that is infused and strengthened by God's blessing and purpose, supported and mediated via the website (which at significant points is repeating what has been said "live" by Joel Osteen in a Lakewood service) by the spiritual royalty of the Osteens. The categories of *Victory* and *Boldness* reflect the deeply entrenched American belief that the rugged, self-reliant individual has the right to claim what they want and will thus succeed in achieving it. The categories of *Financial Success* and *Healing* undergird the American creed of *rags to riches* that is steadfastly protected in the American economy and politics, and the categories of *Visioning a Positive Future* and *Healing* both anchor in the tenacious hope that is required for the full experience of the successful American Dream to achieve lift-off. The *rags to riches* creed of the American dream has been transformed into a myth with different resonances amidst the vagaries and uncertainties of radical modernity, just as evangelical Christianity has, as a result of a ripened modernity, been transformed into an institution that claims to know things that, in reality, it cannot know. The co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood plays into, and adapts in order to restore, these cherished ideals and beliefs.

Victory

A typical definition of victory would include "the overcoming of an enemy or antagonist" and "achievement of mastery or success in a struggle or endeavor against odds or difficulties" (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Within Lakewood language use, the frequent references to gaining victory over some aspect of life are further imbued with the sense that these victories are both the result and evidence of Godliness. The "Women's Ministry" page claims that "women

focusing on the transformation of their hearts result[s] in living the victorious lives of Godly Women" (p. 29, 68). This same claim, verbatim, is made for men on the "Men's Ministry" pages (p. 62). The reader is encouraged to "overcome….and get back on the path to victory!" (p. 126), and is promised "victory over cancer" (p. 199), "Victory over the Storm" (p. 162) of adversity in life, and the opportunity to "come and hear about [the] victories" (p. 88) of those who have achieved "personal total health transformation" through weight loss. A full description of fasting as a "powerful weapon" toward victory (p. 92), an article and sermon available on CD or DVD on "Strategies to Win at Life" (p. 5), a Joel Osteen book offering "30 Thoughts for Victorious Living" (p. 161), and a workshop series on "Winning at Work and Home" (p. 21) are all offered as tools to achieve the desired godly, and consequently victorious life. All of this indicates that a successful Lakewood Church Christian is a victorious Christian, and the Osteen family demonstrates how to invoke victory language as evidence of a successful Lakewood Church Christian identity, thus establishing it as a staple in the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon. Rather than leaving its congregants in a permanent state of uncertainty or confusion because of our vulnerability to the symbolic systems and tokens of radical modernity, Lakewood offers a clear path to victory. Like the rugged individualist of the American dream, the Lakewood attendee is welcomed into a language community which will overcome a storm, cancer, excess weight, or any personal adversity one may be facing, charting a path toward a victorious life.

Boldness and Visioning a Positive Future

As is the case with all language use, including sanctified language, many words, terms, and concepts are linked with each other in the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon. Victory is

directly linked with calling out the promise of victory through bold declarations, and the visioning of a bright and promising future. Many of the declarations are made by members of the Osteen family in articles, sermons, or books, urging their readers or listeners to think, speak, and choose boldly in their lives. Lisa Osteen Comes urges readers to “Claim Your Inheritance” (p.5), Victoria Osteen urges readers to “Step out and Prime the Pump” (p. 5), and the “Women’s Ministry” page advertises the next upcoming large event, which is entitled “Love Your Life: Living Bold and Beautiful” (p. 21, 29, 47, 70), a promotion found leading on four separate pages throughout the Lakewood website. The “Love Your Life” event page further suggests that “God desires you to be filled with his peace and power, and for you to live bold and beautiful!!” (p. 29). But the majority of the ways in which the reader or listener is urged to be bolder in their lives is through the books and sermons offered in declarative language by Joel Osteen. We are told we should “Dare to Dream!” (p.5), “Do It Now” (p.5), “Break Out and Start Living Your Dream Today” (p. 10), “Just Do It”, “Dream It!” (p.25), and “Break Out! Go Beyond Your Barriers!” (p. 159). Victorious godliness is seemingly achieved when one says “I Declare” – the perlocutionary effect being achieved through the individual’s illocutionary declaration – and actively practices the “31 Promises to Speak Over Your Life” (p. 25). This approach to achieving victorious living is further reinforced by a free resource offered on the website which includes a total of 91 “scripture-based positive confessions that we[35] encourage you to speak over your life every day” (p. 171), which have much the same tone as Joel Osteen’s book and sermon titles.

[35] Here again, the royal Osteen “we” is employed.

This boldness is employed quite frequently to vision a positive and accomplishing future. Lisa Osteen Comes most recent book is titled "You are Made for More!" (p. 15). She tells us that "God has a bright destiny for you to walk in now" and that "there is incredible hope to be found in God's unchanging purpose for your life right now" (p. 15). The blog section of the website is introduced with the assurance that each of us has been shaped "for the incredible plans God has in store for us" (p.56), because "God can take an ordinary person and make them extraordinary" (p. 57). Joel Osteen's book titles suggest[36] that "It's Your Time: Activate your Faith, Achieve Your Dreams, Increase in God's Favor", that you can "Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life everyday (p. 161), and seek "Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential" (p. 161). One can download an article by Joel Osteen regarding how to "Change Your Words, Change Your World, Share your Future" (p. 5), or purchase a calendar that fosters the attitude that "Every Day is Friday: How to be Happier" (p. 25) with notes of encouragement from Joel Osteen on every page, or purchase a CD or DVD in which Joel will explain how "You Are Destined: Embracing God's Purpose for You" (p. 25). Or one can attend regular Monday night classes in which "developing a powerful faith will teach you how to have the faith to overcome every obstacle and enter your Promised Land" (p. 132).

Nowhere is the emphasis on the importance of boldly claiming a positive future more evident than in the letters that Joel and Victoria write to their readership and congregants, in which they say that "we are standing in faith with you to see every God-given dream and desire

[36] It could be argued that Joel Osteen's book titles do not merely "suggest," but rather insist, given the bold declarative structure of the language he uses.

come to pass in your life" (p. 65), "we believe God has a good plan for your future and that your best days are right out in front of you" (p. 52), "we believe that 2014 is going to be your best year ever!" (said twice on p. 166), and one should "be on the lookout for a shift of God's favor, blessing, and increase in every area of your life!" (p. 49). In each of the four statements just mentioned, Joel and Victoria also include declarations of love for their readers or listeners: "Victoria and I want you to know how much we love you" (p. 65), "Victoria and I want you to know that we love you and pray for you every single day" (p. 52), "Please know that we love you so much" (p. 166), and "Victoria and I love you so much and pray for you every day" (p. 49). Given the overwhelming presence of the Osteens on the Lakewood Church website, the combination of declarative statements issued by them, about declarations everyone else should be making, assuring their congregants of their love for them in the midst of these double layered declarative statements creates a powerful environment of socio-symbolic influence. Add to this the inferred prophetic tones (i.e., Joel and Victoria present themselves as knowing what the future of others will be), and it all begins to take on manipulative overtones and capacities. There is a rich (and perhaps troubling) irony in the observation that at the same time that Lakewood seemingly *frees* its members to be bold, it also *constrains* its members by limiting that boldness to only that which Joel and Victoria deem to be appropriate boldness.

The lexicon of Lakewood does not offer vocabulary calling for boldness in civic duty, boldness in engaging or interacting with Pastor Joel's decisions or theology, boldness in living a life of simplicity for the sake of the environment, or boldness in challenging consumerist norms of culture. While the tension between the Lakewood call for boldness and the requirement of

obedience[37] seems glaringly contradictory, it clearly works, given the 40,000 plus weekly attendees at Lakewood services. It works because the call for boldness is invoked to serve the Self in a manner that seems to speak to the liminal states being experienced by its members in facing the uncertainties and anxieties of early twenty-first century America. And as long as the bold declarations that Lakewood calls its members to invoke are felt to benefit the members themselves, these congregants appear to be unconcerned with how narrow and self-serving these declarations are, or how these might grant inordinate power and benefit to the Royal Family of Lakewood, and Joel and Victoria in particular. The excessive use of the type of vocabulary discussed above, contextualized as the key to victorious living, creates a very influential co-sanctified lexicon of ways of thinking, talking, and eventually acting, i.e. a fully internalized Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon has the makings of a very particular type of individual habitus. Particularly powerful is the combination, or pairing, of the call to boldly claim personal well-being on many fronts with Joel and Victoria's prophetic promises that all things *will* be well in your personal world. Set inside the cultural ethos of personal powerlessness within radical modernity, this pairing is potentially particularly potent. Like the lure of the original American Dream, which was anchored in the tenacious hope of the mid-twentieth century, itself grounded in the emergence of organized modernity, the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon calls for a much headier, more willful, form of sacred hope. The greater loss of meaning created by radical modernity, and the severity of the feeling of being cast adrift it carries with it,

[37] See the section above title *The Pre-eminence of Joel Osteen*, which discusses the need for various members of Lakewood to submit to Pastor Joel Osteen's authority.

are compensated for by the co-sanctified lexicon, inspired through the authoritative mediation of the Osteens, and by the authoritative charisma of Joel Osteen in particular.

Blessing, Financial Success, Healing

When victory is achieved through boldness and envisioning a positive future, further resources within the co-sanctified lexicon offer (perhaps require) that blessing, financial wealth, and healing will result. In blog letters to their readers and members, written by Joel and signed by Joel and Victoria, they state that each reader will experience “A Shift Into Greater Blessing” (p. 10). Blessing, as defined by Joel, is God moving you “from the back to the front…..from unqualified to being suddenly qualified, from being looked down on or disrespected to being esteemed and respected….to move you up…accelerate your dreams…give you what you didn’t deserve….shift you into a position that you could have never gotten on your own” (p. 10). It is further suggested that if you “put God first you’ll see his Hand of blessing on your life in a fresh, new way” (p. 52). The concept of blessing appears to be all-encompassing – any good thing that happens to you is filed into the lexical category of “blessing from God”. Lisa Osteen Comes assures her readers, when discussing her most recent book, that “God can make us stronger, wiser, more blessed than ever before” (p. 15). She also offers an article on “The Blessings of Righteous Living” (p. 5), and her brother, Dr. Paul Osteen, writes of “The Blessing” (p. 5). If you come to the women’s encounter “you will be blessed in many ways” (89), and STM Team meeting notes claim that “the key to abundant blessings lies in seeking the Kingdom of God before all else”, and that such seeking will “position ourselves to receive ‘unexpected’ blessings” (p. 94). CD or DVDs offering Joel’s sermons include “Everyday Favor”, and “The Lord

Gives", and John Osteen's "Living in the Abundance of God" (p. 25) remains available despite the fact that he died 21 years ago. The introductory paragraph to the 91 Positive Confessions resource that Lakewood members are encouraged to repeat every day explains that "our words can activate our faith and unleash blessing" (p. 170). Blessing from God is the ultimate evidence of living victoriously, and is promised to all who can meet the identity markers of a successful Lakewood Christian.

Two particular forms of blessings are referenced extensively – that of financial wealth and healing (most often physical). An article by Lisa Osteen Comes entitled "A Vision for Your Finances" is available as resources on the website, as well as another by Joel Osteen entitled "Preparing for Promotion" (p.5). Lisa tells her readers that "God desires you to be the most blessed and most prosperous in the land" (p. 26, 207), that "giving produces a rich harvest in our lives" (p. 26). Lakewood Church offers classes entitled "Discover the Financial Champion in You", a "Financial Freedom Series" (p. 72) of classes, and the Financial Ministry section of the website offers a "Living Under the Blessing of Supernatural Provision" workshop, and a "Release Your Faith for Financial Blessing" (p. 72) class. As noted in the *Re-lexicalization* section above, one of the resources available on the website is "Biblical Confessions for Financial Prosperity" (p. 168) which includes seven claims regarding God's desire and intent to make each person financially wealthy. One can also find twenty-one statements specifically under the "Finances" section (p. 180) of the Positive Confessions resource which makes claims that all are entitled to regarding financial wealth, and finally a "Scripture References and Recommended Reading" resource (p. 186) which provides nine Bible verses containing the

same type of sentiments. One can also find, among the resources offered, a two-page guide for fasting which explains that "through fasting you will experience …financial blessing" (p. 92).

As discussed above, Dodie Osteen's miraculous healing from cancer is featured repeatedly on the website, resulting in her identity being constructed as somewhat of a specialist in the area of supernatural healings. This is further reinforced by "Dodie's Prayer and Healing Service" which is offered on a regular basis, in which she will "personally pray over you and believe God for healing in your life" (p. 23, 126). Also available on the website is an article authored by her entitled, "He sent His Word to Heal" (p. 5), in which she claims that everyone can be healed if they read and know the Bible. But encouragements to have expectations of healing provided on the Lakewood website go considerably beyond just these from Dodie Osteen. "Healing is Yours", a CD or DVD featuring Joel Osteen, a series of three sermons by Lisa Osteen Comes and Dodie Osteen also entitled "Healing is Yours" (p. 162) indicate that other members of the Royal Spiritual Osteen Family also actively engage in dialogue about physical healing. A blog by a Lakewood Staff member advises that though "the enemy will say 'you don't deserve to be healed', but you say "**By his stripes I am healed!**' The enemy will say, 'You don't qualify for financial blessings', but you say, **'Jesus has qualified me!'**[38] (p. 69). Included on the website are also testimonies of Lakewood members who claim that "God answered my prayers of healing. I told the infection and leaky heart valve that I rebuked it out of my body and that I stand in faith against it, God has healed me. I know he has and still is" (p. 127) and despite spending "years trying to have a baby; was told that without invitro it would be

[38] The bold is part of the original text.

impossible. Ohhh but thanks be unto God who is our Healer, I now have a 19-month-old miracle. Impossible is His Specialty!" (p. 127). As with many of the above elements of Lakewood's co-sanctified lexicon, one can find resources available on the website that employ and reinforce this highly specialized language use. Available is a "Healings Scriptures" (p. 167) document which lists thirty-eight scripture verses that are to be understood as referring to physical healing, the "Positive Confessions" resource which includes a section on Physical Healing (p. 191) that includes fourteen declarative statements claiming healing for oneself, as well as a resource document of "Scripture References and Recommended Reading" which includes a section of ten biblical references and explanations for physical healing (p. 200).

It is abundantly clear that within the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood Church "blessing", while including anything good that might happen to you, is quite focused on financial and physical prosperity.

An overarching pattern of written language use, present in all categories of the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood, is the use of superfluous or hyperbolic language. The constant use of exclamation marks throughout the website, talk of painting a "masterpiece on the canvas of life" (p.1), God being "madly in love with you!" kids having a "great big life with a great big God!" (p. 49), God "mak[ing] the impossible possible in an instant…. expect the miraculous!" (p. 53), likening eating at Lakewood to "eating a meal with the Lord Jesus Himself. Totally memorable!" (p.57), "stirring up mighty men!" (p. 65), God taking a person "from ordinary to legendary!", and "impossible is his specialty!" (p. 127) all demands a certain degree of enthusiastic energy from the reader/member/participant that is likely difficult to sustain.

The greatest superfluous language use are Joel and Victoria's repeated claims that "we love you" (p. 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 65, 134, 166), which has the potential to function quite manipulatively given the status and power of Joel and Victoria Osteen at Lakewood Church.

The language of *Blessing*, *Financial Success*, and *Healing* is couched in the constant encouragement to be bold. The resulting ethos of demandingness is deepened by the hyperbolic nature of much of the discourse, becoming all encompassing – one need only follow the simple formula offered by Pastor Joel, and all will be well. The sheer number of members at Lakewood along with its physical size and the impressiveness of their facilities further reinforce the power of Lakewood Church in the minds of attendees, which is in effect the power of Pastor Joel Osteen. If one does what Pastor Joel says God's reward and blessing are sure to follow, and the dis-ease and dis-equilibrium of radical modernity will simply melt away. It is plausible to suggest that these ways of talking (the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon) enter the durable internal structures (habitus) of the participants through the *externalization, objectivation,* and *internalization process* outlined by Berger and Luckmann (1966), offering an ontological security which radical modernity has previously taken from them. And nowhere are the underpinnings of the American dream more baldly and boldly present in the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon than in the discussion of financial success, which is the ultimate goal and god of the American Dream.

The Pre-eminence of the Self Motif in Lakewood Discourse

The re-lexicalization process has contributed to the creation of the co-sanctified language of Lakewood Church, and the use of co-sanctified language contributes to the

continued re-lexicalization process. At the center of that process is the same element as that which has become dominant within the discursive structure of the American Dream: self-fixation. As Christopher Lasch astutely observed nearly 50 years after Truslow Adams (Adams 1931/2012) identified and articulated it, the American Dream has morphed into a form of narcissism in which the American people “hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security” (Lasch 1979:7). We see the American dream, which fostered a culture of individualism wherein “the pursuit of happiness [became] the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self” (Lasch 1979:xv), evidenced in the co-sanctified language of Lakewood Church. Within this language, the balance of emphasis is overwhelmingly on not only the right for individuals to seek a deserved future filled with blessing, financial success, healing, and victory, but also on the moral imperative that this *should* be so. At Lakewood, it is all about the Self.

In their 1985 academic bestseller, the influential *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,* Robert Bellah and his co-authors make the observation that individualism - with its emphasis on individual rights, dignity and autonomy - has seemed to invalidate many biblical traditions, due to the discrimination and oppression these traditions have historically created and enforced – “unequal rights and obligations – between husbands and wives, masters and servants, leaders and followers, rich and poor” (Bellah et al. 1985:144). They then pose the question as to whether these “biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights”

(Bellah et al. 1985:144), that of recognizing we are all products of our communities and societies, and that the valued aspects of individualism can, in reality, only be sustained when community is also nurtured. This type of approach requires making sacrifices for the greater good of community, along with societal health and well-being. Pondering the extreme – albeit increasingly common within contemporary American culture – form of individualism in which no other reality is taken into account, Bellah goes on to suggest that "perhaps only the civic and biblical forms of individualism – forms that see the individual in relation to a larger whole, a community and a tradition – are capable of sustaining genuine individuality and nurturing both public and private life" (Bella et al. 1985:143). Lakewood presents us with evidence that while the biblical tradition has indeed been reformulated, one could question whether here it has successfully remained faithful to its deeper insights of self-sacrifice in the service of love and care of neighbor, such as in the reformulations one encounters in the West Angeles and Mars Bible Church discourses. The inalienable right of each citizen to the pursuit of happiness, wealth, and over-all well-being (which is the language of the American Dream and the closely associated cultural schemas of individualism and, increasingly, of narcissism) finds a direct parallel, and consolidation, in Lakewood's co-sanctified language of living a victorious life which includes physical wealth and healing, and a happy and blessed life that is not nested inside notions of civic or biblical ethics of obligation and duty to community. Declarative statements from the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon function to invoke all manner of inalienable right to goodness and blessing on and for the self. Based on their co-sanctified lexicon, Self is the dominant motif of Lakewood, given its lack of emphasis on relational attachment, obligations to

others, or importance of community. The question that Bellah et al. (1985) posed regarding Christian capacity to remain true to the deepest insights of the biblical text in light of individualism is seemingly answered by Christian Smith's (2011) observation of the current prevalence of *moralistic therapeutic deism* – that the goal of life is to have a positive self-image and be happy. Hence God is only necessary when these basic goals of life are either thwarted in their development or challenged once established. This ethos, according to Smith, is currently colonizing evangelical Christianity.

Given its emphasis on individualism as reflected in their re-lexicalizing process and religious morphing of the American Dream, of the three megachurches in this study, Lakewood's co-sanctified lexicon is probably the most direct and comprehensive response to the micro *casualties* of radical modernity that litter the religious landscape. This is inasmuch as it is significantly focused on the individual, their feelings of vulnerability in this world, and the offering of solutions on a micro level.[39] By tapping into, and evolving, an already deeply held belief in the *American Dream* which is a well-used muscle in American culture (hence virtually instinctual when invoked), the conflation of the perceived inalienable right to success with the notion that God is present for the very specific purpose of facilitating that success constitutes a powerful merging of ideas. Its sensational nature blinds those constantly bathed in its light to the structural realities of radical modernity that are very much present in the social, political, and environmental landscapes of the society of the United States and of the globe. The separation of "space" and "place" (Giddens 1991) is closed in this new Osteen lexicon. Despite

[39] Though most of these casualties are a result of the macro forces of radical modernity

the *symbolic tokens* and *expert systems* – which we can neither fully understand nor significantly control or change – serving to disrupt and undermine reliable truths that can be known and acted upon, the Osteen's congregants begin to feel and believe that there *are* truths to be known which promise them all manner of wealth and well-being. The constant emphasis on the sureness of *Victory*, rather than the insecurity produced by the *reflexivity of* radical modernity, means that one can, as Joel Osteen claims and calls his listeners to claim, step across the threshold into a bright and bold new future, leaving behind that liminal place of disequilibrium. All one must do is inhabit Lakewood's linguistic universe – speak these things and they will become true. According to the Lakewood-Osteen new lexicon, this is what God wants to do for you. To believe anything other than this is to be without faith. It would appear, as presented by the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood, that to live inside this linguistic universe is to speak constantly of what God will do for you, how safe, secure, and bright your future is in God's eyes and God's hands. You will be *blessed*, you will be *healed*, and you will be *wealthy*. Focus group based interviews of mega-church attendees exploring and discussing this dynamic process would likely provide greater nuance and new insights into how Lakewood attendees internalize these powerfully framed ideas.

The sheer quantity of these linguistic norms on the Lakewood website would alone be enough to produce an alternate worldview. But arguably equally powerful, already noted above, is the all-encompassing authority granted to Joel Osteen who speaks these words. Also to be considered is the hyperbolic nature of this co-sanctified lexicon. Linguistically, the volume is always on "high," and everything is always "big." Hence the universe-building capacity of

Lakewood's co-sanctified lexicon is potentially all consuming because of these three layers: 1) the immense size and weight of the co-sanctified lexicon; 2) the awe-inspiring quality of the sacred power granted to the lead voice who creates and employs this co-sanctified lexicon, namely, Joel Osteen; and 3) the hyperbolic nature of much of the lexicon, employing emotional, expressive, and outsize language to convey messages meant to be taken literally.

As noted by Sapir and Whorf, the world is both built by way of language habits, and language shapes how we see that world (Caroll 1964). So too Joel Osteen has crafted a new religious landscape resplendent with gleaming, beaming victorious Christians, having replaced, and saved, the casualties of radical modernity by describing the world as he has. Drawing on the conceptual observations of Berger and Luckmann (1966), one can say that Lakewood has produced not only a religious landscape, but has also constructed its members on that religious landscape, as the favoured of God, intended to be healthy, wealthy, and blessed. This process of *externalization* now stands outside of them – an entity separate from them, though mutually created by them – *objectivation*. The reality of a God who is focused on making people happy is now presented as a simple fact. A presupposition that needs no examination. No longer possessing this meaning but rather possessed by it, *internalization* is now complete. Current qualitative research (noted previously) affirms this dynamic, but as already discussed above, in situ research specifically around the discursive processes explored in this thesis would likely greatly complement the analysis presented here, with the potential to provide much useful additional detail in our quest to understand the habitus that the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon appears to generate in their attendees. Based on the nature of the examined discourse,

however, it seems plausible to suggest that reflexivity, one of the bulwarks of radical modernity and one of the primary mechanisms that has produced the disequilibrium we all now wrestle with, is no longer an active process in the Lakewood world. This can also be described using Bourdieu's concept of "*genesis amnesia*" (Bourdieu 2008:436) – one now acts motivated by objective, unrecognized intentions which outrun conscious intentions. The Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon has deconstructed significant foundational aspects of the "immense edifice" (Berger 1967:54) of radical modernity, and, in its place, has re-constructed an immense edifice of its own.

Community: Belonging to Lakewood

The Lakewood website gives considerable attention to identifying the benefits to being a part of Lakewood. In keeping with the high-intensity style of Lakewood's discourse, Lakewood depicts itself as a "happening" place with high energy, where important life-changing people and activities are present.

A Caring, Busy, and Loving Place

"People feel so loved and accepted when they enter the doors of Lakewood" (p. 13) because "at Lakewood you don't have to go through a trial alone" (p. 126). You can "just come and be blessed" (p. 6), and "refreshed" (p. 53) because "Lakewood's hand of ministry reaches out" (p.7), "helping hurting people" (p. 23). You are welcomed to participate in "life-changing classes" (p. 48), which have resulted in "years of changed lives" (p. 32). This promise of welcome and blessing is further reinforced by information that indicates that there is not only quality but also quantity. Lakewood is presented as a bee-hive of activity, in which there is "a

lot going on” (p. 21, 47), there are “large groups of adults at Lakewood Church” (p. 166), you can “make new friends” (p. 43), it is the “family of Christ” (p. 42), and hence you “should never miss a moment of what Lakewood has to offer” (p. 7). This “caring atmosphere, quality leadership, and community outreach” (p. 7) welcomes you to “connect, grow, and serve [which] is the DNA of Lakewood” (p. 38). The sense of reliability and predictability offers a sense of safety and security, which is difficult to achieve in the cultural ethos of radical modernity.

Size, Diversity, and Influence

According to what Lakewood says about itself, it is “the largest regularly used worship space in the US” (p.13), “America’s largest and fastest growing church,”, and one can find posted on their website an article by *Beliefnet* entitled “Joel Osteen and the littlest Big Church in the World” (p. 18). It is clear that Lakewood wants people to know that they are big. Whether leaders are aware of it, or not, megachurch research indicates that the euphoric drug high of some megachurch services are incrementally intensified the greater the number of people present (Wellmann et. al. 2020). But not only do they understand themselves to be big in terms of literal size (both attendance and facility), but also that their influence is far reaching. One could say that a subliminal message of an immense corporate power is conveyed. One understands that Lakewood has the capacity to both protect and promote, its congregants against the vicissitudes of contemporary life. By hitching one’s wagon to Lakewood, one will be part of something solid and powerful. In place of fear and impotence, one will have confidence and power. We are told that John Osteen, the founding pastor, “made a historic mark on the landscape of Christianity,” that he and his wife Dodie “touched the lives of millions of people in

more than 100 countries" (p. 7, 13) through "a weekly television program which could be seen in 100 countries worldwide" (p. 7). The current generation of the Osteen family is presented as even more influential. "Joel is the most watched inspirational figure in America," "viewed on television by seven million Americans each week, and more than 20 million each month," and his broadcast is seen in "almost 100 nations around the world" (p. 13). We are told that Lisa Osteen Comes "traveled the world teaching God's Word" (p.13). Members and potential members are assured that "at Lakewood, we make it easy for you to have a global impact" (p. 41), and that "through the international reach of Lakewood Church, your story can encourage and inspire millions" (p. 127). Not only does attending Lakewood mean you are in the largest church in America, influential across the globe, but you as an individual will be given the opportunity to have a global impact as well.

Service as Lakewood and Evangelism focused

There are four separate pages throughout the Lakewood website which lead with "Volunteer - Touch Lives at Lakewood" (p. 22, 30, 44, 105). One is told that "you can make a difference in the lives of others by sharing your gifts and talents here at Lakewood….to minister to others with the love and hope of Jesus Christ" (p. 22, 30, 44, 105). Each of these pages includes an urgent call from Joel who says, "don't miss the joy and fellowship of volunteering at Lakewood" (p. 22, 30, 44, 105). You are also encouraged to apply for the volunteer Internship Program at Lakewood in order to "take your leadership skills and gifting to the next level" (p. 73), adding that those serving as interns will "realize their dreams" (p. 73) of success in ministry. Four subsequent pages discuss the high profile nature of interning at Lakewood,

which claims that “Lakewood enjoys an extraordinary level of attention from all over the world for her creativity and excellence” (p. 74), that you “owe it to yourself to consider what our Internship Program has to offer” (p. 75), and the testimony of a previous intern stated that “God gave me exactly what I asked for” (p.76) in volunteering as an Intern. In a blog written by one of the volunteer interns, offered as an example of the excellence of the type of interns the volunteer Internship Program produces, he writes of achieving success in life:

> Why fly coach when you could be traveling first class? Why eat hamburger when steak is much more flavorful? Why drive a beat up Ford when you could be driving a brand new Mercedes? Why live an unfulfilled life when you could be fulfilling your life-long dreams? Why have an impact on 10 people when you could be impacting 1000s? Why stop growing when there's much more God-given potential within you? Why not decide to do something much bigger than yourself? (p. 77).

There are also two pages given to calling for volunteers for the Music Ministry (p. 78), and the Creative Arts Ministry (p. 79), which include extensive lists of the types of volunteers needed. One can also apply to volunteer to be a Stephen Minister who offers “Bible-based encouragement” (p. 137), who “care in the name of Christ” (p. 137). In considering giving of one’s time in volunteer service, the Lakewood website clearly emphasizes that one should give that time to Lakewood itself, and that it will bring you personal success and fulfillment to do so.

In contrast to the significant emphasis and space on the page given to encouraging attendees to volunteer at Lakewood only two pages of their 207-page website focuses attention beyond Lakewood in terms of volunteerism. In those two pages, local missions in which “Lakewood encourages its members to share the love of Christ with the Houston community through volunteerism, evangelism, and ministry” (p. 31, 106) are discussed. The website provides a guide for local organizations where one can volunteer (p. 113 – 122), none

of which are connected to Lakewood in any way, and two thirds of which are Christian-based ministries which often include an evangelism component in their program offerings

The ministries that Lakewood themselves spearhead include: a Hospital Care ministry in which “our dedicated volunteers bring encouragement, prayers of faith and the healing touch of Christ to those who are hospitalized” (p. 131); a “Baskets of Love – Servolution Event” (p. 107) which involves packaging “ribbon-laced vinyl bags” (p. 107) with donated “lotions, perfumes, and casual jewelry” (p. 107) for single moms in the Houston area; and providing labor for the Houston Food Bank by packaging food items, a time together which was “filled with hearts of ministry as our volunteers served as the Hands and Feet of our Lord” (p. 108). They also hosted a Servolution “Thanksgiving Youth Feast” (p. 109) in which 108 youth came from Houston-based areas and the girls were gathered together for “hand massages and nail painting” while the young men “played basketball in the gymnasium and soccer” (p. 109) as well as video games.

In terms of an international focus, this is also evangelism, mission based, with an opportunity to participate in a Nicaragua Missions trip to “help communities create sustainable water, sanitation, hygiene, and provide Christian witness programs” (p.41) with an emphasis on being “dedicated to fulfilling the great commission of reaching the word for Christ! At Lakewood, we make it easy for you to have a global impact” (p. 41). Their international reach is defined as “reaching around the world with the message of Hope and Compassion of Jesus Christ through International Television and Media and City Tours as well as forming, training and sending evangelist, humanitarian and medical Missions Teams to assist people in need”

(p.111). The medical emphasis, as evidenced on the website, comes only in the form of Dr. Paul Osteen (one of the Osteen royals), whose family offers medical missionary services in various locations in Africa (p. 41, 111). The only other international presence evidenced on the website is a missionary couple in Botswana, Jerry and Jana, who have “their roots deep in Lakewood Church” (p. 112) and who are “making a huge impact for the Kingdom” (p. 112) there.

Service at Lakewood is defined primarily as meeting the volunteer needs at Lakewood. The minimal encouragement toward humanitarian aid that is present is linked to religious conversion.

The Power of Lakewood

Somewhat less direct than the previous two themes is the message that to be associated with Lakewood is for oneself to become influential and successful. We are told there is “a new generation rising at Lakewood church, a generation who doesn’t believe in limits, and who believes all things are possible” (p. 7). This identification of Lakewood style Christianity with personal achievement, which has been explored in various ways throughout the above discussion, appears to have a less obvious, but perhaps more hegemonic, element to it. The “New Here?” link on the home webpage takes the reader through a series of links about how to become a Christian. There are step by step written instructions as well as a video by Joel Osteen taking you through a prayer in which you accept Christ as your Savior. After doing this, the new initiate is told that “now that you have made the most important decision of your life, it’s important to make a few changes to keep your life on track with Christ. First, make

today a day of new beginnings in your life and don't look back!" (p. 20, 37). "Second, give us[40] one year of your life and commit to Lakewood Church where your faith can grow" (p. 20, 37). Committing to Christ, if you are to be successful, also means committing to Lakewood. Rather than suggesting finding a group of Christians to worship with, one is encouraged to commit specifically to Lakewood. Given that the individual is going through the conversion process guided by a website, which means their geographical location is as likely to be somewhere outside of Houston as in Houston, it would make considerably more sense to instruct the new initiate to find, and commit to, a church near her or him. There appears to be an undertone of exclusivity, and perhaps even competition, as Lakewood seeks to draw as many people to itself as possible. Maintaining the Compaq Centre facility, and the mega-media machine of Lakewood, requires a steady stream of donations. This is true of all churches, including those examined in this research, but the more opulent the facilities, IT, and programming, the higher the financial need.

Testimonials of four separate Lakewood members on the history page of the website tell us that "I cried out to Jesus and visited Lakewood," "I gave control of my life to God at Lakewood," "I was saved in July 2007 at Lakewood," and "I was saved at Lakewood Church" (p. 32). In the first testimonial, crying out to Jesus resulted in visiting Lakewood, and in the second the focus is on *where* (at Lakewood) the individual gave their control to God rather than on God him/herself.[41] In the final two of the four testimonials, God or Jesus is not even mentioned -

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[40] Note the use of the royal "we", in this case "us".

[41] While many understand God as neither male nor female, the syntax of English frequently requires that God be given a sex. Therefore, God is always referred to as both male and female in my text. But it should be noted that Lakewood Church would likely name this as heresy. For Lakewood, God is unequivocally male.

rather the emphasis is on Lakewood Church as the focus of their salvation experience. This coalescing of Lakewood with salvation, in which sentiments about salvation are blended together with Lakewood in such a way that they become fused into one, ascribes to Lakewood the power of God to save. Functionally, it makes Lakewood God. It is little wonder then, that rather than encouraging their members to stay connected to God during the week, members are encouraged to "stay connected to Lakewood during the week" (p. 39). "Lakewood on the Go" is available on the iPhone App store, which means that you need "never miss a moment of all that Lakewood has to offer" (p. 1a). Just as traditional conceptions of Christianity suggest that once saved, God is always with you, one finds echoes of this same sentiment in the way that Lakewood suggests it is important "to stay connected to Lakewood during the week" (p. 39).

On three separate pages of the website, one finds "Joel's Urgent Call" that readers not "miss the joy and fellowship of volunteering at Lakewood" (p. 22, 30, 105), and repeatedly throughout the website one is encouraged to "touch lives at Lakewood" (p. 29, 105), and "make a difference volunteering at Lakewood" (p. 105). It appears fairly clear that one of the goals of the Lakewood website is to draw people into Lakewood activities throughout the week, not merely weekend services.

In a New Year's Letter, Joel writes that

> When you start your year by being planted in the house of the Lord, when you are committed and faithful, I believe you are setting yourself up for God's blessing. You're setting yourself up to flourish! Not only that, when you bring someone to church with you, you are setting them up for success as well (p. 166).

He goes on, later in the letter to ask, “Why don’t you bring someone to church?” (p. 166), and closes the letter with a “p.s. Do you have a story about inviting someone to church? Tell us about it in the comments below” (p.166). Again, we see the identification of Lakewood membership and attendance with being a flourishing, faithful Christian. And part of the evidence of this is bringing others into Lakewood. This ‘good behavior’ is rewarded by an opportunity to post your story on the Lakewood website.

In keeping with their co-sanctified lexicon of the American Dream complete with success, influence and power, Lakewood’s discourse constructing notions of community is focused on these same values – to be part of Lakewood is to be, by association, successful, influential, and powerful. Lakewood community is analogous to being part of the popular clique in high school. It’s where all the cool kids are.

The Moral Imperative to Flourish: What is NOT in the Lexicon is as Important as What is in the Lexicon.

The most subtle of Lakewood’s exclusionary language practices is also its most pervasive – above all, the Lakewood lexicon insists: that individual Christians must flourish as individuals; that individuals are expected to evidence this through their involvement at Lakewood; and that Lakewood itself, as demonstrated most potently by the Royal Spiritual Family of Lakewood, is a church that thrives and flourishes. As demonstrated by the various foci of examination above, the lexicon of Lakewood has no room for paradox, disease, mediocrity, poverty, pain, or sadness as an accepted part of the human journey if you are a Lakewood Christian. There is room primarily for conversations of overcoming, through boldly claiming in the name of God, in

order to be victorious. The result is a subtle, yet powerful form of exclusion. Only those who can demonstrate adeptness in employing the Lakewood lexicon, and the resulting personal success it is purported to achieve, can be considered victorious Christians. To speak of failure is in itself already a failure, because according to Joel Osteen and the Osteen Royals, "our words literally have the power to change our circumstances…. we should use our words not to describe our situation but to change it" (p. 10). Like the "moral duty to be happy" that Amy C. Wilkins (2011) identified in her ethnographic study of the Unity Church, failure to meet the moral duty to *flourish* at Lakewood would "threaten to undermine the moral and social order of the group" (Wilkins 2011:311).

As so astutely identified by the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism, language alerts us to some parts of the environment and not others. In the case of Lakewood, one is consistently and frequently alerted to the imperative of gaining victory over all aspects of one's life in order to flourish, while virtually ignoring the presence of permanent forms of difficulty and struggle. There appears to be no conversation on the Lakewood Church website that indicates room for the multiple complexities of life while maintaining a successful Lakewood Christian identity: failed marriages that God could not, in fact, put back together; the piercing bittersweet experience of joy in the midst of sorrow and loss; people whom we love, who die of cancer and accidents and even self-inflicted trauma, where no supernatural healing took place even when it was 'declared' or 'claimed'; physiological and psychological diseases such as schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder, in which describing the situation differently does not, in fact, change it. Disease, pain, and death remain a staple of the human experience, both

within and outside of religious communities. But the Lakewood Church website lexicon excludes the negative emotions resulting from the common human experience. Lakewood Christians find a parallel in the Unity Christians studied by Wilkins, only the moral duty at Lakewood is one of more generally flourishing, rather than the narrower focus on happiness that was the duty of Unity Christians. "The absence of [flourishing] indicates either that [you] have not sufficiently put [your] faith in Christ *or* that [your] true self is not really Christian" (Wilkins 2011:320). With wealth, happiness, physical health, and interpersonal achievement you can successfully claim the identity of a Lakewood Christian. If you don't flourish, it appears you must either continue to increase your skill at employing the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon in hopes that it will indeed change your circumstances, or you will need to seek out other means of making your journey in life meaningful.

Though joy and sorrow are, in reality, our daily companions on life's journey (sometimes fused in a single event) in any era, Lakewood Christianity appears to deal primarily in the victorious aspects of life. With paradox, difficulties and tensions lost, it would appear that many aspiring Lakewood Christians are left to hone their impression management skills in the absence of vocabulary in their co-sanctified Lakewood lexicon that allows for expression of the pains and struggles of life. Assuming that Lakewood members do, in fact, experience the pains and struggles of life like all the rest of us do, the absence of such vocabulary in the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon suggests that they must impression manage their lives, employing the vocabulary that *is* available to them as they "talk and act in certain ways……so that others will form desired impressions of [them] and [their] current situation" (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine

2010:126), i.e., as bold and victorious Christians visioning a power-filled future. While the individual habitus, and total environment constructed by the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon identifies the paramount importance of flourishing in the ways described above, it is worth noting that other churches have very different concepts of what flourishing might look like, and these will be explored in the chapters below.

Conclusion: Megachurch Themes in Lakewood

As indicated in chapter 2, the argument of this thesis is that a significant part of the "integrated theory" called for by Stephen Ellingson (Ellingson 2010: 258) can be provided through linking the themes and dynamics of *consumerism, therapeutic comfort, anti-establishment, and cultural relevance* to the deep structures of radical modernity. This approach can account for, and begin to make sense of, the variety of megachurches. For whilst one or more of the five themes may be present in any particular megachurch, they are not constants that are present in all megachurches, and when they are present, they will usually have a variety of particular and sometimes unique characteristics, and will also often not be combined and configured in the same ways. The character of organizational and cultural structures, and of social norms, vary greatly from one megachurch to the next (Thumma and Travis 2007). Hence, in order to take this point seriously, it is necessary, firstly, to look more closely at each megachurch in order to respect their particular characteristics and processes, and, secondly, it is important to build on this analysis to identify variations between megachurches as well as commonalities within this variety. The concluding section of this and

the following two chapters will attempt to draw out these lessons in relation to each of the three megachurches of the study against the analytical backdrop of the five substantive themes identified from the wider literature.

Of these five megachurch themes identified in previous research – *consumerism*, *individualism*, *therapeutic comfort*, *anti-establishment* and *culturally relevant* – this chapter has shown that Lakewood's dominant theme is that of *consumerism*, and that this, in turn, is tethered to both *individualism* and *therapeutic comfort*. In the process of relexicalizing and transforming the American Dream into the sacred truth that God seeks to provide for every individual – with its emphasis on self, feeling good about the self, and the understanding that feeling good about the self means succeeding within the ideologies of *consumerism* – a very powerful antidote to the miseries and malaise of late modernity is distilled. It will also be illuminating to reflect on the themes of *anti-establishment* and *cultural relevancy*.

The pre-eminence of *consumerism* is made immediately present to the attendee in a physical sense by the building itself, which is a large sport complex that was renovated to include five additional floors with an entire floor dedicated exclusively to the myriad of broadcasting offerings produced by Lakewood Church. The very large stage at the front "features two waterfalls, three gargantuan television screens and a lighting system that rivals those found at rock concerts. Two choir lofts with 12 rows of rich purple pews sit between the waterfalls, accented by live foliage" (Sullivan 2005). It has the familiarity of a mall or a corporate ethos, and you will find no crosses, steeples, or stained glass windows which are traditional markers of evangelical religiosity. Hence, some of the 'nones' who have grown

skeptical about traditional, and often rigid, religion yet still consider themselves to be spiritual (Drescher 2016; Butler Bass 2012; Lim, Putnam, and MacGregor 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010) are drawn to the non-traditional, albeit bureaucratic, branding of Lakewood, stripped of religious markers, and looking and feeling just like the local mall. The Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon projects an identity of Lakewood Christians as people of health, wealth, and success. It is a gospel that cultivates and sacralizes desire and that speaks of "materialism and transcendence in a single breath" (Bowler 2013:234). The transformative promises of *consumerism* and *conspicuous consumption*[42] are also echoed in all of Joel Osteen's "positive confessions," which promise all manner of personal, relational, health, and professional transformation. The most hegemonic power of consumerism, as described by Bauman, is the transformation of the consumer into the commodity they are consuming (Bauman 2007). Lakewood exemplifies this process in ways that West Angeles and Mars Hill do not, particularly in the re-lexicalization process that is foundational to their co-sanctified lexicon. Repetitively cast as "wealthy, healthy, happy, and successful 'soon-to-be's" by the spiritual authority of Joel Osteen, you (supposedly) become all of these things. In the terms of Christian Smith's discussion of the interpretation of scriptures introduced in chapter 3 above, one can say that it is the weight and repetitive performance by the Osteens of these meanings and projected dispositions within the *illocutionary* practices of the websites, which produces these *perlocutionary* effects. In claiming the God-given prosperity that Joel Osteen casts you as

[42] Conspicuous Consumption is defined by Ritzer as "the consumption of a variety of goods not for subsistence but for the higher status particular goods confer on those who consume them" (2019:384).

claiming, you are told that you are transformed. In the words of Bauman, Lakewood attendees "are *simultaneously, promoters of commodities* and the *commodities they promote"* (Bauman 2013:6 italics original). *You* are now a commodity that is a healthy, wealthy, successful Lakewood Christian, and Lakewood can then sell this – the commodity that is you—to its newest "customers."

This prosperity gospel approach is inevitably paired with *individualism* given its emphasis on "the individual's responsibility for his or her own fate [which] resonate[s] strongly with the American tradition of rugged self-reliance" (Bowler 2013:227). *Consumerism* and *Individualism* are often functionally intertwined in the processes of capitalism, and such is also the case within Lakewood. Just as the American Dream has been culturally transformed into a form of narcissism, so too has the Lakewood version of the American dream been reconfigured into a form of narcissism. The consistent emphasis on various forms of prosperity within the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon are *always* focused on the individual, their individual financial goals, their individual health goals, their individual vocational goals, and even their individual relationship goals. At Lakewood it's all about you….and what God can do for you.

The "what God can do for you" emphasis of the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon which fixates on the assumption that the "central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself" (Smith and Lindquist 2005:17) reflects the *therapeutic comfort* theme. Couched within a habitus where the constructed reality that God is focused primarily on making people happy is not recognized as constructed, this "genesis amnesia" would seem equipped to function powerfully as a deeply comforting antidote to the destabilizing sense of personal threat caused

by the consequences of radical modernity. To believe (or "know" if this is fully internalized) that God is intentionally available to make you happy and content is to turn a blind eye to the swirling chaos "out there" that others are caught in, not merely enabling narcissism, but rather re-labeling narcissism as the virtue of being a successful Lakewood Christian. The 43,000 Lakewood attendees are perhaps testament to what appears to be the therapeutic comfort and healing effects of the construction of this uniquely self-focused habitus.

As already noted above, the lack of any type of traditional religious symbolism is the first indication that Lakewood is *anti-establishment*, although it is so in a very particular and limited manner. Because Lakewood is not connected to any denomination, it frees the leadership (the Osteens) from typical denominational commitments and controls such as specific theological positions, programming processes, educational expectations, hiring practices, and financial obligations. Like the rugged individualist Lakewood Christian they are socializing, Lakewood itself is a rugged individualist, self-contained and self-sustaining and high-achieving. In other ways, however, Lakewood is very pro-establishment. In creating a haven for its congregants in the face of the liminal vagaries of radical modernity, its response has been to squarely align itself with the corporate ethos of the times, rather than to challenge it. The religious-cultural ethos of Lakewood is one that offers safety, security, and well-being for some by aligning itself with the institutions and ideologies of consumerism, individualism, and a preoccupation with the self. In doing this it accedes to and reinforces the impersonal structural landscape of expert systems and symbolic tokens, with all the cultural and human damage that has accompanied this. A similar establishment ethos can be seen if one examines Lakewood's

own hierarchical leadership and decision-making structures. Leadership tightly controls the meta-narrative, and in that sense, they expect their attendees to defer to the bureaucratic establishment of Lakewood.

And finally, Lakewood is most certainly *culturally relevant* to those to whom it directs its message, with its sophisticated media and multiple media platforms with high production values, high energy and professionally polished worship music, contemporary drama, lack of traditional religious symbols which would turn away many of the 'nones' and 'somes', personally motivating messages that are anchored in the ideologies of consumerism and the American Dream, and very little acknowledgement or engagement with national or global issues. All of this dovetails with the sense of alignment with establishment power and promise. Lakewood surrounds the attendee with a certain ambience and atmosphere: a sense of cutting-edge facilities and media, a sense of comfort and excitement like the latest new mall, and an exuberant sense of welcome for all. Both Joel and Victoria are stylishly dressed in what are clearly expensive garments, and Victoria is always perfectly "made up" in terms of make-up, hair, and teeth. With perfect pearly white smiles, they also both fit the cultural body beauty standards of the day. With a son and a daughter, both involved in the public face of Lakewood (Jonathan plays and sings in the worship bands, as well as preaching, and Alexandra sings, often soloing in the worship bands), and both also meeting the cultural standards of attractiveness, the Joel Osteen family presents as the perfect American Christian Lakewood family. Though involvement of lay-leaders is not foregrounded in the discourse of Lakewood in any way (which would be more typical of the *anti-establishment* theme) the Osteens draw no explicit attention

to the strong hierarchy of their leadership structure. Rather they draw attention to their charisma, optimism, and ‘love’ for their attendees. The power is ever present, but it resides backstage, not front stage.

Chapter 5

The Embodied Discourse of West Angeles Church of God in Christ: Bondage History, Therapeutic Spiritual Valorization of Self, and Civic Advocacy

Introduction

As was noted in the opening of the Lakewood Church chapter, research indicates that successful megachurches demonstrate considerable variety from each other. Not surprisingly then, West Angeles Church of God in Christ is significantly different than Lakewood. To begin, it is possible to discern two co-sanctified lexicons (bi-partite) in West Angeles, and it is illuminating to examine these analytically, both as distinct from each other and as they are brought into interaction with each other. To understand and interpret both of these current linguistic expressions of faith employed by West Angeles Church one must first understand the history of slavery and religion in the United States. Hence, after a brief description of West Angeles demographics for broader context, this chapter begins with an exploration of the history of slavery in the United States as pertains to language development and social change. These are the roots from which the current West Angeles co-sanctified bi-partite lexicon is drawn. Part I of the co-sanctified lexicon, which I will entitle *Black Liturgy,* includes themes of freedom, bondage, release, vigilance, deliverance, and the promised land, all motifs which function to memorialize their slave history. It can be seen that a primary site for the establishment and development of this discourse was and continues to be their rousing worship language which is highly emotive, improvisational, often finding its home within their music. The consideration of these themes is followed by a discussion of the Black Lives Matter

campaign, which is motivationally fueled in part by the historical understanding within slave religious culture that the gifts of the holy spirit to his people include demonstrating, organizing, and publicizing. The chapter goes on to discuss how this unique, historically informed lexicon is engaged in re-lexicalizing through inferred contrastive sets, producing the foundational motifs of *From Bondage to Freedom* (which harkens back to their slavery era but also their present oppression), and *Blessed to Be A Blessing* (the belief that one should share what one has with their community), which inform so much of the West Angeles discourse. The chapter then moves on to examine the ways in which discourse constructs understandings of the centrality of community, which is defined as not merely church but also neighbourhood, city, and country. Final observations on the Part I co-sanctified lexicon involve a micro-analysis of the asymmetrical naming patterns between leadership and laity (revealing a firm hierarchical structure, but shared leadership among those with power), and the strongly gendered notions of male leadership. The second half of the chapter examines Part II of the co-sanctified lexicon, which is focused on civic-minded discourse, and the discursive performance of identity necessary for effective social activism regarding housing, crime, and community programming. The chapter concludes with observations on the complex sophistication of the on-going style shifting that takes place between the black liturgy lexicon and the civic-minded discourse lexicon.

Located on Crenshaw Boulevard in Southwest Los Angeles which is often referred to as "the historical main street of black Los Angeles" (Meares 2019:1), West Angeles is a member of the Church of God in Christ Pentecostal Holiness denomination, is known for its active city and

street ministry and social justice advocacy (discussed at length below), and its congregants are primarily African-American. The charismatic Bishop Charles E. Blake has been the lead pastor at West Angeles for 51 years, and the Presiding Bishop of the entire Church of God in Christ denomination for 13 years. Much of the energy of West Angeles is given to the politics of improving communities in their area, "building lives and providing amazing services to the community – youth programs, healthy living programs, counseling services, etc. – with a continual focus on building values and community through worship" (Newswire 2019:1). With a weekly attendance of approximately 20,000, they are well known for their lively, spontaneous, and charismatic services and their iconic 103-foot tower cross constructed of stained glass.

In establishing a discourse analysis Identity Profile for West Angeles it becomes clear, however, that not only is West Angeles markedly dissimilar from Lakewood Church, but also that it is in some ways directly opposite. While the co-sanctified lexicon of Lakewood is focused on the American dream of health and prosperity for the *individual*, the bi-partite (explained below) West Angeles' co-sanctified lexicon is focused on health and prosperity for the *community*. The latter emphasis on the community is, in turn, directly paired with an emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to contribute to communal well-being. West Angeles Church is, like Lakewood, extremely successful even though the basic orientation of the two churches is profoundly disparate. In the midst of the migration of religious "nones" who are de-populating the evangelical landscape, both of these churches give every appearance of thriving in spite of the disequilibrium and dis-ease produced by radical modernity.

A unique feature of West Angeles is that the co-sanctified lexicon they inhabit, and that inhabits them, is bi-partite. One part of the lexicon is deeply rooted in their historical liturgy of slavery, and the other is rooted in the current language of social and civic activism. As Fishman notes in the sixth and seventh statements of his theoretical decalogue (Fishman 2006), sociocultural change is also language change, and sometimes multiple linguistic varieties exist within one religious community. Such is certainly the case with West Angeles Church, where i) the co-sanctified lexicon developed from slave Christianity, giving rise to a distinct liturgical expression that draws from and memorialises that history is combined with ii) the co-sanctified lexicon that has arisen in current times in the U.S. to argue for black rights in the political arena. The result is a bi-partite co-sanctified lexicon.

West Angeles Co-Sanctified Lexicon Part I: Historical Slave Language and Christianity producing a Black Liturgy

The Roots of Black Liturgy

The work of Anglican missionaries was the first significant systematic attempt to bring Christianity to the slaves of the Southern colonies of the United States in the 1750's. Their success was considerable, but the relationship between Christianity and slaves, as well as slave holders and Christianized slaves, was tenuous at best. Many plantation owners feared the possibility that the biblical ethic of equality of all believers taught by some of the missionaries would encourage the desire, and right, among the slaves for liberation. Hence many of the preachers hired by slave holders taught a very specific brand of Christianity which emphasized singularly the need of slaves to obey their masters (Raboteau 2006). "Church was what they

called it" recounted former slave Charlie Van Dyke, "but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal…. the overseer stood there to see the preacher talked as he wanted him to talk" (Raboteau 2006:299). The slave holder fears were not unsubstantiated, as the prolific testimony of fugitive and freed slaves has made it clear that the slave community did indeed take hold of the message of salvation as one of the right to freedom, as Africans were "quick to equate conversion with the right to be free" (Raboteau 2006:313). Retaining elements of their African indigenous religion the African slaves formed a "unique and coherent understanding of Christianity…from often illegal and hidden religious practices" (Hopkins 2003:1). Employing their African indigenous "preference for nature, the field and barns, bushes and forest, over buildings, churches, and pews" (Vondey 2012:152), and desiring their own unique expression of Christianity, slaves sought out secret places to gather, worship, and pray. And while slave quarters were sometimes the place where this happened, more often their African roots drew them to secluded natural spaces on the plantation where they could gather in secret, which became known as "hush arbors" (Raboteau 2006; Vondey 2012). Forbidden by their masters to engage in such activity, slaves risked horrific beatings in order to attend these services. Slave gospel songs were used to signal meeting nights, and huddled behind wetted quilts and rags to deaden sound, or arbors created by cutting down bushes full of green leaves, they brought the horrors of their enslaved lives to each other and God, in a cry for deliverance and freedom. Here, in a democratic format that allowed each slave to give voice to their individual agonies and hopes, intensely emotive and expressive forms of worship became the norm. Leaving an exhausting day of work in the fields that lasted

till sundown, Richard Caruthers described how they would sneak to the praying ground straight from the field and "goes down in the hollow to pray. Some gits so joyous they starts to holler loud and we has to stop up they mouth. I see niggers git so full of the Lawd and so happy they draps unconscious." (Raboteau 2006:302).

We see here an example of Emile Durkheim's ideas about effervescent assemblies (Durkheim 1995), which Shilling and Mellor further explore as a form of *embodied intoxication* in which one is "excited, enthused or intoxicated sufficiently to inhabit their physical being as a social or religious body" (Shilling and Mellor 2011:17). Temporarily shedding the intense struggles and vulnerabilities of their enslaved lives, loves, and labour, this temporary internal metamorphosis "of the individual … serves to sustain and embolden group life" (Shilling and Mellor 2011:18). Though an intensely personal experience it is practiced in a social context with contributes to a particular kind of total environment building for the collective community under the hush arbor and beyond. Out of these practices emerged a Christianity entirely distinct from white Christianity which was framed "in their own language and idiom" (Hopkins 2003:1). Smith argues that this black slave version of Christianity "enabled the African exiles to endure slavery precisely because these beliefs supported their moral revulsion toward it and promised eventual deliverance from it without demanding that they risk their lives in immediate resistance" (Smith 2006:314). The powerful sense of hope and endurance fostered by these "plantation prayer grounds" (Vondey 2012:147)), and the habitus building experience of embodied intoxication that they provided, resulted in "Christianity having pervaded the slave community" (Raboteau 2001:297) by the end of the Civil War.

Integrating freed slaves into established religious structures was one of the great challenges the American South faced when abolition was achieved as a result of the Civil War. It was the growing Methodist, Baptist, and Holiness Movement in particular within white Christianity, and their popular tradition of camp revival meetings, that became the staging ground for the "mixing of liturgical temperaments" (Vondey 2012:155). Camp meetings were initially held in rural, outdoor areas. Arrangements were often spontaneous, meeting areas were crowded, and the organization of eating, resting, and sleeping were often overlooked. They were also typically highly emotive and 'spirit-led', and "the celebrations were temporally restricted only by the exhaustion and weariness of the participants; bad weather and nightfall rarely shortened the meetings" (Vondey 2012:157). This experience made sense to the communities of slave Christianity, and here is where freed slaves felt most welcomed into somewhat more formalized white religious contexts where the experience itself had some parallels to the plantation prayer grounds of their slavery days. And it was here that their particular form of religious expression was first legitimized by white Christianity, and further, began to significantly influence white Christianity and the future of Pentecostalism.

The Great Migration of emancipated slaves resulted in this unique African-derived liturgy, which was the blending of Holiness Movement camp meetings and plantation praise houses, moving into urban contexts in the northern, northeastern, and western borders of the United States (Vondey 2012). Soon the "teachings and values of the Holiness Movement and the rituals of African liturgy meshed in urban areas, and exposed Pentecostals in the storefront churches to the revival rituals of the forest temples" (Vondey 2012:160). Charles Fox Parham, a

white Klu Klux Klan sympathizier, and William J. Seymour, a son of freed slaves, were considered to be the leaders of the Holiness movement. Seymour was the pastor of the Azusa Street congregation in Los Angeles, and the interracial nature of Azusa Street congregations nurtured a "multicultural environment for liturgical celebration that soon spread to other parts of the country" (Vondey 2012:161). Increasingly, both black and white Holiness Movement leaders came to Azusa Street to experience this unique blending of African and Holiness movement liturgies, and were profoundly influenced by them. In 1907, a particularly intense series of such revival meetings, with prominent Holiness leaders present, is now considered by most historians as the birth of Pentecostalism (Hollenweger 1977), and reveals the degree to which the African slave liturgy had become the dominant sanctified language of the movement. Parham's (white Klu Klux Klan sympathizer) influence waned as a result, while the influence of Seymour (son of freed slaves) and other Holiness leaders grew. In 1909, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) was formed, which is now "the largest African-American Holiness Pentecostal church in North America" (Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. van der Maas 2002). It did not take long before racial tensions grew in intensity, and in 1913 white Pentecostal leaders separated from COGIC and "formed a separate white Pentecostal denomination, the Assemblies of God" (Chism 2013:430).

The belief that deliverance and freedom from oppression is a part of Christian salvation, as first birthed and solidified on plantation prayer grounds and hush arbors, has remained a central tenet of black Pentecostalism. Barnes' (2010) in depth analysis of the Black Church through "in-depth interviews, sermon data, and direct observations" (12) concludes that

"ultimately, empowerment, self-efficacy, and a healthy racial identity are important objectives for such churches….part of the Black Church's call involves: socializing Blacks to be self-reliant; helping people understand and counter negative societal forces; and, providing the spiritual, intellectual, and practical skills to combat stereotypes, prejudices, and negative outcomes associated with their race and culture" (112-113). Elements of black culture are woven throughout these tasks, to both anchor and motivate.

Among the gifts of the spirit typically embraced by Pentecostalism, "such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, religious dancing, and praying for the sick, they practice the gifts of demonstrating, organizing, and publicizing. These are considered as another kind of prophecy" (Hollenweger 1977:27). Walter Hollenweger, a Swiss academic and theologian, and recognized authority on Pentecostalism, notes the blending of the two co-sanctified themes mentioned above. "I have known black Pentecostal churches in which these activities were explicitly mentioned in a list of gifts of the Spirit……they become part of a new unity between prayer and politics, social action and song" (Hollenweger1977:27). COGIC leaders have historically contributed to social justice initiatives on behalf of the black community. The 1968 strike of sanitation workers in Memphis had its headquarters in a COGIC church, black Pentecostals won seats on city councils and in state legislatures, and black Pentecostal theologians criticized the Billy Graham crusades as having "nothing to say to the poor nor to the black people" (Dugan 1970:29). Current Bishop of West Angeles COGIC and presiding bishop of the entire COGIC denomination since 2007, Charles E. Blake participated in the famous Selma to Montgomery march of 1965 that ultimately secured passage of the Voting Rights Act for blacks, which is

considered a landmark federal achievement of the Civil Rights Movement. Gerlach and Hine (1970) describe black Pentecostalism as a “movement of social transformation” (Hollenweger 1977:34) because “liberation is always a consequence of the presence of the Spirit” (Hollenweger 1977:31) - spiritual salvation and social justice always dance together in the liturgy of black Pentecostalism.

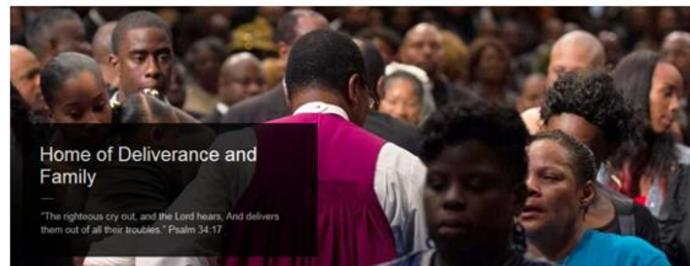
In this tracing of the history of black Pentecostalism, various terms have been used to characterize the nature of their discourse community – “multicultural environment for liturgical celebration,” “African slave liturgy,” “rituals of African liturgy,” and “African derived liturgy.” In his study of African American worship and spiritual expression, Vondey (2012) offers the term “Black liturgy.” Addressing the accusation sometimes directed at black Pentecostalism that it is a “movement without liturgical sensitivities” (Vondey 2012:148), he suggests that liturgy, in the broadest sense, refers to any activity that is a work of the people (*leitourgia*) (Vondey 2001) which in Pentecostalism encompasses a particular form of spirituality and a particular form of worship. This Black liturgy resists being formalized, determined to remain open to the free response to an encounter with God. Singing, preaching, prayer and worship, with an emphasis on empowerment, improvisation, and liberation are central tenets that, when taken together, define a Black liturgy (Vondey 2012). The roots of the Black liturgy of West Angeles church are deeply intertwined with this unique slave Christianity. Bourdieu’s “generative principle of regulated improvisations” (Bourdieu 2007:30) is readily observed both in the historical development, and current expression of West Angeles’ Black liturgy. Within this total environment and the individual habitus its form would seem to favour, as we will read below,

the structure of regulated improvisations is likely to produce something "powerfully generative" (Bourdieu 2008:428) that functions as anti-structure, challenging the myriad forms of oppression the African-American community currently faces in America.

Slave Language

The opening page of the West Angeles church website includes a prominent picture of congregants with Bishop E. Blake in their midst (Figure 5:1), and a large caption that reads "Home of Deliverance and Family" (p.1), followed by Psalm 34:17 from the biblical text which reads "The Righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles."

Figure 5.1: West Angeles "Home of Deliverance and Family"



The congregants look serious, perhaps troubled, and are looking either at Blake, downward, or at each other. And with that image and text the reader is introduced to one of the primary identity markers of West Angeles church – they are a people that share a history of bondage who are still fighting to be free. This type of discourse keeps history alive, bearing witness to past wrongs, and it connects the viewpoint - the phenomenology - of the present church and its congregation to the historical experience of slavery and suffering, and mixes this liturgical temperament with the texture of biblical texts. As discussed earlier in Rienstra and Rienstra

(2009), observations regarding the various dimensions of language at work in any worship context (such as the one depicted here) point out the *memorial* dimension of language, which "carries memories with it" (37), "placing our stories into the larger story" (37). Anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen, in his exploration of the symbolic elements necessary for the construction of a community, notes that a "community refers to a putative past or tradition" (Cohen, 1985:99) which serves to function as a current identity marker. The past is used selectively as a resource out of which to construct current identity. Cohen notes that while historians may describe this process as "the invention of tradition" (99), anthropologists "would be more inclined to treat [this] as an expression of the way in which people cognitively map past, present and future (99). Here we can see that the linguistic habits of the historical religious slave community have been retained in recognizable form in the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon, creating a constant reminder of their journey in order to focus on the destination they must yet reach. These maps, "heavily scented by the past" (101) are "continually revised in such a way as to bend to present needs" (101). As indicated by the "Home of Deliverance and Family" example discussed above, the West Angeles website leads by employing purposive and instrumental language which intentionally places their reader inside the slave history of African-Americans as a central part of the identity construction of its congregants. Numerous sermon titles also bring attention to surviving beyond their slavery roots: "Break Free, don't go back to Herod" (a classic Bible story about slaves fighting to be free), "There is a Way Out," "Just Wait A Little Longer," "Living Through Affliction," "How to Retain Hope in the Midst of Trials," "Christ's Prayer for the Preservation of his Followers," and "How to Snatch Victory from the Jaws of Defeat" (p. 7, 20,

21, 22, 27, 28, 59, 60, 534, 545). Each of these titles appears a minimum of ten times throughout the website via various cross-referencing hyperlinks (for a total of 70 mentions throughout the website). This type of linguistic mapping of the past (i.e., memorial use of language) is employed to the present needs of the West Angeles congregation and community, which is understood to be the ongoing call of social justice for African Americans. This "fusion of horizons" (Garrett 1978:392), the phenomenology of the present understood through the lens of the past, has produced the first of their two co-sanctified lexicons.

The West Angeles website also has quotes from the most recent sermons, and here again we find slavery as a discursive reference point. In two separate sermons Blake calls his listeners to "stand upon our watch" (p. 9, p. 25), which was a common practice during illicit slave gatherings.[43] In other sermons he tells his listeners that "we are in captivity, we're in bondage" (p. 19), and that we are to look for "the promised land" (a biblical reference to freedom), that "the time is now", because the "promised land is ready" (p. 68), and that we are to be "taking the mind cuffs off" (p. 489). The theme of slave language is further reinforced with calls to action such as "It's Time for War" (p. 38, 58, 70, 115, 125), and, "It's Time to Join the Revolution" (p. 7, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 59, 60, 534, 535), suggesting that "the greatest war to be fought is in the hearts and minds of black people" (p. 25).

The Prayer Wall feature of the website allows everyone to post their prayer requests, and here again we see the memorial dimension of language employed as it relates to their

[43] The Summer Enrichment Programs also employ a practice common to their slavery history – they conduct "Rites of Passage" (p. 497) ceremonies to signify moving from one social station to another.

slavery history. “Deliverance” from various circumstances and afflictions was requested 66 times (p. 528, 546, 551), and further variations such as “set free,” “freedom,” “bondage,” and “release” were mentioned a total of 30 times (p. 528, 546, 551). The monthly prayer calendars for May and June of 2015 (the time during which the data for this research was being collected) includes the theme of “Deliverance”, and welcomes congregants to “commit to divine deliverance and freedom” (p. 367, 368) in their personal prayers.

Rather than choosing to write slavery out of their past in an attempt to assimilate into their current cultural context, the West Angeles church calls its congregants to memorialize, embrace, and write their slave history into the present through their linguistic choices. To be an African-American Pentecostal is to be a survivor of slavery. They employ this historic slave language in order to use their history “to bend to present needs” (Cohen 1985:101). As we will see in further analysis of the data (below), this process of intentionally retaining slave references as part of their community of discourse is employed to provide motivation for positive action for themselves and their broader community, not sympathy for the self. The co-sanctified lexicon this has produced contains a unique irony – its reference point is the language of white Christianity given to them by their owners, which is now interlaced with the demand for freedom and self-determination, and is being used to speak back to the very people who were, historically, their oppressors. As observed by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, language alerts us to some parts of the environment and not others (Charon 2004). The constant references to their slave history by way of their linguistic choices draws consistent attention to the deep injustices perpetrated against African-Americans. Symbolic

interactionism also observes that language is a form of interaction with oneself. When the language (i.e., worldview) one is given is constantly reminding one of an unjust history, the nature of the “interaction with oneself” is quite likely to include considerable focus on how to deal with the present-day injustices resulting from their slave history. All of this reinforces a deeply collectivistic way of conceptualizing their social world.

The emphasis within the WA co-sanctified lexicon on slave language and freedom serves a further purpose. Identity in the social world (in this case historically a slave, presently only partially ‘free’) “is established by the thoughts, feelings, and action of others as well as those of the individual” (Hewitt 2010:3). One’s identity becomes a social fact when one’s announcement is paired with placement by others who affirm one’s announced identity. Announcements do not always align with placements (Hewitt 2010). If one is not granted an identity by the social world that surrounds them (i.e., placement), a stable identity is not established. Hewitt points out that the achievement of identity (announcement coinciding with placement) “is important because it provides a key basis for motivation and action” (Hewitt 2010:4). The West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon is knit together by references to an oppressed history combined with hopes for a just future. These two colours of thread, constantly interwoven, are a very strong identity claim that is increasingly granted placements within the United States and serves as a very powerful motivation for the discourse and work of civic advocacy that is present in Part II of the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon – civic minded discourse (discussed below).

We can also see Stones' "quadrapartite cycle of structuration" (Stones 2005: 84-115; Ritzer 2007:85) at work in this co-sanctified lexicon. In this particular in-situ context, the *external structure* is one in which African-Americans are deeply disenfranchised and disempowered within the country where they are citizens. This is overlaid by the more general anxieties and insecurities produced by late modernity. The formidable combination of the two sets of forces has produced embedded cultural schemas and dispositions within the *internal structures* of the African-American psyche which threaten to eat away at a sense of strength, power, self-dignity and worth. The West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon of black liturgy reminds its speakers that injustice has been done, provides a discourse and a culture of mutual support as resources through which to resist the continued effects of these historical wrongs, and calls for *active agency* through which these resources can be used to positively challenge current forms of inequality, injustice, and misrecognition. One of the readily identifiable *outcomes* (the fourth stage in this recursive quadripartite process) is the civic-minded co-sanctified lexicon which is the second half of the bi-partite co-sanctified lexicon of West Angeles (discussed below).

There are three specific categories of slave language that are used extensively within the co-sanctified lexicon of West Angeles that are identified in this research as: i) *Rousing Worship*, ii) *Visceral Music,* and iii) *Black Matters*.

Rousing Worship

The intensely emotive, religiously improvisational nature of plantation prayer grounds and plantation praise houses remains a central part of the black liturgy of West Angeles. Many

of the events and leaders of West Angeles promise attendees these types of experiences. Elder Owens promises an interactive experience of "practicing holy reading" (p. 15), Elder Wilfred Graves encourages listeners to be "agents of healing and salvation" (p. 23), the Mission Statement of the Young Adult Ministry is to be "passionate and reverent in our worship" (p. 489), and the goal of the WAY Youth Ministry is "empowering transforming and contagious lives" (p. 484). Socialization into this black liturgy begins young, with the Kids Sunshine Band geared for learning to "live holy and productive lives" (p. 483), "powerful worship" at the Kids Under Construction Power Hour (p. 480), and the Infant and Toddler Preschool "actively participat[ing] in Praise and Worship" (p. 482).

At Brotherhood events you are promised "anointed worship and profound insight" (p. 17), at the Men's Retreat you will also be "blessed by anointed worship and profound insight" (p. 75 twice), at the Watch Night Service (another reference to slave activity) "thousands of saints will be on their knees praying" (p. 92), at the Youth New Generation Sunday you will "experience an outpouring of unyielding power in Jesus name" (p. 111, 112), and the Christian Education department is "fully charged to fulfill God's second purpose of edification" with "Holy Spirit filled anointed teachers" (p. 496). In the full-page posts which provide select quotes from three of Bishop Charles E. Blakes' recent sermons, the reader is told that his sermon was "impassioned" (p. 58), "that the West Angeles congregation [was] on their feet in thunderous praise and worship" (p. 58), and that he preached a "rousing sermon" (p. 15). In quotes from his sermons, Charles E. Blake calls for the attendees to "clap your hands and give praise" (p. 69), or to be the "army of God – deputized to tell the devil and the forces of evil, "STOP! You are

under arrest!" It's time for war!" (p. 58). In this particular sermon about battle, Blake uses the term "war" or "warriors" 17 times, and various other combat terminology (e.g., defeated, fight, good and evil, attack, Army of God) another 14 times, detailing the "fight of a cosmic battle" and "run-ins with the devil" (p. 58).

Special events are advertised or spoken of as events of great emotional intensity. At the Christmas at the Cathedral event the "sanctuary erupted in hand-claps, spontaneous dance, and all-out call-and-response praise", and it was a very "powerful performance" (p. 63). In an advertisement for a Celebration Night of Worship & Praise, the attendees are told to "get ready for an awesome time in the Lord" (p. 124, 125). You are also welcomed to attend a "Hands Up, Hands Up Rally" (p. 55).

A call to join the Missionary Choir is presented as "needing singers to raise the praise" (p. 420), qualifications for evangelists, according to the Evangelist Missionary Department, are to be "saved, sanctified and filled with the holy ghost' (p. 420). When the Evangelists and Missionaries join together with The Brotherhood for an event, we are told that they will "present Holy Ghost Revival Part 3," and promise the attendees that there will be "powerful prayer, inspirational singing, and anointed preaching" (p. 109, 110).

The Prayer Wall, where everyone is welcome to post requests, includes iterations of "miracle," "anointing," "warfare," "restoration," "cover with the blood," and fire in your soul" 76 times.

Slaves faced the challenge of coming to terms with the hypocrisies of Christian slave owners who taught them grace and mercy (in theory only, for the most part), yet at the same

time oppressed them (often brutally). This required complex processing, and from this emerged "a deep sense of the paradox and mystery of God's dealings with [people]. Hence the pathos of their songs and prayers…and this intertwining of emotion and perception in their religious awakening, gave birth to a theology of hope" (Smith 2006:314). This opened them up to the experience of awe, and the "ecstasy of such moments, repeated often in prayer meetings and revivals, represented not so much a flight from reality as a celebration of their discovery of the strength with which to face it" (Smith 2006:319). This form of liturgical discourse remains present in West Angeles community of discourse, as they face the myriad forms of rampant racism and accompanying discrimination that remain a part of the African-American experience in the United States of America.[44] They are offered strength for the fight as conceptualized through their co-sanctified black liturgy which reiterates spirit-filled power.

This rousing worship-filled vocabulary is often depicted in the WA website discourse as being highly emotive and demonstrative, resulting in the potential need for considerable emotion work for non-expressive participants, which is the "process of evoking, suppressing, and otherwise managing" feelings (Sandstrom et al. 2014:1760). Arlie Russel Hochschild, who originally developed the concept of emotion work, notes that "it can be done by the self upon the self, by the self upon others, and by others upon oneself" (Hochschild 1979:562). Each day we find ourselves in social circumstances where specific types of emotions are required. These may be only what Hochschild terms "surface acting" (Hochschild 1979:569) where we

[44] The murder of a black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer, news of which reverberated around the world, is just one of the more recent examples of the dangers that particularly young black men constantly face in America.

demonstrate an emotion for others, or it may be “deep acting” (Hochschild 1979:569) where we attempt to manipulate or call forth the desired emotion in ourselves. The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism explores the many ways in which “emotions are social objects” (Sandstrom et al. 2014:206) that we manipulate, and that then in turn manipulate us. This phenomenon is particularly powerful when specific feeling rules dominate an important social group in our lives, such as is the case with West Angeles congregants. It is through “our interactions with others in [significant groups that] we learn a set of expectations about what emotions are appropriate to feel in given situations and how we ought to express or display them” (Sandstrom et al. 2014:206). This creates an emotional culture such as that of West Angeles, as described by their website. With the basic character of the WA co-sanctified lexicon steeped in requirements to feel specific things in order to fit in, and to be what God (as constructed by WA) asks one to be, the emotion work is indeed done to the self, by the self to others, and by others to the self (Hochschild 1979). This co-sanctified lexicon asks its participants to feel free and empowered, with active agency to change the conditions of their lives because God wants justice for them. This is a very powerful antidote to the deep malaise and disequilibrium produced by radical modernity.[45] Here, qualitative research taking the form of interviews or focus groups might potentially work in the opposite direction to the dominant one suggested thus far, for the most part, in this thesis. That is, there may well be a degree of

[45] Comparatively, it is of interest to note that this rousing worship language has echoes of the hyperbole employed in the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon, but in the case of Lakewood the hyperbole is employed to forecast a new and improved person in the *future* whereas the West Angeles rousing worship language is often describing or promising highly emotive and emotional experiences in the *present* moment.

resistance to the WA discursive formation. Given that there is a high likelihood that at least some form of impression management pressure is part of attendee engagement with West Angeles, individual interviews exploring this dynamic would likely provide rich and informative data about various forms of personal dissonance within the bold and confident total environment of megachurch services.

Visceral Musical Expression and Experience

Steeped in a rich history of slave songs which were highly emotive, and experientially recognizing the emotional power of music, the rousing worship language of the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon often pairs these two. Hence, in addition to the already potent cocktail of a co-sanctified lexicon that creates a very influential emotional culture (as discussed above), West Angeles adds the additional emotion and reality creating power of this unique combination of emotion laden, slave song music.

While it is clear that the Pentecostal movement instigated at Azusa Street was the birth of the contemporary music and songs of blacks, there is a variety of opinions regarding the origin and function of the Negro spiritual. These range from understanding them as being misinterpreted hymns of white Christianity to a clear mirror into the enslaved Negro soul (Hollenweger 1977). This disagreement notwithstanding, it *is* clear that the Negro "spiritual is a powerful means of communication which has 'preached' and communicated the gospel in black American communities more powerfully than any book or sermon" (Hollenweger 1977:33). "The divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals" (Cone 1972:33).

The West Angeles black liturgy includes a very significant focus on music, echoing the slave song traditions of their past. This is immediately evident on the home page of the West Angeles website in which four of the six rolling images include depictions of performing artists. The website also features a full discussion entitled "Perfect Harmony: The Power of Music and Why We Sing" (p. 65). It explores how music makes a person feel "euphoric," leaving the "hair on [ones] arms standing on end." If further outlines how music can change your life because i) "singing creates community" by generating solidarity, ii) "music connects us to our history" (i.e., the work songs of enslaved Africans which gave birth to Negro Spirituals, iii) "music keeps us focused on purpose" – "the songs sung by the enslaved Africans contained codes and biblical references which kept them sane under inhumane conditions and focused on freedom. It also gave them directions to stop on the Underground Railroad" (p. 65), and finally, iv) "it connects us to God" – "through our heartbeats, our breathing, our pulse, God keeps us alive. All life has rhythm and rhythm is the basis of song." "Each song is designed to invite the presence of the Holy Spirit." "The experience of singing amid 100 other voices during my time in the choir left my entire body pulsating. Those powerful songs had permeated my spirit, and in my mind" (p. 65). This powerful explication of the spiritual power of music, hyperlinked in four other places on the West Angeles Website, indicates the centrality of music as a part of the Black liturgy of West Angeles.

West Angeles has a Performing Arts Theatre, and a Music and Worship Arts ministry dedicated entirely to music and drama, complete with 13 choirs: Angelic Choir, Chorale, Daughters of Destiny, Extension, 4 Hymn, Judah Chorale, Mass Choir, Revelation, Songs of

Thunder, Voices of Experience, Women of Power, Youth and Young Adult Choir, and the evangelists Missionary Choir (p. 420, 494). The “Sing, Dance, or Act? We want you!” (p. 83), and “Join West Angeles Music and Worship Arts” (p. 84) pages of the website indicate active recruitment to join in.

Naming the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) denomination as being known for “an exuberant, musical expression of praise and worship deeply rooted in African tradition [that] has widely influenced the gospel music genre from its inception” (p. 61), the West Angeles website pays tribute to the legendary blues musician B.B. King, who grew up in the COGIC denomination, with an entire page (p. 61) that is hyperlinked seven times throughout the website (p. 61, 82, 88, 92, 94, 104, 119). The West Angeles website also pays tribute to Pastor Andrae Crouch, another lifelong member of the COGIC, who was “known as the father of modern gospel music” (p. 54), and who worked with “Michael Jackson, and Madonna, but also Elton John, Quincy Jones, The Commodores, Diana Ross and Ringo Starr” (p. 54) when they needed help with their gospel sound. This tribute is hyperlinked throughout the West Angeles website a total of ten times (p. 54, 84, 86, 94, 102, 104, 108, 112, 114, 119).

At the time that the data was gathered for this research project, the significant seasonal celebration that had just happened was Christmas. As such, there were still advertisements for the “Christmas at the Cathedral” event on the website even though the event had already happened, as well as pictures and descriptions of the event itself. The event featured the West Angeles Mass Choir, Gospel singer Terrill Hall, singer Sister Avanna Bereal, the children’s dance ministry, and an impromptu sermonette by Bishop William L Sheals. All of this was emceed by

comedian George Wallace. The highlight performance of the evening was Yolanda Adams, a highly successful gospel artist and record producer. A thorough description of the event, complete with numerous pictures, is featured in 9 different places on the West Angeles website (p. 64, 90, 94, 97, 98, 102, 104, 108, 114). Of the 19 pictures of the service, 15 of them are of musical performances. With titles such as “My Liberty,” Someone Watching Over You,” “The Only Way,” “Time to Change,” “Still I Rise,” “Victory,” “Through the Storm,” “This Too Shall Pass,” and “Never Give Up,”[46] it would appear that the contemporary gospel music of the West Angeles black liturgy continues to resonate with the themes of the Negro spiritual of slavery days.

Considerable cross-disciplinary research has focused on the social and psychological power of music in ways that can reinforce Durkheim’s insights about ritual effervescence (Durkheim, 1995) and Shilling and Mellor’s articulation and exploration of embodied intoxication (Shilling and Mellor, 2011), discussed above. In *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control* (2013), the contributors to this volume outline both historical and current research regarding the ways in which music influences us. Philosopher Joel Krueger explores communicative musicality suggesting that listeners “engage with music to forge relationships and shared experiences” (Cochrane et al. 2013:178). Music psychologists Lincoln John Colling and William Forde Thomson observe that before the recording industry “music making was often social, collaborative…and had weak boundaries between performer and audience” (Cochrane et al.

[46] These are all song titles of the gospel singer and recording artist Yolanda Adams.

2013:197). Neuroscientist Stefan Koelsch examines neurophysiological correlates of emotions elicited by music. He outlines "the deep social significance of musical activity" (Cochrane et al. 2013:232), arguing that "music *is* in fact goal directed" (van der Schyff 2014:246), because "music-evoked emotions are related to survival functions" (Cochrane et al. 2013:232). The active process of "emotional contagion" (Cochrane et al. 2013:170) combined with listeners who "come to musical experiences primed for action" (van der Schyff 2014:249) creates a very powerful encapsulated experience. In Wellman et. al.'s (2020) research, megachurch attendees interviewed in focus groups most commonly used "contagious" to describe their experience of the singing in their megachurches. This experience of collective effervescence is the primary attraction, as these "practices are in the body before they are adjudicated in the mind" (80). Coining the term "connetic" (103) to describe megachurch attendee experiences, Wellmann et al. further point out that this ""multisensory mélange of sensory input" (103) is incrementally intensified the greater the number of people present.

In the world of West Angeles, marrying these powerful emotional functions of music to generate emotion, motivation, and a strong sense of community and belonging to the already authoritative co-sanctified lexicon of West Angeles produces exactly what many West Angeles congregants have reported above. As observed by Berger and Luckmann's three-part social construction of reality by way of language, "immense edifices of symbolic representation that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world" (Berger 1967:54) are constructed in a particularly unique way through this interimplication of powerful partners (music and language). Their history of slavery becomes a weekly embodied

remembering, as does their motivation to be free of the current oppressions they continue to face in American society.

Perhaps most significant to the powerful role that music plays at West Angeles is the fully democratic nature of it – everyone in attendance at a service has access to the possibility of embodied intoxication. It is not reserved for the elite or the well-educated or the most eloquent or the most talented. If you are present, you are welcome to enter into the spirit of collective embodied intoxication, adding your own voice to the total environment-building enterprise of musical worship at West Angeles. Here again we must note how the regulated improvisations of their *visceral music* lives in recursive relationship with that which is powerfully generative (Bourdieu 2007), offering feelings of safety, security, and well-being that counter the toxic consequences of radical modernity. One is left to ponder whether a total environment constructed by *all* voices is likely to hold a power that is in some ways more enduring than a total environment constructed only by elites.

Black Matters

Included in black Pentecostal listings of the gifts of the spirit are "the practice of demonstrating, organizing, and publicizing" (Hollenweger 1977:27). This is readily evident in the co-sanctified Black liturgy of West Angeles, and can be summed up as various reiterations of the phrase, "black matters." This well-established phrase within the West Angeles lexicon quickly morphed into "Black Lives Matter" when the #BlackLives Matter hashtag emerged in 2013 and was the beginnings of a significant ongoing social movement across much of the United States. Unlike Lakewood Church, the West Angeles congregation is not steeped in –

arguably entitled - assumptions of rugged individualism as an expression of the American Dream. Theirs is a collective dream of freedom and social justice for their people.

Among the sermon podcasts are “A story for Black History,” “Blacks are Not Domestic Terrorists,” “A Sermon for Black History Month,” and “A Message for Black History Month.” Including hyperlinks, each of these sermon podcasts are featured in twelve different places on the website (p. 7, 8, 20, 21, 22, 27, 29, 59, 60, 363, 534, 535). In public protest against the racial profiling and killings by the police, Presiding Bishop of the entire Church of God in Christ denomination (COGIC), Charles E. Blake declared Dec. 14th “Black Lives Matter” Sunday. This event replaces the regular services for that Sunday morning, and everyone is encouraged to wear black as an indicator of solidarity. At this event in 2015 all the men were called to the altar for Bishop Blake to pray over them. The “Black Lives Matter” initiative is featured prominently on various pages of the West Angeles website (p. 34, 35, 36, 58, 100). The West Angeles Website also features a twitter campaign entitled “Blacks are Not Domestic Terrorists #JusticeForMikeBrown.”[47] This link, encouraging congregant participation, is featured on seven separate pages of the West Angeles website (p. 7, 34, 38, 92, 102, 108, 115).

In a sermon responding to the “Bible study massacre at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC on June 17” (p. 25), Bishop Charles E. Blake challenges blacks in America, saying “we’ve got to love ourselves enough to take charge of our destiny” because “when people find something worth working for, they become a people of purpose,” and “the greatest war to be

[47] On August 9, 2014, in Missouri, Michael Brown, an African American man, was fatally shot by a white city Police Officer. Michael Brown was unarmed, and the incident created considerable tension in the U.S.

fought is in the hearts and minds of black people" (p. 25). In his "It's Time for War" sermon quotes posted on the West Angeles website, Blake insists that "it is time to redefine ourselves" (p. 58). The co-sanctified lexicon Part I Black liturgy of West Angeles is a discourse steeped in reminders of the dignity and worth of black people, and their right to be treated as equals. The black church, according to yet another set of sermon quotes from Bishop Blake, "is the place where our dignity as a people is inviolate" (p. 80). Given that they are a discourse community that utilizes the English language, in which "black" is steeped with negative connotative meanings, perhaps the most significant thing to note here is that they insist on a semantic self-labeling of Black, and do so with great pride. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms, though the relatively fixed discursive identity of "black" in the wider, dominant, US culture has been negative, there is always a possibility to challenge the current "construction of nodal points that partially fix meaning" (Howarth 2012:102). This is what West Angeles is doing with the term "black", as it challenges and re-constructs the discursive identity of "black" as something positive, supportive, and empowering. Here we can also see Victor Turner's concept of liminality at work in the juxtaposition of Structure and Anti-structure – the invisibility of white power and privilege is the Structure, and the felt pressure to change to empower Blacks results in multiple layers and levels of creative responses embedded in, and empowered by, the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon of Black Liturgy and Black Matters which is thus the Anti-Structure. African-Americans find themselves standing on a doubly liminal threshold, i) the liminality that radical modernity has produced that all Americans feel, and ii) the liminality of no longer being slaves yet still being oppressed – free, yet not free. There is much here that

religion must 'set right' (Giddens 1991:131), and the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon of Black Liturgy arguably demonstrates considerable success in convincing its congregants that things are being "set right" if the size of their congregation is taken as evidence of such.

The most common sites of research in discourse analysis are *speech communities*, also referred to in the research literature as *discourse communities* or *communities of practice*, which are understood to be any "human group, defined either geographically or socially, whose members share a common language variety and a set of linguistic norms" (Thomas et al. 2005:219). Of particular interest is the continually overlapping process of individual and collective identity construction in speech communities whereby "the process of interacting, via discourse moves that make claims to equality, inequality, solidarity, or detachment" is ongoing (Johnstone 2009:139).

These "claims to equality, inequality, solidarity, or detachment" (Johnstone 2009: 139) through language use happen i) between community members as formal positions and informal social roles are negotiated, and ii) between the community as a whole and those outside its linguistic boundaries. In both situations, whether creating identity *within* the group or creating identity *for* the group, identity "refers to the outcome of processes by which people index their similarity to and difference from others, sometimes self-consciously and strategically and sometimes as a matter of habit" (Johnstone 2008:151). Though the focus of West Angeles' Black Matters theme is that of valorizing the *collective* identity of African-Americans, the line between positively impacting collective identity and potential subsequent positive impacts on *individual* identity is a very blurry one. Hence positive impacts on collective identity will likely

have the ripple effect of positive impacts on individual identity to varying degrees, i.e., the more that the black community of West Angeles internalizes the powerful message that Black Matters, the more that the individuals within the West Angeles community will recognize their own worth as black Americans outside the sanctuary of West Angeles COGIC.

Re-lexicalizing through inferred contrastive sets

Woven throughout the Black liturgy of West Angeles is the use of inferred contrastive sets (Tracy 2002), employed to construct a new identity for black Americans (i.e., re-lexicalize). There are three general themes of re-lexicalization through contrastive sets present in the West Angeles discourse, i) calling members from bondage to freedom, ii) being blessed to be a blessing, and iii) calling members from individuality to community.

From Bondage to Freedom: Black Emancipation and Salvation

The invocation of slave language which is “heavily scented by the past” (Cohen 1985:101), constantly reminds their members, through the *memorial* functions of language, that though they once were enslaved now they are free. This over-arching generalized use of the contrast of bondage and freedom is consistently operative throughout the West Angeles Black Liturgy. The following sermon titles are examples of specific inferred contrastive sets within this over-arching pattern: “Break Free, don’t go back to Herod” (you need to break free because you are bound in some way), “There is a way out” (you need to get out because you are in), “Living Through Affliction” (the goal is peace, but right now you are afflicted), and “How to Snatch Victory from the Jaws of Defeat” (you are currently defeated but you want victory) (p. 7, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 59, 60, 534, 545).

Blessed to be a Blessing: Empowering Others

In Bishop Charles E. Blake's invitation to church attendees to get involved in urban initiatives of COGIC, he boldly suggests that "we cannot be satisfied to be in a community that's blessed and prosperous until we reach out and bless everyone in that community" (p. 9). He reiterates this sentiment again, saying "we are blessed that we might reach out to those less fortunate" (p. 9), and then solidifies these ideas with the summative statement, "We are blessed to be a blessing" (p. 9). Inviting his listener to consider the contrast (using a two-word alliteration), Blake asks them to first of all view themselves as blessed, but then secondly (and more importantly according to Blake), he calls them to move to considering themselves as "blessers." Inferred in his contrastive set is a moral imperative – if you are blessed, then you are required to be a blessing. This simple, but clever alliteration is employed a number of times on the website (p. 9, 19, 487). This re-lexicalizing is consistently reinforced by Blake in his sermons, as he calls for his listeners to be "channels of blessing" (p. 7), "to be a positive impact on the earth" (p. 9), and to "live for the good of others, in harmony with living things" (p. 56). Inferred in these calls to action is the choice not to be a blessing. That is, Blake insists that "if you have something to give and don't give? Then you don't love" (p. 19), that "God can use each and every seed of goodness that we plant into the lives of others to yield a rich harvest of blessing to humanity at large" (p. 23), "everything we are here to do is meant to uplift others" (p. 54), and that "you made it so you can help the rest of us to make it" (p. 25). Perhaps most significant of all, at West Angeles "you will be nurtured and have a chance to nurture others" (p. 418). In contrast to Lakewood, West Angeles does not reflect the individual "pursuit of

happiness," something that many have seen as a cultural norm in North America. This is a pursuit that Christopher Lasch, for one, has seen as leading somewhat inexorably to "the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self" (Lasch 1979:xv). With donors at West Angeles who are everything "from single working mother to the highest paid actor" (p. 419), the church is "involving the next generation in philanthropy" (p. 424), because, as the website points out, evidence of being saved (and thus free according to the Black liturgy of West Angeles) is through your actions: "I will show you my faith by my works. James 2:18" (p. 467). West Angeles does not merely promise you well-being for your own sake, rather it promises you well-being so that you can offer it to others. There is a contrastive theme in much of the West Angeles discourse that consistently calls their members to use their blessing to bless.

Community: From Church to Neighbourhood to City to Country

When the West Angeles website employs the word "community," it does not mean the members of West Angeles church only. It means all the people who live in the Crenshaw area (the neighborhood where West Angeles church is located), as evidenced by the following: the Ministries and Departments of West Angeles lists the Office of the Pastor as "serving the needs of the congregation and community" (p. 14, 29, 372, 547); the Brotherhood is a "commitment of service to the church and the community" (p. 422); a Ministries Department titled "Community Development Corporation," which focuses on housing developments in the Crenshaw area, is tasked to "seek to develop our community" (p. 30); and the COGIC Urban Initiative, also focused on capital urban development of the Crenshaw area, asks us, according

to Bishop Blake, to say "I don't want to just stand by. I want to have a positive impact on life on earth. I want to have a positive impact on my children, my family, on my community" (p. 9).

When West Angeles employs the word "community," it also means the city of Los Angeles (the city in which West Angeles church is located) more generally beyond the Crenshaw area as evidenced by the following; a capital campaign which will "further enable us to better serve our local congregation and the people of Los Angeles (24); "Pray for firefighters and their families" (p. 106); the Counselling Services inform the reader that they are "serving YOU (regardless of membership status) in a more EXCELLENT way!" (p. 423); Baby Dedication and Baptism Services inform the reader that "parents do not need to be members of West Angeles for their child to be dedicated" (p. 421); and the new capital campaign is intended to 'further enable our local congregation and the people of Los Angeles" (p. 24).

When West Angeles employs the word "community," it also means the nation of the United States, and occasionally the globe, as evidenced by the following: the COGIC Urban Initiative claims to "impact our communities, impacting the cities of our nation" (p.9); the Prayer Ministry Shut-In is committed to praying for "the safety and protection of our community and nation" (p.118, 119); a call to "Pray for Oklahoma" in the wake of a devastating tornado (p. 122, 123); an annual church service dedicated solely to "Breast Cancer Awareness" (p. 107, 108); it hosts an annual "Diabetes Awareness Month" to promote "health within our families and communities" (p. 101, 102); annual donation drives for Thanksgiving and Christmas to "feed families" and "provide toys for less fortunate children for Christmas" (p. 99, 100); and

the New WestA.org media services are “designed to strengthen the communities in which we serve worldwide” (p. 24).

As evidenced here, in the lexicon of West Angeles, the term community is a multi-layered concept which includes much more than their own members.

An “Othering” Community

Walter Brueggemann, a renowned Old Testament scholar, defines “other” and “othering” as verbs: “I mean to suggest that “other” is not simply a counter-object, but it is the risky, demanding, dynamic process of relating to one who is not us, one to whom we are accountable, who commands us, and from whom we receive our very life” (Brueggemann 1999:1).[48] While much of the post-structuralist, post-colonial literature defines ‘othering’ as negative and exclusionary, Brueggemann’s use of the concept of ‘othering’ is positive and inclusionary. Considering their definition of community (above), almost all the programming at West Angeles “others” beyond their congregation. The West Angeles contrastive set motif of “blessed to be a blessing” is an “othering” motif. As we will see in the discussion below regarding the civic minded discourse of West Angeles, their “othering” is firmly focused not merely on their community, but more broadly on the civil rights of African Americans.

West Angeles church understands itself to be central to the task of creating a village of safety and security that goes well beyond the threshold of its sanctuary doors. West Angeles church “prides itself in community relations. We understand the civic responsibility to the well-

[48] “Othering” here is not being used in the sense that post-structuralist and post-colonialist literatures do, where “othering” is the process of identifying some as “not one of us”.

being of [our] community and we rise to the occasion with a loving interest. West A's goal is to establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with surrounding communities and businesses" (p. 467). The monthly Prayer Calendar of West Angeles church for April, May and June include numerous reminders to focus on others. One is encouraged repeatedly to be "honouring God with our wealth and possessions," to commit oneself to "generous, cheerful, and sacrificial giving," and "to [be] praying for the needs of other people" (p. 366, 367, 368). In the aftermath of the Charleston Bible Study killings, Bishop Blake prays that God would help us "to do everything we can to make this world your paradise" (p. 25), and that he wants to "have a positive impact on my children, on my family, on my community" (p. 25). The West Angeles emphasis on serving the needs of the broader community – "othering" – is perhaps best summed up by Karen Lascaris' statement (contributing writer for the West Angeles Church of God in Christ website) that "we cannot have freedom, liberty, or peace until all in the world do" (p. 43). For West Angeles church, to "other" is essential to both giving and receiving life.

A particularly unique element of the West Angeles website is that, despite the strong hierarchical structure and presence of leadership at West Angeles church (discussed below), the distribution and type of pictures on the West Angeles website indicates a strong commitment to celebrating the "ordinary" members of their congregation. One of the prominent features on their website is entitled "Sunday's Best." These pictures depict individual and small group photos (in the church foyer) of Sunday morning service attendees at West Angeles. There is a total of 265 pictures. Bishop Charles E. Blake is in five of them, along with 1 of President Obama, and 1 of Stevie Wonder (American musician, singer, songwriter). The other 259

pictures are the ordinary people of West Angeles Church, and the pictures of Blake, and celebrities are mixed in with everyone else, and identified in no special way. What is perhaps most notable about these pictures is the variation of groups and types of people they depict. In a Christian evangelical context in which nuclear families tend to be the focal point of church membership, West Angeles offers a very different visual of who they are. The images of a predominantly African-American congregation are depicted are as follows[49]: 39 pictures of single males, 51 pictures of single females, 19 couples, 10 mothers with children, 11 fathers with children, 8 families (mother, father, children), 10 boys, 9 girls, 4 children, 16 single elder males, 17 single elder females, 9 elder female friends, 2 elder male friends, 5 mixed friends (African-American and Caucasian), 7 male friends, 12 female friends, 3 elders with children, 6 a mix of brown/dark and white, 8 groups, 1 white elder male, 1 white male friends, 1 Asian male, 2 white single male, 3 white single female, 1 mixed race couple (African-American and white), 1 white couple, 2 white families, 1 white female friends. The considerable variance of these pictures would seem to indicate intentionality regarding their selection. It appears that it is important to West Angeles that when someone looks at who they are, they see everyone. And that when members of West Angeles are interacting with their own website, there is a visual reinforcement that everyone matters. This collection of images is available as a hyperlink on twenty separate webpages of the West Angeles website beginning with the second page (p.2, 75, 77, 70, 81, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 97, 99, 101, 103, 105, 107, 111, 113, 116). This means that

[49] The categories listed assume African-American individuals unless otherwise noted.

there are 2,850 pictures in total of West Angeles members depicted on their website as of the date the data was captured for this research study.

The constant discourse presence of i) bondage to freedom, ii) blessed to be a blessing, and iii) community rather than individual, functions as a powerful trifecta that is one of the foundation stones of the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon. Though the juggernaut of modernity has resulted in a state of liminality and hence psychological homelessness for many, a discourse that is always reminding one that they not only belong and will be cared for but that everyone present is equally responsible to care for each other can serve as an effective collective safety net, preventing one from being swept away by the rush of liquid modernity (Bauman 2013). One can, with some confidence, step across the threshold into a sense of home and safety.

Systems of Address: Asymmetrical Naming

Leadership and Laity

While the visual images on the West Angeles website clearly indicate a valuing of every member of West Angeles, there is a firm hierarchical structure in place that is clearly evident in the asymmetrical naming between church leadership and church laity. Charles E. Blake (the senior pastor of West Angeles church) is mentioned 970 times on the website, including all hyperlinks. In every instance, the title "Bishop" is included. In 56 of those 970 he is also referred to as the "Presiding" Bishop (p. 9, 31, 36, 58(2), 62(3), 66, 69(4), 70, 75, 77, 79, 81, 83, 85, 86, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 101, 103, 105, 107, 109, 111, 113, 116, 118, 120, 122, 124, 352, 356, 362(2), 472, 505, 509, 533, 536, 553(2). In 31 of those 970 times, he is also referred

to as "His Eminence" Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake (p. 75, 77, 79, 81, 83, 85, 87, 89, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 101, 103, 105, 107, 109, 111, 113, 116, 118, 120, 122, 124, 362)2), 533, 536, 553(2). Bishops in the COGIC are the ordained lead pastors of individual churches. The Presiding Bishop is elected by the General Assembly to lead the COGIC denomination as a whole. "Eminence" appears to be an additional honorific given to the Presiding Bishop that is used when the website is discussing very formal or important occasions, reinforcing the sacredness of the event, in the Durkheimian sense. One of the typical characteristics of *Old Line/Program Based* megachurches is an authoritative senior pastor (Bird and Thumma, 2011; Spinks, 2010), which is certainly the case with the West Angeles church. It is, however, of interest to note that along with the many times that Bishop E. Blake's name appears on the West Angeles Site, the names and titles of Elders, Superintendents, other Bishops, Pastors, and Dr.'s also appear on the West Angeles site. Including hyperlinks, various elders are named 129 times, various Superintendents are mentioned 57 times, other Bishops are mentioned 345 times, various Pastors are mentioned 106 times, various Dr.'s are mentioned 57 times, and various Reverends are mentioned 18 times. So, while it remains clear that Bishop Charles E. Blake is an authoritative senior pastor, naming patterns appear to suggest that authority is shared significantly with many other church leaders with a ratio of 970 Blake:612 other leaders.[50]

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[50] Bishop Corby Bush, Pastor Edwin Walker, Superintendent Phil Jackson, Elder Uleses, Elder Lawrence, Bishop Dwight Pate, Pastor Benjamin Stephens III, Bishop Edwin Bass, Dr. Kevin Cosby, Pastor Lawrence Powell, Bishop Alton E. Gatlin, Bishop Brandon Porter, Bishop Larry T. Kirland, Bishop Norman Harper, Dr. mark V.C. Taylor, Bishop Brandon Porter, Bishop Cosby Busy, Pastor Edwin Walker, Bishop Darrell Hines, Elder James Smith, Elder Manuel Thomas, Pastor Alonzo Johnson, Dr. Elijah Hankerson, Elder Henderson, Bishop Gideon Thompson, Bishop Noel James, Bishop William Wright, Bishop Tudo Bismark, Bishop Designee Matthews, Reverence Floyd Flake, Superintendent Carl Pierce, Pastor Talbot Swain, Superintendent Derrick Hutchins, Bishop Rance Allen, Bishop Nathaniel Wells, Bishop Frances Kamau, Bishop Lercy Woolard, Dr. James Felton, Superintendent Frank White,

COGIC is governed by a General Assembly composed of all Bishops, Pastors, and Elders which meets twice a year. This Assembly elects a 12-person General Board from among the Bishops, of which one Bishop is chosen as the Presiding Bishop. Hence in the case of West Angeles, all their Bishops, Pastors, and Elders participate in decision making, but ultimately it is the General Board that governs COGIC on a day-to-day basis. The charismatic centrality of Bishop Charles E. Blake is evident in a eulogy to Elder Marion Green, who was the 1st Assistant Bishop to Blake at West Angeles. He is praised as having "stood by the side of Bishop Blake in unwavering support, leadership, strength, grace and humility" (p. 37). Elder Green's virtues are offered relative to how they had been used to serve Bishop Blake. The West Angeles Web Team, launched in 2008, sees its task as "to propel Bishop Charles E. Blake and the West Angeles Church of God in Christ's ministry into the social arena" (p. 529). The successful development of this Web Team since its inception has been credited to "Bishop Blake's prophetic vision" (p. 529). We are also told by the Evangelist Missionary department of West Angeles that "whatever your call, gift or ministry is in the body of Christ, there is a place for you in the Evangelist-Missionary Fellowship under the covering of our Pastor Bishop Charles E. Blake, our auxiliary manager Elder Oscar Owens and our President Dr. Catherine Gray" (p. 420). While Bishop E. Blake is clearly *central* to West Angeles church and COGIC, he is not *singular*.

Bishop Sedjwick Daniels, Bishop Carls L. Moody, Bishop J.H. Sheard, Superintendent Milton Timmons, Pastor Marchus Ways, Bishop Michael E. Hill, Bishop Carlis L. Moody, Bishop George McKinney, Bishop Joe L. Ealy, Bishop Oscar L. Meadows, Superintendent Jimmy Williams, Superintendent Kurt Thompson, Elder James Smith, Superintendent Mark Ellis, Elder Marion Green, Dr. Myles Munroe, pastor Andrae Crouch, Bishop Delano Ellis, Reverence Ellis, Dr. Myles Munroe, Dr. Kenneth Hammonds, Elder Oscar Owens, Deacon John Wilson, Elder Lawrence Champion Blake, Elder Richard Brooks, Elder Ray Reynolds, Dr. Zenobia Bereal (p. 7, 8, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 34, 35, 37, 39, 43, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 63, 66, 67, 68, 70, 73, 75, 76, 77, 82, 84, 86, 88, 92, 94, 96, 98, 100, 102, 104, 108, 112, 114, 119, 121, 363, 364, 373, 472, 489, 491, 493, 496, 505, 534, 535).

His authority operates within a structure of considerable shared authority with other leaders of the COGIC denomination, unless you are female, in which case you have virtually no formal decision-making authority in the West Angeles church or the COGIC denomination.

Gender: The Invisibility of Women

In the entire 556 pages of the West Angeles church website, women are never named as Bishops, Pastors, or Elders, or addressed by the honorific of Reverend or Eminence. There is one title that is used for women and that is "Evangelist." Including hyperlinks, women are named as Evangelists 100 times (p. 7, 8, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 59, 60, 363, 364, 505, 534, 535). The 100 mentions are of a total of 6 women. [51] The honorific used for the wife of Bishop Charles E. Blake is "Lady", which is used each of the 60 times that she is referenced and in one instance she is named as "Our First Lady" (p. 353). There is one woman who is given the honorific title of "Mother Willie Mae Rivers" (p. 7, 8, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 59, 60, 363, 364, 534, 535), one instance of a woman being given the honorific title of "Sister Dorothy Johnson" (p. 420) who is part of the Evangelist Fellowship of West Angeles, and the oldest African Methodist Episcopal Church in the southern United States is referred to repeatedly as "Mother Emmanuel" (p. 26, 32) in two separate discussions of the Bible study shootings that occurred there on June 17th, 2015.[52] There are also two female speakers who are listed 22 times as "Dr." (p. 7, 8, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 59, 60, 534, 535).[53] The titles of respect given to women, which are rare relative to the

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[51] Evangelist Joyce Rodgers, Evangelist Barbara Bryant, Evangelist Ruth C. Pryor, Evangelist Maria Gardner-Langston, Evangelist Faith Brooks, Evangelist Dorinda Clark-Cole.

[52] During a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church a gunman entered the church and shot nine people, including the senior pastor and state senator Clementa C. Pinckney. The gunman, Dylann Roof, later confessed he had hoped to ignite a race war.

[53] Dr. Rita V. Womack, Dr. Judith McAllister.

titles of respect given to men on the West Angeles website, reflects their lesser role. In the Pentecostal tradition, an Evangelist is a respected role, but it relies entirely on charisma and has no formal authority. The only title given to female members of West Angeles remains one without formal authority vested in it. The honorific of "Mother" indicates a maternal authority that comes from a place of subordination, "Lady," is an honorific that has long been understood by feminist theory as trivializing and disempowering – "God bless the Ladies," "little Lady," "Lady of the evening" (Nelson 2010:171) etc. – and "First Lady" is a reference to a woman who is the wife of an important male.

This lack of a significant female presence is further reflected in the abundance of attention drawn to the activities of men in the West Angeles church relative to the activities of women. The COGIC Urban Initiative has a five-part focus, one of which is "Family – We've created programs to strengthen the family with a special emphasis on the role of fathers" (p. 9, 487). There is no equivalent emphasis on mothers. They offer "Manhood 2 Fatherhood" sessions on a weekly basis where they can learn to become "strong men of God." Again, there is no equivalent series of sessions for women. The Manhood 2 Fatherhood series is featured in two separate places on the website (p. 9 (2), 10). The Brotherhood Organization sponsors numerous men's only events which are featured repeatedly on the website: the Annual Fishing Trip, the Brotherhood Golf Tournament, Breakfast with the Presiding Bishop, a Men's Retreat, a Men's Weekend, a Men's Summit, and the monthly Men's Fellowship Prayer Breakfast (p.17, 31, 75, 76, 87, 422). "Women's Affairs Organization" is twice mentioned on the website (p. 29, 30), but no activities are listed or featured. On a page dedicated to discussing Evangelist

Missionaries, there is a single reference to a “Deaconess Board” and a “Young Women’s Christian Council” (p. 420), though there is no description of their activities, responsibilities, or events. The West Angeles website also features a Boy Scouts and a Girl Scouts page. The description of the purpose of the Boy Scouts is much more extensive than the purpose of the Girl Scouts, and includes instilling “strong moral character,” “assists our men in pursuing success in every area of life,” “preparing them for the diversity of the world,” “teach them to be the ‘light’ and leaders in any environment,” and “we believe all men should have knowledge of various skill sets therefore, vocation training and techniques are also available” as well as “reinforcing their primary education and skills through tutorial and other specialized programs” (p. 470). The purpose of the Girl Scouts is to “grow our spirited girls into strong and confident young women,” who will “encourage teamwork and sisterhood,” help them to “truly have a heart for service” and “blossom into an independent and confident young lady” (p. 471). The first thing you read underneath the lead picture on the Girl Scouts page is that they will be “selling delightful and delectable Girl Scout cookies” (p. 471). There is only one page that features the Girl Scouts (p. 471), while the Boy Scouts are featured on 4 separate pages (p. 14, p. 29, 372, 470). While the boys are being groomed to succeed in society, the girls are being groomed to succeed relationally and be supportive. The boys learn vocational skills and develop “strong moral character” while the girls learn teamwork, sell delectable cookies, and “blossom.” Traditional gender stereotypes are clearly invoked by the language used for the respective Scouts, which is further reinforced by how much more prominently Boy Scouts feature on the website than Girl Scouts.

Gender exclusive language is used repeatedly on the website. “Mankind” is used instead of humankind 5 times (p. 40, 57): Dr. Myles Munroe states that “marriage is the most important decision a person will make, next to *his* decision to follow Christ” (p.57), Bishop Blake notes that “every Christian is born a warrior. It is *his* destiny to be assaulted. It is *his* duty to attack” (p. 58), that to obey God’s commands is “the whole duty of *man*” (p. 66), and the “Counselling Centre recognizes the trichotomy of *man*” (p. 423). In two posts written by Karen Lascaris (contributing writer for the West Angeles Church of God in Christ website who is given no formal or honorific title) she uses the term “humankind” (p. 56) once, and says “smell his skin, see her sleeping” (p. 43) in an illustration she is using. In the “Black Lives Matter” campaign that Bishop Blake initiated, the poster for the event depicts three black men and one black woman, and the webpage featuring the event says that “a special prayer will be given for all of the men present in the service on that day” (p. 36).

The frequent use of the term “Brotherhood” throughout the West Angeles website perhaps sums it up best. When West Angeles talks about its people and its work, its default understanding of those people, based on the language used, is male - “Brotherhood”.

As previously discussed in the Lakewood chapter, traditional Christianity equates the fulfilment of binary gender roles with biblical truth, generally blaming any type of breakdown in the family on the external pressures of culture (i.e., radical modernity) because people are not living out of the biblically prescribed gender roles. The previously discussed Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon maintains a delicate balance of making sure that males are ascribed the greatest authority while at the same time giving a nod to cultural norms of female

empowerment by facilitating a prominent public voice for Victoria Osteen (though under the clear headship of her husband, Pastor Joel Osteen). West Angeles' co-sanctified lexicon offers no nod to cultural norms in this area. There are no prominent female voices present in their lexicon. Men speak in and into public contexts. Women do not. The West Angles stance which aligns strongly and fully with traditional gender norms is a form of symbolic and practical resistance to radical modernity and the havoc it is perceived to have wreaked within the family (Kroeger, Nason-Clark, and Townsend Fisher 2008). Gender norms and roles are among the most public and personal of all social norms, hence the expectation of traditional gender norms (such as is the case at West Angeles) functions as reassurance that the chaos and breakdown within family units has a clear cause and thus a clear solution. Living *out* of these traditional roles is present *inside* the individual in almost every moment, as well as present in the linguistic worldview of the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon, making it (as noted in the Lakewood chapter) a very powerful but unseen element of the West Angeles Discourse community.

Contours and Contradictions; Sexism, Racism, and Equality

Throughout the West Angeles discourse there is a heightened reflexivity towards racial injustice (see below) while at the same time a seeming blindness to gender injustice. Though anti-establishment regarding the dominant cultural discourses on race, they maintain an establishment discourse on gender that is very conservative. This contradiction, which is a general tendency of all the traditional black religious denominations, is unique in its contours (Green 2003:115). Set within the sweeping framework of historic and global patriarchy, and inside the American culture where "Black maleness [is] marginalized and under continual threat

by the dominant White society, the Black minister became the one genuine man of the Black community, the substitute patriarch for a manhood not embraced outside the African American Community" (Green 2003:123). This then further becomes "a ready vehicle of social mobility" (Baer 1993:66) for admittance into the political arena, such as we see with Bishop Blake. The successful black preacher functions as the icon of African-American self-esteem (Baer 1993:123). In the context of a nation still deeply divided by racial oppression that African-Americans face and feel daily,[54] the "synonymy of Blackness with criminality" has resulted in the "demonization and criminality of unarmed black male[s]" (Smiley and Fakunle 2016:350). It is a complex conundrum for a Black woman to create dissension about inequality "within the ranks" when the "ranks" are under such systemic and horrific attack from without. The result for many Black women is that "in order to bolster the Black male image, and in a display of solidarity to the race, many Black women willingly acquiesce[d]" (Green 2003:123) to the male monopolization of leadership roles within African-American churches. It would appear that the regulated improvisations of Bourdieu's *habitus* are deeply at work here, as these women work fiercely for, and defend, a justice for their themselves and their race that they themselves are denied by their own race. The "universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be nonetheless "sensible" and "reasonable"" (Bourdieu 2008:436) is palpable here. Though it is neither "sensible" nor "reasonable" to the outsider looking in, the nature and power of *habitus* makes it so for them.

[54] Most pointed currently (June 2020) is the higher rates of African-Americans affected by COVID due to their economic marginalization, and the murder of George Floyd by a police officer which ignited not only American but also worldwide protests against racial injustice.

Though beyond the parameters of this discussion, it is worth noting that just as the notions of biblical justice that took root in the early slave hush arbors and have now resulted in their (African-American) insistence on equality, so too the “powerfully generative” (Bourdieu 2008:428) nature of individual agency is restructuring individual habitus as African-American women find non-black churches that ordain them and empower them to lead. The seed of equality sowed long ago has reached maturity in relation to race, and has dropped its mature seed into the soil of gender equality.

West Angeles Co-Sanctified Lexicon Part II: Civic Discourse and Advocacy

The strength for the fight that West Angeles draws from their co-sanctified Black Liturgy, informed as it is by their history of oppression, also finds its expression in a very unique second co-sanctified lexicon employed for the purposes of achieving social justice. The resulting “style-shifting” (Johnstone 2008) between the West Angeles’ co-sanctified lexicon of Black Liturgy and its co-sanctified lexicon of Civic Minded Discourse has become highly sophisticated and effective. Barnes’ (2010) observation that “the bible was inspirational as well as instructional as slaves used it to learn to read” (1) captures the essence of West Angeles, and helps us to understand the reason for the second part of their Co-Sanctified Lexicon. Their faith is braided together with their social activism. Tucker-Worgs’ (2011) qualitative interview based research of black megachurches uses the three questions of Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 sermon, “A Knock at Midnight” (a metaphor about a request for need in the darkest hour) to frame her research questions and results. She asks and explores whether black megachurches are

“answering the knock at midnight? Are they attempting to provide the social and political bread that black communities need? Are they trying to provide the “bread of freedom” or economic justice that King spoke of?” (3). She suggests that “the repertoire of black church public engagements activities comprises three broad categories: protest politics, electoral politics, and community development” (103), pointing out that despite common assumptions, not nearly all black megachurches actually stock all three of these categories in their repertoire, and in fact, some actually fall more accurately into the category of prosperity gospel megachurch models. In the case of West Angeles, the black megachurch of interest here, while some black megachurches are now accused of having lost their “prophetic voice” (7), all three of the elements Tucker-Worgs identifies in Luther’s sermon are present and actively robust within the world of West Angeles, which despite challenges has in many ways retained the role of “the prophetic black church” (180) that calls for freedom and justice.

Civic Minded Discourse

In the wake of emancipation and the Klu Klux clan era of lynching that followed, the freed slaves of the United States began to develop skills of “discursive performances of identity,” adopting “features associated with identities with which others might not normally associate them” (Johnstone 2008:153). Though most of the citizens of the United States refused to see them as free or equal, their insistence on black equality required a civic lexicon to prove otherwise. Of the 555 pages of the West Angeles website, 82 of them (p. 374-415, 427-466) feature the West Angeles Community Development Corporation (CDC), which employs a well-developed lexicon of civic advocacy. Housed in the Ministries and Departments section of the

West Angeles website, it was founded by Bishop Charles E. Blake (a member of the Selma marches) together with the Trustees of the West Angeles church to "expand the compassionate outreach and neighborhood development and ministries of the church in the face of mounting problems of poverty and injustice in the surrounding community" (p. 376). Incorporated as a non-profit organization, it focuses on "lack of jobs, business investment and affordable, decent housing, struggling schools, endemic homelessness and gang activity", and is "the developer of nearly $50 million of real estate, manager of nearly a dozen programs, and a leader in economic development along the Crenshaw Corridor" (p. 376). It is certified by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. There is a parliamentarian on their Board of Directors (p. 378), and there are more secular "Partners" (p. 379) who come from corporate, civic and community or philanthropy organizations than there are religious "Partners" (p. 379). Their Mission Statement reads as follows: "THE MISSION OF West Angeles Community Development Corporation is to increase social and economic justice, demonstrate compassion and alleviate poverty as tangible expressions of the Kingdom of God through the vehicle of community development" (p. 377). This has resulted in "a variety of ministries and programs" (Barnes 2010:18) that Barnes refers to as "cafeteria-style programs", not least because they are "often offered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week…to under-serviced Black urban communities" (18). The CDC has a significant focus on educating and equipping community members (not exclusive to church membership) with the skills of homeownership. This includes:

- a Home Buyers Education course (p.374, 387, 388, 409, 410, 411, 440, 441, 442) in which participants receive a Certificate of Completion which allows them to access most

down-payment assistance programs offered by the city of West Angeles and the County of Los Angeles.

- a Home Retention Clinic set up to provide "homeowners struggling to retain their homes with information about their options and (to) assist with negotiating loan modification applications with their lenders" (p.389, 440, 442). West Angeles works collaboratively with the Freddie Mac Borrower Help Centre to help struggling homeowners by keeping "them in their homes, whenever possible" (p. 389) by providing assistance.
- a Credit Counselling service that offers one-on-one counselling "to improve their credit score and qualify for the best loan product" (p. 390, 443).

These programs are driven by the CDC conviction that "homeownership is essential to financial success. Your home may be the largest investment you will make in your life" (p. 387).

Various forms of emergency care are also part of the CDC program offerings:

- the provision of "emergency food to individuals and families once every month, or sooner if extreme circumstances dictate" (p. 383,434, 435, 436).
- the Utilities Assistance department hosts numerous "other community agencies to operate their programs through services such as Energy Assistance Programs, Project Angel, Health SHARE, and 'Feed the Children'" (p. 384, 434, 435, 437).
- Housing Referrals helps to assist in placement to emergency shelters and more permanent housing, refers those seeking housing to various regular, subsidized, and low

income housing availability (p. 385, 434, 435, 438), as well as referrals to transitional living and substance abuse programs (p. 385, 434, 435, 438).

- the provision of information for those seeking employment – permanent, temporary or day labor, as well as referring them to improvement programs that "better qualify them for consistent work" (p. 386, 434, 435, 439).

The Economic Development Department of CDC

> aims to reverse the trend of disinvestment in inner city commercial districts through the redevelopment of state-of-the-art commercial properties, as well as offering programs, education and resources for individuals and families that will create momentum for ongoing improvements in the lives of people who live and work in the Crenshaw District and surrounding South Angeles communities (p. 392, 393).

They offer an Individual Development Account in which they match the savings of a successful application as their savings increase, if the applicant commits to using it for post-secondary education, a home purchase, or to start a small business (p. 394). As part of the process, they are taught how to manage their finances. The Economic Development Department also offers free assistance with annual tax returns (p. 395).

The Small Business Development Department offers a free small business tax preparation service (p. 397, 449, 450), an 8 session Entrepreneurial Training course for a fee of $50.00 (p. 398, 449, 451) and offers small business loans of up to $10,000 (p. 399, 449, 452).

The Law and Justice Center of CDC "offers a free 'Law Day'" to the Community every quarter, in which attorneys offer free legal services (p. 400, 401, 452, 453), and provides various workshops, awareness campaigns, and dramatic productions about domestic violence and prevention, "believing the resulting impact will be that social intolerance toward domestic

violence will continue to grow" (p. 402, 454). It also offers a "Back on Track Women's Re-Entry Program" for women seeking to re-enter society after serving a prison term (p. 403, 455), which includes everything from interpersonal skills, clothing for interviews, and financial counselling to mental health support and substance abuse treatment.

The Neighborhood Revitalization Department "strives to serve as a catalyst for the revitalization of South Los Angeles' diverse neighborhoods" (p. 404, 456, 457). They facilitate and support affordable rental housing in order to "reinforce the rich cultural and architectural heritage of the area while also building upon its re-emerging real estate market" (p. 405, 456, 457) such as the Vermont and 41st development that was "an eyesore to the community, filled with litter, overgrown weeds, and transients. Today, that site features our signature West Angeles Homes apartments" (p. 405, 457). The West Angeles Parklane Apartments are "no longer known to be the access point to crack alley in reference to a public alleyway behind the property formerly used profusely by pushers and addicts" (p. 405, 457). Commercial and Mixed-Use developments are focused on providing "a Fresh and Easy Food Market, Union Bank, and space for other retail and office tenants" (p. 406, 458), along with further commercial development for small businesses, as well as industrial developments for office and retail spaces. They are currently also launching a district city planning transit initiative, "Train Coming our Way Community Engagement Program", to facilitate "sustaining a vibrant business corridor that serves families, commuters, business owners and locals alike" (p. 407, 459).

The CDC also offers a "Manhood 101" course because "young men need a safe space to ask questions, seek answers and be exposed to meaningful information as they navigate toward

manhood" (p. 408, 459). The "Manhood 101" course recognizes that "our youth confront various issues daily and need tools to help them combat academic, social, emotional and economic barriers to success" (p. 408, 459).

Except for the Mission Statement on pages 377 and 430, there is not a single mention of God in the entire 82 pages of the CDC, and the co-sanctified Black Liturgy of West Angeles is never invoked. Yet the very same challenges, concerns, and hopes for the future that birthed the Black Liturgy of West Angeles are present throughout the discourse of the CDC. Though entirely without religious connotations, the West Angeles church has developed a highly effective discursive performance of identity in order for those outside their religious community to take their insistence on equality, and the call for social justice, seriously. This discursive performance of identity cannot be dismissed as the religious coping mechanism of an oppressed people. Rather, it is a community of discourse that proves itself to be what it is calling to be treated as - the equals that they know themselves to be. The second co-sanctified lexicon of West Angeles church is civic-minded.

As with Part I of the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon, we can again see Stones' "quadrapartite cycle of structuration" (Stones 2005:84-115; Ritzer 2007:85) at work in this Part II of their co-sanctified lexicon. The particular in-situ context in this case comes not from religious and historical language speaking of the passage from bondage to freedom (as it does in Part I), but rather is represented by the multitude of statistics indicating the ways in which African-Americans are deeply disenfranchised and disempowered within the country where they are citizens – the particular aspects of *external structure* that are brought into focus.

Again (as in Part I), this has produced *internal structures* within the African-American psyche which eat away at a sense of strength, power, self-dignity, and worth. The West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon of civic-minded discourse both reminds its speakers that injustice has been done and simultaneously calls for *active agency* to be developed on the basis of this internalized discourse of resistance. One of the readily identifiable *outcomes* (the fourth stage in this recursive quadripartite process) is the recursive reproduction and consolidation of this Civic-Minded co-sanctified lexicon. The more objective outcomes ('objectivation' in the terms of Berger and Luckmann) of active agency are very concrete initiatives of the Community Development Corporation of West Angeles that are focused on community growth. The construction of decent housing, programs, and scholarships to support education, counseling and finances to facilitate small business ventures, and training and upskilling for success in the job market are readily measurable *outcomes* of *active agency* attempting to redefine (and one could argue successfully redefining) both the existing *external* and *internal* structures.

Style-Shifting

The quasi-dichotomous nature of the two lexicons of West Angeles – one steeped in emotive spiritual expression (the historic sanctified lexicon of Black Liturgy) and the other a crisp discourse of civic advocacy (the newly co-sanctified lexicon of Civic-Mindedness) – makes the entirety of the West Angeles church lexicon complex and interesting. But perhaps even more intriguing is their adeptness at effectively style-shifting between these two lexicons.

In his opening remarks of the remembrance service for the Charleston Bible study shootings, Bishop Blake prays "Dear God, here I am. Reaching for you, reaching for the dream,

reaching to do your will, and walking to my destiny, so help me God" (p. 25). He invokes the words of Reverend Martin Luther King, whose "I Have A Dream" speech called for equality and justice for all African-Americans. The following clause of the sentence is "reaching to do your will," a spiritual surrender to the guidance of God. Blake combines the civic advocacy language of the Civil Rights movement with the personal spirituality of the West Angeles' Black Liturgy, moving effortlessly between them. A little later in the sermon quotes, he moves into an extensive prayer that uses only the Black Liturgy lexicon, which is then followed by another call for his listeners to "fight for their dreams" (p. 25). This transition is followed by an extensive section on various statistical social measures of the black community. Here is a sampling:

- 25% of blacks live at or below the poverty level
- White males live more than five years longer than black males live, and a black man is seven times more likely to go to jail than a white man
- Black men are 25% more likely to die of cancer and twice as likely to die of diabetes. We're still the poorest, and the sickest, and the first to die in many areas,
- 50% of our young people do not complete high school (p. 25)[55]

Blake goes on to discuss this list of statistics at length, once again employing the Civic-minded lexicon, and then moves seamlessly back into the Black Liturgy lexicon with the statement

> People of the Lord, we must not look only to the others, and to the outside to heal our wounds. We cannot deter action while we wait on and plead with other folk to begin to love ourselves…. I pray that in this season, every one of us will stand upon our watch, and that we'll go to God and say, 'God, I just don't want to stand by. I want to have a

[55] It is significant to note that in the list of 10 of African-American Statistics, 8 out of 10 of them reference only male African-Americans.

> positive impact on life on earth. I want to have a positive impact on my children, on my family, on my community. God, show me what you would have me to do, show me what direction you would have me to go'. Go to God for the vision (p. 25).

He continues on using the Black Liturgy lexicon extensively, closing with "God is speaking to somebody today, 'I know you're tired, and I know you're discouraged, but try again. Don't give up! Don't stop! Try it another way! Innovate! Create! Dream! [highly emotive rhetoric employed here] When we obey, our God will go to work, when we serve Him our God will go to work for us" (p. 25).

This type of smooth and repetitive style-shifting from the Black Liturgy lexicon to the Civic-minded lexicon and back again is typical of Bishop Charles E. Blake in particular. In his letter to the church asking them to pray for Charleston, he concludes that

> The tragedy at Mother Emmanuel Church is yet another wake up call to the entire African American Church, calling for effectual prayer coupled with sustained action. In this moment, our hope is that the Body of Christ will come together in unity, as never before, to address the violence, the poverty, the racism, the economic disenfranchisement and inequality that is ripping the fabric of our communities and indeed the entire nation apart (p. 32).

The first half employs the Black Liturgy lexicon, and the second half employs the Civic-minded lexicon. In his "Black Lives Matter" sermon, Blake says

> I watched, as did most of America, first the video of the incident, then the report of the Grand Jury in the Eric Garner case.[56] I am saddened by the decision of the Staten Island Grand Jury to not indict New York City police officer Daniel Pantaleo. With no indictment in two national cases in less than a two week period, and to hear and see Eric Garner, a father and grandfather, placed in a banned choke hold and repeatedly say, 'I can't breathe,' takes us back years in the struggle for equal justice (p. 36).

[56] Garner was an African American approached on the sidewalk on July 17, 2014 by a New York City Police Officer on suspicion of selling cigarettes. He was put in a choke hold, and died as a result. This event sparked a significant public outcry.

Moving from the lexicon of Civic-minded to the Black Liturgy lexicon, Blake's next statement is "We must find a way, through God's help, to continue the work of emphatically telling everyone that will listen that "Black Lives Matter!" (p. 36).

A typical example of Style-shifting employed beyond the leaders of West Angeles would be a piece by Karen Lascaris, contributing writer for the West Angeles Church of God in Christ website. In a feature on 'Missing Children', Karen Lascaris uses the Civic-minded lexicon to describe the social problem of missing and trafficked children, and then outlines five things each of us can do. The first suggestion invokes the Black Liturgy lexicon reminding her readers that it is essential to be a part of "the village it takes to raise your children, and helps to create a hedge of safety around them (Psalm 91)" (p. 43). The second suggestion invokes the Civic-minded lexicon, calling her reader to "activate your activism" (p. 43) by writing to elected officials and working to change laws. The third suggestion continues to use the Civic-minded lexicon, encouraging readers to educate children on the dangers, and connecting with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to do so. The fourth and fifth suggestions return to using the Black Liturgy lexicon urging her readers toward "prayer, fasting, and meditation……because "He sends us the answers" (p. 43), and to "have faith…. the bible reveals the solutions to the moral dilemmas of our time" (p. 43). Her summative statement includes both the Black Liturgy lexicon and the Civic-minded lexicon: "No matter the skin color or the country, we cannot have freedom, liberty, or peace until all in the world do, and we who believe in Jesus cannot rest until that day comes" (p. 43).

In a sermon addressing "Racial Profiling and Social and Criminal Injustice," Elder Uleses Henderson Jr. (an intellectual property attorney) spends the first half of the sermon employing the Civic-minded lexicon as he details an extensive history of racial profiling in the United States from slavery to racially driven crimes by law enforcement against free blacks. Halfway through, he segues to the Black Liturgy lexicon by reading John 7:53 – 8:11, followed by the observation that "it is important to know that God's house is the only court we should be concerned with because with just one sentence Jesus dismantles the prosecution" (p. 114). From this point on, the second half of his sermon employs only the Black Liturgy lexicon.[57]

Youth Socialization into a Civic-minded Lexicon

While it is typical of most churches to use their resources to support religious education, West Angeles church would be an exception to this pattern. They do have a school for religious education (The West Angeles Bible College & School of Practical Christian Living), but virtually all their free community programming is targeted at socializing their youth into their Civic-minded lexicon.

The COGIC Urban Initiative offers College Prep and Education Enrichment resources (p. 9, 472) that are part of the Youth Sector of West Angeles. Their mission statement is to "provide various educational enrichments programs that lead to better access, higher excellence and fairness/equity of opportunity for youth and adults" (p. 12). They offer

[57] Though not related to this subtopic, it is of interest to note that Elder Henderson begins his entire sermon on racial profiling and criminal injustice by outlining black-on-black crime rates, and then admonishes his listeners that "before we point the finger at other people let us first examine ourselves. The facts are glaring, and it makes no sense to protest injustice if we do not first value the lives of our own youth" (p. 114).

- a College Readiness Program that "prepares parents and students for the admissions process. In our weekend sessions, families get a chance to sit and speak with college admission counselors. These counselors advise on how to make it through college, navigate the financial aid office, how to look for scholarships, etc." (p. 473, 498), and also take grade 12 students to visit colleges throughout the year.
- a 22-hour SAT prep course as part of the Princeton Review TM-West Angeles Church enrichment partnership which prepares students for their college entrance exams (p. 372, 474, 499).
- an after-school enrichment program "for grades 6-12 in all levels of Math and Science, as well as history and English. We teach concepts in small groups with enhances one-on-one help as needed" (p. 475). This is done because "a large portion of [our kids] are failing their math classes" (p. 475, 500).
- six week long summer Enrichment classes that focus on "algebra concepts and formulas, as well as writing techniques" (p. 476, 501).
- a Sponsorship Fund for West Angeles high school graduates and current college students (p. 477, 490, 502).
- a Higher Learning program to support Young Adults who are currently in College. They provide "peer support, tutoring, counseling, mentoring, emotional support" so that "even though they may be away, they are still at home" (p. 492).

These programs are free to all community members regardless of membership or attendance at West Angeles church with the exception of the SAT prep course which is open to

everyone but costs $100.00, and the Sponsorship Fund which is available only to active members of West Angeles Church. As noted above, all these considerable resources are offered toward the purpose of "better access, higher excellence and fairness/equity of opportunity for youth and adults of the congregation of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ and its surrounding community" (Education Department Mission Statement, p. 12). West Angeles is actively equipping their youth with the capacity for "discursive performances of identity" (i.e., Civic minded discourse) in order to facilitate their insistence on black equality in their society. And they employ their sanctified Black Liturgy lexicon, "heavily scented by the past" (Cohen 1985:101) to motivate themselves and their youth to become skilled and effective invoking their co-sanctified Civic minded discourse lexicon when needed.

Conclusion: Megachurch Themes in West Angeles

Of the five megachurch themes identified in a previous section – *consumerism*, *individualism*, *therapeutic comfort*, *anti-establishment,* and *culturally relevant* – West Angeles most clearly reflects, as paternal twins, the themes of *individualism* and *therapeutic comfort*. Significantly, however, the theme of individualism here is distinctive, as the idea of the individual is deeply intertwined with ideas of the collective and community, rather than being presented in a contrastive opposition to these. These are the kinds of associations that are captured in post-structuralist emphases on the propensity of signs to shift their meanings in different social contexts (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Howarth, 2012). The key point here is that by adding this post-structuralist emphasis on shifting associations to the approach of the

sociology of language and religion, the theme of individualism can be more subtly differentiated. This enriches our grasp of the empirical manifestations of this key theme within the megachurch literature as it becomes possible to distinguish the ‘rugged individualism’ of Lakewood from the more ‘communitarian individualism’ of West Angeles. The latter has much in common with the ethos advocated by Bellah *et al* in *Habits of the Heart* (1985).

The themes of *anti-establishment*, *consumerism,* and *cultural relevancy*, in turn, are not present in ways that are dominant, or readily identifiable as described in the research. However, in some subtle and less predictable ways there are partial aspects of them present.

West Angeles has a significant focus on a concept of community that reaches considerably beyond their doors, and emphasizes the idea of one’s *individual* civic responsibility to that broader community. This emphasis on civic community responsibility is very strongly anchored in *individual* emotive experiences of being “filled with the spirit” and “speaking in tongues,” but these are individual experiences that are set firmly in a symbolically collective context. These highly demonstrative experiences of *embodied intoxification* (Shilling and Mellor 2001) are taken as evidence of the indwelling of God’s presence within the individual. As intensely personal and often visceral experiences, whether performative or organic, but also experiences whose symbolic content ties them to the solidarities of a wider community, they offer significant *therapeutic* value to the individual experiencing them. They do this as they temporarily suspend the vulnerabilities and dis-orientation of liminality, offering a distinctive and profoundly embodied sense of wellbeing, safety, and security. West Angeles’ public events, which often have considerable collective spectacle, also feature individuals that are

thus "filled with the spirit," most often a charismatic preacher or singer or musician. Whether an individual in *front* of everyone, or an individual in the *midst* of everyone, this form of *therapeutic comfort* is centred on the individual experience. Though not fixated on the individual in the consumerist sense, or degree, of Lakewood, where virtually everything is focused on helping the individual become richer and more successful, the powerful emotional wellbeing sustaining experiences of the hush arbors of their slavery history continue to manifest in these individualistic spirit filled experiences which offer comfort, euphoric release, and a reinforcement that what they, at West Angeles, believe, is indeed *the* truth. Each individual experience, because it is both a significant public part of their services and of an ethos that emphasizes community, contributes to the collective *therapeutic comfort* experience of both shoring up truth claims and a sense of reassurance. In the cultural ethos of radical modernity, complete with all the swirling forces of disequilibrium, these individual experiences are collective, and community-oriented, offering anchoring points for the one experiencing them, but also for the ones witnessing them.

The *anti-establishment* theme of megachurches is understood to be resistance and rejection of religious control and hierarchy, as often manifested by means of denominational affiliations. Clearly this is not the case with West Angeles – it is a member of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) denomination,[58] and is significantly hierarchical in its leadership and power structures, and truth is proclaimed by those granted authority within their chain of authority. But a point of pride among Pentecostals is that they are non-structured, that services unfold "as

[58] Bishop Blake, the Bishop of West Angeles, is also the Presiding Bishop of the COGIC denomination.

the spirit leads," and that therefore they are always open to the spirit overturning whatever might be present in the moment. Being "filled with the holy spirit" and "speaking in tongues" are spontaneous events. If the descriptions of services on their website are accurate, a new attendee to a West Angeles service would, in all likelihood, observe this flexibility and fluidity (described on the website as a sign that the holy spirit is present) as evidence of the spontaneity of being "filled with the spirit" on the part of leaders, speakers, and performers in the service, and also spontaneous responses from those in attendance. If, however, that same attendee were to return to West Angeles services a few Sundays in a row, they might find that this flexibility and fluidity that facilitates spontaneous behaviour actually facilitates the same type of spontaneous behaviour from week to week (given that all services are described on the website in this way). In a culture of non-conformity to structure and order, such as that uniquely expressed in the Pentecostal tradition of West Angeles COGIC, if everyone is spontaneous in much the same way from Sunday to Sunday, it ultimately functions as a form of conformity, i.e., in a culture of non-conformity, non-conformity is a form of conformity.

A first look at the co-sanctified lexicon of West Angeles would likely leave the impression that *consumerism* is not present as a theme, given their primary focus on social equality for everyone in the community, which is much beyond their doors. But a closer look does reveal that while the overtly religiously infused "health, wealth, and prosperity gospel" aspects of consumerism are most certainly not present, there are nevertheless elements of *conspicuous* consumption present, in which the possession of various goods grants the owner or user higher status (Ritzer and Stepnisky 2019). This can be seen in the clothing choices of

attendees and also the architecture of the building itself. The Sunday morning ethos of West Angeles calls for a very particular kind of fashionable attire and a very sophisticated decor. As noted earlier in the chapter, there are 259 images of Sunday morning West Angeles attendees hyperlinked variously throughout the site, for a total of 2850 pictures. In these images most of the men are in suits, or dress pants and sweaters or shirts, along with all manner of stylish accessories such as scarves, flashy shoes, hats, vests, leather bags, etc., and the women are in various styles and types of dresses, high heels and stilettos, also paired with all sorts of accessories such as purses, scarves, and jewelry. Most notable would be the very large and ornate hats worn by the older women – it would appear that stylish, expensive clothing matters, and much of it is colourful and glitzy.

And as noted in the opening of this chapter, West Angeles is known for its iconic 103-foot tower cross constructed of stained glass. It is both lavish and large, with a striking stained-glass feature all along the large back wall behind the pulpit, and a very ornate stained-glass feature with a cross above the main entrance. While many megachurches avoid all symbolic elements of the sacred, West Angeles employs the symbols of the cross and stained glass extensively throughout their décor, intentionally claiming sacred space in the Durkheimian sense (Durkheim 1995). West Angeles also employs the concept of visual branding (which comes from the world of capitalism and consumerism) to identify themselves as a charismatic church set in the Pentecostal tradition. This is accomplished, in part, through the sacred symbols discussed above, along with the types of images one can find on their website of impassioned speakers, singers, and congregants. They also evidence a strong entrepreneurial

spirit, not in their encouragement to believe that God desires to make each individual wealthy, but in the many types and forms of programs which encourage neighbourhood real estate development, locally owned businesses, mortgage program support for their congregants, grants for furthering education, to name a few.[59]

West Angeles is *culturally relevant* primarily *within* the African-American subculture, with a significant focus on expressive and emotive discourse, participatory services and music in which the memorial function keeps the language and power of their slave history present and relevant, focused discourse surrounding the valorizing of black identity in America, and their extensive civic advocacy on behalf of the African-American community within the United States. But beyond their own subculture, the theme of *cultural relevancy* is not present.

In creating a haven for its congregants in the face of the liminal vagaries of radical modernity, combined with the oppression the African-American community continues to face in the U.S., West Angeles has firmly anchored its response in a memorial valorization of black identity, attempting to instill black pride into each individual attendee. Their *individualism* is not informed by the rugged individualist theme of the American dream as is Lakewood's. Rather, they steep their members in the norms and expectations of a deeply individualized embodied experience of the divine which functions both *therapeutically and collectively*, discursively offering the possibility of helping them to overcome the loss of identity and belonging created by radical modernity and the historic and current forms of African-American oppression.

[59] West Angeles Co-Sanctified Lexicon Part II: I Have A Dream (above) provides a comprehensive list.

Chapter 6

The Pliable Discourse of Mars Hill Bible Church: Journey, Story, Teachings, and Teachers

Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the demographics of Mars Hill Bible Church, followed by a brief review of the general context of radical modernity and its effects on religion and religious adherents, Christians in particular. The discussion then summarizes the research on the social phenomenon of growing "nones" (church refugees) which, upon closer examination, reveals that many of the "nones" are in reality "somes" (those who continue to incorporate spiritual practices into their lives, but do so divorced from bounded religious norms). The subsequent section is an examination of the numerous ways in which Mars Hill's lexicon reflects an awareness of spiritual seekers who have grown weary and wary of formalized religious expression. Re-lexicalizing their listeners from theological gate-keepers to pilgrims on a journey requires sophisticated forms of linguistic convergence. The ambiguous nature of Mars Hill's lexicon further augments this re-lexicalization, offering a fluid non-specific collection of reference points rather than linear rationality and an apologetics approach to choices of faith. The section's account of this process is approached through, and in part framed by, reference to the academic literature on sociolinguistic communication and language convergence. The discussion then moves to an examination of the colloquial nature of much of Mars Hill's lexicon which further reinforces their commitment to informality and non-

institutionalization (e.g., they refer to their Sunday mornings as times of gathering rather than a church service), while at the same time retaining traces of liturgical rituals re-framed in new language. This commitment to informality is also present in their systems of address and asymmetrical naming. In keeping with the observation that "somes" are leaving their formal religious contexts to do more social justice activism in their communities rather than less, the Mars Hill lexicon employs the secular language of human rights and social justice, converging it with an interpretation of the biblical text that emphasizes social justice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the intentional thematic element of transformation present in the much of the Mars Hill lexicon.

Mars Hill Bible Church is a non-denominational megachurch located in Grandville, Michigan, one of the oldest suburbs of Grand Rapids, in which 89.4% of the population is white (United States Census Bureau, 2010), and this is reflected in profile of the attendees of Mars Hill Bible Church if current (2021) images on their website of leaders, elders, and church attendees can be generalized. Unlike the opulence of a 103-foot stained-glass cross-tower (West Angeles), or having taken up residence in what was previously a large and well-known Sport Centre (Lakewood), Mars Hill Bible Church is located in what was formerly an anchor store of an old mall that had shut down. They have virtually no signage on the exterior of their building, a very plain interior, and they maintain a very low-tech approach to their Sunday morning services (which, as previously noted, they call gatherings – discussed below). Rob Bell was the founder and pastor of Mars Hill for 13 years until he wrote *Love Wins* (2011). Positing very non-conservative views of hell, it became an instant best-seller, and he was branded a heretic by

conservative evangelicals such as those who would likely attend Lakewood or West Angeles. He left Mars Hill, not wanting to embroil the church in this controversy, but Mars Hill continues to offer alternate understandings of the biblical text and the Christian journey. Weekly attendance at Mars Hill has ranged from 2,500 – 10,000 over the years, and is, at the time of this writing, approximately 3,500 weekly.

Evangelical Christianity and Radical Modernity

Much of North American Christianity of the 20th century adopted, virtually entirely, the theoretical underpinnings of the early modernist project of rationality, as evidenced by the Christian apologetics movement – a rational defense of Christianity[60]. As discussed in chapter 1, the driving forces of modernity – *distanciation, disembedding, and reflexivity* – have resulted in the cultural ethos of radical modernity in which we are reaping the ultimate outcomes of rationality – "we are left with questions where once there appeared to be answers" (Giddens 1991:49) – and a deep distrust of the social institutions which have proven so ineffective in

[60] This is a very limited sampling of hundreds of works on Christian apologetics: *Apostolic Defence of the Gospel: Christian Apologetic in the New Testament*, 1967, by F. F. Bruce; *Answers for the Now Generation*, 1969, by Carl Henry; *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 1969, by Cornelius Van Til; *Set Forth Your Case*, 1971, by Clark H. Pinnock; *God who Makes a Difference; a Christian Appeal to Reason*, 1972, by Bernard L. Ramm; *Evidence that Demands a Verdict; Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith*, 1972, by Josh McDowell; *Testing Christianity's truth-claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics*, 1976, by Gordon R. Lewis; *Christian Apologetics*, 1976, by Normal L. Geisler; *Every Thought Captive; A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth*, 1979, by Richard L. Pratt; *Reason Enough*, 1980, by Clark H. Pinnock; *Know Why you Believe*, 1987, by Paul E. Little; *Return to Reason; A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and a Defense of Reason and Belief in God*, 1990, by Kelly James Clark; *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologetics,* 1994, by William Lane Craig; *Handbook of Christian Apologetics; hundreds of answers to crucial questions*, 1994, by Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. ; U*ncertain Belief;: Is It Rational to be a Christian?* , *1996,* by David J. Batholomew; *To Everyone an answer: A Case for the Christian worldview – essays in honor of Norm L. Geisler,* 2004, edited by Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J.P. Moreland; *Faith Has It's Reasons; An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity*, 2005, by Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr.; *On Guard: Defending your Faith with Reason and Precision, 2010, by William Lane Craig*.

offering a sense of stability and safety, including the institution of religion. The era of radical modernity, with its discursive domains of ambivalence, doubt, angst, and suspicion at best, and in extreme cases the outright rejection of metanarrative, has been deeply threatening to Christian evangelicals. It is likely not a coincidence that as the questioning of metanarratives has risen, we observe a decline in religious adherents among traditional, bureaucratized, institutionalized Christian churches, the result being the "nones" category in religious research (a "none of the above" survey response option) discussed in the opening paragraph of chapter one, i.e., those raised in religious families who are walking away from formal religious belief, experience, and expression (Drescher 2016; Bass 2012; Lim, Putnam, and MacGregor 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Giddens's observations regarding the consequences of *reflexivity* (i.e., uncertainty about what we know because it could be revised at any point as a result of rational analysis) are born out in this research on religious adherence.

Nones Who Are Somes: from Religiosity to Spirituality

Chapter one has already documented the rise of religious "nones" within religions more generally (Pew Research Center 2015), and research pertaining to Christians specifically now refers to these "nones" as "post-Christian"[61]. Of particular interest here, as it will relate to the examination of Mars Hill Bible Church below, is the nature of belief among the "nones" category in the Pew 2015 data surveying the United States – 61% of them still believe in God, and 27% are absolutely certain about God's existence. Many of the "nones' have not left behind

[61] Post-christian is defined in footnote 2, page 2 (above).

the notion of God or a Creator, but they have left behind organized, institutionalized, bureaucratized religion of the type that controls and guards the meta-narrative it claims. In a large survey conducted by the Barna Group "Americans who qualify as 'post-Christian' rose by 7 percentage points, from 37% in 2013 to 44% in 2015. Across the United States, cities in every state are becoming more post-Christian—some at a faster rate than others." These same trends and attitudes are present in Canada, only more extreme, with only 30% inclined to embrace religion, 26% inclined to reject it, and 44% somewhere in between. Angus Reid compares the census of Canada results of 1971 in which only one in 25% reported they were "not into religion" (Angus Reid Institute 2015) with the current results in which "1 in 4 Canadians say they are not 'into religion' (Angus Reid Institute 2015).

Wanting to gain a greater understanding of what lies behind the "nones" phenomenon, particularly the 'post-Christian' aspect, sociologists Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope (2015) conducted a large qualitative survey of over 100 in-depth interviews with those who have withdrawn from organized Christianity but have retained some form of faith – "church refugees." Interviewing well past the saturation point in what their data revealed, they distilled the following four themes: 1) Church refugees found churches to be places of judgment more than places of community - "instead of understanding that shared life leads to shared beliefs, churches frequently want to make sure that everyone signs on to a common belief system before they can begin to do life with each other" (Packard and Hope 2015:40), 2) Rather than meaningful activity, the life of the church was primarily a place of bureaucracy – "heavily centralized and hierarchical organizations tend to concentrate power and gradually compel all

activity inward, stifling innovation, creativity, and opposing ideas" (Packard and Hope 2015:56), 3) Church refugees were longing for conversations, and instead were given theological instruction – "It's in relationships and conversations that I find God. It's not a real conversation if you're trying to convert me to your position. That's an argument. I'm not interested in arguing. That's not a real relationship either" (Parkard and Hope 2015:78), and 4) Church refugees wanted life-giving and life-receiving engagement with the world, but what they experienced instead were moral prescriptions – "I went to church because I thought I could do some good there that I couldn't do alone, not to come home angry because they said my friends would burn in hell for who they loved, while they debated how much money to spend on the new church parking lot" (Packard and Hope 2015:103).

The "nones' category is not as homogeneous as first understood. In *Choosing our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (2016), Elizabeth Drescher's research distilled the top twenty-five spiritual practices of the "nones" and found that many of the "nones" are actually what she calls spiritual "somes,"[62] those who retain spiritual practices in their lives such as reflection, service, prayer, enjoying nature, and studying sacred texts. Drescher concluded that "the boundaries between the affiliated and the unaffiliated are remarkably porous . . . the spiritual paths of the Nones and Somes parallel and intersect on a regular basis" (Drescher 2016:14). Despite the stereotype which tends to perceive "nones" as "spiritual navel-gazers," Dennis Hiebert notes that most "nones" (which includes Drescher's category of "somes") do "believe in a higher power, pray in order to connect with transcendence and the sacred, engage

[62] Also now referred to in the research as "spiritual"

in rituals that mark sacred space and time, and ground ethical action in Good Samaritan care for others" (2020:115). In direct opposition to their navel-gazing stereotype, "the de-churched are, as a general rule, leaving to do more, not less" (Packard and Hope 2015:133), looking to live out the Golden Rule unencumbered by boundary enforcing theological norms. And it is likely that some may 'do more', informed by ethics that are not related to spirituality in any way. Where they part from structured, institutionalized religion is that "they take interpersonal relational intimacy to be the starting point of spiritual life, maintaining that caring compassion, not ideology or theology, is the core of meaningful spiritual life. Spirituality for them is …about being and becoming" (Hiebert 2020:112).

The result of these rapidly rising attitudes and experiences is millions of Christian church refugees ("somes" and "nones") who have vacated the pews of theologically modernist minded churches in search of a discourse community that has a few more colors other than black and white in its lexicon. While the discourse habits of Lakewood Church and West Angeles Church of God in Christ Church do not indicate either awareness or an intentional response to these specific experiences and grievances of church refugees, the discourse habits of Mars Hill Bible Church appear to be quite cognizant of the state of current church refugees. Informed by the ethos of radical modernity in which dis-ease, distrust, and personal and societal anomie loom large the discourse habits of Mars Hill Bible Church indicate an overt recognition of the desire for convincing meta-narratives divorced from institutionalization and theological gatekeeping. This is evidenced by their highly effective forms of linguistic convergence between traditional, orthodox Christianity and radical modernity. While their pews (not a term they use, for reasons

discussed below) are obviously not populated by "somes" and "nones," their co-sanctified lexicon appears to have intentionally constructed a levee that functions to prevent "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2013:2) from flooding out evangelical Christianity entirely, and demonstrating awareness that their pews are likely filled with many who are on the cusp of departure.

Mars Hill's Co-Sanctified Lexicon: Journeying as the Lead Metaphor in Linguistic Convergence

Linguistic Convergence

As will be discussed below, the Mars Hill Bible Church co-sanctified lexicon demonstrates a sophisticated adeptness in converging elements of evangelical Christianity with a heightened awareness of the frustrations and ambivalence of potential church refugees. This skilled linguistic convergence is evidenced in the Mars Hill lexical emphasis on speaking of virtually every human experience as a journey rather than focusing on arriving at a destination, along with conceiving of life with God and community as an unfolding story versus a set of theological rules to live by. This type of discourse re-lexicalizes the listener from a religious adherent and defender of dogma to a pilgrim on a journey toward greater enlightenment. As the academic exploration of style-shifting (such as that practiced by West Angeles) grew, it appeared that in some cases style-shifting morphed into a type of convergence, where two different "ways of talking" blended into one form, rather than moving back and forth between forms. This is the very thing one can observe in the co-sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill (discussed below) – a sophisticated awareness of the tenuous commitment to formal forms of faith

inherent in the church refugee, paired with their desire to find a comfortable home to explore their religious and spiritual experiences.

The academic observations surrounding the phenomenon of convergence first began to emerge approximately four decades ago, and were originally referred to as interpersonal linguistic accommodation. Sociolinguist Howard Giles developed this into a fuller theoretical framework referred to as Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles et al. 1987), which was eventually replaced with the further nuanced theoretical framework of Communication Accommodation Theory by the sociolinguistic communication and language specialists Nikolas Coupland and Howard Giles (1988). Linguistic convergence, a form of accommodation, is defined by Fuller as "the adoption of lexical and structural features from one language into another" (Fuller 1996:494). Thornborrow defines it as "changing their patterns of speech to fit more closely with those of the person they happen to be talking to," based on the premise that "people are mainly seeking to show solidarity and approval in their dealings with others" (Thornborrow 2005:169). As will be evidenced in the discussion below, this is the type of accommodation which Mars Hill practices with their intentional merging of church refugee sensibilities and the desire for a metanarrative to cope with the disequilibrium produced by radical modernity. This accommodation by way of merging can happen "whether between different varieties of a language form or from one language to another" (Thornborrow 2005:170). Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) has been employed in domains such as courtroom interactions, diplomacy, and radio news reporting (Coupland and Giles 1988). According to CAT, linguistic convergence can be "strategic and motivated, rather than a simple

correlate of socio-structural variables such as region, class, or social situation" (Coupland and Giles 1988:175), as is the case with Mars Hill Bible Church. CAT suggests that "speakers will reduce linguistic differences between themselves and other speakers if and when they actively want to communicate more efficiently with them, or to 'move closer' in relational terms" (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991:175). Sometimes this is driven by uncertainty and insecurity about one's social position. Hence "uncertainty management, interactional strategies with strangers, and communication accommodation…..are a family of behavioural variables well-known in social psychology" (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991:82). Meyerhoof (2001) points out that "accommodation may be used strategically to achieve a speaker's larger goals of reducing uncertainty, or its affective counterpart, anxiety" (Coupland, Srangi and Candlin 2001:73). The generalized anxiety present in evangelical Christianity due to the flood waters of fluid modernity has most certainly created "uncertainty and insecurity" about the social position of evangelical Christianity in broader North American culture. Once a taken-for-granted institution respected not only by those who adhered to it, but many outsiders as well, the loss of many of its adherents puts it in a challenging position. The forms of convergence that the Mars Hill Co-sanctified lexicon employs can be situated within this context, a response to this uncertainty and angst (a byproduct of radical modernity). The hybrid discourse navigates a unique new way of talking about what were once presented, understood, and internalized as taken-for-granted truths. Their various forms of convergence have produced a unique hybrid co-sanctified lexicon merging evangelical Christianity and radical modernity.

Journey versus Destination

In keeping with the continual fluctuation inherent in the ambivalent approach to knowledge present in much radical modernity discourse, Mars Hill's extensive and pervasive use of the concept of *journeying* functions to transform ideas about foundations of faith into identifying various types of anchor points along the faithing journey instead. It is one of the most prominent elements of their hybrid co-sanctified lexicon. As an intransitive verb, the word "journey" does not take a direct object. For example, in the sentence 'I am on a journey,' "there is no word in the sentence that tells who or what received the action" (Merriam Webster, 2016). As a transitive verb, it "expresses a doable action," that is, someone "receives the action" (Merriam Webster, 2016). Hence you "go on a journey," and in the process you "travel over and through" (Merriam Webster, 2016). To journey is to be in process. Both as an intransitive and a transitive verb, the concept of journey does not necessarily infer destination. A journey is an experience in and of itself, irrespective of whether there is a target destination, or whether a destination is reached – both are beside the point. The journey itself is the point. It is about the "being and becoming" observed by Hiebert (2020:112).

Mars Hill church attendees are encouraged to "journey together towards transformation," "journey through this season of confession and transformation together" (p.7), and "journey with others in our community" (p. 60, 83, 84, 231, 233, 240). They are welcomed into community care and encouraged to "take advantage of connecting and journeying with us" (p. 77, 507). Attendees are invited to "take this journey with us" as a way of welcoming them to become members of Mars Hill, and are promised that "you don't have to

journey alone" (p. 255, 549). Journeying *together* is how Mars Hill characterizes the life of the community. Pastors are understood to be "journeying with our community" (p. 160, 505), and the advertisement looking for a new lead teaching pastor requires that the successful candidate demonstrate "commitment to helping people explore faith as a journey" (p. 87). Receiving teaching (a full exploration of the word "teaching" follows below) is also conceptualized as a journey, as attendees are asked to "journey alongside" (p.7) of the teaching as it explores Lent, to "journey alongside" (p. 7) of the most recent teaching series, and attendees are welcomed to "journey through the [biblical] text" (p. 218) of the Sermon on the Mount teaching series. Individuals are encouraged to understand community life events as opportunities to take "members further on their faith journeys" (p. 230), that the teachings of the church have "something for every stage of your journey" (p. 230) that will help you "journey into your future" (p. 233), and that The Way Teaching Series will lead to "the next step in our faith journeys" (p.293). Provisions for basic urgent needs are available for those who are "being journeyed with" (p. 509). Both the generalized skepticism emanating off of radical modernity and the sense of being at the mercy of forces well beyond one's control are subtly addressed in this way of conceptualizing "journey" as a communal experience. One is not given specific ideas or theologies that must be believed in order to participate or belong (which addresses the skepticism), and one is promised to be surrounded by a community that will offer care through the journey of life (which addresses the dis-ease and disequilibrium of radical modernity). One is offered safety, both psychological and physical, within the journeying narrative of Mars Hill.

Many other terms which infer the experience of journeying are also employed by Mars Hill. You can request group discussion guides entitled “embark” (p. 2). Repentance, forgiveness, and transformation are all referred to as “pathways” (p. 7), and one is welcomed to “walk along pathways of repentance,” “walk, reflect and remember the passion of Christ,” and “journey to the cross” (p. 8). To go through the experience of metamorphei is “seeing with new eyes, and navigating how we go forth” (p. 8). One is welcome to “further explore” (p. 10) the metamorphei teaching series, “to discover the way of Jesus…and to explore together” (p. 63). “Finding the truth [is] a long, bumpy ride,” and we must draw together to “learn, explore, create” (p. 223). In the Mars Hill Teachings “we invite you to further explore” (p. 232), “to be a community and walk together through it” (p. 242), and “walk with other members of the community” (p.246), encouraging attendees that members of the community are “available to walk with you” (p. 507). Along with the other journey metaphors noted in this paragraph it is worth pointing out that one of them is a commentary on how “truth” is contextualized in the Mars Hill experience as a process of learning, exploring, and creating that is a long and bumpy ride rather than an arrival destination. Mars Hill’s co-sanctified lexicon recognizes the reality of *reflexivity* with all its accompanying consequences of “no stable social world to know” (Giddens 1991:45). The unstable and mutable state of things is acknowledged, whether knowingly or otherwise, in their fluid descriptions of what truth is or how it might be found. Rather than being threatened by radical modernity the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon is hitching its horses to a form of discourse that focuses more on process than structure. If it doesn’t resist the tidal

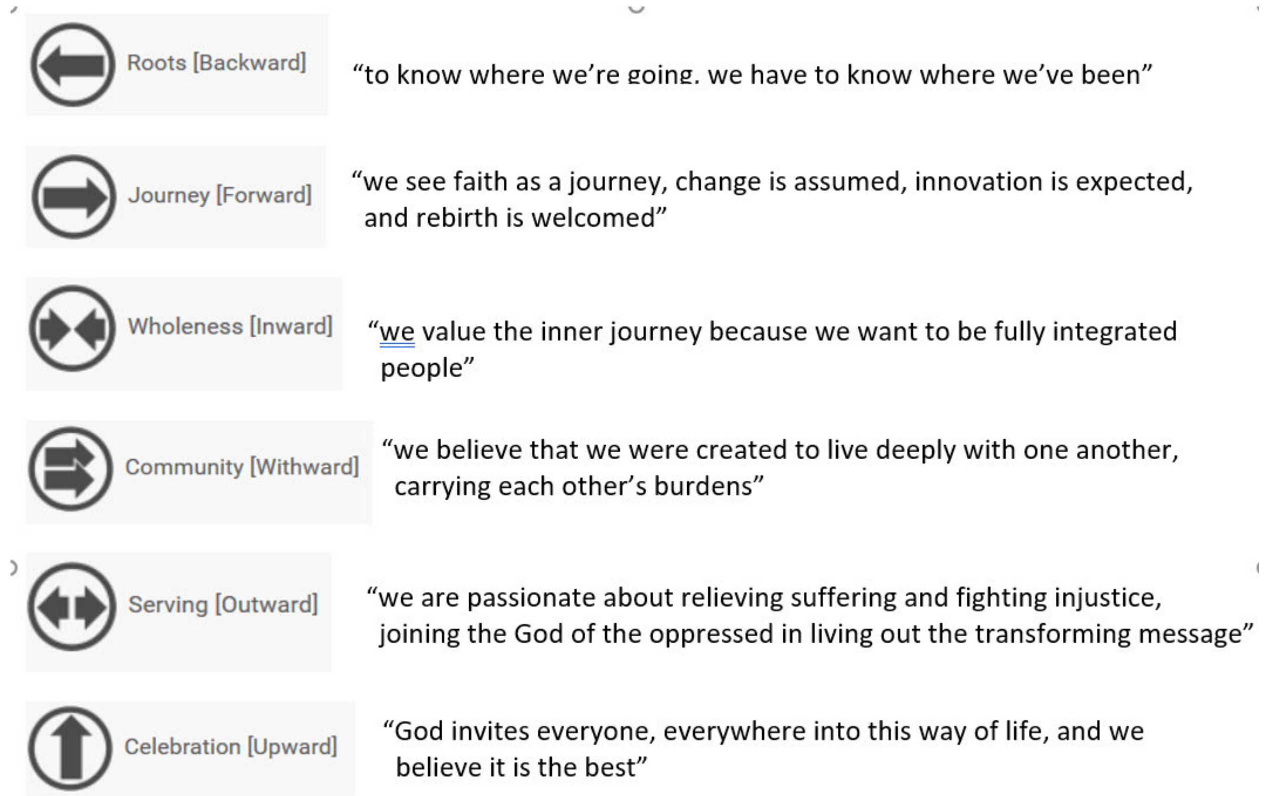
waters of fluid modernity, instead absorbing and flowing with them to some degree, perhaps Christianity, and Mars Hill, will survive.

If you are in the first five years of marriage, you are invited to "journey with 6-15 other married couples [to] share our experiences [and] open up an honest dialogue on both the beauty and challenges of married life" (p. 245), if you are "on the road to divorce" (p.246), the "road to recovery is a journey" (p. 246) and it is good to "walk with other members of our community….to take the next step" (p. 246). There are programs for "moms of all ages and stages to journey together" (p. 252). You can join a group which is "about the male journey" (p. 293), and those gathered can "walk through our experiences and toward health and wholeness" (p. 293). You can volunteer at a homeless shelter for youth because those resources may provide "resilience to carry them forward" (p. 414), or you can work as a Life Group Leader which "helps students discover and live the best kind of life" (p. 478, 480) and "discover who God made them to be" (p. 479), as well as "be available to walk them through difficult issues" (p. 479).

It is standard practice in Christian churches to have a Doctrinal Statement or Statement of Faith which functions as a creed or confessional outlining the beliefs of the faithing community. Creedal statements are considered to be the absolute truth statements of the community that owns them, and are evidence of the deep commitment to rationality present in traditional evangelical churches. In the terms that Lyotard uses to describe contemporary society, what he sees as the postmodern condition, which has many overlaps with the idea of late or radicalized modernity (cf. Giddens 1990:150), these are the rules of the language game

of a "particularized narrative" (Appelrouth and Edles 2016:742; Lyotard 1984). At Mars Hill, their creedal statement is entitled "The Directions," and nowhere is the centrality of the ambiguous term "journey" in the Mars Hill hybrid co-sanctified lexicon more apparent than in their "The Directions" statement, as outlined below (Figure 6:1). Each title includes a directional subtitle of movement – backward, forward, inward, withward, outward, upward – and is explicated as follows:

Figure 6.1: Mars Hill "The Directions"



Repeated on pages 67, 158, 162, 163, 194, 195

"The Directions" are steeped in the language of journey. Unlike typical creeds or confessionals which are precise and specific, the Mars Hill creedal statement is far more focused on movement toward truth than focusing on naming truths arrived upon (destination truths). "Partnering with God," "taking part in the endless conversation between God and people," and believing "the Bible to be the voices of many who have come before us, inspired by God to pass along their poems, stories, accounts and letters of response and relationship with each other and the living God" (p. 158) would all generally be considered much too non-specific and ambiguous to qualify for inclusion in a Christian creedal statement of any sort.[63] [64]

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[63] This is the fuller text for "The Directions" in Figure 6:1:
Roots [Backward] We affirm the central truths of historic orthodox Christian faith, seeing ourselves in a long line of generations taking part in the endless conversation between God and people. We believe the Bible to be the voices of many who have come before us, inspired by God to pass along their poems, stories, accounts, and letters of response and relationship with each other and the living God. To know where we're going, we have to know where we've been.
Journey [Forward] We have great confidence that God will restore all of creation under the authority of Christ. We believe that every church has to ask the question: "what does it look like for us to live out that future reality today?" We are constantly exploring, questioning, wrestling with new and creative ways to live out and communicate the teachings of Jesus. Because we see faith as a journey, change is assumed, innovation is expect, and rebirth is welcomed.
Wholeness [Inward] We believe that God wants to bring about a new humanity by redeeming every part of us. We embrace the salvation Jesus offers as the only hope for the healing of our relationships with God, each other, ourselves, and creation. We believe that all of life is spiritual, and that all of our fears, failures, and brokenness can be restored and made whole. We value the inner journey because we want to be fully integrated people – mind, body, and soul, emotions and experiences all offered together to God.
Community [Withward] We value the image of God in all people, everywhere. We believe that we were created to live deeply with one another, carrying each other's burdens, sharing our possessions, to pray for and confess our sins to each other, to suffer and celebrate together. It's in these honest, loving relationships that God transforms us and truth becomes a reality. The way of Jesus cannot be lived alone.
Serving [Outward] We believe that Jesus is God in human form and that the church is God's ongoing presence in the world. Let by the Spirit of God, we are passionate about relieving suffering and fighting injustice, joining the God of the oppressed in living out the transforming message of the resurrected Jesus. Jesus calls his Church to be a compelling force for good in the world, and we believe that the church is at its best when it serves, sacrifices, and loves, caring about the things God cares about. We were created to live for something larger than ourselves.
Celebration [Upward] We take great joy in partnering with God to change the world, embracing the truth that all of life is sacred, hope is real, and tomorrow can be better than today. We celebrate the divine in the daily, pursuing lives of hope, gratitude, and worship. God invites everyone everywhere into this way of life, and we believe it is the best possible way to live.
[64] The nature of the few truth claims that are included in "The Directions" are analyzed below.

The emphasis on journey in all aspects of the Mars Hill lexicon creates a community of discourse that is less focused on the Christian linear rationality typical of modernity which resulted in the exclusion of "the language of myth and metaphor" (Frye 1995:16) which the literary critic Northrup Frye lamented. The "pretending to know what nobody 'knows' anyway" (Frye 1995:20) appears to be something that the Mars Hill discourse is intentionally attempting to do less of in the way they construct the human experience, and faithing experience, as a journey rather than merely in rational, moralistic terms. Much of their discourse appears to reflect an awareness of the uncertainty about meta-narrative, and perhaps an awareness of a cultural context which is more open to engage notions of localized, particularized narratives.

As already noted above, given the current increasing emigration of the previously faithful from the formal, institutionalized Christian church, and their resolve to embrace a refugee status rather than return to modernist, hierarchical Christian churches, Christianity at large and individual Christian churches are feeling uncertainty and anxiety about the influences of radical modernity. Adapting the old adage "If you can't beat'em, join'em", Mars Hill's discourse style demonstrates a range of sophisticated, creative forms of linguistic convergence between traditional Christianity and radical modernity that have produced a unique hybrid type of co-sanctified lexicon.

Exploring Truths: Story versus Dogma

Stories are fluid, open to multiple interpretations through *different* readers and within *individual* readers, and also open to multiple interpretations through the contexts and cultures of the *collective* reading community that engages a particular story. And stories, Frye reminds

us, are unlike rationality in that they have room for paradox. Hence the emphasis on story in the discourse of the Mars Hill website increases the potency of their hybrid co-sanctified lexicon, and the concept of journey and story function in a symbiotic relationship in their discursive practices.

Given the deep suspicion regarding meta-narratives that permeates mature modernity, the Mars Hill emphasis on contextualized story is noteworthy. "Love for all-encompassing truths and ideologies," a reflection of the original immutable rightness granted to rationality in modernity and whose consequences are now what characterize mature modernity (Hiebert 2020:2), is not present in the Mars Hill Bible Church. In fact, in direct contradistinction to this love of all-encompassing truths, Mars Hill offers a way forward that focuses on non-totalizing stories.

The Mars Hill emphasis on story is woven throughout their website. On the individual level, attendees are invited repeatedly throughout the website to a class entitled "Retelling" in which they are encouraged to "journey with others in our community while exploring your story" (p. 60, 83, 84, 231, 233), so that you can "explore and learn from your past story" (p. 60, 83, 84, 231, 233), "examine how your story impacts your life and relationships" (p. 60, 231, 233), and thus "journey into your future with God and others" (p. 60, 231, 233). On the collective level, one is reminded that "you are an important part of our community and our story" (p. 77), that "our story won't be the same without your story" (p. 507), and that it is best to "journey with others in our community while exploring your story" (p. 240). Hiring a new lead teaching pastor for the church is described as "writ[ing] a new page in our part of this

story" (p. 164). As a reading community, Mars Hill expresses the hope that in relation to the biblical narrative "by the grace of God, this story becomes our story" (p. 336), and that "communally and individually [they will] be faithful to interpret and live out that story today" (p. 92). The Bible, treated by evangelicals as the ultimate meta-narrative not only for their lives, but everyone else's as well, is re-cast as a "narrative" and a "story" in the Mars Hill lexicon. In the section of the website dedicated to recruiting volunteers to teach various children's classes and programs, "storytelling" and "storytellers" are emphasized repeatedly (p. 470, 471).

The most significant sense in which story is embraced at Mars Hill is in the concept of Narrative Theology:

> We believe that, as a community and individuals, God is calling us to participate in God's unfolding story of love, rescue, resurrection, and restoration. Our Narrative Theology Statement embeds our beliefs in context, perpetually inspiring our community to participate in what God is doing in the world. (p. 92).

Again, unlike the "love of truth" typical of evangelicals, the Mars Hill discourse focuses on what they term narrative theology, the embedding of belief in contexts of community and participation, *Stories* of faithing rather than *The Story* of faith.

The advertisement seeking a Lead Teaching Pastor for Mars Hill further indicates the centrality of story to their theological understandings:

> We believe that God has been writing a story of redemption for the entire world and that Jesus is at the centre. God's story is a story of movement, from creation to new creation. We believe God has given us a role to play in the restoration of our relationship: with God, with ourselves, with each other and with creation. By the grace of God, this story becomes our story…. (p. 87)

Here too, though a hallmark of evangelicalism is the literal death and resurrection of Christ, one finds no such truth claim present in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon. They speak of Jesus as the centre, God moving one to newness and restoration, and how this can be "our story." They make no static claims – everything is enroute, in process, or evolving in some way. For those who are contemplating joining the evangelical de-population movement, poised to become "somes" or "nones", this particular convergence of referencing the anchor points of evangelical Christianity without engaging them as truths to be defended demonstrates considerable deftness in creating a hybrid lexicon which appears to recognized the contexts and consequences of radical modernity, while retaining palatable elements of evangelical Christianity. Just as Lyotard suggests that the absence of belief in meta-narratives does not prevent "countless other stories (minor and not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life" (Lyotard 2003:19), here we see evidence of this very perspective applied in a religious context. Rather than a discourse fixated on a meta-narrative, Mars Hill is focused on the more fluid alternative discourse that Lyotard calls "storytelling" (Lyotard 2003:11).

Mars Hill points out that "the word theology comes from two Greek words: 'theos', meaning 'God', and 'logos', meaning 'word'. So theology is words about God. Since story is central to our belief about God, our words about God – our theology – exists in the form of narrative" (p. 91). Further, Jesus "told stories, and stories are hard to pin down" (p. 207), and he "didn't tell stories because he was trying to make points. He told stories because stories more than anything move us from being passive listeners to active participants" (p. 207).

Not only does Mars Hill conceptualize God as writing a story, and Jesus as a storyteller, it also understands the Bible itself "to be the voices of many who have come before us, inspired by God to pass along their poems, stories, accounts and letters of response and relationship with each other and the living God" (p. 158). Philosopher Abigail Doukhan aligns with this form of engagement with the biblical text, suggesting that it is a compilation of stories that "both escapes the pitfalls of [modern] metanarrativistic discourse and the relativistic/subjectivist trap of postmodern story telling" (Doukhan 2013:48-49). Unlike the modernist evangelical commitment to rationality which has cast the biblical text as a position that needs to be argued in order to defend its metanarrative stature, Mars Hill's co-sanctified lexicon casts the biblical text as stories that offer wisdom for living grace-filled, just lives (50).

It would appear that Mars Hill is attempting to move away from the "militant use of words" (Frye 1995:16) that Frye observed was a result of modern Christian linear thinking. The symbiotic nature of their use of both journey and story have produced a creedal statement that is more suggestive of movement than arrival, most pointedly so in the title itself: "The Directions." It is framed as considerably less rigid and foundational than is typical of Christian creedal statements – less dogmatic and more fluid, enroute, suggestive of being on the way somewhere. The fluid nature of this approach to conceptualizing religious faith allows for some of the tenets of evangelical Christianity to be experienced as merging with Liquid Modernity, thus suffering fewer casualties. The religious solids of tradition, truth telling and defending, rationally established theological belief, and accompanying boundaries of belonging are undergoing the "process of liquefication" (Bauman 2013:2) in the Mars Hill co-sanctified

lexicon. Because they are not conceptualized as "solids" in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon, but rather as fluid, they have the capacity to merge and converge, creating a uniquely malleable approach to being an evangelical Christian. Here too, what this research has revealed about the centrality of both *journey* and *story* in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon would benefit greatly from either individual interviews or focus groups with Mars Hill attendees, exploring how these themes are internalized.

While Bauman optimistically suggested that the project of modernity was, and is, not an attempt to "do away with solids once and for all and make the brave new world free of them forever, but to *clear the site for new and improved solids*" (italics added) (Bauman 2013:3), the Mars Hill Bible Church has instead re-cast radical modernity (the inevitable outcome of mature modernity) as having cleared the site for a new and improved *liquid.*

Re-lexicalizing: Pilgrims Together

The significant emphasis on journeying and story as central to the faithing experience of the Mars Hill community re-lexicalizes their members, no longer identifying them as "delivered," "sanctified," and "saved"[65] (Moore 2002:21) and charged to "speak the truth in love"[66] (Addison 2004:14) to a lost generation, but rather as pilgrims on a spiritual journey toward a somewhat undefined sacred place/space, mining truths through hearing and living story along the way.

[65] Typical descriptors from the traditional evangelical christian lexicon.
[66] Another typical phrased from the traditional evangelical christian lexicon.

At Mars Hill faith is seen "as a journey, change is assumed, innovation is expected, and rebirth is welcomed" (p. 158), because they "value the inner journey because we want to be fully integrated people – mind, body, and soul, emotions and experiences all offered together to God" (p. 158), to "live for something larger than ourselves" (p. 159). As noted above, to be a Mars Hill pilgrim is to be an explorer, a creator, and a learner (p.8, 10, 60, 63, 83, 84, 223, 231, 232[67]). To be open to journey is to recognize the power of story, and to identify as someone who recognizes truth in and through story, and more importantly as someone writing a story – that is how the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon recasts its members (p. 77, 87, 91, 92, 164, 240, 336, 507[68]). Rather than a "one size fits all paradigm of truth, thereby occulting the diversity and pluralism of walks with God in the Bible" (Doukhan 2013:51), Abigail Doukhan suggests that a storytelling approach allows for the mystery of truth to emerge, and the gathering of "richness and plentitude" (Doukhan 2013:51) to prevail rather than a "coercive approach to the truth, intent on argumentation and justification" (51). This is the exact approach that Mars Hill has steeped its co-sanctified lexicon in, resulting in a highly effective convergence that in its own terms recognizes and respects the context created by mature modernity, while continuing to validate the desire for some sense of a governing story to remain present. The Mars Hill attendee is both described as, and asked to speak of the self as, a wayfarer whose specific destination is unclear, who is focused on the passage, not the place.

[67] These are only select references. One can find many more references to journey on the Mars Hill website.
[68] These are only select references. One can find many more references to story on the Mars Hill website.

Most significant of all is that the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon is littered with literally hundreds of "we" statements. The most powerful aspect of their re-lexicalization is that your suggested identity is first and foremost a collective one. Almost all of the journey statements begin with "we," and almost all of the story statements begin with "we." That "we" is not the leadership talking to its membership (such as is often the case in the Lakewood discourse), it is the "we" of all those who gather. At Mars Hill you are welcomed to recognize that you are not alone – you are journeying with a host of "we's." You are no longer only a "you," you are also a "we." West Angeles also has a strong sense of "together", though it does not frame it as "we" statements. Instead, it anchors their sense of "together" in their shared slave history.

Ambiguity

A trademark of discourse influenced by the consequences of radical modernity and postmodernism is ambiguity – "able to be understood in more than one way; having more than one possible meaning; not expressed or understood clearly" (Merriam-Webster 2016). Language use that wishes to avoid foundationalism tends toward relativistic, ambiguous forms of expression.

One finds this type of ambiguous language use throughout the Mars Hill discourse. It is a searching language, one that conveys the sense of being engaged in a quest. You can attend "Short Circles," which is a way of "digging deeper into our teaching series" (p. 1, 2, 7, 10, 8, 83, 84), "Metamorphei" in which you will be "seeing with new eyes, and navigating how we go forth from these seasons of change" (p. 1, 8, 9, 10, 56, 84, 177, 232), "Exegy" where you will learn to "put your weight on something or identify when a relationship is non-mutual," "helping

you live more intentionally" (p.234), "Retelling" where you will "live into your future" (p. 60), or "Into the Noise" where you will take "cultural plunges" at "key festivals throughout the year" (p. 455). You can find "Joy Boxes" and "Joy Stands" (p. 69, 71, 72, 73, 78) throughout the building where you can donate to Mars Hill, and you can request "Deep Sheets" or "Deeper Sheets" (p. 177, 213, 214) which accompany "teachings" (full discussion of teachings below). Many of the descriptions of activities, experiences, and opportunities use ambiguous language: calling for "extra energy around outreach initiatives" (p. 70) could mean anything from extra volunteer hours to extra money to extra time given to organization or extra prayer; "breaking through the cracks of suffering" (p.84) leaves open what is defined as suffering, what breaking through might look like, and in what way cracks is a description of suffering; "God calls us to immerse ourselves" in the biblical text (p. 92) could be meant literally or figuratively, begs the question of what "immersing" might look or sound like, and how or what it looks like when God "calls"; "endless conversation between God and people" (p. 158) leaves one to ponder how one has a conversation with God and a group of people, why such a conversation is taken as a good, and how to make sense of the suggestion that it could be endless. Further ambiguous phrases in the hybrid lexicon of Mars Hill would be: "The Directions form the broad rule of life" (p. 158), "church could be about desire, longing, connection" (p. 161), "lean into the presence of God" (p. 8), "creating space in the wilderness to be still before the Creator" (p. 252), "keeping open and flexible to whatever he might surprise us with" (p. 190), "the emerging mission of our community" (p. 203), "questioning and learning together" (p. 293), "naming what is" (p. 293), "the point is to leave asking" (p. 294), and "lived out one or more of our shared values" (p. 482).

While all the above have a generous dose of ambiguity, arguably the most ambiguous aspect of the Mars Hill lexicon is the "teachings" titles:

> Beneath the Waves, Knowing is the Game, Opening Your Splanchnon, Dune is Heavy, Beyond Names and Bears, In the Ordinary, Spoiling the Illusion, Guard This, Helicopters, Alicia Keys and a Woman in an Art Museum, I know Johnny, Stay in the Boat, A Scorpion and the Egg, Why are you Staring at the Sky?, Drop by Drop, How Big is this Story?, More Gardeners, Look to the East, Pass the Peace, Container + Contents, Falling Together, Superheroes + A World Upside Down, Dust + Walls, Miracles and Maple Trees, Return to the Bubble Maker, Anonymous Feet, Thin Ice and the Spear, Are you a Line or a Circle?, A Word in Need of a Story, Uncaging the Lion, Both Sides of the Cup, Bread and Buckets, Change the Story, Drop the Jawbone, Lessons in Vapor Management, Broken Bottles, Puppies and Prostitutes, Three Kinds of Hands, Before the Bowl Breaks, Enough Dirt for my Mule, Lantern, The Moment Before the Moment, Gnats and Camels, Growing Smaller and Smaller, Returning to the Field, Light and Skin and Soul, Making Ripples, New Skirts, Path-ology, What Happened to Me, But What Does it Matter, I Do Not Know, Grasping and Giving, Crus and the Hyperhyposem, Beware the Dogs, Skubalon, Remember, Pay Attention, and See, Are you Stuck?, The Middle of the Night, Not a Bad Investment, Nothing is Wasted, The Two Houses, Facing, A Gentle Stillness, Why to Sing, Surprise!, Swim for your Life, The Mother God, The People in the Chairs, The Power of Story, The School by the Side of the Road, The Simple Way, The Village Elder, Touching the Stove, Tortured by Books, Unconditional Lens, Unmarked Graves, Wait, Water, Reviving the Nephesh, Plan and Pine Together, Where are you? (p. 179 i-xxxi)

Most of the titles are enigmatic and equivocal, e.g., "Unmarked Graves," "Pay Attention," and "Are you Stuck?" inviting all manner of speculation about what the 'teaching' topic will actually be, while a few are obtuse or unintelligible, e.g., "Crus and the Hyperhyposem," "Skubalon," and "Reviving the Nephesh".

The hybrid co-sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill, informed by a context of uncertainty and anxiety about church refugees, seems to be both "strategic and motivated" (Coupland and Giles 1988:175) in seeking to reduce linguistic differences between the lexicon and potential and current church refugees. It has all the hallmarks of an active attempt "to communicate more efficiently with them, or to 'move closer' in relational terms" (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles

1991). This linguistic convergence with the cultural ethos of radical modernity has included an emphasis on journey rather than destination and story rather than dogma, ambiguous language which allows for multiple meanings and interpretations, colloquial use of language and the elimination of traditional labels of authority which reduce the sense of formality and hierarchy, and culturally relevant discourse surrounding social justice issues. Rather than "pretend[ing] to know what nobody 'knows' anyway" (Frye 1995:20), the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon is consistently careful to couch ideas and suggestions in more searching, ambiguous terms. This constant suggestibility of their discourse carefully avoids the modernist evangelical apologetic of truth-claiming as the heart of being Christian that has been the result of the maturation of modernity into radical modernity. Neither Lakewood nor West Angeles attend to the ethos of "incredulity toward metanarratives" produced by radical modernity in their co-sanctified lexicons as Mars Hill does. Lakewood and West Angeles both unapologetically claim a specific and large supernatural meta-narrative. Lakewood claims the irrefutable truth of Gods desire for one's personal success, harnessing the American dream in the process, and West Angeles claims the irrefutable truth of God's presence and protection as they fight for racial equality. While Lakewood and West Angeles proclaim their chosen truth, Mars Hill tentatively journeys a road toward a more open, unfolding, sense of truth.

Informality and Non-Institutionalism

Colloquial Discourse: "Stop Here for a Bit of a Scoop"

In an extensive examination of the history of manners, the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters (2007) observes that in England, the USA, the Netherlands, and Germany, up until the early to mid-twentieth century, manners (i.e.,formalization) was an important way of maintaining social distance between various social statuses and roles. Beginning in the early twentieth century, Wouters identifies a significant reversal toward informalization as a result of ideological shifts toward equality. In keeping with their emphasis on egalitarianism and non-institutionalism, Mars Hills employs a high degree of informality in their discourse through their use of both colloquial and slang styles of speech. The "use of more evocative and informal language…are directly related to increasing social equality and sensitivity to inequality, to processes of social emancipation and social integration" (Wouters 2007:91). In keeping with their emphasis on story, which is less structuring and imposing than typical Christian church contexts with formalized titles, and highly structured ways of thinking and acting, Mars Hill avoids "fixed rules of manners (in this case language habits and manners) experienced as rigid and stiff and their performance as too obvious and predictable, as 'insincere', even as a 'fraud' (Wouters 2007:92). The main area where their services are held, typically referred to in Christian discourse as a sanctuary or main auditorium, is referred to instead as "The Shed" (p. 7, 72, 123, 141, 149, 151, 152, 153, 178, 328, 336, 462, 469, 484, 485, 496, 497, 498, 504). They describe their physical location in contrast to what typical megachurches look like – "we don't have a big, lofted logo that's visible from the highway, and if you're looking for a swanky sign

pointing out our facility, you won't find it" (p. 63), so if the reader is planning to attend Mars Hill they should "stop here[69] for a bit of a scoop." If you find the directions to Mars Hill confusing, they "highly recommend carpool buddies for help with navigation" (p. 63). They will "roll out a welcome mat for you" (p. 63, 159), and though a "handshake and a 'hi' would probably be nicer" (p. 178) they introduce their teachers on their website. Even if you are "stopping by for just one Sunday" (p. 335) you are encouraged to check out their Mars Hill Kids programming. While at Mars Hill you can "grab materials" (p. 2, 7, 10, 232) for further learning about the teachings, volunteer, group, or class involvement. You are encouraged to engage the ideas of Mars Hill by "digging deeper" (p. 7, 231, 232) or "dipping your toes into a short-term study" (p. 230). If you want to know "what makes this place tick" (p. 234) you can join Mars Hill Connect. If you want to "know what happens when God shows up" (p. 218), are "finding truth was a long bumpy ride" (p. 223), want to hear about how in Ecclesiastes there is "a man who doesn't pull any punches" (p. 196), or hear about how "Jesus was crazy for the Kingdom" (p. 207), you can listen to the Teachings podcasts. On their History page, they talk about the ideals that drew people together to form Mars Hill and how they decided to "give it a shot" (p. 161) and attempt to avoid all the "fluff and hype" (p. 161). They introduce their career page and job postings saying that "from time to time we hang out a sign looking for qualified people to join our staff" (p. 65, 164). In looking for volunteers they describe the characteristics of potential volunteers as someone who "has a knack for making things clean and tidy" (p. 472), "shows up" (p. 480), enjoys helping "hold down the fort" (p. 495), "cares about curb appeal" (p. 503), "plays

[69] Meaning the website page they are already reading.

a mean harmonica" (p. 503), has "guitar shredding skills" (p. 468), or "can sit Indian style[70]!" (p. 503) when working with kids. They need "more hands on deck" (p. 498) to help with coffee preparation and service, and encourage you to "don a coat, hat and gloves and join us!" (p. 500) for winter maintenance tasks.

Mars Hill's informalization plausibly functions to decrease social and psychic distance between the leaders, between the laypeople, and between the leaders and the laypeople. Here we see the continually overlapping process of individual and collective identity construction described by Johnstone that was discussed in chapter one, whereby the process of discursive interaction is, in this case, making claims to equality and solidarity in clear contradistinction to inequality and detachment (Johnstone 2009). Within the theoretical framework of this thesis, one can again see here reasons for believing that the language and discourse embedded in the websites play a powerful role in processes of habitus and total environment formation, and do so in ways that are often likely to take place below the level of conscious awareness. Rather than the hierarchy and structure of institutionalized Christianity and the resulting concomitant discourse style (a product of mature modernity), the co-sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill has a "relaxed" feeling to it, is accessible and egalitarian.

Liturgical Traces: Lent, Baptism, and Communion

While the majority of the discourse on the Mars Hill website is highly informal, a trace of the traditional sanctified lexicon of Christianity remains. In a rather unique juxtaposition with the colloquial use of language in the Mars Hill lexicon, we also find the incorporation of some

[70] In a Canadian context, "Indian Style" would be considered racist language use.

liturgical elements. Liturgy, “a fixed set of ceremonies or words” (Merriam-Webster 2016), has been retained by Mars Hill in select contexts. There is considerable attention given to the season of Lent, with the 10-week series entitled “Metamorphi”, already mentioned (p. 177). Lent is a form of spiritual preparation for Easter practiced by all mainline Christian traditions and some Anabaptist and evangelical traditions, and generally includes some type of fasting as a form of penitence.[71] The Mars Hill Lent series is highlighted in numerous places on their website (p. 7, 8, 9, 10, 56, 57, 58, 59, 83, 84, 85, 177, 209, 232). The second liturgical element practiced by Mars Hill is baptism (p. 230, 372, 550), a ritual of either sprinkling with water or full immersion into water which signifies admission into the church generally. The third liturgical element is Communion (p. 336), also referred to in various Christian traditions as the Eucharist or the Lord’s supper, which involves a ritual eating of bread and wine to celebrate the Last Supper before Jesus was put to death. Here again we see, in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon, highly effective forms of convergence. While their discourse is dominantly open, somewhat ambiguous, and journey-focused, they have retained just a few traditional elements of evangelicalism.

Systems of Address and Asymmetrical Naming: Teachers and Their Teachings rather than Pastors and their Sermons

A pastor is a “spiritual overseer; a clergyman serving a local church or parish” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2016); “a minister in charge of a Christian church or congregation” (Oxford Dictionary 2016). The authority of a pastor looms large in Christian churches. In

[71] Types of fasts: giving up coffee, television, internet, chocolate, etc.

megachurches, pastors typically loom larger than life, and their "personality and…charisma… are at the centre of the church's life" – the church "is *of* and *by* a certain pastor" (Spinks 2011:64). The Hartford Institute for Religion Research observes of pastors in megachurches that "the senior minister often has an authoritative style of preaching and administration and is nearly always the singular dominant leader of the church, and many attribute megachurch success to the charisma of their lead pastors. Supporting these senior pastors are teams of 5 to 25 associate ministers, and often hundreds of full-time staff" (2016). Yet despite being a megachurch, and the nomenclature of *pastor*, *preaching*, and *sermon* being a standard part of all evangelical Christian lexicons, the term *pastor*, as defined above, appears on the Mars Hill website only occasionally or perhaps arguably not at all (discussed below), and the terms *preaching* and *sermon* never appear at all. Rather, Mars Hill has "Teachers" who practice "Teaching." "Teaching" appears 39 times,[72] and "Teachers" appears 26 times[73] on the Mars Hill website. Further, creatively borrowing from the linguistic concept of "verbing," in which a noun is turned into a verb,[74] Mars Hill practices "nouning" by turning the verb "Teaching" into the noun "teachings." The term "teachings" appears 387 times[75] on the Mars Hill website, and is

[72] 2 (2),9 (2), 10, 56, 57, 58(2), 64(3), 70, 84, 91, 121, 159, 160 (2), 175 (2), 177, 178 (5), 229(2), 231, 232(2), 328, 332, 372, 483, 497, 498, 505

[73] 7, 8, 9(3), 58(3), 64 (4), 87, 121(2), 160, 164, 165, 176, 177, 178(2), 178(2), 203(2), 241

[74] For example, *tabling* a discussion or *shouldering* the blame

[75] 1, 2, 8(3), 9, 10, 56 (2), 57(3), 58(2), 59(1) 60, 61, 62, 63, 64(3), 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84, 91, 92, 93, 121 (2), 123, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 175 (2), 176 (2), 177 (3) , 178(2), 179(105), 180(12), 185(5), 186(4), 187(3), 188(3), 189(3), 190(3), 191(3), 192(3), 193(2), 194(3), 195(3), 196(3), 197(2), 198(3), 199(3), 200(3), 201(3), 202(2), 203(2), 204(4), 205(3), 206(3), 207(3), 208(3), 209(5), 210 (3), 211(4), 212(2), 213(2), 213(3), 215(2), 216(3), 217(3), 218(2), 219(2), 220(2), 221(3), 222(3), 223(3), 224(2), 225(3), 227(4), 229(3), 230, 231, 232, 233, 234(2), 235(3), 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243(2), 244, 245(2), 246, 247, 248, 250, 251(2), 252(2), 253, 254, 255, 257, 258, 293, 294, 328, 329, 330(2), 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 372, 373, 409, 410, 411, 412, 413, 414, 415, 452, 453, 454, 455(2),457, 468, 473, 480, 481, 484, 485, 489, 492, 493, 495, 500, 502, 504, 505, 506, 507, 508, 509, 510, 547, 548, 549, 550

present on well over two thirds of its 559 pages. “Teachings” are what would typically be referred to as sermons – the Sunday morning presentation given to adult attendees in the main gathering area. Mars Hill is all about “teachings” and their “teachers.”

There are three places on the website where the term *pastor* is employed. The first is a listing of Pastoral Care resources (p. 81) which offer care through prayer, visitation, funerals, and weddings. Pastor is defined as “individuals in our community who are gifted in supporting others through life’s most challenging circumstances” (p. 81). The second is a list of 11 Mars Hill Pastors (p. 160), which includes pastors of congregational care, worship, life education, life groups, youth, and lay pastors. The third is in the LifeGroup volunteers section (p. 475 – 493) where those mentoring youth aged grade 6 through to the end of high school are described as pastors, using the following description:

> A LifeGroup Leader is a pastor, Christ’s gift to the church to equip his/her students for works of service so that the Body of Christ may be built up. As a pastor he/she commits to:
>
> - Inspire students to discover who God made them to be and who he’s called them to be in the world
> - Be available to walk through difficult issues with your students when they arise
> - Help students hear the cry of those around them
> - Initiate and plan a service project with your LifeGroup
> - Actively partner with the parents of your students to care not only for the student but their family as well. (p. 475 478, 480)

In each of the nine LifeGroup volunteer positions, included in their qualification descriptions is the term pastor, as defined above. While the common understanding of pastor would be someone hired to be in charge first and foremost of teaching and leading their congregation, in the Mars Hill lexicon a pastor is a volunteer mentor, or someone tasked to care for the daily life

of the community and members of the community, offering mentorship and support in various small group ways. The teaching and leading aspects of traditional pastoring, where traditional authority has typically been granted, rests instead with those titled “teachers” in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon. So, though they do occasionally employ the term “pastor,” they have given it a significantly different meaning than what the word has meant historically in evangelical Christianity. One of the most prestigious terms of authority granted to a leader as the central authority in a congregation (that of pastor) is repeatedly divested of its sanctified status and power, and demoted to that of a volunteer and care-giver in the hybrid co-sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill. The authority of the pastor has been transferred, as evidenced by the shift in nomenclature, to Mars Hills’ teachers. The “Teachers” (p. 178) at Mars Hill are well known authors, activists, religious leaders, and educators, virtually all of whom engage the church on issues of cultural relevance. An entire section of the website (p. 175 – 229) is dedicated to describing the “teachings” of these teachers, offering them as podcasts and videos for purchase, and in some cases also printed materials. There is a “teachings” hyperlink on virtually every page of their website. “The Directions” (which functions as the creedal statement of Mars Hill) is described as “our shared values, which along with our mission and Narrative Theology form the core curriculum at Mars Hill” (p. 158). Mission and Theology serve *curriculum*. Curriculum is the domain of teachers. The use of the term curriculum to replace theology further reinforces the authority that Mars Hill invests in its Teachers rather than its Pastors. It also indicates, in yet another way, the intentional development of a co-sanctified lexicon which does not employ the structure and nomenclature typical of evangelical Christian

churches. The webpage dedicated to providing a description of the Mars Hill teachers opens with "Here's a start that will help you become acquainted with the people who'll be teaching and leading us." Teaching and leading are paired together. The Exegy class, designed to "help you identify false narratives driving your daily choices" is "led and taught by Mars Hill trained leaders in our community" (p. 241). The people who teach are the people who lead. The entire Mars Hill website uses abstract images and artwork to bring color and interest to their webpages, except for 145 pictures of the "teachers." In each picture, their teachers are up front in the main auditorium, teaching to the adult attendees present. No other members of Mars Hill, or any file photos of people, are present on the Mars Hill website at the time this data was collected – the only people visually present are the "teachers." Unlike Lakewood and West Angeles, the asymmetrical naming patterns are considerably more subtle and nuanced within Mars Hill, but they are nevertheless present.

As part of the Mars Hill emphasis on de-institutionalizing the hierarchy and formality of the traditional church experience and structure, they have removed the label of Pastor from their discourse and have replaced it with Teachers. Rather than a single Pastor, understood as the final word on all things spiritual and biblical, they have a team of Teachers to guide their congregation. They re-invent the functional authority and use of the term pastor by giving this label to their many volunteer mentors and program leaders.

The Informality of Gathering rather than the Formality of a Church Service

Yet another term that has long been part of the sanctified lexicon of Christianity is the term used for a church meeting for worship – church service. Mars Hill does not speak of

church services – rather, they speak of “Sunday Gatherings”, which appears on virtually every page of the Mars Hill website. All other meetings are also referred to as “gatherings” at Mars Hill: “our community gathers for teaching and worship” (p. 63); “build relationships by gathering” (p. 84), “our community gathers” (p. 161); “every week people from Mars Hill community gather” (230); “attend a gathering of common interest” (p. 230); “we gather together in the student room” (p. 329) “the gathered community for worship on Sunday” (p. 336). No matter whether it is a children’s Sunday School class or a meeting of the Teachers, Mars Hill “gathers.” There is only one context in the entire website where the word “service” is used to refer to a Sunday morning meeting for worship, and that is the Sunday morning meeting for the purposes of Baptism, which is referred to as a “Baptism Service” (p. 550). It is worth noting that a term from the historical sanctified lexicon is employed for a service that also adheres to the historical liturgical practices of the church. Here we see one of the ways in which Mars Hill anchors into one of the traditional elements of Christianity, employing its sophisticated convergence skills. While surrounding the congregants with the discourse of “gatherings” and “journeying,” it nevertheless concretely marks what is considered a significant destination point along the journey with a Christian practice that is as old, and contested in form,[76] as Christianity itself.

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[76] There are many forms of baptism including but not limited to full immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. Where they happen also varies from a specific part of the church, or a tank, a river, or a lake. Some denominations only consider it “valid” if their approved form of baptism has been completed. *Who* has the authority to conduct a baptism is also contested – a priest, a minister, a lay minister, a youth leader, etc. – and again, there is dispute about its validity depending on who has conducted it.

Social and Cultural Relevance and Activism toward Social Justice

In one of their metamorphei series teachings which explores notions of death, the teacher concludes that death being conquered by Christ (the Christian salvation narrative) results in us being tasked with bringing things such as “a dream, passion, desire, relationship” (p. 84) back to life. The teacher asks the listener (reader) to ponder what that power over death might “look like for you or your family? Your community? Our country? Our world?” (p. 84). The church, according to the Narrative Theology of Mars Hill, is “a global and local expression of living out the way of Jesus through love, peace, sacrifice, and healing as we embody the resurrected Christ, who lives in and through us, to a broken and hurting world” (p. 92). That includes “bringing an end to injustice and restoring all things to God’s original intent” (p. 92). Being part of God’s story, for Mars Hill, is to “serve our local and global community” (p. 336). Hence outreach is “moving our resources and ourselves in response to human need. Focusing largely on the most vulnerable…. Locally and globally, our skills, experiences, resources, and heartbeat meet around forgotten places, people and issues” (p. 415). As a pastor of a LifeGroup, you are expected to commit to “help[ing] students hear the cry of those around them” (p.475, 479, 480).

The Mars Hill discourse surrounding this orientation of “focusing on the most vulnerable… forgotten places, people, and issues” (p. 415) is culturally relevant and globally aware. The secular language of human rights and social justice have converged with an interpretation of the biblical text which emphasizes social justice. “Putting an end to injustice” (p. 92), “relieving suffering and fighting injustice, joining the God of the oppressed” (p. 158)

requires cultural engagement, according to Mars Hill. They offer various gatherings and classes: for those who are divorced to help them "take the next step on their journey of wholeness…..focusing on relevant issues such as forgiveness, stress, anxiety, self-care, and navigating new relationship" (p. 246); both opened and closed AA meetings for those who wish to "fight and recover from alcoholism by sharing their experience, strength, and hope with each other" (p. 248); an adoption support group for those "considering adoption, in the midst of 'the wait', or raising adopted children….a safe place to share, hear stories, pray together and find encouragement" (p. 245); a cancer support group to help "unpack [the] burdens" (p. 251) of a cancer diagnosis and entailing tests and treatments; an environmental activist group entitled Renewing Eden which "act[s] in the community as caretakers of creation, and joining together socially" (p. 252); an Overeaters Anonymous support group in which the goal is "not diet, and no weigh-ins involved. Our primary purpose is to abstain from compulsive eating and compulsive food behaviors and to carry the message of recovery through the Twelve Steps of OA to those who still suffer" (p. 247); a Special Needs program to "learn more about how we can meet the specific needs of your child. Without you and your family, our community is not a true picture of the body of Christ" (p. 258); a special event entitled "On Sexuality" in which "Peggy Campolo, a minister and gay rights activist, discuss[es] divergent views on gay sexuality and the church, and how we as a community might build bridges of understanding" (p.293); a special event on the children of divorce in which the teacher "redirects efforts for assisting children of divorce…not only from a theological and spiritual perspective, but also from a young person's perspective" (p. 293); a marriage enrichment event in which the "complex cocktail of

possibility and disappointment, fear, and hope, brokenness and beauty" (p. 293) of marriage is examined; and a Cesarean Awareness network because "cesareans have an impact on us socially, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. They also impact our babies" (p. 250). In the case of both the marriage enrichment event and the Cesarean Awareness network, both spouses and partners are welcome, i.e., Mars Hill embraces both legally recognized unions as well as common-law unions.

Mars Hill has a composting team which "helps us care for our world by collecting and sorting our compostables after our Sunday Gatherings and events" (p. 498), as well as a mentoring program in which a volunteer is "paired one-on-one in a mentoring relationship with a K-5th grade student at our Burton or Southwest Community Campus Schools" which are "some of the most under-resourced schools in Grand Rapids" (p. 489). Another way in which Mars Hill is "deeply committed to serving the kids in our local community" is through sponsorship of the HQ Runaway and Homeless Youth Drop-in Centre" (p. 413). If you chose to become a mentor of a student in the Mars Hill Mentoring program, you are to "please keep nutrition in mind. Obesity is becoming an epidemic with at-risk kids… please dole out treats sparingly" (p. 411). Mars Hill identifies water as a social justice issue because "there are one billion people without access to clean water. That's seventeen percent of the world's population. That's not right" (p. 452). For the past 10 years, Mars Hill has been working in partnership with World Relief Rwanda to improve clean water supply (p. 490, 491). Mars Hill is also involved in a sustainable agricultural project in Cite Soleil, Haiti, because it is "named the most dangerous place in the world by the United Nations, desperation and poverty grip this

area and [that is] the reason we must" (p. 453) go. As part of the Metamorphi teaching series, one is asked to "examine how our habits of consumption impact others. Do the products we use honor and bless those who make them or bring them harm?... together we'll learn how we can make measurable change through small, intentional changes in our purchasing habits" (p. 7, 83).

Their website also features a Grassroots page which outlines organizations that "weren't started by Mars Hill, [but are] people connected to Mars Hill [who] have come up with ways to reflect our mission through their own work and service…. bringing measurable change to the world" (p. 454). These organizations include *Hope Farms*, an organization that helps refugees restore their past farming practices, *Manasseh Project*, *Relentless*, and *Michigan Abolitionist Project* each seeking to end sexual exploitation of young men and women in Michigan, *Harbor House* supporting adults with severe impairments to find purpose and dignity in their lives through meaningful activity, *Todd Waite Legacy Foundation for Suicide Prevention*, *Fill Your Own* bringing awareness regarding the environmental harms of bottled water, *Kids for Compassion* which supports Rwandan children with AIDS, *Kingdom Aid Adoptions* which offers financial aid to support the adoption of orphans, and *Grand Rapids Red Project* seeking to support AIDS victims in Michigan.

Given Mars Hill's engagement with many of the pressing social justice issues of the day, it is not surprising that in their advertisements seeking a kid pastor the successful candidate should be able to "develop content that is theologically sound, developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant" (p. 85). In the case of the advertisement seeking a lead teaching pastor,

the successful candidate should be able to "demonstrate wisdom and discernment; spiritual, emotional, cultural and relational maturity" (p. 87), and in the case of both the kid and lead pastor, the successful candidate should be able to "synthesize and think critically about spiritual, theological, developmental, and sociological issues" (p. 86, 87).

While Lakewood responds to the uncertainties of radical modernity, in part, with sacred reassurances of health, power, influence, and wealth for the individual, and West Angeles responds to the uncertainties of radical modernity, in part, with a strong emphasis on achieving racial equality through loyalty to racial activism from their members, Mars Hill's response to radical modernity is, in part, considerably more outward facing than the other two churches, focused on relevant social and environmental issues beyond the members of Mars Hill and the immediate geographical community surrounding them (e.g., water shortages, over consumption, human trafficking, socially driven mental health struggles such as substance abuse and overeating, AIDS, refugees, poverty, Human Rights, i.e., LGBT inclusion, etc.). It would appear that Mars Hill not only wants to find ways to survive within the general context and consequences of radical modernity, but to be part of the generative energy to change the objective and subjective conditions that shape the current context. West Angeles is seeking to change the context and consequences of radical modernity on one particular and very important issue (African-American social and physical poverty), and Lakewood is merely finding coping mechanisms for the individual to overcome the current context and consequences of radical modernity.

Community & Relationship: Conversation and Collaboration

In keeping with their emphasis on gathering (discussed above), the Mars Hill discourse puts a great deal of emphasis on the gathered community and relationship, which are both a stable part of the sanctified lexicon of Christianity. On the landing page of their website is a welcome to "engage in the life of our community" (p. 1) that is thematically present throughout their discourse. The landing page of their website also includes an invitation to Short Circles, encouraging you to "sign up to meet a few new people from our community" (p.1). This same invitation is repeated almost every time Short Circles is featured on the website. All forms of gathering are "a good way to meet others in your community" (p. 83). You are welcomed to "go deeper into the community" (p. 8), "enter into deeper experience of community and personal understanding" (p. 60, p. 83), and "journey with others in our community" (p. 83, 233, 240, 505, 507). It is in community that they "serve one another and others" (p. 63), "take great joy in giving and receiving together" (p. 69), "live more deeply with one another, carrying each other's burdens, sharing possessions" (p. 93), "have everything in common" (p. 509), and "as a community might build bridges of understanding among us" (p. 293). Readers of the website are told that "you are an important part of our community" (p. 77), and the assumed centrality of Mars Hill to the individual is indicated by statements such as "we find belonging" (p. 295), and "do life together" (p. 295). Community provides the capacity to "live faith personally within community" (p. 372) which, according to Mars Hill, is being "drawn to service – to living out our commission to be the hands of feet of Jesus…pouring back into the community the gifts we have received" (p. 468). As a Mars Hill attendee you are asked to "help our local community by

donating blood" (p. 84), recognize that in terms of parenting "it takes a village to raise a child…[so] let's be a community and walk through it together" (p. 242), which includes a Moms with Moms groups which is "a community for moms of all ages and stages to journey together and support one another" (p. 252). One should "walk with other members of our community moving beyond divorce….and help participants [divorcees] take the next step on their journey" (p. 246). Like the West Angeles co-sanctified lexicon, one finds a significant emphasis in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon on the need to care for others, both those within the Mars Hill community and beyond.

Understandings of community, as shaped by the sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill, serve the purpose of relationship – "relationships matter more than programs at Mars Hill" (p. 83, 84), because "relationships are power" (p. 83, 84). The Narrative Theology of Mars Hill speaks of God as being always "in communal relationship with himself…. God created us to be relational as well and marked us with an identity as his image bearers" (p. 92). In order to be a member of Mars Hill Bible church one must covenant with Mars Hill, and "what makes a covenant different from a simple binding agreement is that covenant implies a meaningful relationship" (p. 162), such as the enduring relationships within habitus described by Bourdieu and Stones (2008; 2005). Short Circles, their primary form of meeting outside of the Sunday morning gatherings, is "a place to build relationships" (p. 483). We see here the very process that Berger & Luckmann describe in terms of language building habitus – when Mars Hill emphasizes meaningful conversations and relationships it is i) welcoming attendees into a shared mutual reality in which its members are also welcomed to create themselves

(*externalization*) as ii) certain kinds of people with certain kind of values that stand as criteria outside of themselves (*objectivation*). As each community member potentially absorbs these taken for granted ethical norms of commitment to community, collaborating together in their individual and shared spiritual journeys, they have the capacity, and distinct possibility, of becoming *internalized*, functioning as Bourdieu's notions of habitus. As such, the disequilibrium of radical modernity is tempered through enduring relationships that have a degree of solidity in an uncertain, fickle, world in which disembedded forces are notoriously impersonal, and where there is little space for the subjectively valued goods of loyalty and continuity.

Their youth programing (functionally equivalent to the adult Short Circles) "isn't a place or a thing – it's people…. time every week sharing in laughter, building lasting relationships" (p. 329). The qualifications for all their LifeGroup leaders (all pre-teen and teen children's programming) include the capacity to build relationships (p. 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 481, 482). The advertisement for a Kids Ministry Pastor requires that the successful candidate be "highly relational" (p. 85) and be able to "foster and model pastoral relationships and leadership for kids, parents, families and volunteers" (p. 86). The advertisement for a Lead Teaching Pastor of Ministry requires that the successful candidate "demonstrate wisdom and discernment; spiritual, emotional, cultural and relational maturity" (p. 87) and have "high relational skills" (p. 88). The Mars Hill discourse and descriptions of their various programming and activities indicate an understanding of the community being addressed as primarily one of those who attend Mars Hill, with the exception of the Sponsor A Student program in connection with Burton Elementary School.

Made vulnerable to forces beyond one's control as a result of the outcomes of mature modernity, Mars Hill's co-sanctified lexicon's constant references to "gathering" and "community" offer a home of sorts, stepping away from a threshold place of liminality. As with West Angeles, one need not fear being swept away by the rush of liquid modernity (Bauman 2013). Rather, you are welcomed into conversation and collaboration as you journey together.

A Transformation Journey of Self and Community

Another stable part of the sanctified lexicon of Christianity which is employed extensively in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon are the concepts of restoration and transformation. The 10-part Lent series (discussed in more detail below) describes the exploration of "pathways to transformation…we continue our journey towards transformation, or as Robert Webber calls it, 'our continuing conversion'" (p. 7). Their Metamorphei theme (their theme for a year), which is to be explored in the Sunday morning teachings, asks "what does transformation look like? Where does it start? What does it entail? And do we have anything to do with it, or does it happen in spite of our trying and failing?" (p. 8). And it is this transformative experience, one's "role to play in that story", that results in "the restoration of our relationships with God, each other, ourselves, and creation" (p. 91). Jesus' return to this world, according to the Mars Hill Narrative Theology, will "restore all things to God's original intent…. and God will dwell with us here in a restored creation" (p. 92). The Exegy class is "led and taught by Mars Hill-trained leaders in our community" (i.e., not volunteers), and appears to be the most elite of the Mars Hill adult programming. In it you will be encouraged to identify the "false narratives driving your daily decisions…. and develop practical ways to discern how to

step deeper into the way of Jesus. The result? A transformed way of living through hearing God's voice in your life, and responding" (p. 241) in which you will be restored to Jesus and God. The youth programs "invite transformative conversations" (p. 328), the adult mentorship program "is transforming lives of both adult mentors and their student mentees" (p. 411), the qualifications and skills of all LifeGroup leaders is that they "live the best kind of life by actively pursuing" restoration of all things and the self, wholeness of mind, body and soul, nurturing community life, being a force for good, and practicing hope (480, 481), the lead teaching pastor must be able to "teach…a transformational presence in the world" (p. 87), and the Food for Haiti project is framed as "this isn't a one-way street. Our desire is to connect to the people of Haiti in ways that are transformative for our local community as well" (p. 453). All of this is reinforced by the Mars Hill creedal statement, "The Directions," which states that serving outward means "living out the transforming message of the resurrected Jesus… we were created to live for something larger than ourselves" (p. 158). Mars Hill "seeks to be a transformational presence in the world" (p. 87).

Much like the *affirmative postmodernists* that Rosenau describes, the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon appears profoundly cognizant of the personal and collective challenges that radical modernity has brought, yet their lexicon is equally cognizant of the individual and collective need for a hope-filled way forward, "seeking a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is nondogmatic, tentative, and nonideological….[they] do not shy away from affirming an ethic, [and] making normative choices" (Rosenau 1992:16).

Conclusion: Megachurch Themes in Mars Hill

Of the five megachurch themes identified in a previous section – *consumerism*, *individualism*, *therapeutic comfort*, *anti-establishment,* and *culturally relevant* – Mars Hill most clearly reflects the theme of *anti-establishment*, as well as offering a unique form of *therapeutic comfort*. The themes of *consumerism, individualism*, and *cultural relevancy* are not exemplified in the typical manner described in the megachurch research, though a nuanced examination does yield interesting insights, to varying degrees, regarding all three of these themes.

Like Lakewood, Mars Hill is not connected to any denomination. This frees the leadership from being bound to specific theological positions, programs, processes, and practices that are expected within the context of any particular denomination, and thus it fits well into the *anti-establishment theme*. Beyond this, one can also observe a robust fidelity to a non-hierarchical structure within Mars Hill, a dogged commitment to keeping ideas about God open, fluid, and evolving within their conversations and reflected continuously throughout their co-sanctified lexicon steeped in metaphors of journey and story. Their discourse is more authentically characterized by "networking than by formal structures that control people's behaviors within the organization" (Roberts and Yamane 2012:207), hence they are considerably more consistently *anti-establishment* than Lakewood, who, though clearly staying well abreast of any of the traditional markings of evangelical religiosity, is nevertheless highly structured and authoritarian in its Osteen only leadership model. The church growth and leadership model of Joel Osteen and the Osteens accrues increasing power to him, and the Osteen family by extension. Here we see a particularly sharp contrast with Rob Bell, the

founding pastor of Mars Hill who conceptualized "teachings" by many at Mars Hill Sunday morning gatherings as a way to distribute leadership and authority. Despite immediate success, Bell "rebuffed supporters who urged him to open a Christian school, a Christian resort, or a Christian humanitarian network" (Saneeh 2012:5). Prior to the 2014 data collection of this research, in 2011 Bell published *Love Wins*, which posits that there is no hell. This was an immediate sensation and scandal in evangelical circles, welcomed and embraced by some and condemned by others, just as Joel Osteen has been condemned by some and enthusiastically embraced by others. Rather than using this traction to increase the visibility and size of Mars Hill, Bell instead stepped down from his role as lead teacher and pastor because "the members of Mars Hill found themselves having to answer for their membership in a church that was suddenly notorious" (Sanneh 2012:2), and Bell felt the best thing for the church would be for him to resign. Mars Hill attendance was 3,500 at that time, and attendance has remained stable since that time, as well as their narrative theology approach and leadership structure of Teaching Pastors and lay-driven decision making. In the context of evangelicalism, Mars Hill began, and has remained, profoundly *anti-institutional* in ways that the megachurch research themes have not accounted for, and this is palpably evident in their co-sanctified lexicon which was and remains layered throughout with language choices that seek to speak *with* (not *to*) the disenfranchised sojourner of institutionalized evangelicalism. The attendees - the 'audience' for the lexicon - is imagined as living within the disequilibrium of radical modernity, and they are positioned by the discourse as if they are seeking a habitus informed by gritty reality and hope.

When the purpose of God is understood to be that of easing the burdens and travails of the individual and this belief frames their *habitus*, set as it is within the current burdens of the travails of radical modernity, *therapeutic comfort* is a likely, and perhaps inevitable effect. Described in the megachurch research theme of *therapeutic* as a God who is *immanent* (a nearby source of comfort) but not *transcendent* (calling for virtues of life lived within commitments to the divine), Mars Hill does not exemplify the resulting *moralistic therapeutic deism* discussed in the megachurch theme of *therapeutic comfort* discussed in Chapter 1. Yet the Mars Hill group classes focus on "relevant issues such as forgiveness, stress, anxiety, self-care, and navigating new relationship" (p.246), recovery from alcoholism, the challenges of divorce, etc. These are clearly forms of *therapeutic comfort* but the comfort being offered is not in promises that God will physically heal, magically restore relationships, make you wealthy, create a promotion for you, and the like, but rather, the comfort is in the process of being and becoming along the journey toward a deepening spirituality into which Mars Hill welcomes its attendees. A place of mutual engagement and discussion. People to talk with and think with and possibly cry with, as one meets the challenges of life. No promises of victory, but plenty of promise of shared presence.

In a significant 10-week teaching series during the season of Lent (when one typically gives up something), one of the Mars Hill foci was over-consumption – asking attendees to consider how they might consume less. This identifies Mars Hill as distinctly different from both Lakewood and West Angeles because of the awareness and intentionality surrounding issues of environment and overconsumption. While West Angeles has an extravagant 103-foot

stained-glass cross tower, and Lakewood inhabits an extensively renovated and expanded sports complex with an entire floor dedicated to media production, Mars Hill took up occupancy in the anchor store of an old abandoned mall and chose to keep the interior warehouse feel by simply painting it black. The lack of large or flashy exterior signage and décor is in keeping with the sparseness of the interior, and functions as a subtle commentary on their 'non-consumerist' brand. And here is where we see how difficult it is to be completely 'non-consumerist' in the cultural context of capitalism and consumption that is radical modernity – it is inevitable, if you are going to be a large church, that you will have a 'brand.' Branding is one of the current driving engines of consumerism. And so, despite what appear to be very intentional efforts to eschew the trappings of *consumerism,* one nevertheless finds trace elements of it at Mars Hill. Their brand is directed at the 'somes', and so just as Lakewood has no religious symbols in their sanctuary, neither does Mars Hill. The difference is that while the Lakewood sanctuary is extravagant, the Mars Hill sanctuary[77] is plain. But each functions as a type of brand. And like the other two megachurches in this study, Mars Hill also has well developed media services, though not as flashy or ambitious as Lakewood or West Angeles – rather their sparseness functions to create somewhat of a "hip" brand. And just as Lakewood and West Angeles seek to achieve transformation (Lakewood into the ultimate victory of wealth and success, West Angeles into a powerful political voice for racial equality), so too Mars Hill seeks transformation, but of a very different type. Theirs is an emphasis on the transformation of the individual's *process* of 'faithing' enabled by the Mars Hill emphasis on journey, rather

[77] Mars Hill themselves would use the phrase "gathering space", not sanctuary.

than an emphasis on a given *outcome* produced by a transformation of their faith. Measured in broad strokes, Mars Hill does not fit well inside the *consumerism* theme, but in an examination of the finer strokes, one finds elements of it (perhaps inevitably) present.

As has been observed in previous chapters, *individualism* is tethered to *consumerism*, and such is the case to a certain extent with Mars Hill as well, but, as noted, the relationship to consumerism here is significantly attenuated, with clear critical elements. The conception of Individualism here differs from those we have so far encountered. Unlike Lakewood, Mars Hill's focus is on individual transformation toward greater personal insight, peace, and an ability to give oneself to the needs of others, facilitating a constant cycle of individual growth resulting in strength to offer to others. Their dual focus on restoration and transformation is both micro and macro – individual healing (restoration) will facilitate individual transformation, which enables that same individual to look beyond themselves to the needs of others within the Mars Hill community and beyond to the marginalized within their city, state, country, and globally. Their emphasis on story – that of the biblical text as story, each individual as living out a story, and the Mars Hill story – continually infers (and occasionally states explicitly) that there are individual roles that one plays in each of these mediums of story. Most frequently, however, the role of the individual and their role in a story (whether micro, meso, or macro) is framed within a broader meta-narrative of community and attendees are welcomed to participate in building and sustaining community if they wish for such activities to be part of their story. Hence the character of *individualism* within Mars Hill is significantly different than that of Lakewood (serving the self) and West Angeles (individual, highly emotional experiences of the

Holy Spirit). The discourses of both West Angeles and Mars Hill address individuals in ways that embed them in strong conceptions of community. However, the conceptions of community differ, and so the related associations attached to individualism also shift, as discussed with respect to post-structuralism in chapter 5. The 'communitarian individualism' of the West Angeles discourse is embedded within references to their history of slavery, raising something that is organic and particular within the collective history of their attendees. There is an objective basis here in the experience of forebears for the invocation of shared collective memory. The associations attached to the meaning of 'community' in the case of Mars Hill are less anchored, more free-floating, in that they are less embedded in a shared history, but, rather, self-consciously directed towards the future, to a journey of transformation and discovery. As a consequence, the orientation of the Mars Hill community is also arguably more open, more outward directed towards a greater range of peoples, projects and enterprises. Less anchored in the past or attached to the present, more oriented towards a future of transformation, one could suggest that the particular nature of the *individualism* of Mars Hill does not fit into the category of megachurch themes, as described in the existing research literature. Yet there is still present a powerful form of self-focus as the point of origin for other-focusedness.

The task of distilling the degree to which Mars Hill is *culturally relevant* is not a straightforward one, in large part due to the type of cultural relevance practiced by Mars Hill. The megachurch themes distilled in the research identify cultural relevance as attending to elements of pop culture. Characteristically, worship is a high energy performance of music and

also sometimes dramatic monologues and dance. Sophisticated media equipment, rock-concert worthy lighting, and motivational speaking styles feature prominently. Religious symbols are scarce, and there is a plethora of high energy programming opportunities. In contrast, while religious symbols are non-existent at Mars Hill and their "brand" is clearly seeker-sensitive (like most megachurches), their Sunday morning "teachings" are delivered from a plain square stage in the centre of the main auditorium, with no special lighting, no extravagant media features, and a "teaching" that contains thoughtful ponderings about journeying, being, becoming, and serving others – the co-sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill does not include any type of hype. There is no attempt to entertain, just to engage. The reliably colloquial form of discourse that populates their co-sanctified lexicon immediately alerts the attendee to their resistance to simply carrying on within the linguistic norms of radical modernity, and their accompanying intuition that this more 'relaxed' form of speech is likely to resonate more with their church refugee attendees. Their co-sanctified lexicon demonstrates a sagacious awareness of the pervasive dis-ease of many evangelical Christians (the 'somes' and nones'), the broader cultural disequilibrium resulting from radical modernity, and the hunger for non-judgmental, exploratory thinking and conversation. In this sense then, Mars Hill demonstrates *culturally relevant* engagement with the strong undercurrents of radical modernity rather than the fast-moving currents at the surface. While Lakewood and West Angeles are like rip currents that are fast and powerful near the shore, Mars Hill is like the tide which is slower yet more powerful, responding to the gravitational pull of the moon.

In creating a haven for its congregants in the face of the liminal vagaries of radical modernity, Mars Hill's response has been predominantly one of uniquely and deeply rooted *anti-establishment.* Demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the dynamics and consequences of radical modernity on the "somes and nones," it has intentionally created a wisely nuanced discourse community of spiritual exploration and collaborative conversation without the dogma, structure, and exclusivism that has been typical of Christianity's modernist expressions of religiosity. This, in turn, would seem to function *therapeutically* for the many potentially post-Christian Mars Hill attendees who find themselves in a liminal state because they can no longer align themselves with, or absorb, Christian Modernity's claims to truth that have harmed and controlled so many, themselves included. Mars Hill offers them a non-controlling, non-exclusionary form of collective spiritual engagement and conversation that potentially goes a long way in alleviating the wounds inflicted by radical modernity.

Chapter 7

Introducing a Further Megachurch Theme:
Low Commitment – High Security Belonging

Based on the data derived from the linguistic ethnographies of this research, it is possible to delineate an additional two-part theme that can provide further critical purchase on the phenomenon of megachurch success. The current chapter will outline this theme, which is one of *low commitment – high security belonging.* This theme has been constructed out of the shared, common, features that have emerged from the comparative aspect of this research. It draws the general theme out of what is shared by each of the three megachurches. It draws their *similarities* out of their unique particulars, drawing them away from their differences. The speculative but empirically grounded argument of the thesis has been that these general, shared, characteristics are a consequence of the megachurches' response to the difficult challenges posed by radicalized modernity. The argument suggests that it is these shared characteristics – each church collectively providing a secure haven that is neither burdensome nor controlling – that go a long way to explaining megachurch success in a seemingly inhospitable socio-cultural landscape.

Low Commitment

In megachurches, which "often provide a low cost and low commitment path by which religious refugees may join the church" (von der Ruhr and Daniels 2012), their sheer size means that a significant number of *low commitment* attendees is virtually inevitable. With a large paid

staff that covers everything from mowing the lawn to running the Sunday morning lighting show to offering counselling services to visiting the sick, gone is the small congregation in which many of these sorts of tasks are routinely completed on a volunteer basis by church members. And while some megachurches still call for volunteers to be greeters and teach children's stories, the bulk of the heavy lifting is done by trained and paid employees of the church. This allows attendees a critical distance from which to assess whether any particular megachurch is offering what they are looking for without making any type of commitment or being asked to support the work and life of the church in any way. Furthermore, megachurches facilitate anonymity that allows attendees to remain in that space of critical distance, or to move in and out of it at will. And unlike smaller churches which generally have a process in place for becoming a formal member, accompanied by expectations of what formal members are responsible to do and give, megachurches are less likely to have such process. Hence there is a significantly higher number of *low commitment* attendees present in megachurches than small churches.

High Security Belonging

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is considered a classic in the discipline of psychology, and is applied within many disciplines including sociology (Maslow, 1943). Conceptualized as a pyramid of five different levels of need for maximum human flourishing, the first two levels are basic physical needs and bodily safety, followed by the third level which is the need for love and belonging – to feel valued one must be loved and belong within the social orbits of families,

friends, or other forms of group engagement. Stated equally eruditely but more poetically is the African proverb: “I am because we are; we are because I am” (Healey and Sybertz 1996:107). To be flourishing individuals we must, paradoxically, belong within groups. Belonging is one of the aspects of human life that has been altered by radical modernity – *distanciation* and *disembedding* (Giddens 1991 – discussed in Chapter 1) processes have produced myriad forms of social separation, often leaving individuals isolated within their “absolute freedom from everything personal” (Simmel 1[907]1978:256). Belonging within the realm of the sociology of religion was notably explored by Grace Davie, whose research into Christianity (with significant attention given to English Anglicanism) in 1990 indicated that in Britain there was a downward trend in both believing and belonging, but the stronger of the two was declining belonging. Though her study is more layered than can be conveyed here, she noted that maintaining religious behaviours of belonging, i.e., attending church, or following daily or weekly rituals (Davie 1990) was decreasing at a greater rate than the decline in maintaining belief, i.e., than the decline in belief in the Church of England. Here we see the emerging consequences of maturing modernity coming to bear in the religious realm. Growing increasingly disillusioned with the rigid and controlling nature of these religious institutions and the lack of meaningful support many felt within them, a noticeable number of people had stopped believing and also attending. Davie’s believe-belong distinction has since that time been further developed (we will not track the detailed history of it here) into a belong-behave-believe model as an explanation for why the era of radical modernity has resulted in so many ‘somes’ and ‘nones’ within the evangelical world (Tickle 2012; Bass 2012). The turn to “spiritual but not religious”

(Tickle 2012:77) has been underway for some time now (as discussed in Chapters 1 & 5), and with it has come the move toward caring increasingly less about belief and belonging within the parameters of institutionalized religion (as originally documented by Davie), and rather seeking out belonging that is no longer reliant on specific and detailed religious beliefs ((Drescher 2016; Butler Bass 2012; Lim, Putnam, and MacGregor 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Tickle 2012). In the era of modernity, it was belief that seemed to lead religiosity. Adrift in the rising sea of radical modernity, the basic human need for belonging is nevertheless present and active, and within the evangelical realm of religiosity, belonging now seems to play a much more significant role in leading belief. In what she terms "The Great Reversal" (and which Davies' research was beginning to unveil in 1990) Bass (2012) suggests that rather than making belief pre-eminent (which results in the very antagonistic debates about truth claims that have been present in the rationalized religiosity of modernity), now it is belonging that is pre-eminent (prioritizing relationship), followed by potential behavioural changes as a result of the religious group to which one belongs. This context of belonging and behaving eventually then shapes what one believes.

Megachurches, with their large buildings and large number of attendees, allow the individual to enter into their space without being noticed as "new," and also then not missed if one does not return. Hence the typical sense of overt institutionalized control that has historically been the experience of those attending small and modest-sized evangelical churches is not present. The whole environment is too big for the individual to be 'noticed' in a specific way. Yet the overall message, from warm greetings at the door to the warm and

gregarious welcome from the megachurch pastor at the front of the stage, nevertheless leaves the individual feeling warmly welcomed while at the same time remaining anonymous. This unique combination of a sense of personal warmth without accountability facilitates a safe sense of entering into belonging without the risk of being overtly cornered, controlled, criticized, or condemned for one's beliefs. Not only can you "get away with" being non-participatory, you are welcomed to do so! Individuals are skittish about all things "churchy" because of the history of churches controlling the beliefs and behaviours of their members, yet these same individuals long for a place to belong, and the megachurch is seemingly the perfect solution.

In exploring the unique facets of *low commitment – high security belonging* (though not using precisely that phrase), Wellman, Corcoran and Stockly (2020) employ Durkheim's concept of *homo duplex* in which "humans desire to be independent, masters of their own universe, sui generis individuals, but they must necessarily do this in and through others" (2020:153). Wellman et al. observe that through the four phase *interaction ritual cycle* (discussed previously above) "megachurch participants experience intense energy that fills each individual with a powerful sense of personal satisfaction [strength and autonomy]. However, this satiation of *individuals'* desire can only be attained in the context of *group* rituals" (2020:19). Hence, at the same time that megachurches create within attendees a strong sense of their own individual importance through fulfilling their emotional needs, creating a strong sense of *high security belonging*, they also focus on drawing in large numbers of newcomers with *low commitment* levels. Because "humans are energized by each others' presence" (2020:21) the large numbers

facilitated by *low commitment belonging* results in "the church appear[ing] more successful and thus stimulating greater amounts of emotional energy" (2020:20), which in turn draws even greater numbers. The unique balancing act of sustaining this paradox of feeding *individualism* via *collective* processes is something megachurches do brilliantly.

Notwithstanding their differences, each of the megachurch co-sanctified lexicons in this study practices a discourse of passive*, low commitment belonging*, while at the same time creating their unique form of *high security* in the midst of the disequilibrium and dis-ease of radical modernity. As a result, each offers a permanent welcoming and "nourishing total sacred cocoon" (Wellman et al. 2020:152), a total environment home for the sojourner of radical modernity, without demanding what have historically been the costs of being a religious adherent.

The Character of Lakewood Low Commitment – High Security Belonging

Lakewood employs its co-sanctified lexicon to build a home, a place for belonging, that is a stylishly expansive and extravagant suburban middle class "gentry"[78] home, welcoming successful middle class or rich attendees, who are symbolic of their God's promises for everyone, free of the daily anxieties and insecurities created by radical modernity. The sheer prominence and spiritual authority of the Osteen family, built into every crevice of their co-sanctified lexicon, immediately creates a sense that this place of belonging will offer security

[78] typically understood as a British descriptor, it means "people of high social status" Merriam-Webster
https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the%20gentry Accessed July 17, 2020

and safety from the buffeting winds of radical modernity, without any need to commit to the tasks that keep Lakewood going. Their co-sanctified lexicon suggests that here is a place that knows how to harness the truth to the advantage of those who belong and are drawn to the rugged individualist approach, including, as noted previously, strong echoes of Schuller's *Possibility Thinking* and *Theology of Self-Esteem* (Mulder and Marti 2020), without the higher levels of commitment typically necessary to experience belonging. Based on attendee self-reports on their website, merely seeing Pastor Joel is enough to lift off heavy chains, begin a new life, be healed by God, and receive God's favour, and this power will be refracted onto the self if one belongs to Lakewood. Such is the habitus home created for the individual attendee by the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon.

And all of this comes without cost. You are, of course, repeatedly welcomed to donate money, but if you do not, no one knows that you did not. They only know if you do.[79] Repeatedly throughout the website, Pastor Joel and Victoria Osteen speak about how much they love you, benevolently offering their advice, and speaking prophetically about all the good to come in your future. All of this is yours if you will commit to being part of the Lakewood family, attending their vast array of classes, programs, and activities, but again, no one will ever know if you do not participate. Their promises are delivered specifically to "you." That is one of the most powerful aspects of the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon. Almost everything is framed

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[79] For the many "somes" and "nones" who have left behind their more overtly controlling churches and denominations to attend a megachurch, the simple freedom of feeling anonymous about whether or not to donate may, in the end, actually result in a greater likelihood of doing so.

as the Osteens speaking directly to “you,” and this suggests a subtle habitus of belonging for the individual attendee that is all the more powerful for its subtleness. The less than subtle conflation of salvation through Christ in small font below a larger picture of Joel Osteen further reinforces the notion of the irrevocable safety of this home. The patronizing nature of the Osteen’s spiritual brand, promising that you are destined, you can live your best life, you should dare to dream and understand your value, has strong parental undertones, which reflects a typical middle-class American Dream style of parenting. But you can have it without cost! This is paired with Osteen promises brimming with confidence that God will indeed do all these things for you, praying for you, and believing for you.

The Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon frequently mentions what a busy place it is, how loved people feel, that it will be life-changing by helping hurting people, and that one should never miss a moment at Lakewood. This is paired with information about the size of Lakewood as the largest and fastest growing church in the United States, that pastor Joel has inspired millions not only in America but across the globe with their more than 100 country broadcasts. Something this big, and this powerful, that yet manages to make the single individual walking through their doors feel personally welcomed (if large attendance can be understood as attendees feeling welcomed) fosters a uniquely anonymous sense of belonging without cost, because that individual is left potentially feeling like this is where everyone is, so whatever is being said about my individual life (promises of blessing and victory) must be true. I matter. To belong within the home of Lakewood is arguably to be, by association, as safe and successful as

everyone around you, cocooned within a total environment safe from the consequences of radical modernity.

As discussed above, all these processes and possibilities remain uniquely optional, to be selected both in terms of type and degree based on personal preference within a megachurch context, due to the anonymity that size creates – you can "disappear" as easily as you "appeared." Free shopping for belonging.

The Character of West Angeles Low Commitment – High Security Belonging

West Angeles employs its co-sanctified lexicon to build a home, a place for belonging, that is a fortified castle,[80] sturdy and resilient, designed to keep out harm, taking in those escaping harm, and expanding beyond their walls building a world with less harm. Facing the myriad anxieties and uncertainties produced by radical modernity, and also disempowered and disenfranchised in the country that calls them citizens, theirs is quite literally a "Home of Deliverance and Family" (p.101). Their shared slave history, and the multiple ways in which the Part I Black Liturgy co-sanctified lexicon memorializes it and uses it to mobilize activism, functions to offer a strong genealogical and familiar sense of home and belonging. The "Blessed to be a Blessing" motif that anchors the West Angeles context undergirds, for each individual present, the importance of the collective, creating a unique form of communitarian individualism (as discussed in Chapter 5). To create belonging and inhabit belonging is to share resources and skills. Yet West Angeles, which runs an extensive number of free programs

[80] Not a castle in the pop-culture fairy tale sense, rather in the historic fortress sense.

including everything from childcare to prepping for SAT exams to gang violence to housing and business development along Crenshaw Boulevard, does not include in either of its co-sanctified lexicons any calls for volunteers. A closer look at their programming indicates that these are virtually all run by paid staff. While one of the primary motifs of West Angeles is clearly that one should support and help others, a support that is targeted to the community outside of the church doors, this motif of solidarity functions discursively, making obligatory demands on the congregation only at the level of collective, shared, meanings and norms. The result is that you can attend West Angeles, benefit from its immense array of community and social programming, while retaining a sense of control and autonomy over your degree of involvement. You are welcomed to experience a high sense of security while offering none of your own time, energy, or money to support their programs.

The community orientation of West Angeles is most evident in the way Bishop Blake addresses members – he is always speaking of "we," as do the entire collection of voices present in their co-sanctified lexicon, whereas the Osteen voice (primarily pastor Joel Osteen) of Lakewood is always addressing "you." "You" creates separation and distance between those leading and dispensing truth, rather than the "we" which levels separation and distance, implying togetherness. So, while each term of address, "we" (communitarian individualism) or "you," (rugged individualism) is built into the home-making of the respective co-sanctified lexicons, the nature of that belonging is profoundly different. In the "we" total environment, you are expected to participate in *creating* the discursive sense of belonging beyond the church for your own people, whereas in the "you" total environment you are only expected to

participate in *consuming* an already composed sense of belonging. But in both cases, you are welcomed to come and stay, with no pressure or control about your degree of involvement, putting forth none of your own efforts to support the programming of the church, while benefitting from the high degree of personal security it affords. Just as in the case of Lakewood, you are encouraged to give financially, but if you do not, the anonymity of the megachurch context means that no one will know you did not contribute.

An additional form of belonging unique to West Angeles is their "raise the praise" (p. 420) motif in all their services and events. This anointed worship[81] is understood as evidence of the holy spirit, and is expressed in various forms of spontaneous speech as well as in their highly expressive and charismatic music. These emotionally euphoric shared experiences require vulnerability for those who participate, and forge strong collective bonds of safety and belonging which are particularly powerful within the double-jeopardy cultural context of African-Americans – at risk because of racial oppression, and at risk because of the insecurities caused by radical modernity. As noted earlier in Chapter 4, sharing music solidifies relationships, creates shared emotions of survival, and forges community bonds (Cochrane et al. 2013). These charismatic processes through either spoken word or sung (and sometimes both), are equally mesmerizing and magnetic, offering a powerful sense of belonging, and harken back to the secret plantation prayer and praise that helped them collectively survive the horrors of their enslaved lives. Whether someone in attendance actually participates in

[81] "anointed worship" is a term frequently used throughout their co-sanctified lexicon, both as an expectation of what *will* happen and as a description of what *has* happened.

charismatic expression or not, the shared emotions of survival are nonetheless available to the minimally participating attendee as a source of strength, safety, and belonging.

Finally, the Civic Minded Discourse (Part II) of their bi-partite co-sanctified lexicon functions to literally build homes, tangible places of belonging, for their own members as well as those in the surrounding community. Exemplifying the African proverb that “It takes a village to raise a child,” the West Angeles Community Development Corporation develops and implements programs to address joblessness and affordable housing, and to reduce gang activity, foster educational goals, provide mortgage support programs, etc., all along the Crenshaw Boulevard (as already noted above). In the process it is socializing their membership into the broader cultural discourse necessary to move out of poverty and familial instability into financial stability and relational health. Here too we see the *low commitment – high security* phenomena at work, in which the individual benefits from whatever programming they wish from the array offered by West Angeles, free of any type of obligation or non-voluntary cost to themselves. The uniqueness of this aspect of their co-sanctified lexicon is that, while the Black Liturgy aspect of their co-sanctified lexicon is layered with “God talk,” this second half of their lexicon makes not a single mention of God. It is entirely focused on creating healthy physical spaces for a “village” to survive and thrive – a literal space to live within a sense of high security.

The Character of Mars Hill Low Commitment – High Security Belonging

Mars Hill employs its co-sanctified lexicon to build not a home but a hostel and, or commune, a place for those weary of the travails and anxieties of radical modernity to pause and rest with other sojourners, carving out a sense of connection and belonging. For the church refugee "somes" and "nones" who are suspicious of bureaucratized and institutionalized evangelicalism, the tentative nature of a hostel allows for a temporary experience. If the hostel experience feels non-constraining, they may transition to the experience of a commune which, as a site of sharing of collective voices and ideas that are evolving rather than truths that need to be defended,[82] offers a safe place of belonging that does not exert control over them. The overall tentativeness of the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon is the most intentional form of *low commitment – high security* of all three churches in this study. Somewhat like trying to approach a baby deer, their lexicon is constantly building in space for slow and careful approaches by their attendees, with the expectation that they might bolt if something feels a bit too controlling, institutionalized, or bureaucratic.

Rather than static theological beliefs, the Mars Hill valuing of belonging is centered on the concepts of journey and story. The commitment to journey alongside each other provides a sense of assurance that whatever life will bring, one will not have to face the potential difficulties and hardships of their journey alone, nor will they be required or coerced into continuing the journey if they feel they have gone far enough. Their co-sanctified lexicon frequently refers to the challenges and opportunities of repentance, forgiveness, and

[82] which has typically been the habitus of evangelicalism in modernity.

transformation as pathways which may be bumpy rides, but which also offer the opportunity to draw together. Unlike Lakewood and West Angeles which offer specific truth claims that when shared create belonging, Mars Hill offers instead a commitment to explore possibilities of truth along the way, and again, this seemingly intentional tentativeness builds in plenty of room for those who are not ready or willing to make commitments to a religious community. While truth is the destination point at which one finds belonging in the Lakewood and West Angeles co-sanctified lexicons, in the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon, pilgrims' shared explorations of truth en route, and the permission to pause at any point in the journey, creates a particular kind of *low commitment – high security* belonging for those who need a place to "be" without the risk of being controlled by an institutionalized religious set of irrefutable truth-claims.

For much of human history, a culture's greatest truths have been retained and passed on to the next generation through story. Story is, and always has been, a primary medium for truth-telling. We are, as the sociologist Christian Smith suggests, a storied people (Smith 2003). Housing truth within story allows that truth to be more malleable, open to various interpretations in different times and places. The Mars Hill emphasis on being a place that is living out a story in which each person plays a part in that story creates a unique sense of belonging which is not constraining, and which allows one to step out of the story for a chapter or two, or permanently, if one so chooses. As previously discussed, stories have room for paradox, and Mars Hill tells its members that their (the member's) story is an important part of the Mars Hill story, and that it is best to explore one's own story (the member's) within the context of community. And ultimately, their concept of Narrative Theology suggests that "God

is calling us to participate in God's unfolding story" (p. 92). Mars Hill welcomes the attendee to join their own story with Mars Hill, and Mars Hill's story with God's story – without being asked to adhere to a detailed Statement of Faith, or a particular and detailed set of theological precepts.

It is proposed that future research agendas would be strengthened by adding this theme of *low commitment – high security belonging* to the five themes that have already been identified by the general literature, and which have played a significant role in guiding and informing the current analysis. The further theme can potentially guide and illuminate many avenues of research conducted with a range of different objectives and employing an appropriate combination from the array of possible methodologies.

More specifically, the theme of *low commitment – high security belonging*, I would argue, can be a particularly productive theoretical tool within future research wanting to replicate the type of investigation and analysis conducted in the current study. However, to return to an important discussion introduced in chapter 1, this additional theme could also be drawn on in future research that wishes not to directly build on the research of this thesis, but to extend its parameters, taking it beyond a primary focus on the language and discourse of texts. These latter studies could incorporate more of a hermeneutic, emic, focus on the internal viewpoints of the church attendees themselves with respect to their internalization (their 'audience reception') of the texts analyzed in-depth in the current study. They would typically employ interview and other related methods in order to do so, as suggested at various points above.

By now, one can see that the type of research into, and analysis of, the language and meanings of texts exemplified by the current thesis would provide an essential backdrop for such hermeneutic, emic, studies. The analysis of this thesis makes clear the significance of the structural-discursive context in which attendees of megachurches internalize beliefs, emotions and dispositions. As such, this kind of analysis can provide an important platform upon which more hermeneutic studies – based, for example, on interviews, focus groups, and observation of in situ interactions - could ground their analyses, saving them from being overly free-floating, with inadequate reference to the character of what is being internalized (or, alternatively, resisted, refused) in various ways. The theme o*f low commitment – high security belonging*, developed as it has been from the close analysis of the text, is in fact underpinned by the theoretical supposition that such texts are typically powerful in the formation of habitus, through internalization. Whilst there is only so much that can be done to substantiate this supposition at the level of textual analysis, with limited hermeneutic, emic, analysis available, textual analysis does provide a very strong structural basis for such analyses, and hence for going on to test out the theoretical suppositions. In doing so it provides a robust basis for any hermeneutic extension of the research agenda, whether around issues of belonging or the internalization of any of the other five themes identified by the megachurch literature.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This thesis began with an indication of the significant and growing success of megachurches in drawing thousands (and in some cases, tens of thousands) of people into their pews at a time when small churches are struggling simply to keep their doors open. As examined in chapter two, the doubled-edged nature of radical modernity has produced a generalized sense of dis-ease and distrust, and it was discussed how this is coming to bear in the de-populating of church pews. In particular, it was observed that the *reflexivity* resulting from radical modernity has produced a liminal state in which what had previously been established as reliable knowledge is now repeatedly being challenged by new information. This has created a cyclical challenging of truth that destabilizes religious institutions and their adherents. At the same time, the thesis has argued that megachurch success can be best understood in terms of the human need to make meaning, that this need remains for many religious adherents who have left institutionalized religion, as they continue to seek out spiritual practices independent of formalized religion.

The empirical data generated by the research investigation into the three selected megachurches, and presented in chapters four, five and six, provided a basis for maintaining that there are strong grounds for holding that each church's distinctive co-sanctified lexicon functions to establish a habitus of safety and security for megachurch attendees despite the uneasy liminalities of radical modernity. This appears to play a significant role in the success of

all of these megachurches, enabling them to thrive, even while their surrounding culture was abandoning formal religious beliefs and practices

The qualitative analysis of the thesis has been informed and guided by five general themes that have emerged from the existing academic literature on megachurches and their success, with each theme indicating an aspect of the orientation of megachurches to contemporary conditions. These general themes are: *consumerism, individualism, therapeutic comfort, anti-establishment,* and *cultural relevancy.* Examining these themes through a framework combining sociological meta-theory, the sociology of language and religion, and theories of radical modernity, it was proposed that their emergence and prominence are most productively understood when placed in the context of radical modernity, but also that these themes are not nearly as common to *all* megachurches as earlier research had originally understood them to be, and thus they cannot be categorically generalized to all or even most megachurches.

The thesis has made it clear that the quantitative research of the Megachurch Today 2005 study discussed in chapter 2 (Thumma and Travis 2007) lacks the fine-grained conceptual and methodological tools necessary to grasp the specificities of the distinctive qualities of particular megachurches. From their quantitative research,[83] Thumma and Travis identified four distinctive streams of megachurches: *Old Line/Program-Based, Charismatic/Pastor-Focused, Seeker,* and *New Wave-Re-Envisioned*. These four streams identify clusters of typical

[83] A total of 406 megachurches responded to a survey questionnaire asking for information about location, worship type, number of services, attendance and building size, political typing (conservative, middle, liberal), program types, volunteer use, growth rate, leadership structure, etc.

characteristics of megachurches that are empirically measurable. This information is, without question, useful to a point. But, as noted earlier, it is too abstracted from actual, embedded, *in situ* processes to be able to account for the combination – the 'mix' – of general and particular elements that one finds in individual megachurches. Though only three megachurches have been examined in this research, the distillation of linguistic ethnographies has opened a depth of nuance that indicates that none of them fit well into any single one of the four streams identified by Thumma and Travis. While West Angeles is similar to the *Old Line/Program-Based* category in terms of being part of an established and well-recognized denomination with a dominant racial group, they do not fit the *Old Line/Program-Based* category because their worship is characterized by exuberance, they are demographically multi-generational, and their free classes move far beyond Christian education to classes about achieving a mortgage, studying for SATS, reducing street crime, etc. Their emphasis on a charismatic leader (Bishop Blake) and the filling of the holy spirit and both individual and collective demonstrative expressions of it would fit more aptly into the *Charismatic/Pastor-Focused* stream. Lakewood arguably fits the *Charismatic/Pastor-Focused* stream, given the power and charisma of Pastor Joel Osteen and his emphasis on God's healing powers. But unlike the *Charismatic/Pastor-Focused* stream described by Thumma and Travis, Lakewood does not emphasize the gifts of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues or prophesying, or animated singing and dancing among the congregants. As already noted, these would be practices more typical of West Angeles. Mars Hill in some ways fits the category of a *Seeker* church because of their unconventional approach to "doing church." But Mars Hill does not have a mission statement that is focused on

evangelism as is typical of seeker churches, and does not work with a business model. Instead, they are committed to layperson contributions and involvement. Mars Hill fits the stream of *New Wave/Re-Envisioned* in its emphasis on social activism. West Angeles fits the *New Wave/Re-Envision* stream in the way they embrace the traditional language of both Pentecostalism and their historic slave liturgy. But they do not teach journaling, fasting, or meditation as described by Thumma and Travis and *New Wave/Re-Envision*. Instead, they call for the gifts of the spirit to move powerfully within the individual and the community. While one could continue to outline in detail the various ways in which each church does and does not fit various streams, or fits more than one stream, it is clear that a qualitative, relational and contextualised, examination of the practices and processes of individual churches – in this case by way of linguistic ethnographies - reveals the significant limitations of Thumma and Travis' categories.

In developing the theoretical perspective designed to investigate the *in situ* success of each of the three megachurches – adding to the aspects of meta-theory and the theories of radical modernity already introduced - chapter three examined Fishman's concept of co-sanctified lexicons (situated within the sociology of language and religion), and Berger and Luckmann's theory of the primacy of language in the social construction of reality. Informed by these language theories, the methodology of discourse analysis was described and employed to conduct an extensive content analysis of the website of each of three large megachurches in the United States – Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas; West Angeles Church of God in Christ, Los Angeles, California; and Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan – to examine and

compare the nature and content of their website discourse, and its representation of communities and practices within this. The linguistic ethnography this produced demonstrated the power of language to create "immense edifices of symbolic representation that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world" (Berger 1967:54). In this case, language produced a myriad of powerful megachurch religious realities. When a sacred lexicon is merged with a vernacular lexicon to such a degree that the vernacular begins to outpace the sacred, a co-sanctified lexicon is created that potentially generates very powerful religious social realities, both at the level of individual habitus, and of collective total environment, plausibly evidenced by the high attendance success of the three megachurches examined in this study. The supposition of the thesis is that one would expect the orchestrated and continuous presentation of these 'realities' - these immense edifices of meaning - to exert a powerful force on the church attendees exposed to them, a powerful force towards the internalization of these meanings within the habitus of the members exposed to them.

This dynamic was seen in the chapter on Lakewood Church, which draws heavily on the deeply entrenched American ideology of rugged *individualism* that informs the American Dream, and on the cultural ideology of *consumerism*. At Lakewood, this vernacular lexicon is paired with the sacred lexicon of a God who is primarily present to bless His adherents with wealth, power, and privilege. The conflation of the rugged individualist with a God who desires individual success creates a sacred version of the American Dream, fully nested within the cultural values of *consumerism*. The Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon also fixedly valorizes Pastor Joel Osteen, granting him a quasi-God status, and his promises of individual wealth in

the name of God appear to be believed by many, given the energy star charisma status (Wellman et al. 2020) granted to him. This exponentially increases the reality constructing power of the Lakewood co-sanctified lexicon, generating a powerful sense of safety, security, and well-being offered to its attendees despite the vagaries of radical modernity.

As with Lakewood Church, we also saw the power of linguistic reality construction in the co-sanctified lexicon of West Angeles Church of God in Christ. But in direct contrast to Lakewood, West Angeles' co-sanctified lexicon eschews the values of individual wealth as fostered by the cultural value of *consumerism*, instead focusing on civic activism and local community neighbourhood development to improve the living and working conditions of the community at large. They marry this civic minded lexicon with a slave history informed by a sacred lexicon of salvation and freedom from bondage. As we saw, this co-sanctified lexicon is also deeply informed by the history of charismatic plantation prayer meetings and hush arbor worship. In this sense, West Angeles offers an *individualist* form of *therapeutic comfort* that functions collectively, and hence does not fit the description of *individualism* in the megachurch themes research. Their co-sanctified lexicon does not construct a reality informed by the expectation of wealth and success, but rather that of fairness and justice and expressive spirituality. More potently perhaps, it further constructs a habitus available to the individual in which the presence of God is viscerally felt within both the physical and social body. They have arrived at a conception of safety, security, and well-being via a significantly different route of language reality construction than the one embedded in the Lakewood discourse, yet it is

similar in also offering a meaningful version of safety, security, and well-being in the midst of the vagaries of radical modernity.

And like Lakewood and West Angeles, we also see the power of language to construct social realities in the co-sanctified lexicon of Mars Hill Bible Church. But in complete contrast to both Lakewood and West Angeles, the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon demonstrated what seems to be a highly nuanced awareness and understanding of the presence of many church refugees on the religious landscape – the somes and nones. This awareness, and its appeal, seems to be more reflexive than that represented in the discourses of the first two churches. With the metaphors of story and journey as their foundation stones, Mars Hill is very careful to avoid truth claims, and instead offers more open-ended explorations of truth. For those on the cusp of vacating church pews altogether, this allows for a sense of collective conversation that does not prescribe where and when you must arrive if you wish to stay in the conversation. It was seen that the Mars Hill co-sanctified lexicon practices a sophisticated linguistic convergence between the elements of evangelical Christianity and the deep frustrations and suspicions of church refugees. The only one of the five megachurch themes that is notably present at Mars Hill is that of *anti-establishment*. To the same degree that West Angeles eschews *consumerism*, Mars Hill eschews all things institutionalized, from their sparse physical gathering place to their lack of pastoral leadership to their behaviours around reducing environmental harm and consumption. The other four megachurch themes are not present at Mars Hill in the ways described in the megachurch research. For the church refugee adrift, having rejected their own religious commitments due to the *reflexivity* produced by radical

modernity, Mars Hill, too, in its own distinctive way, offers safety, security, and well-being in the midst of the vagaries of radical modernity.

As has been argued in examining each of the megachurch co-sanctified lexicons, these communities of discourse exhibit symbolic edifices capable of creating “self-contained and self-sustaining environment[s]” (Carney 2012:61). Through their extensive and influential co-sanctified lexicons, each one very different from the other, the three megachurches in this study have each created an immense presence that, in their externalization and objectivation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:78-9), offers variations of safety, prosperity, meaning, and belonging within the dis-ease and disequilibrium of the broader cultural context of radical modernity. The doors of smaller churches are closing because they have not accurately “read” and adjusted to the deeply embedded individual and collective stories of trauma, anxiety and sense of being adrift that have been created by the juggernaut of modernity. The absence of such astute adaptation has, in turn, produced a growing skepticism among increasing numbers of departing members about the value of small church leadership’s expectations of members, requiring them to make cognitive and other commitments that are controlling and theologically narrow.

As explored in detail above, the capacity of language to construct a reality for attendees that can be experienced as a safehold habitus is evident in the functions and processes of the three megachurches studied. Two of the three megachurches in this study make strong truth claims (Lakewood and West Angeles), but they do so without requiring dutiful and obligatory commitments from their attendees. Hence those who are skittish about a church gaining overt

power over them likely do not recognize the covert power of these co-sanctified lexicons, or perhaps they do recognize this whilst also intuitively appreciating the spaces provided in these megachurches for greater personal autonomy than is granted to members of more traditional church communities. The importance of this sense of autonomy alongside the significance of a sense of community and collective power was recognized in the introduction of a new megachurch theme, that of *Low Commitment – High Security Belonging.* Mars Hill, in turn, makes very minimal truth claims relative to Lakewood and West Angeles, intentionally creating a co-sanctified lexicon which "owns" that it cannot and will not make a host of truth claims. But, it is argued, like Lakewood and West Angeles, its co-sanctified lexicon nevertheless can also function as a basis for the formation of a safehold habitus within its attendees. A further commonality that all three of these megachurches share in relation to their sacred and influential co-sanctified lexicons is their relationship to liminality. Turner, who first employed the concept of liminality – a threshold experience – suggests that it is the space between structure and anti-structure (Bigger 2009). Structure involves social status, authority, and power – which, it should be added, take on distinctive characteristics within the milieu of late modernity - and anti-structure is the felt pressure to change, and the creative responses that result from that pressure. This liminal space of anti-structure emerges when the need for change feels greatest, here defying the authority and power (structure) of radical modernity, and offering "positive anti-structural activities" (Bigger 2009:210), new ways of thinking, and being. This is what each of these three megachurches has achieved. Selectively engaging the megachurch themes in creative ways that speak to the disequilibrium created by radical

modernity, they have intuitively or otherwise felt the pulse of the refugees flooding out of church doors. And they have offered a "creative and generative moment" (Kapferer 2008:6) with minimal commitment or cost, one that offers belonging, and fits within the values and institutions of late modernity to varying degrees (consumerism, individualism, therapeutic comfort, anti-establishment and cultural relevance). They have achieved this through their co-sanctified lexicons, each unique and distinctive in comparison to the other two. Inevitably, in the process, the hegemonic power of these megachurches' co-sanctified lexicons becomes, potentially, a new form of authority and power (structure), but this is a form that is much more palatable to their members, whilst also offering a haven of collective security and shelter from the storms of the contemporary world.

While the social locations, ideologies and theologies of each megachurch are significantly different from each other, what they share as a commonality, it has been argued, is the power to create and offer potent co-sanctified lexicons to their attendees. These co-sanctified lexicons selectively harness the phenomena identified by the themes established in previous research, and these then serve as the basis for offering a shared total environment and also individual habitus of safety and belonging, quelling and subduing the dis-ease and disequilibrium produced by radical modernity.

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