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**MEGACHURCHES CAN HAVE MEGA PROBLEMS – INSIGHTS FROM
TOXIC LEADERSHIP IN MODERN MEGACHURCHES**

Brandon Billings

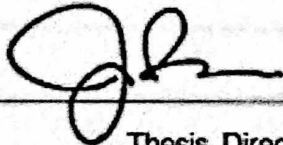
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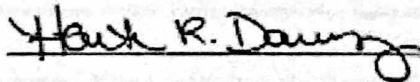
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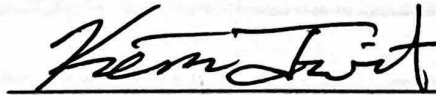
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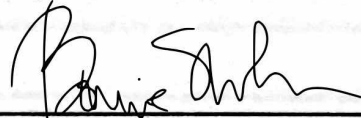
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MEGACHURCHES CAN HAVE MEGA PROBLEMS – INSIGHTS FROM TOXIC
LEADERSHIP IN MODERN MEGACHURCHES

Brandon Billings

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Belmont University Honors Program

Abstract

The Christian megachurch is a relatively recent phenomenon, championing new ideals and theological practices for faith communities around the world. Megachurches, by definition, are Christian churches that consist of over a thousand attendees. Most megachurches are independent from a denomination – a characteristic that brings a multitude of advantages as well as challenges. One specific challenge for megachurches is the problem of potential abuse by pastors that are characterized by toxic and destructive leadership. In recent years, many Christians, as well as non-Christians, have been shocked by the number of megachurch pastors revealed as bullies, narcissists, or sexual assailants. Although incidents often impact a single church, the reasons behind toxic leadership in megachurches are often similar. By examining three American megachurch pastors, Mark Driscoll from Mars Hill Church, Bill Hybels from Willow Creek Community Church, and James MacDonald from Harvest Bible Chapel, one can discover how a church's failure to govern itself properly could potentially cripple a thriving faith community in a matter of days. Evidence from recent megachurch moral failures suggests a correlation between toxic leadership and a lack of accountability in independent single leader-focused churches. However, an accountability structure alone is not enough to stop abusive pastors – church structures need to consist of members that have both the willpower and resources to recognize destructive behaviors from leadership and take decisive action. In order to prevent such tragedies, independent megachurches must learn how to diffuse power, subject themselves to legitimate accountability structures, and partner with elders and church members that protect abuse survivors over systems that protect abusers.

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I: Introduction

What is Wrong?

Success. Gaslighting. Megachurches. Manipulation. Jesus. These five words should not belong together. However, after a closer look, it seems as if they are, at times, deeply intertwined. A new wave of concern is sweeping throughout the Church in the United States about abusive leadership. Church researchers and laypeople have noticed the dismissal of several beloved pastors from their churches because of serious allegations of sexual or emotional abuse. Professor at Western Theological Seminary, licensed therapist, and author, Chuck DeGroat voices his concern in his book *When Narcissism Comes to Church*. He writes, “Sadly, in recent years we’ve witnessed too many instances of charismatic Christian leaders gaining a massive following, both within the church and on social media, only to be exposed as manipulative, abusive, and dictatorial.”¹ These megachurch pastors are not just local leaders; they preach to national audiences through podcasts, books, and television programs. Just as their influence is great, so is their exposure when abuse occurs. Several newspapers and magazines have exposed cherished pastors in a single instant. Nancy Beach, a woman that was repeatedly sexually assaulted by a megachurch pastor, asks the question, “How could he have done all this good... when there were such dark things happening behind the scenes?”²

The megachurch is the “stage” on which this discussion of pastoral leadership will focus. It is necessary to understand the roots of the megachurch before ever trying to grasp why pastoral abuse might occur in megachurches. Engaging with the abusive megachurch pastor phenomenon

¹ Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 23.

Note: DeGroat’s categorization of “charismatic” refers to a leadership style rather than the theological category of “charismatic.” Throughout the rest of this thesis, the term “charismatic” will continue to refer to a leadership style.

² Laurie Goodstein, “He’s a Superstar Pastor. She Worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/us/bill-hybels-willow-creek-pat-baranowski.html>.

means first engaging with megachurch values, organizational structure, and terminology. By examining academic studies from religious institutions, historical sources, and popular culture, a sufficient background can be cast for a discussion about the leadership model behind these types of massive churches.

As the church in the West grows and evolves, a new ecclesiology is being written. Christianity is headed into uncharted territory. The core values of the faith remain the same, but its manifestations and practice are changing with culture. The megachurch is one of the newest phenomena in the Church, and some are even saying it is “surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last thirty years.”³ In his article “Historicizing the Megachurch,” David E. Eagle provides much-needed context surrounding the principles and roots of the American megachurch. The prefix *mega* has multiple implications beyond referring to the church’s attendance, which is typically above a thousand attendees. Megachurches typically offer a plethora of personalized programs and a desire to “achieve broader cultural importance.”⁴ Theologically, megachurches are generally Protestant with conservative-leaning theology. Eagle notes that theological leaning is not directly correlated to high attendance, but more correlated to conservative evangelicalism being the dominant theological leaning of the United States.

Pastors of megachurches typically have massive influence. The term “celebrity pastor” recently became synonymous with “megachurch pastor.” Many celebrity pastors are making waves on social media sites like Instagram and Twitter, drawing follower counts in the hundreds of thousands. The celebrity pastor persona has appeared even in popular satire websites such as

³ David E. Eagle, “Historicizing the Megachurch,” *Journal of Social History Advance Access*, February 25, 2015, http://people.duke.edu/~dee4/articles/eagle_hist_megachurch.pdf, 2.

⁴ Eagle, 3.

The Babylon Bee, with headlines such as “Megachurch Stage Collapses Under Pastor's Massive Ego.”⁵ In April 2019, the Instagram account “Preachers and Sneakers” broke into the mainstream conversation about celebrity pastors. Posts on this page show influential pastors sporting rare and expensive shoes like Yeezy and Off-White, calling the spending habits of wealthy megachurch pastors into question.⁶ However, just like a celebrity in Hollywood, when a celebrity pastor makes a poor decision, their downfall is judged from every angle, yielding news stories, blog posts, and podcasts. By studying several megachurches, an observer is able to draw a common thread of conclusions about celebrity pastor leadership.

Every church has different processes and standards of accountability depending on their denominational affiliation (or lack thereof). Whether big or small, all churches claim to have a protocol or hierarchy in order to operate smoothly. Churches are run by either an Elder board, the congregation, a single leader, or managed by an outside organization. At its core, church accountability refers to checks and balances for leaders. Most Protestant churches subscribe to one of three different models of church government: Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational leadership models. Each model offers particular strengths and weaknesses, full of diverse voices that participate in what pastors believe is the most responsible and biblical way to organize the local church. Understanding church structure is essential in knowing not only how abusive pastors make their way into positions of power, but also preventing abusive pastors from acquiring power in the first place.

Megachurch “scandals” are not simply about any single pastor that makes one mistake. When a pastor’s moral failure is highly publicized, it is often because of deliberate and

⁵ The Babylon Bee, “Megachurch Stage Collapses Under Pastor's Massive Ego,” *The Babylon Bee*, March 3, 2017. <https://babylonbee.com/news/megachurch-stage-collapses-pastors-massive-ego>.

⁶ Rick Rojas, “Let He Who Is Without Yeezys Cast the First Stone,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/nyregion/preachers-sneakers-instagram-account.html>.

continuous manipulation, abuse, and oppression upon church members or other staff members. The ministries of Mark Driscoll (Mars Hill Church), Bill Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church), and James MacDonald (Harvest Bible Chapel) will be investigated in this thesis, including discussions about each pastor's leadership style, the church's theological foundations, governmental structure, and response to the highly-publicized allegations. There is a significant lack of published literature about megachurch pastors that have experienced high-profile moral scandals. In part, it is because many of these scandals are happening in real-time. The majority of sources about toxic pastoral leadership are written within the context of a specific situation itself but do not explore the larger issue of abusive megachurch pastors. The most accessible resources about abusive megachurch pastors are primary news sources or first-person accounts. What individual news stories lack is synthesis – many of them report the facts of each individual situation without detailing the emotional trauma and wreckage that abusive pastors left in their wake. A discussion about these three pastors can reveal a common thread that connects authoritarian church leadership that lacks sufficient accountability related to widely-publicized pastor scandals. Each pastor will be evaluated on four specific criteria: leadership style, theological foundations, church structure, and response to allegations.

Why Does This Matter?

Chuck DeGroat writes, “Respected celebrity pastors are navigating scandals involving adultery, abuse, gaslighting, plagiarism, financial malpractice, and more... [These situations] prompt more than a little curiosity and wonder. Might we be in a moment of reckoning?”⁷ DeGroat encourages pastors and lay leaders in the church to look beyond “curiosity and wonder,” opening a dialogue about the reasons why toxic – and often narcissistic – leadership

⁷ DeGroat, 115.

makes its way into church doors. Henri Nouwen, an honored Christian contemplative once wrote, “The long, painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led.”⁸ Understanding the factors that contribute to abusive leadership in the church will help local church leaders resist the temptations that Nouwen so poignantly voices. Evidence from recent megachurch moral failures suggests a correlation between toxic leadership and a lack of accountability in independent single leader-focused churches. However, an accountability structure alone is not enough to stop abusive pastors – church structures need to consist of members that have both the willpower and resources to recognize destructive behaviors from leadership and take decisive action. In order to prevent such tragedies, independent megachurches must be unequivocally committed to ideals that protect abuse survivors over systems that protect abusers. In order for a local church to guard against toxic pastoral leadership, recovery and prevention must be central to the conversation. By practicing compliance, truth-telling, repentance, and growing in empathy, churches that suffered through toxic leadership can begin to heal.⁹

⁸ Henri Nouwen, *In The Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, 1989), 60.

⁹ Before continuing, an important disclaimer must be made. It is understood that all of the pastors being examined in this work are white men that identify with the Evangelical Protestant movement. The research in this thesis will steer clear of conversations about gender and race, focusing on leadership style, theology, and church accountability structures. It would take an entire book rather than an undergraduate thesis to delve deep into gender and race criticism of American Protestantism.

II: Governing God's People

What is The Biblical Vision of Leadership?

The first place to look to for wisdom on church leadership should be the New Testament. Unfortunately, there is not a universally agreed-upon method of church government; however, there are several passages that highlight aspects of a healthy Christian community especially in regards to its leadership structure: 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, Acts 6:1-6., and Acts 15:1-35.¹⁰ 1 Timothy 3:1-13 is the most specific of these passages. It first lists a host of qualifications for “overseers,” including: “above reproach,” “sober-minded,” “self-controlled,” and “not a lover of money.” Verses 8-13 then describe the specific qualifications for “deacons,” which include: “not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, and not greedy for dishonest gain.” Titus 1:5-9 echoes many of the same requirements as 1 Timothy 3 for overseers, including: “above reproach,” and not “arrogant or quick-tempered.” It also charges overseers to be “hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.”

In Acts 6:1-6, the twelve disciples elected “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to meet the needs of their community so that the twelve could stay committed to prayer and the preaching of the Word. Dr. Darrell W. Johnson, professor at Regent College, draws four central requirements for Christian leadership. By drawing from these three passages, Johnson presents four themes: commitment to Christ, conviction, competency, and character.¹¹ Although Acts 15:1-35 does not list qualifications of church leaders, it does offer insight into how the early church conducted church conflict. In Acts 15, early believers met in Jerusalem to discuss whether circumcision was an issue of salvation. The text mentions that they

¹⁰ Biblical references will use the English Standard Version.

¹¹ Darrell W. Johnson, “Biblical Requirements of Leaders,” *Christianity Today*, July 12, 2007, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/july-online-only/le-040329.html>.

gathered together, debated their perspectives, and brought the Hebrew prophets into the discussion as well. After agreeing that Gentiles need not be circumcised for salvation, the early church leaders composed a letter to circulate around the churches so that they would be unified in thought.

The problem is that these passages can be interpreted in different ways, yielding several different Biblical implementations of church governance and leadership. The traits and characteristics of a healthy church outlined in the Biblical text are mostly objective, but the *implementation* of those characteristics is often subjective. Local churches are left to decide for themselves what they believe to be the most robust and Biblical version of church governance.

The History of the Megachurch

The megachurch did not emerge as a “brand” until the 1980’s when churches like Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Community Church (now Saddleback Church) rapidly expanded. David Eagle, however, argues that the modern megachurch’s roots were present long before it became popular in the West. As early as 1601, French Protestants were dreaming up sanctuaries that held upwards of ten thousand congregants. The designer of this concept, Huguenot Jacquet Perret, also saw this space as viable for community events.¹² Revivalist preachers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as George Whitefield and Charles Spurgeon also dreamt of large worship spaces. In fact, Spurgeon regularly preached at the largest Protestant church in his time which seated nearly six thousand listeners. Spurgeon’s church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, was also the type of community hub that Perret envisioned, holding an orphanage, Sunday School, and much more.¹³

¹² Eagle, 4-5.

¹³ Eagle, 5-6.

Protestants in the United States soon followed suit. By the twentieth century, American Protestants were also building huge worship spaces. Many of these spaces built after 1900 were large, multi-tiered sanctuaries with a heavy focus on the events occurring on the stage. “Mass Evangelism” – a congregational (rather than denominational) movement was sweeping the United States and was the predecessor to the modern American megachurch. Church leaders committed themselves to utilizing large meeting spaces, contemporary music and preaching, and accommodating services towards their congregants.¹⁴ Soon, massive youth rallies, “crusades,” and celebrity evangelists emerged.¹⁵ These characteristics laid the foundation for the twenty-first century American megachurch.

Many megachurches today are often categorized as “seeker-friendly” or “seeker-sensitive.” In seeker-driven megachurches, “teachings and operations are tailored in order to align the ‘product’ to the preferences of the consumer market.”¹⁶ Valuable “products” are offered to draw in potential church seekers. Services such as exceptional children’s programming, coffee shops, large gathering spaces, and well-executed worship services from those on stage are meant to attract seekers and keep them coming back.¹⁷ Robbie B. H. Goh from the National University of Singapore, in his work “Hillsong and ‘Megachurch’ Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism” explains how the physical space and architecture of the megachurch is utilized to create an intimately personal worship experience. He examines the architecture of Hillsong Church – a massive megachurch in Australia that is

¹⁴ Eagle, 9-10.

¹⁵ Here, a “crusade” is not referring to the religious wars in the Middle Ages – the term was reclaimed by evangelical leaders to describe large evangelistic revival meetings.

¹⁶ Matthew Wade, “Seeker-Friendly: The Hillsong Megachurch as an Enchanting Total Institution,” *Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 4 (December 2016): 661–76. doi:10.1177/1440783315575171.

¹⁷ Stewart M. Hoover, “Megachurch,” *Contemporary American Religion* (edited by Wade Clark Roof, vol. 2, Macmillan Reference USA) 1999, pp. 436-437. Gale eBooks, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3401300281/GVRL?u=tel_a_belmont&sid=GVRL&xid=1d8e123a, Accessed 19 Sept. 2019.

known worldwide for its music ministries (Hillsong Worship/Hillsong United/Hillsong Young & Free). Goh notes that “The use of predominantly dark colors – black, dark gray, dark blue – in the interiors also reinforces the open layout, making the physical church structure (as it were) disappear, helping to induct the individual worshiper... into a personal experience of a spiritual state that transcends the concretely physical.”¹⁸

The 2015 Megachurch Report from Hartford Seminary, an ecumenical graduate school in Hartford, Connecticut, is one of the most reliable metrics for understanding megachurch changes and growth. This report notes that megachurches, at their core, are people-oriented. They are community hubs designed to draw people to worship and to have fellowship with each other. However, many of these congregants will not meet each other because of the sheer size of the gathering. To encourage more personal interactions between congregants, megachurches often emphasize small group communities, which are typically weekly Bible studies with a small number of church attendees.¹⁹ Hartford’s 2015 Report notes that churches with a greater emphasis on small groups believe they have stronger spiritual vitality.²⁰

Hartford’s Report also highlighted another recent shift in megachurches – the shift to a “multi-site” model. Megachurches that operate as multisite campuses typically have one large main “broadcast” campus alongside several smaller satellite campuses. These small campuses usually have live music and in-person staff, but stream the sermon from the broadcast campus. According to Hartford’s research, more megachurches are trending towards adopting this multi-site model. In 2015, sixty-two percent of megachurches utilized the multi-site model, compared

¹⁸ Robbie B.H. Goh, “Hillsong and ‘Megachurch’ Practice: Semiotics, Spatial Logic and the Embodiment of Contemporary Evangelical Protestantism,” *Material Religion* 4 (3): 284–305, 2015, 294.

¹⁹ Hoover, “Megachurch.”

²⁰ Scott Thuma, Ph.D., and Warren Bird, Ph.D. “Recent Shifts in America’s Largest Protestant Churches: Megachurches 2015 Report.” *Leadership Network & Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, 2015, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/2015_Megachurches_Report.pdf, 4.

to only forty-six percent in 2010. This allows churches to “maintain a smaller physical size, grow larger and, as evidenced by the survey findings, grow faster than single-site megachurches.”²¹ Multi-site churches are, in theory, infinitely scalable. They no longer rely on one physical building to hold all of their congregants. Instead, they can utilize several smaller campuses to spread their reach more cost-effectively.

The Governance of the Megachurch

It is clear that megachurches are complex entities and are individually unique. However, many megachurches share common characteristics. According to Hartford Seminary’s 2015 Megachurch Report, nearly forty percent of megachurches identify as nondenominational. Even if those surveyed megachurches did identify with a denomination, they indicated that denominational ties were loose.²² Just by their name, it is evident that nondenominational churches do not submit themselves to the authority of a denomination. For many churches, this can be liberating. Nondenominational congregations are often able to use finances more freely and they are not required to adhere to a particular denomination’s theology. Some denominations allow their churches act independently, sharing many characteristics with nondenominational churches. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention – the largest Protestant denomination in the United States – has unifying principles and beliefs, but each member church maintains autonomy.²³ Although it is *technically* a denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention acts more like a network or association of churches since they have no governing body. In regards to polity, the SBC-affiliated church and nondenominational church are both independent – they govern themselves. They may be accountable to elders in their church and part of a greater

²¹ Thuma and Bird, 4.

²² Thuma and Bird, 10.

²³ “The Southern Baptist Convention: A Closer Look,” Southern Baptist Convention: Reaching the World for Christ. Southern Baptist Convention, Accessed March 14, 2020, <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/acloserlook.asp>.

network, but the church ultimately decides who is in charge, and there is no outside organization for oversight.

In 1948, a handful of early celebrity pastors held several meetings in Modesto, California to plan the governance of their large ministries. As a result of this, Billy Graham, Cliff Barrows, George Beverly Shea, and Grady Wilson drafted The Modesto Manifesto. Graham wrote about these meetings in his autobiography *Just As I Am*. Graham wrote that the Manifesto was “an informal understanding among ourselves—a shared commitment to do all we could do to uphold the Bible’s standard of absolute integrity and purity for evangelists.”²⁴

Money was the first item on the list. As public figures outside of a church or formal organization, they had no method of financial accountability. So, these faith leaders committed to raising funds locally rather than succumbing to “the temptation to wring as much money as possible out of an audience.”²⁵ Sexual integrity was also noted. Since these pastors traveled often, they knew that there would be a temptation to be unfaithful. The “Billy Graham rule” was born – they committed to not meeting, eating, or traveling alone with women who were not their wives. These leaders also committed themselves to the local church and pledged not to disparage clergy or other faith leaders – they sought to be a unifying force for the gospel. The final commitment that Billy Graham and his team made was to integrity with the press. They wanted to be honest about reporting attendance and other metrics.²⁶ These values were foundational for megachurches and celebrity pastors in the future and are still implemented by many megachurches.²⁷

²⁴ Billy Graham, “On This Date: The Modesto Manifesto,” The Billy Graham Library, October 24, 2017, <https://billygrahamlibrary.org/on-this-date-the-modesto-manifesto/>.

²⁵ Graham, “On This Date: The Modesto Manifesto.”

²⁶ Graham, “On This Date: The Modesto Manifesto.”

²⁷ From my personal experience as a music directing intern in 2018, Saddleback Church, a 40,000-member megachurch in Southern California still abides by several of these principles.

Major Models of Church Leadership

It is beneficial to discuss church government in a discussion about toxic pastoral leadership in megachurches. One might wonder: is there a central problem in how megachurches typically govern themselves that allows for such destructive behavior? Churches that are planted out of a denomination are essentially instructed how to govern their churches, because it must align with that denomination's style of governance. On the other hand, the independent megachurch has the freedom to *choose* their model and decide the rules: who has authority, how decisions are made, and how staff is held accountable. By studying the major models of church leadership, an independent megachurch is able to wisely choose how to organize their particular church government.

Steve B. Cowan's introduction for *Four Views on Church Government: Who Runs the Church* immediately answers a vital question: why does church government matter? It is not an issue of salvation, after all. However, Cowan asserts that "the issue of church government may not be a doctrine crucial to the *esse* (being) of the church, but it is a doctrine crucial to the *bene esse* (well-being) of the church and vital to its spiritual health."²⁸ The reason church government is a critical issue is because the spiritual health of a church depends on it. If a church is run improperly – whether it is by the tyranny of a single leader or complacent leadership altogether – the church's spiritual health suffers. A church's governing structure *should* provide proper checks and balances. The structure can be the difference between a pastor causing harm or being blocked from making destructive decisions.

Most scholars would say that three major ideologies of church leadership have emerged from the Christian tradition: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Cowan's text gives

²⁸ Steve B. Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government*, Edited by Paul E. Engle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 11.

a detailed, yet concise breakdown of each ideology. In *Four Views on Church Government*, four different faith leaders write about the method of church government they prefer and why. Then, the authors of the other perspectives respond with critiques and questions. The responsive model gives a robust and balanced perspective of each method. Derivatives of each model are plentiful, especially within congregationalism. In the midst of such variety, the authors of each chapter offer the most traditional position. Paige Patterson, who defends single-elder congregationalism, says that “one must acknowledge that any reading of the New Testament reveals examples of all three forms of church government, or at least provides passages which could be so interpreted.”²⁹ An overview of styles of church governance can reveal whether any system is more vulnerable when a destructive and manipulative leader is operating within such a system.³⁰

Episcopal Model

Reverend Dr. Peter Toon, a rector in the Church of England, offers what Cowan calls a “moderate” view of Episcopal church governance. The word “episcopal” comes from the Greek word for “bishop,” which Toon notes as the unifying factor among different waves of Episcopal thought. He defines “bishop” as “a subgroup within the totality of all its ordained pastors or ministers.”³¹ Different Episcopal groups define bishops differently. Those in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Eastern, Anglican, and a handful of other traditions identify a bishop as a pastor above deacon and presbyter. In these traditions, the bishop is categorized in a more holy and unique order of ministry, identifying with the tradition of “apostolic succession.”³² Other Episcopal traditions such as Methodists and Lutherans view the bishop as a “superintendent” of a

²⁹ Cowan, 147.

³⁰ This thesis will reference highlights from each section and give a brief overview of each model, but will not offer a full scope of how each system operates. For full disclosure, I currently attend a Presbyterian (PCA) church, and am partial to that model of leadership. Despite this, I will attempt to be as unbiased as possible in my analysis of the models of church leadership.

³¹ Cowan, 21.

³² Cowan, 21.

region that consists of multiple churches. In this case, even though a bishop may preside over a region, they are not more holy or distinct in terms of hierarchy. A bishop's role in an Episcopalian system is most directly connected to their authority as ordained ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Secondly, an Episcopal bishop participates in a "partial" continuation of the apostolic succession through their authority over issues like corporate worship, doctrine, and church discipline.³³

Even though the bishop is in charge of the church, synods rule dioceses and provinces. A synod contains a house of bishops, a house of clergy, and a house of laity. In Episcopal governments, the synod is central. In a strictly operational setting, the Episcopal church operates similarly to the Roman Catholic Church government. However, in terms of theology, Episcopalians reject the papacy where Roman Catholics affirm it. This is what makes Episcopalians Protestant by nature. Toon even refers to Episcopalian government as "reformed Catholic."³⁴ In addition to this distinction, each nation of Episcopal churches is independent of one another, with a few exceptions. Toon offers an example, noting that the Anglican Church of Uganda operates independently from the Anglican Church of Canada, and vice versa. In order to keep churches generally on the same page theologically, there are some "instruments of unity" – documents that outline distinct theological positions. Toon notes that as the Anglican church has progressed into the twenty-first century, theological leanings have become more divisive.

The Episcopal structure hinges on a handful of key theological doctrines. Toon describes them simply as "One, Two, Three, Four, and Five." Episcopalians believe in "*one* canon of Scripture with *two* testaments, *three* creeds (Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian...), *four* ecumenical councils (from Nicea in AD 325 to Chalcedon in 451...), and *five* centuries of

³³ Cowan, 36.

³⁴ Cowan, 23.

historical development.”³⁵ This is another area in which Episcopalians distinguish themselves theologically from Catholic thought.

Presbyterian Model

In *Four Views on Church Government*, Dr. L. Roy Taylor, “stated clerk” of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), gives his defense for a Presbyterian structure of church government. The term “Presbyterian,” Taylor remarks, is a term describing church government rather than a theological system. In political terms, Taylor offers a general analogy that Presbyterians operate similarly to a representative republic.³⁶ Presbyterianism, like Episcopalianism, consists of several hierarchical levels that span across geographical regions. In the Presbyterian model, the first level is the local church. “Above” the local church is the presbytery – a “court of ministers and ruling elders” that represent a small region. Above the presbytery is the synod. A synod also consists of ministers and ruling elders but is over a larger geographical region than the presbytery. The general assembly is the largest church court in the Presbyterian model, consisting of more ministers and ruling elders from “the entire denomination.”³⁷ The congregation of a Presbyterian church has a responsibility to make decisions as well. A local congregation elects elders to a regional session, as well as votes on a pastor for their local congregation. However, the presbytery must give their stamp of approval before establishing that pastor in that church. Presbyterian churches have deacons as well, but they are not ruling elders, but rather “a ministry of mercy.”³⁸

One of the key aspects of the Presbyterian government is that they are “connectional,” as Taylor describes. He says that Presbyterian churches “see themselves as part of the larger church,

³⁵ Cowan, 23-24.

³⁶ Cowan, 74.

³⁷ Cowan, 75.

³⁸ Cowan, 75.

that local churches are not independent but are accountable to the larger church, and that local churches do not minister alone but in cooperation with the larger church.”³⁹ Much like Episcopal churches, Presbyterian churches rely specifically on the networking of their denomination to thrive, managing processes such as minister ordination and church discipline.

Congregational Model

The congregational model is the model upon which this conversation will most focus. At the time of the head pastor’s moral failure, Mars Hill Church, Willow Creek Community Church, and Harvest Bible Chapel were all independent churches holding to a congregational model. Mars Hill belonged to the Acts 29 Network and Harvest Bible Chapel belonged to the Southern Baptist Convention. Despite their various associations, all of these churches were congregational by nature.

Just like the Episcopalian and Presbyterian models, there are many different varieties of the congregational model. In *Four Views on Church Government*, two types of congregational leadership are presented – single-elder and plural elder congregationalism. Single-elder congregationalism is defended by Paige Patterson, former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS).⁴⁰ Congregationalists generally subscribe to two defining theologies. The first of these is church autonomy. Patterson explains that autonomous congregations are “a law unto themselves. However, it turns out this autonomy is limited since it

³⁹ Cowan, 75.

⁴⁰ An important disclaimer must be made before moving forward. In May 2018, thousands of women wrote Paige Patterson a letter demanding that he apologize for objectifying comments towards a teenage girl in a sermon. Not long after Patterson apologized, he was fired from his position at SWBTS for lying about rape allegations, withholding documents, and “attempting to ‘break down’ a victim of a recent rape incident.” However, despite Patterson’s moral failures, his explanation of single-elder congregationalism is valid. One might even draw a connection between Patterson’s moral failures and his support of single-elder congregationalism. See sources for more information:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/05/10/southern-baptist-leader-apologizes-for-sermon-example-about-teenage-girls-physical-appearance/>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/may/paige-patterson-fired-southwestern-baptist-seminary-sbc.html>

‘operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.’”⁴¹ The other tenant of congregational government is the belief in two church offices: pastor and deacon.

Paige Patterson specifically explains the single-elder version of congregationalism and why he subscribes to it. By “single-elder,” Patterson is referring to the head of a local church as one singular individual elder (usually a “senior pastor”) rather than a group of elders with equal authority. He gives several reasons for his preference. First, Patterson says that in the Bible, God generally called single leaders at a time, such as the judges and early church leaders. Second, he sees senior pastors as a pattern through church history. Not only does Patterson trace single-elder rule through early church history, Patterson also asserts that the structure of the Jewish synagogue system endorses a single-elder view.

Samuel E. Waldron, professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, prefers a plural-elder approach. Waldron embraces congregationalism for the same reasons that Patterson does: democracy and independence. However, Waldron explains why he and many others subscribe to a plural-elder version of congregationalism rather than single-elder. One of Waldron’s reasons for plural-elder leadership is because he asserts that there is not a single New Testament church with a single-elder structure, an exact argument that Patterson used to defend the single-elder rule.⁴² Waldron also says that there is biblical evidence for an elder system where every elder has the same authority in the church. Waldron does not see a distinction in the Biblical text between ruling and teaching elders. To him, a ruling and teaching elder is one and the same, meaning that teaching pastors/elders also hold power to govern the church.

⁴¹ Cowan, 138.

⁴² Cowan, 212.

Conclusion

There is great variety in perspectives on church governance and leadership in the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational models. Each model manages authority, organization, and association in different ways. After examining distinguishing factors between each methodology of church leadership, modern megachurch leadership most coincides with the single-leader and plural-elder congregational approaches. One might argue that the congregational approach functions properly when the system is led by healthy individuals and driven by a servant-leadership-minded culture. But, when an entire system is under the charisma and charm of a toxic leader, the congregation could never, and would never, be able to remove that pastor from their role because they are bound under his spell, revealing a significant potential for abuse to be perpetuated. In the next chapter, it will be evident how three particular leaders manipulated an independent congregationalist structure to commit acts of spiritual and physical abuse.

III: A Case Study of Three Megachurches

Introduction

There is no agreed-upon metric of the total pastors removed from their position of influence because of destructive behavior. Not enough research exists to determine such a number. However, a few incidents have risen to the top of the media's attention. The pastors in this case study are some of the most prominent examples of destructive church leadership in the twenty-first century thus far. The church leaders – Mark Driscoll, Bill Hybels, and James MacDonald – were celebrities within the Evangelical Protestant community. They were respected authors, inspiring leaders, and faithful preachers. All three of these pastors failed significantly in unique ways. Despite the unique circumstances surrounding each pastor's departure, their situations also share striking similarities. The following case study intends to highlight notable factors from each church and their respective leader. The evaluation of each church is a reflection more of the individual leader and the culture they cultivated at that church.⁴³ The destruction that Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald caused is tragic and should be understood with a sense of gravity. Real people were hurt by the leadership of these three pastors. However, tragic events should not be ignored – they should be examined and evaluated so as to not be repeated.

Criteria

The case study will evaluate each church leader on four different criteria: leadership style, theological foundations and traditions, church structure and governance, and their response to the allegations.⁴⁴ By using these four criteria, common connections between each story of

⁴³ In no way does this case study intend to entirely condemn the ministry of a single church nor anyone that currently or has previously worked at Mars Hill, Willow Creek, or Harvest Bible Chapel. The goal of discussing these churches is to make observations about church leadership and draw together common themes.

⁴⁴ The theological foundations of each church will not be discussed in full – rather, certain key issues will be highlighted to find out if the three churches share similar foundational beliefs and theologies.

abuse will be revealed. Although each of these pastors led different churches in different places at different times, evidence shows that these pastors' actions are not all that dissimilar.

Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church

Introduction

Mark Driscoll was one of the most popular pastors in America in 2009. His church, Mars Hill Church, and his church planting network, Acts 29, were thriving. Driscoll was known for his unorthodox preaching style, often cursing and discussing graphic sexual topics in his messages on Sunday mornings. His sermons were also lengthy – some often lasting for over an hour. Driscoll marked a resurgence of the “new Calvinism” movement. In a piece written about Driscoll in *The New York Times*, his theology was summed up as: “you are not captain of your soul or master of your fate but a depraved worm whose hard work and good deeds will get you nowhere, because God marked you for heaven or condemned you to hell before the beginning of time.”⁴⁵ Mars Hill Church marked themselves by departing from the typical, suburban, straight-laced megachurch. Instead, Mars Hill was edgy, tattooed, and unabashed. At its peak, Mars Hill Church operated over fifteen congregations in five different states with a total attendance of 13,000 people.⁴⁶

Everything changed for Mars Hill between 2013 and 2014. Driscoll was accused of bullying, threatening, lying, and misusing church funds. An investigation launched, and several church members, along with several staff members at Mars Hill came forward, affirming accusations of Driscoll's destructive leadership style. In November of 2013, Janet Mefferd's Christian-focused radio show hosted Driscoll as a guest. During the interview, Mefferd

⁴⁵ Molly Worthen, “Who Would Jesus Smack Down?” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 6, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11punk-t.html>.

⁴⁶ Craig Welch, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,” *The Seattle Times*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill-church/>.

confronted Driscoll, accusing him of plagiarizing fourteen pages from another pastor's book. Driscoll reluctantly apologized and criticized Mefferd's method of public criticism. He turned the argument back onto Mefferd, telling her, "I think it's rude, and I think the intent behind it is not very Christ-like. But I'll receive it and I'll try to receive it graciously and humbly. But I wouldn't allow you to pretend to take a generous, gracious moral-gospel high ground."⁴⁷ Shortly thereafter, Bloggers discovered hidden websites from 2000 during Mars Hill's early years, where Driscoll called America a "pussified nation," alongside several other sexist comments. Former Mars Hill pastors regarded Mars Hill Church under the leadership of Mark Driscoll as "the most abusive, coercive ministry culture" in which they had ever been involved.⁴⁸ Additionally, *WORLD Magazine* conducted an investigation, accusing Driscoll of paying over \$200,000 in church funds to a marketing firm to place his book, *Real Marriage*, on various bestseller lists.⁴⁹ These actions led to a lawsuit in 2016, which was filed by four former church members accusing the church of practicing racketeering in such a way that was "so deeply embedded, pervasive and continuous, that it was effectively institutionalized as a business practice."⁵⁰ In August 2014, Driscoll was removed from leadership in Acts 29 and Mars Hill Church. Only two months later, Mars Hill Church announced that it would dissolve. As of April 2020, Mark Driscoll is currently lead pastor at The Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona. Mark Driscoll is slated to speak at the Sticky Teams leadership conference in October of 2020 in order to "build, healthy, thriving ministries."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Welch, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill."

⁴⁸ Welch, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill."

⁴⁹ Warren Cole Smith, "Unreal Sales for Driscoll's *Real Marriage*," *WORLD Magazine*, March 5, 2014.

⁵⁰ Nina Shapiro, "Racketeering suit claims Mark Driscoll misused Mars Hill donor dollars." *Seattle Times*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/mark-driscoll-accused-of-racketeering-at-mars-hill-church/>.

⁵¹ "Sticky Teams." North Coast Training. Accessed March 14, 2020. <https://northcoasttraining.org/sticky-teams-2020/>.

Driscoll is not the only Acts 29 leader removed for displaying toxic leadership qualities. Darrin Patrick, pastor of the Journey Church in St. Louis and former vice president of the Acts 29 Network was removed from leadership in 2016 for “manipulation, domineering, lack of biblical community, and ‘a history of building his identity through ministry and media platforms.’”⁵² Then in February 2020, Kate Shellnutt’s article “Acts 29 CEO Removed Amid ‘Accusations of Abusive Leadership’” surfaced on *Christianity Today*. At the time, Steve Timmis was CEO of the Acts 29 Network and an elder at his church in the UK, The Crowded House. In the article, former staff and church members described Timmis as controlling and abusive. Timmis often required absolute and total commitment to The Crowded House’s vision – a couple reported that Timmis criticized them for skipping a Bible study in order to spend time with their children. Current Acts 29 President Matt Chandler, from The Village Church in Dallas, Texas, was accused of being aware of Timmis’ toxic leadership by elders five years earlier, but concluded that it was merely a difference in leadership styles.

One of Timmis’ former collaborators described Timmis’ leadership as “gospel gaslighting.”⁵³ Chuck DeGroat describes gaslighting as a type of emotional abuse that makes someone doubt their perception of reality. If one is being gaslighted by an abuser, the victim often feels as if they are crazy.⁵⁴ “Gospel gaslighting” is gaslighting that utilizes specifically Christian language to make someone doubt their reality. For example, DeGroat references an instance of “gospel gaslighting” in *When Narcissism Comes to Church*. In a psychological evaluation with a potential church planter, Zak. DeGroat noticed Zak’s tendencies towards the narcissism spectrum, and Zak fought back, blaming those tendencies on his wife. Zak told

⁵² Kate Shellnutt, “Removed from Acts 29 Megachurch for ‘Historical Pattern of Sin,’” *Christianity Today*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/april/darrin-patrick-removed-acts-29-megachurch-journey.html>.

⁵³ Kate. Shellnutt, “Acts 29 CEO Removed Amid ‘Accusations of Abusive Leadership,’” *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/february/acts-29-ceo-steve-timmis-removed-spiritual-abuse-tch.html>.

⁵⁴ DeGroat, 118.

DeGroat, “She’s lazy. She needs to understand how vital our work is for the kingdom... She needs to be mission focused, eye on the ball. My anger is for her edification.”⁵⁵ It is clear that even six years after Driscoll’s departure, Acts 29 is still wrestling with the aftermath of toxic leadership.

Leadership Style

As a leader, Driscoll was bold and unapologetic. Unfortunately, Driscoll’s desire to push his congregants to Christ turned him into a bullying presence. In *The Seattle Times*’ article “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,” Driscoll sums up his own leadership dynamic at Mars Hill Church. He boasts, “There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus, and by God’s grace, it’ll be a mountain by the time we’re done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus.”⁵⁶ To Driscoll, his aggressive leadership was directly connected to God’s sovereignty. Many staff members and congregants of Mars Hill Church noticed a “culture of fear” that surrounded Mark Driscoll.⁵⁷ Driscoll often utilized “gospel gaslighting” in his conversations with both co-pastors and critics, shifting blame onto others rather than owning his own faults.

Theology

It is difficult to fully pinpoint the theological position of Mars Hill Church because of a lack of publicly shared information concerning church doctrine, but conclusions can be drawn from articles and reports of Driscoll’s radical leadership. Driscoll was a champion of the “New Calvinist” movement. Mars Hill Church subscribed to a version of theology that finds itself in extreme manifestations of the Reformed and Puritan traditions. New Calvinism was a twenty-first century wave of Calvinist thought. Calvinists affirm the doctrine of double predestination;

⁵⁵ DeGroat, 121.

⁵⁶ Welch, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill.”

⁵⁷ Welch, “The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill.”

God, before the beginning of the world, elected those who would be saved and those who would not. Driscoll also often emphasized complementarian views that see men and women as fundamentally different in both biology and role in society. Because of this, Mars Hill Church believed that women were unfit to serve as pastors and elders.

Church structure

Identifying the government structures of Mars Hill Church and the Acts 29 Network during Driscoll's leadership is also challenging due to the dissolution of Mars Hill Church. Although Mars Hill Church dissolved, Acts 29 still exists as a large church planting network. Acts 29 defines themselves as a diverse, global family of church-planting churches characterized by: theological clarity, cultural engagement, and missional innovation.⁵⁸ Acts 29 is not a denomination – they are an association of pastors – each member church of Acts 29 acts autonomously. Member churches of Acts 29 are able to participate in a denomination in addition to their membership as Acts 29 churches. Although specific details surrounding the specific leadership structures of Mars Hill Church and Acts 29 are not publicly known, it is clear that Mark Driscoll was the central and dominant leader of both organizations.

Response

Mark Driscoll seemed to be unrepentant amid the many accusations thrown at him. At one point in his ministry, he remarked that “In the last year or two, I have been deeply convicted by God that my angry-young-prophet days are over, to be replaced by a helpful, Bible-teaching spiritual father.”⁵⁹ Even after Driscoll made this statement, he still proved to be spiritually abusive and domineering. He often referred to his wrongdoings as “mistakes,” deflecting

⁵⁸ “About | Acts 29,” Acts 29 Network, Accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.acts29.com/about/>.

⁵⁹ Michael Paulson, “A Brash Style That Filled Pews, Until Followers Had Their Fill.” *The New York Times*, August 22, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/us/mark-driscoll-is-being-urged-to-leave-mars-hill-church.html>.

responsibility from the harm he caused in his church. Many accused Driscoll of being “the brand” of Mars Hill Church, making him a necessary element of the church. Driscoll made it evident that he believed he was the essential ingredient for Mars Hill’s success. Not long after he was removed from Mars Hill, he began work as Senior and Founding Pastor at The Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona. By founding another church, Driscoll was effectively rejecting Mars Hill’s judgment that he was unfit for ministry.

Wade Mullen researched the impression management strategies that Mars Hill utilized in the midst of Driscoll’s departure in his doctoral dissertation, “Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations In The Wake of An Image-Threatening Event.” Mullen discussed both the impression management tactics that Mars Hill implemented as well as the populations that the tactics targeted. Mullen listed several key tactics, including: organization promotion, ingratiation in the form of compliments and opinion conformity, as well as boasting.⁶⁰ Mullen asserts that “dark-side leadership and a reliance upon impression management behavior walk hand-in-hand.”⁶¹ Mullen’s investigation displays that Driscoll’s response to being exposed as a toxic leader was more concerned with image-management than repentance and growth.

Conclusion

Although Mars Hill Church was a megachurch, Mark Driscoll’s leadership was founded on his bombastic and unapologetic style instead of seeker-sensitive ideals. He boldly criticized those who opposed his leadership and made it clear that he sought to foster a cult of personality around himself and would do whatever that required – including using church funds for

⁶⁰ For an in-depth look into Mars Hill’s impression management tactics, read Mullen’s full dissertation at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rXrd8MYay5Vg5s7JXfx7S91hDTIm1CVX/view>

⁶¹ Mullen, 177.

racketeering. Driscoll's current activity as lead pastor of a church and frequent public speaking makes one wonder if Driscoll is truly repentant for his actions or if he views his opponents as just more metaphorical "dead bodies" behind his "bus."

Bill Hybels and Willow Creek Community Church

Introduction

Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC), based in the Chicago suburb of South Barrington, Illinois was a champion of the seeker-sensitive megachurch movement. The church, founded by Bill Hybels, started in a small movie theater in Palatine, IL in 1975. Throughout the 1980's, 1990's, and even into the twenty-first century, WCCC was widely recognized as the face of the seeker-sensitive megachurch movement.⁶² By 2018, WCCC had grown to over 25,000 members at the central campus in South Barrington with seven more satellite campuses operating in the Chicagoland area. Hybels also frequently spoke at events hosted by the Willow Creek Association (WCA), most notably the Global Leadership Summit (GLS). The GLS is a yearly motivational and leadership conference for both Christians and non-Christians alike. The event was simulcast to thousands of participants in over one hundred countries, further increasing the influence of Bill Hybels and WCCC.⁶³ In the fall of 2017, Hybels announced his early resignation from his position as lead pastor six months ahead of schedule. This announcement made history by naming a woman as chief executive of WCCC after Hybels's departure.⁶⁴

At the time, some speculated that Hybels's early departure was prompted by allegations of sexual misconduct spanning several decades. These claims surfaced in 2014, when victims

⁶² Verla Wallace, "Community Is Their Middle Name," *Christianity Today*, November 13, 2000, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/november13/1.48.html>.

⁶³ Willow Creek Community Church, "Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report." Willow Creek Community Church. February 28, 2019, <https://www.willowcreek.org/-/media/images/7-0-about/elders2019/iagreport-022819.pdf?la=en>.

⁶⁴ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, "After Years of Inquiries, Willow Creek Pastor Denies Misconduct Allegations," *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-met-willow-creek-pastor-20171220-story.html>.

claimed that Hybels engaged in inappropriate behavior, including “suggestive comments, extended hugs, an unwanted kiss and invitations to hotel rooms.”⁶⁵ In 2018, Bill Hybels interviewed with the *Chicago Tribune*, emotionally denouncing repeated claims as lies from individuals colluding against his ministry. Hybels definitively stated in the interview,

This has been a calculated and continual attack on our elders and on me for four long years... I want to speak to all the people around the country that have been misled... for the past four years and tell them in my voice, in as strong a voice as you’ll allow me to tell it, that the charges against me are false. There still to this day is not evidence of misconduct on my part.⁶⁶

Hybels’s claims were not left unchecked – the elder team at WCCC participated in a yearly evaluation of Hybels as well as a general vigilance for inappropriate conduct in the church. However, in August of 2018, *The New York Times* broke a story titled: “He’s a Superstar Pastor. She Worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly.”⁶⁷ Former WCCC secretary Pat Baranowski accused Bill Hybels of coercing her into over two years of sexual favors. Baranowski was now the seventh woman to accuse Hybels of the same thing – of using his power to intimidate and coerce women into spending alone time with him.⁶⁸ Hybels on stage spoke about his conviction to follow the Billy Graham Rule, where he would not spend any alone time with women other than his wife.⁶⁹ Even though Hybels had already retired from his pastorate, WCCC decided to launch an investigation.

WCCC hired an autonomous Independent Advisory Group (IAG) to run the investigation and “lay the foundation for a new and better Willow that honors God in all dimensions, whatever

⁶⁵ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, “After Years of Inquiries...”

⁶⁶ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, “After Years of Inquiries...”

⁶⁷ Laurie Goodstein, “He’s a Superstar Pastor. She Worked for Him and Says He Groped Her Repeatedly,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/us/bill-hybels-willow-creek-pat-baranowski.html>.

⁶⁸ Bob Smietana, “Willow Creek Promises Investigation Amid New Allegations Against Bill Hybels,” *Christianity Today*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/april/bill-hybels-willow-creek-promises-investigation-allegations.html>.

⁶⁹ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, “After Years of Inquiries...”

that looks like.”⁷⁰ Although WCCC and WCA would be compliant with the investigation, they were not represented in the advisory group. The IAG was run by four members: co-chairs Jo Anne Lyon (general superintendent emerita and current ambassador of The Wesleyan Church) and Leith Anderson (president of the National Association of Evangelicals), alongside other members Margaret Diddams (provost of Wheaton College), and Gary Walter (former president of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Chicago, Illinois). The investigation would be focused primarily on group meetings and one-on-one interviews.⁷¹

On February 26, 2019, the IAG published its seventeen-page report outlining their observations, conclusions, and recommendations after completing their investigation of WCCC and WCA. The IAG observed two types of accusations: “sexually inappropriate words and actions in relationships with individuals; abuse of power and position.”⁷² Accusations also included Hybels expressing degrading and abusive language towards both men and women. Especially at higher level management, the IAG observed that Hybels instilled a strict and authoritarian corporate culture to feed his hunger for power. In addition, several employees reported Hybels himself often disregarded the church’s employment policies on alcohol and language use. Certain board members also reported a frequent power struggle with Hybels during his time at the church.⁷³ The report also acknowledged that WCCC was unprepared for the events that followed the 2017 *Tribune* article.⁷⁴

The Independent Advisory Group made several conclusions after their investigation, but informed the reader that it could not be a legal conclusion; rather, the conclusions are made on

⁷⁰ Bob Smietana, “Willow Creek Promises Investigation...”

⁷¹ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 2.

⁷² Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 4.

⁷³ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 6.

⁷⁴ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 10.

“preponderance of evidence (i.e.: more likely to be true than not true).”⁷⁵ The IAG concluded that allegations of sexual assault, intimidation, and inappropriate language were credible and would have been punishable if Hybels had continued to pastor WCCC. The report also concluded that WCCC’s board was unable to check Hybels’s power and “provide effective oversight.”⁷⁶ The IAG made recommendations and action steps for WCCC in the aftermath of such events. Some of the most notable recommendations were: making reconciliation programs available, paying for counseling for those affected by Hybels’s leadership, and recommending that Bill Hybels return financial resources that were mismanaged during his leadership.⁷⁷ In addition, the IAG recommended that WCCC establish a clear written policy for reconciliation and discipline of its leaders alongside a denominational-level structure of accountability to prevent the same abuses of power from happening.⁷⁸

To make matters worse, in January 2020, a former church member accused Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian (often called “Dr. B”), a mentor of Hybels and co-founder of WCCC, of sexually assaulting her repeatedly for four years. In her public Facebook post, the church member recalled the countless times that Dr. B forcefully kissed her and even pressured her to have sex with him. He described how much happier he was with this particular church member instead of his wife. WCCC’s elder board confirmed the church member’s allegations, admitting that they were aware of Dr. B’s inappropriate behavior nearly ten years ago, but Dr. B’s restrictions to ministry associates and personnel were not “adequately communicated.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 4.

⁷⁶ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 13.

⁷⁷ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 15.

⁷⁸ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 16.

⁷⁹ Emily McFarlan Miller, “Willow Creek Confirms Abuse Allegations Against Gilbert Bilezikian.” *Christianity Today*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/gilbert-bilezikian-dr-b-abuse-confirmed-willow-creek.html>.

As WCCC continued to rebuild, new lead pastor Heather Larson resigned along with the entire board. The search for a new lead pastor at WCCC has been difficult – in January 2020, the search team had narrowed the search down to two candidates, but they were eventually released from candidacy. WCCC’s first interim pastor, Steve Gillen, stepped down from leadership in January of 2020, and new interim pastor Ray Johnson took the helm in March 2020. As of April 2020, WCCC is still searching for a new lead pastor, according to regular elder updates posted to their website.⁸⁰

Leadership Style

Bill Hybels was passionate about radical Christ-centered leadership. WCCC was built on such principles. The Global Leadership Summit was further evidence of Hybels’s passion to create fresh and authentic leaders. Unfortunately, Hybels’s passion for radical leadership is deeply ironic considering how destructive he was behind closed doors. The intimidating and degrading persona he showed in private would surely have not been approved by his own criteria in his book, *Who Are You When No One’s Looking?* Hybels seemed to exert dominance over both men and women verbally, but women were the primary victims when it came to physical and hierarchical dominance. Hybels preyed on women in the church that trusted him. He used his power and prestige to abuse them and continued to exercise power in order to silence the women he harmed. For example, Hybels reportedly instructed Ms. Baranowski to rent and watch pornographic videos for “research” for anti-pornography work with James Dobson. Ms. Baranowski noted that Hybels sat and watched as well, wearing only a bathrobe.⁸¹ In terms of leadership, Hybels crafted a culture of fear, abuse, and violence behind the guise of servanthood to Christ.

⁸⁰ See past and future elder updates at: <https://www.willowcreek.org/en/blogs>.

⁸¹ Goodstein, “He’s a Superstar Pastor...”

Theology

WCCC sits in a perplexing place theologically. There is significant evidence that they fall in the mainline conservative evangelical tradition, upholding Biblical authority and emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.⁸² Typically, conservative evangelical megachurches embrace complementarian ideals, only permitting men to lead both families and the local church. However, WCCC made a push towards more progressive theology when they elected Heather Larson as chief executive. The “seeker-sensitive” movement is also foundational for WCCC. WCCC focused on creating programs, worship services, and community events that related to people that were currently unchurched.

Church structure

One reason Hybels’s fall from grace was so shocking was because of WCCC’s strong and well-defined leadership structure. WCCC’s church structure is based on a plurality of elders. Their church website says that “By relying on consensual agreement of godly Elders selected from the congregation, the church creates a healthy checks-and-balances of leadership direction, financial accountability, spiritual guidance, and ministry implementation.”⁸³ The elders accomplish this goal by casting a vision for the church, holding the lead pastor accountable and regulating the church’s teachings and theology. Unfortunately, the WCCC incident shows that an accountability system such as a plurality of elders was still unable to hold their lead pastor fully accountable.

⁸² “Beliefs & Values,” Willow Creek Community Church, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.willowcreek.org/en/about/beliefs-and-values>.

⁸³ “Elders & Leadership,” Willow Creek Community Church, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.willowcreek.org/en/about/elders-and-leadership>.

Response

Both Hybels and WCCC's response to legitimate accusations of abuse are dark. Hybels used language that indicated that he believed accusations made against him were spiritual warfare from Satan. Hybels called allegations "lies" and an "attack."⁸⁴ The rest of WCCC defended Hybels on a similar level. The leaders and elders had full trust and support in their pastor and found no evidence of abuse in their investigations. However, when the former president of Zondervan publishing said that Hybels had sexually pressured her, the leadership at WCCC decided to step back and reevaluate their previous investigation.⁸⁵

Conclusion

WCCC was a prominent church in the evangelical megachurch movement. To state that Hybels's twisted leadership shocked the church is an understatement. Even after Bill Hybels was exposed as a predatory leader, WCCC still struggled to value the testimony of survivors.

James MacDonald and Harvest Bible Chapel

Introduction

Harvest Bible Chapel (HBC) shares a similar physical location and identity to WCCC. Although it is a younger church, HBC also grew in the suburbs of Chicago. James MacDonald founded HBC, starting as a small meeting in Rolling Meadows High School with a vision to plant ten churches in ten years. Eventually, over one hundred churches would become associated with the Harvest Bible Fellowship (HBF) church planting network.⁸⁶ As of January 2020, the church operates several campuses in the Chicagoland area serving over 12,000 weekly

⁸⁴ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, "Willow Creek's Journey from Defending Pastor to Accepting Accusations Unfolds Slowly, Ends in Mass Resignations," *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-met-willow-creek-resignations-20180810-story.html>.

⁸⁵ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, "Willow Creek's Journey..."

⁸⁶ Patrick M. O'Connell and Morgan Greene, "A Church in Turmoil: Inside Harvest Bible Chapel's Questionable Financial Moves and Erratic Leadership," *Chicago Tribune*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-harvest-bible-chapel-finances-20190319-story.html>.

worshippers. The man behind HBC was James MacDonald. Like Driscoll and Hybels, MacDonald built a ministry that was widely recognized in the American megachurch movement through work outside of his pastoral ministry. For MacDonald, it was “Walk in the Word” – a weekly radio and TV ministry. HBC was also the home of a successful team of songwriters and recording artists called Vertical Church Band and even a private Christian school, Harvest Christian Academy.⁸⁷

In September 2013, eight former elders of HBC brought a letter to the current elder board, warning them of MacDonald’s violation of biblical requirements for leadership in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. They accused MacDonald of “repeated patterns” of pride, domineering, and idolizing money, among other accusations. Just twenty-four hours later during Sunday morning worship, a video was played of current HBC elders publicly excommunicating three of the eight elders that signed the letter.⁸⁸ The elders’ video made it clear that they “unanimously rejected” the “great sin” of the divisive letter from former elders, inviting former elders to “have a fraction of constant and ongoing grace and humility that we see so frequently in our pastor.”⁸⁹ A year after the letter was issued, MacDonald apologized for the harsh tone that leaders used to excommunicate them, and the three former elders agreed to remain silent and uninvolved in the hope that current elders would take necessary action.

Five years later, Julie Roys, in her *WORLD Magazine* article titled “Hard Times at Harvest,” reported that the original eight elders who signed the 2013 letter had only heard more stories of relational abuse, financial misuse, and deception. Roys also discovered dozens of similar testimonies from both current and former staff members. One example of MacDonald’s

⁸⁷ Julie Roys, “Hard Times at Harvest.” *WORLD Magazine*, December 13, 2018.

https://world.wng.org/2018/12/hard_times_at_harvest.

⁸⁸ See attached letter in “Hard Times at Harvest.”

⁸⁹ See embedded video in “Hard Times at Harvest.”

hunger for power was his dissolution of HBF, HBC's church planting network. MacDonald unilaterally executed this decision without the necessary approval of the elders, and the elders released an update alerting the congregation that MacDonald violated church bylaws and was reprimanded accordingly. David Wisen, pastor of a former HBC church, suggested that HBF was dissolved because of inappropriate uses of finances. Wisen and other former HBF members claimed that millions of dollars were mismanaged, including a \$50,000 donation to Mark Driscoll's new church, The Trinity Church. Wisen reported that HBC offered to pay now-former HBF churches \$2.5 million under one condition – they were required to not publicly criticize HBC. Other former staff members and elders also reported that they had been pressured into signing nondisclosure agreements to not speak about departure circumstances or criticize HBC.⁹⁰

HBF and “Walk in the Word” were once financially independent nonprofits organizations, but over time they became a part of the financial umbrella of HBC, allowing funds to flow fluidly between each organization.⁹¹ Despite the ability to manage funds from over three individually successful organizations, HBC still found themselves in debt.⁹² MacDonald had also been accused of living a lavish lifestyle, falsely under-reporting the size of his 1.4 million dollar house.

Anger issues also seemed to be at the heart of HBC's unrest. As Roys was working on her “Hard Times at Harvest” investigation, she was sued by HBC for defamation, further supporting MacDonald's strong impulse to silence anyone that stood in his way. The suit also targeted two elders that ran a website titled “The Elephant's Debt,” which uploaded elder updates, internal financial documents, videos, and other examples of MacDonald's erratic

⁹⁰ Roys, “Hard Times at Harvest.”

⁹¹ The murkiness around church finances increases exponentially when churches grow to a size as big as Harvest. Financial records of churches that associate as “networks” are difficult to obtain because they are not obligated by law to fill out an IRS 990 tax form that would be used to determine the salaries of top officials.

⁹² Roys, “Hard Times at Harvest.”

behavior. In addition, several elders and employees cited examples of MacDonald violently defacing pictures of them with a butter knife and pellet gun. Not long after, Chicago radio host Mancow Miller played clips on air of MacDonald using harsh and vulgar language to describe those attempting to expose him. In these clips, MacDonald allegedly threatened to put child pornography on the computers of those that opposed him.⁹³ In January of 2019, MacDonald was placed on an “indefinite sabbatical,” which seemed to indicate his suspension from all preaching and leadership roles. However, MacDonald inferred that he would possibly preach at the new HBC campus in Naples, Florida.

In February 2019, James MacDonald was removed from his position as senior pastor of HBC. The church stated that MacDonald was “engaging in conduct ... contrary and harmful to the best interests of the church.”⁹⁴ After MacDonald was removed from leadership, more revelations came out about his frivolous spending habits with church money. Former elder and former chair of the HBC executive committee, Steve Huston, called the church’s spending “ungodly.” Reports from former employees, including a bodyguard of MacDonald’s, specifically indicated that the church paid for lavish vacations for MacDonald to go hunting in Africa for exotic game.⁹⁵ Videos also surfaced of MacDonald being demeaning and bullying to students at Harvest Christian Academy, where he would sometimes be a guest teacher. In one lecture, he even said that “Teachers aren’t allowed to touch students, but pastors are.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Susan Sarkauskas, “Pastor James’ Defamation Suit Finally a Response to Mancow’s Allegations against Him.” *Daily Herald*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.dailyherald.com/news/20191216/pastor-james-defamation-suit-finally-a-response-to-mancows-allegations-against-him>.

⁹⁴ Kate Shellnutt, “James MacDonald Fired from Harvest.” *Christianity Today*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/february/james-macdonald-fired-harvest-bible-chapel.html>.

⁹⁵ Brandon Showalter, “James MacDonald Used Church Funds for African Safari, Lavish Vacations, Says Former Staff,” *The Christian Post*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/james-macdonald-used-church-funds-for-african-safari-lavish-vacations-says-former-staff.html>.

⁹⁶ Julie Roys, “HCA Bible Class Feb. 8, 2017,” YouTube video, 37:39. March 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpTeTRmScIE&feature=emb_title.

In March, the church's bulletin noted a \$1.8 million shortfall in donations since MacDonald's departure. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that after reviewing public records:

Internal church documents and interviews shows the discord at one of the biggest churches in the Chicago area has been boiling for years, the culmination of an aggressive expansion strategy and MacDonald's ambitions in spreading the gospel. That growth led to a series of questionable financial maneuvers and a tangled web of property transactions, building purchases, mortgages and lawsuits.⁹⁷

At the time, the church was \$40 million in debt, which leadership justified by the size of the church's operations. As of April 2020, Harvest Bible Chapel is still rebuilding after the wake of MacDonald's oppressive spirit and reckless spending. Meanwhile, a few months after MacDonald's public apology, MacDonald launched a website titled "James MacDonald Ministries." The website hosts a multitude of sermons, Bible studies, and even a form to sign up for an upcoming trip to the Biblical World in November of 2020. The most curious section of his new website is a program titled "Home Church Network," a platform designed to deliver livestreamed preaching from James MacDonald and musical worship from "some of the most loved and widely appreciated worship leaders in the world."⁹⁸ The website also contains a tab titled "Controversy," where MacDonald criticizes HBC's arbitration process and calls their accusations of reckless spending "simply false."⁹⁹

Leadership style

Much of James MacDonald's leadership style was centered around power and influence. Both staff members and church members stated that he expressed anger towards those that opposed him. MacDonald often acted swiftly with no apologies, violating church bylaws by

⁹⁷ Patrick M. O'Connell and Morgan Greene, "A Church in Turmoil..."

⁹⁸ James MacDonald, "James MacDonald Ministries." James MacDonald Ministries, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://jamesmacdonaldministries.org/>.

⁹⁹ James MacDonald, "James MacDonald Ministries."

overstepping elder leadership and spending church money on himself and other Christian influencers. MacDonald also struggled to accept his elder-imposed sabbatical, attempting to preach at the newest Harvest campus. Throughout HBC's history, it seemed as if MacDonald consciously chose to make key decisions independent of other leadership, running his church more closely as a dictator than a servant leader.

Theological Foundations

Out of the three churches studied, HBC is the clearest about theological and social issues. HBC identifies itself as a “non-charismatic, conservative, evangelical fellowship that welcomes all who know Jesus Christ as their Savior and all who are seeking Him.”¹⁰⁰ They believe in the literal inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. They also place strong theological emphasis on church planting and “proclaiming the authority of God’s word without apology.”¹⁰¹ HBC also clearly opposes women participating in the role of Elder or preaching doctrine to men.

Church structure

HBC identifies as a church led by a plurality of elders and affirms two offices (elder and deacon) of church leadership. The senior pastor is counted as an elder, and “may be considered first among equals as a member of the Elder Board.”¹⁰² At HBC, elders are teaching elders focused on regulating doctrine, church direction and vision, and church discipline. Deacons are also church leaders at HBC, but their role revolves around service rather than teaching and preaching. In Roys’ *WORLD Magazine* article, she explains that HBC’s plural elder leadership under James MacDonald was not what it seemed. She notes, “multiple former staff members and

¹⁰⁰ “What We Believe About...” Harvest Bible Chapel, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.harvestbiblechapel.org/what-we-believe/what-we-believe-about/>.

¹⁰¹ “Doctrinal Statement,” Harvest Bible Chapel, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.harvestbiblechapel.org/what-we-believe/doctrinal-statement/>.

¹⁰² “Church Government,” Harvest Bible Chapel, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://www.harvestbiblechapel.org/what-we-believe/church-government/>.

elders... told me that in practice, MacDonald exercises ultimate authority.” She also referenced a 2015 church bylaw that states that a senior pastor can only be removed by a unanimous vote of the entire elder board as well as the executive committee – a committee that MacDonald himself sat on as lead pastor. The bylaw continued in MacDonald’s favor, by authorizing the senior pastor to “act in an emergency to suspend any elder board member... subject to earliest possible ratification by the executive committee.”¹⁰³

Although they were not a direct part of church operations, HBC was connected to two organizations that gave HBC’s leadership a sense of legitimacy. A typical congregant would see these associations as sufficient accountability structures. In 2015, HBC began associating with the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denominational body in the United States. As previously stated in Chapter 2, the Southern Baptist Convention is an association rather than a governing body.¹⁰⁴ The other entity with which HBC associated was the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA). The ECFA works on a review and accreditation process, only giving their stamp of approval to churches that meet their seven-standard criteria.¹⁰⁵ However, in March 2019, the ECFA stated that HBC “may be in serious violation” of their standards. According to Roys, there has only been one other organization terminated from the ECFA in the last two years.¹⁰⁶ The HBC investigation has raised questions about the integrity of the ECFA. Since HBC had supposedly been misusing funds for years, the ECFA should have noticed their financial impropriety much sooner. Each member church of the ECFA pays a membership fee in accordance with their budget. HBC’s membership fee was estimated to be around \$10,000 per

¹⁰³ Roys, “Hard Times at Harvest.”

¹⁰⁴ Shellnutt, “James MacDonald Fired from Harvest.”

¹⁰⁵ See: https://www.ecfa.org/PDF/ECFA_Seven_Standards_of_Responsible_Stewardship.pdf

¹⁰⁶ Patrick M. O’Connell and Morgan Greene, “A Church in Turmoil...”

year. Some critics have even suggested that the ECFA did not terminate HBC's membership because of the financial loss the ECFA would take if they lost such a large source of income.

Response

Amid critique and allegations, James MacDonald was mostly silent – the HBC elder board did most of the speaking until MacDonald was removed from HBC leadership and formally disqualified from ministry. After MacDonald was removed, he made two statements on social media. First, he posted on Instagram, citing 1 Peter 2:23, which said “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” He expressed in the post that he was disappointed in the results of the financial investigation for both publishing the results of financial audits, and simultaneously resolving issues confidentially.¹⁰⁷ MacDonald also posted a lengthy apology on his Facebook page, which seemed to still express hard feelings towards those that removed him from ministry. In one of the opening paragraphs, he wrote, “I was, am, and will remain very sorry for the careless and hurtful words that were illegally recorded and publicized.” Later in the letter, he confessed:

I fell back [into sinful patterns of fleshly anger and self-pity] beginning in late 2016 and have only myself to blame. I wrestled with the stress I felt, the injustice I endured, etc. Yet, over time I have come to see only myself and my own relational failing in the mirror, and with grief and sorrow I ask your forgiveness.¹⁰⁸

Throughout this letter, MacDonald seems to be repentant of his actions, but not without jabs toward those who exposed him. Near the end of the letter, MacDonald expressed his thanks

¹⁰⁷ James MacDonald, (@pastorjamesmacdonald). “On Thursday, November 21, Harvest Bible Chapel leaders announced results of their financial investigation,” Instagram, November 22, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B5Lwqi_Ac3L/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

¹⁰⁸ James MacDonald, “Dear Friends: I trust this timing finds you well in the Lord and growing in your awareness of how good He truly is,” Facebook, November 8, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FDrJamesMacDonald%2Fposts%2F2807916235899479&width=500>.

for being welcomed into another church in the Chicago suburbs – New Life Covenant Church. HBC has taken several measures to resolve the conflict that MacDonald started. One action step that HBC has taken to adjust church government structures is that of shrinking the elder board from thirty to nine, as well as implementing new leadership while searching for a new lead pastor.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Like Driscoll and Hybels, MacDonald's downfall took several years before enough evidence was gathered and whistleblowers were heard. Church members and leaders around the world were shocked by MacDonald's actions because HBC bore the hallmarks of accountability and transparency. HBC's decisive elder board, their involvement with the SBC, and their supposed regular audits by the ECFA all seemed to point towards a healthy church structure with legitimate checks and balances. Despite these structures, HBC still fell prey to a leader that engaged in controlling and abusive behavior. One is led to the ultimate question: How can a church be safe from a destructive and manipulative leader?

¹⁰⁹ Patrick M. O'Connell and Morgan Greene, "A Church in Turmoil..."

IV: Common Themes

In the wake of Mark Driscoll, Bill Hybels, and James MacDonald's destruction, many churchgoers were left grappling with the viability of the independent church structure and governance. Not even the seemingly most elite and successful pastors could escape from the seduction of money, power, and status. When examined closely, several key factors enabled and perpetuated abuse in Mars Hill, Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC), and Harvest Bible Chapel (HBC). Because of a significant concentration of power on one individual, a severe lack of external accountability, and elders within current accountability structures that refuse to exercise authority, these three churches found themselves in deep pain and trauma.¹¹⁰

Concentration of Power on One Individual

The first, and potentially the single most important factor contributing to the downfall of Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald was unrestrained and unchecked power placed in them by their church. The ministry of Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC were all centered around their respective celebrity pastors. The potential for abuse is great – these abusive pastors were not only given ultimate decision making and vision-casting power by the church, but they also actively took advantage of the power and responsibility they were given. Additionally, a church's theology of pastoral authority significantly affects how congregants and staff engage with their pastor. In many churches, the pastor is viewed as nearly divine, possessing infinite wisdom, teaching, and counsel. In this type of theological stance, the authority of the church rests on one singular man rather than God. In a six-part *Houston Chronicle* case study on sexual assault in the Southern Baptist Convention, one assault survivor critiques churchgoers of often believing that the church

¹¹⁰ Clearly, these are not the only possible contributing factors why these leaders descended into abuse. Additionally, one could never assert a *direct* correlation without having been present in each church's individual situation. Regardless of these factors, legitimate similarities can still be drawn out of the stories and experiences reported in each of the churches presented.

is *sacrosanct* – a word that describes something too valuable or important with which to interfere.¹¹¹ A similar sentiment is often adopted regarding the authority of a local pastor. A strong theology of pastoral authority seemed to be especially present in WCCC, David Gushee (professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University in Atlanta and president of the American Academy of Religion) notes in his conversation with the *Chicago Tribune*. He asserts that Hybels’s downfall reminds churchgoers of the danger of a pastor with unrestrained power. He writes:

Where you have a person of charisma who has the ability to create and build something massive, it becomes very difficult to develop a structure in which people with clear eyes are able to hold them accountable... A lot of times they’re the ones who name the leaders and have almost unquestioned power.¹¹²

In Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC, whistleblowers were often silenced by church staff and the pastor himself. They would not allow anyone or anything to get in the way of their power, especially accusations against their character or judgment. In order to protect their power, they needed to protect their external identity. A church that gives the pastor the final word eliminates collaboration in the community and exchanges it for a dictatorship. Mark Driscoll took pride in the “pile of dead bodies” that have been run over by his ministry. Driscoll and MacDonald both significantly overstepped organizational power, attempting to make decisions without proper elder consent. Driscoll and MacDonald also blatantly used church funds for their own endeavors. Their power was expressed through, at the very least, three facets of relationships: emotional, spiritual, and sometimes even physical/sexual.

¹¹¹ Lise Olsen, Robert Downen, and John Tedesco, “Abuse of Faith, Part 3 - Preying on Teens.” *Houston Chronicle*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/All-too-often-Southern-Baptist-youth-pastors-13588292.php>.

¹¹² Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, “Willow Creek’s Journey...”

Mark Driscoll, Bill Hybels, and James MacDonald were often feared by those within the church, playing on the emotions of their parishioners. All three of these abusive pastors created a “culture of fear” – a quality that more than a few church members have assigned to their respective abusive pastor.¹¹³ Rather than embracing a loving environment that values all opinions, their attitudes demanded that their ideas, visions, and policies must be implemented. Pastors are typically met with vulnerability and trust from a congregant or staff member, but these pastors returned vulnerability with bullying and emotional abuse. The dominant spirit of these three pastors showed their deep desire for power over people and church structures, as well as perpetuated an abusive culture. Pastors and board members in Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC flat-out denied accusations of toxic and abusive leadership, displaying a domineering power dynamic.

One of the most striking examples of this response is these pastors’ denial of accusations, specifically in Hybels’s rejection of abuse in his 2018 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*. Hybels used distinctive language that suggested legitimate accusations from whistleblowers were spiritual attacks from Satan. Similarly, James MacDonald continued to pursue ministry and designated himself as a victim in the HBC controversy. Mark Driscoll made several apologies for his behavior, mirroring a repentant heart, yet he continued to practice pastoral leadership and give pastoral counsel on thriving church teams. Hypocrisy lies at the heart of such a decision – even though Driscoll was removed for domineering leadership, he refused to take a step back and do the necessary heart work. Instead of jumping into the process of healing and repentance, Driscoll jumped deeper into ministering to others. Chuck DeGroat emphasizes the harm that such a stance can inflict upon congregants. He writes, “When pastors and churches deny the impact of

¹¹³ See: Shapiro, “Racketeering suit...”, Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 5, and Shellnutt, “Acts 29 CEO Removed...”

emotional abuse, they retraumatize the victim. When we defer to suspicion of a victim and support of a potential abuser, we run the risk of doing irreparable harm.”¹¹⁴ One pastor in particular, Bill Hybels, abused the power given to him in an especially physical way. He intimidated and assaulted women, using his power as lead pastor and shepherd as a seductive tool. He even offered his power to women that he abused, attempting to entice them to “rule the church together.”¹¹⁵

Lack of Sufficient Accountability

Another common theme between these three churches is the insufficiency of their church structure to hold a lead pastor accountable. Each of these churches is independent and therefore not held accountable to a specific governing body. Instead, they are in charge of their governance and answer to no one except themselves. Several individual journalists reporting on the downfall of pastors have alluded to the void of accountability in large, nondenominational megachurches. In journalist Ruth Graham’s article for *The Atlantic* about Mark Driscoll, she noted a flaw in their structure. She writes, “‘Nondenominational’ organizations like Mars Hill, built on faith and charisma alone, will always be vulnerable to the fate of losing the popularity contest.”¹¹⁶ Many celebrity pastor-led megachurches are resting solely on the reputation and personality of their pastor. For example, after Mark Driscoll’s actions were exposed, Mars Hill quickly dissolved.

Each of these churches engaged in corporate tactics of image management, something that Dr. Wade Mullen discusses in his Capital Seminary Ph.D. dissertation titled “Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations In The Wake of An Image-

¹¹⁴ DeGroat, 124.

¹¹⁵ Manya Brachear Pashman and Jeff Coen, “After Years of Inquiries...”

¹¹⁶ Ruth Graham, “How a Megachurch Melts Down,” *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/11/houston-mark-driscoll-megachurch-meltdown/382487/>.

Threatening Event.”¹¹⁷ Independent megachurches with no accountability structure are only subject to critique when their image is threatened. As long as an abusive church continues to silence accusations of abuse successfully, members will continue to be ignorant or dismissive of abuse, maintaining the church’s shiny reputation. In WCCC’s case, honesty was not the default. They sought to manage their image rather than be upfront and honest – many churches see accusations of abuse and assault as a PR event rather than legitimate damage that should be investigated and taken seriously.

Laurie Goodstein’s bombshell article for *The New York Times* makes a keen observation regarding church accountability. She writes, “Mr. Hybels built a church independent of any denomination. In such churches, there is no larger hierarchy to set policies and keep the pastor accountable. Boards of elders are usually volunteers recommended, and often approved, by the pastor.”¹¹⁸ An elder board full of “yes men” that is chosen by the pastor will hardly stand up to the pastor or disagree with him. In addition, many churches place the pastor on the board as a ruling elder, like HBC. This effectively blocks any substantial change and prevents the senior pastor from ever being removed from his or her position. The removal of a senior pastor typically requires elder agreement, something that would be unattainable if the senior pastor was involved in that decision because, in such a model, the senior pastor is accountable to himself. Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC did not even have the ability to check the power of Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald because their churches were not structured in such a way to implement healthy checks and balances. If Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald had built their churches with sufficient accountability structures, their damage could have at least been mitigated. Examples

¹¹⁷ Wade Mullen, “Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations in the Wake of an Image-Threatening Event,” Capital Seminary and Graduate School, Lancaster, PA, March 2018.

¹¹⁸ Goodstein, “He’s a Superstar Pastor...”

and suggestions for a healthy church structure that implements legitimate accountability will be outlined in the next chapter.

As previously stated, church polity and theology can severely impact change and decision-making in churches. As an example, Southern Baptist churches believe that they should not be held accountable by a larger superstructure or denomination. Even though the Southern Baptist Convention is viewed as a denomination, it provides no oversight, also placing them in the “independent” category of church polity. In fact, at the 2019 annual Southern Baptist Convention meeting, delegates ratified an amendment that would allow the SBC to disfellowship themselves from congregations that mishandled abuse. SBC President J.D. Greear pleaded delegates to undeniably support survivors of sexual assault. “But because SBC churches... are autonomous, and not beholden to centralized leadership, Greear’s words are essentially advice.”¹¹⁹ In fact, Greear acknowledged that some SBC members see discussions around sexual assault as a “leftist” distraction, making it even more difficult to enforce and implement change within church polity.¹²⁰ Clearly, there is still significant ground to cover when it comes to listening to and giving voices to church abuse survivors. Similar principles apply when speaking about independent megachurches – no external authority can command them to take action. Independent megachurches are most commonly structured so that it is up to each individual church to hold themselves accountable.

¹¹⁹ Tricia L. Nadolny, “‘The Tongue Is a Fire’: Southern Baptist Church Fractures over Secrets and Spiritual Abuse,” USA Today, February 13, 2020, https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2020/02/13/southern-baptist-sex-abuse-pastors-history-divided-church/4586698002/?fbclid=IwAR1SHihF9f5Q7s53nKvgQm6qExEb68NBPP1xBF6iIzEy-07kLzY_P2TjHKE.

¹²⁰ Abby Perry, “SBC President: We Failed to Heed Victims’ Voices,” *Christianity Today*, October 7, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/october/southern-baptist-president-greear-caring-well.html?fbclid=IwAR2mdoo1IHvjZkmAdIwYilkzkU-0Y10GUyq0Em5rsqKgXviKOHUIPUIAz_w.

A Lack of Willpower in the System

The third factor that enabled and perpetuated abuse in Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC was the lack of willpower from an accountability system. Even as the systems at Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC were insufficient, elders in the systems proved to be ineffective in fulfilling their duties as leaders and protectors of parishioners. They lacked the willpower to enforce Christian accountability for two reasons: a false accountability system and a fear of ruining the ministry.

The concept of a false accountability system is intricately connected to a lack of sufficient oversight. In each of these churches, it *appeared* as if they had sufficient accountability. Elders made decisions, the church voted on key issues, and budgets were shared. Despite this, the leadership structures and safeguards of these churches were a sham and gave a false sense of security. In the case of HBC, witnesses seemed to indicate that the elder board was merely a puppetry that held no real power and followed MacDonald's every command. In independent megachurches, elder boards often seem to make decisions on behalf of the church, but they are typically not an actual counterbalance of power to the lead pastor. HBC also used the ECFA to display their financial responsibility, but that turned out to be a false system. ECFA, for unknown reasons, was not holding HBC to the high standard that they presented. Because of the ECFA's complacency, MacDonald was able to misuse HBC funds irresponsibly and for his personal gain. An average church member of HBC would also assume that HBC's association with the SBC would provide even greater oversight. The truth is that SBC cannot provide any legitimate oversight, because such oversight violates their core value of church autonomy. HBC *appeared* to have a plethora of trusted accountability systems, yet every single one of these accountability systems failed, giving MacDonald significant opportunities to overstep and grab power wherever it could be found.

The false accountability systems in Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC also misled whistleblowers. WCCC and HBC staff members made it clear that the concerns and accusations of abuse would be dealt with seriously. Instead, they pushed abuse under the rug, giving a false hope to those that fought for justice in their churches. False accountability systems silenced survivors rather than honoring their testimonies.

A system that lacks the willpower to enforce accountability also engages with a fear of ruining the pastor's reputation or the church's ministry. Boz Tchividjian, a former sex crimes prosecutor that works for GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in Christian Environments) sees a fear of ruining a minister's reputation as "the most significant reason sexual harassment can go unchecked."¹²¹ He continues, "So many victims within the evangelical world stay silent because they feel, if they step forward, they'll damage this man's ministry, and God won't be able to accomplish the things he's doing through this man." Churchgoers and church staff are often left with a choice to either expose someone they see as a friend, mentor, and disciple-maker or stay silent and perpetuate abuse. Unfortunately, the latter option has been chosen far too many times.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

One must acknowledge the possibility of personality disorders in the conversation around power-hungry megachurch pastors. Psychologists, therapists, and pastors are beginning to research a possible connection between Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and pastoral leadership. Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a "twisted form of self-love/self-hatred that dominates all relationships..." Narcissists typically are prideful, have a grandiose image of themselves, require constant affirmation and affection, and constantly exploit relationships for

¹²¹ Goodstein, "He's a Superstar Pastor..."

their own personal gain.¹²² R. Glenn Ball and Darrell Puls's text, *Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It*, contains research regarding the epidemic of narcissistic church leadership. Unfortunately, Dr. Wade Mullen and other research professionals noticed faulty research methods in Ball and Puls's study that led them to believe that nearly a third of Canadian pastors surveyed suffered from clinical NPD. Eventually, the publisher decided to pull *Let Us Prey*, and Ball and Puls have committed to reworking the text to reflect more accurate research. Despite the inaccurate research presented in *Let Us Prey*, narcissism is still a legitimate threat to church leadership that requires continued extensive research, and the qualitative principles in their research should not be ignored.¹²³ One portion of their work directly relates to the conversation of independent megachurch leadership. They write,

The local church is where [psychological testing for Narcissistic Personality Disorder] is most important, particularly for independent churches that have no denominational resources to use or fall back upon in winnowing candidates. It also appears that independent churches are where those with predatory narcissism would be most attracted.¹²⁴

Ball and Puls suggest that a pastor with NPD would be *most attracted* to a church where they could acquire extreme power. One must be careful not to diagnose Driscoll, Hybels, or MacDonald with NPD – diagnosing a person without a legitimate psychological evaluation would be irresponsible and unethical. Despite this, the narcissistic tendencies displayed in Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald are quite striking.

In March 2020, therapist Chuck DeGroat released his book *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, offering his clinical perspective on NPD in the church. DeGroat sees the root of

¹²² R. Glenn Ball and Darrell Puls, *Let Us Prey: The Plague of Narcissist Pastors and What We Can Do About It*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 20-23.

¹²³ Julie Roys, "Study Claiming 31% of Pastors Have Clinical Narcissism Is Debunked By Expert Researchers." *Julie Roys: Engaging Issues. Seeking Truth* (blog), August 1, 2019, <https://julieroys.com/study-claiming-31-of-pastors-have-clinical-narcissism-is-debunked-by-expert-researchers/>.

¹²⁴ Ball and Puls, 176.

narcissism often mischaracterized as extreme self-love, but he believes the true root of narcissism is deep toxic shame.¹²⁵ DeGroat echoes Ball and Puls's convictions that narcissists are often drawn to ministry – a profession that assigns spiritual authority to their ego.¹²⁶ DeGroat also expresses a concern for independent churches that lack sufficient accountability and ordination processes. He grieves,

In too many post-denominational ministry networks today, where traditional ordination processes have been abandoned, young leaders are snatched up and deployed without proper training or soul formation, simply because they've been successful in other arenas. We've not yet learned. But as stories of damaging narcissism increase, and as social media serves as an amplifier for victim's voices, we may be approaching a reckoning.¹²⁷

He later expresses how bullies and narcissists are drawn to systems where they might possess the ability to hold ultimate and exclusive authority. He adds, "I've most often seen bullies in nondenominational contexts, and many are the founders, planters, and entrepreneurs who guard their churches and organizations like the extensions of the narcissistic ego they are."¹²⁸ Independent churches and church planting organizations often look for visionary leaders with the charisma and guts to plant a new congregation while overlooking essential components of healthy emotional regulation and self-image. DeGroat also suggests that a pervasive narcissism can overwhelm an entire organization. "Collective narcissism," to DeGroat, is a symbiotic relationship where a narcissistic leader feeds on the affirmation of the followers, and the followers thrive off of the "visionary" energy of the narcissistic leader, creating a never-ending narcissistic feedback loop.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ DeGroat, 42.

¹²⁶ DeGroat, 19.

¹²⁷ DeGroat, 21.

¹²⁸ DeGroat, 81.

¹²⁹ DeGroat, 23.

DeGroat explores how a concentration of power on a narcissistic individual can be detrimental to a local church. A narcissistic pastor will often form the church leadership hierarchy to “protect his authority at every level of decision-making.”¹³⁰ A narcissistic pastor may allow other voices to be heard, but will always value his own opinion above another’s perspective.¹³¹ By holding a view of the pastorate that designates it as sacrosanct and possessing the highest spiritual authority creates a conundrum when it comes to confronting a narcissistic pastor. DeGroat continues, “The ecclesial authority prompts followers to a holy deference to his calling and role.”¹³² A narcissistic pastor that claims the authority of God on his behalf is nearly impossible to challenge. When a narcissistic pastor is in control of an entire church governance, church staff and congregants have no choice but to choose between complicity and leaving.¹³³ Once again, one must be careful not to diagnose Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald with NPD, but several commonalities can be drawn between their behaviors and the behavior of a toxic narcissist.

Conclusion

Although incidents of abuse in Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC were isolated, they share common contributing factors: a concentration of power upon one individual, a lack of sufficient accountability, and a lack of willpower from within the system. These commonalities are not only backed by this thesis’s research, but also endorsed by several pastors and church scholars. Church pastors and Acts 29 members Joe Thorn and Jimmy Fowler from Redeemer Fellowship in St. Charles, Illinois, spoke out in response to Acts 29 CEO Steve Timmis’s resignation in February 2020. They noted what they thought were possible reasons for abuse in their own

¹³⁰ DeGroat, 71.

¹³¹ DeGroat, 72.

¹³² DeGroat, 74.

¹³³ DeGroat, 84.

church network and beyond. Thorn and Fowler specified a lack of accountability and community through close friendships, fear of discrediting the ministry/head pastor, and a lack of willpower from elders to hold the pastor accountable as potential causes for recent moral failures of pastors.¹³⁴ *Christianity Today* published an article in February 2020 about the leadership void in WCCC and HBC since their lead pastors had departed. Journalist Abby Perry quotes abuse advocate Ryan Ashton, saying that he “has seen the pattern of pastor misconduct or coverups at multiple churches and is frustrated that more churches don’t look into the factors that can lead to such abuse: lack of accountability, lack of discipleship, or unhealthy church culture.”¹³⁵

The church, however, should not be left in darkness. In order to both *prevent* toxic leadership and for churches to *thrive* post-toxic leadership, church leaders must make substantial changes to their structure and power dynamics. What is difficult about the independent megachurch is that they must choose to be committed to healthy change – no organization or entity can compel, or even force them, to reevaluate church structures and power dynamics. Both The research presented here is not intended to condemn all independent megachurches. However, as long as independent churches continue to build their churches around systems that have great potential for abuse, congregants will continue to leave local megachurches bearing scars of trauma from abuse, deception, and assault. Independent church history in the twenty-first century should not be marked by great potential for abuse and power trips, but rather by sorrow, repentance, healing, and joy.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Joe Thorn and Jimmy Fowler, “Bonus Episode: Steve Timmis and Acts 29,” *Doctrine and Devotion* (podcast). February 7, 2020, <http://www.doctrineanddevotion.com/podcast/timmis>.

¹³⁵ Abby Perry, “Willow Creek and Harvest Struggle to Move On.” *Christianity Today*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/february-web-only/willow-creek-harvest-after-hybels-macdonald-moving-on.html?fbclid=IwAR0DB7cXdFUIYC8OVnBbWeTDZHTwciHeil9C72SV68wRdYQ0gRNeE2tsfko>.

¹³⁶ DeGroat, 170.

V: Moving Forward

A Proposed Solution

Hopefully, there can be a solution for the tragedy of abuse and toxic leadership in independent megachurches. One could argue that all churches should participate within an accountable denomination, but that proves to be unlikely and a difficult task because of structural and theological differences. A solution *within* the independent church system is essential for the independent megachurch to move forward and thrive for the years to come. There is no perfect church structure since every church structure involves broken people. The independent megachurch is not doomed to a cycle of toxic and narcissistic leadership – independent megachurches can implement safeguards and power checks to limit opportunities and potential for abuse within their system of church. Theoretically, the more safeguards that enforce proper conduct, the less abuse should happen.

The local church must unequivocally be dedicated to protect and love their flock, and all those who fall under its ministry. The mantra many universities have adopted regarding sexual assault – “one assault is too many” – must be the cry of church leadership. Josh Packard, PH.D. offers advice in *Church Refugees* from his years of research with the “Dones” – a group of American churchgoers that are “done” with church. Packard invites church leaders to create a culture that allows each church to “be the church that no one wants to leave.”¹³⁷ Crafting a safe and loving ministry is an essential piece of creating a healthy church culture that no member wants to leave. The solutions that this chapter will propose mirror the problems that were previously exposed. A healthy independent megachurch must have a diffusion of power, a legitimate accountability system, and members within the accountability system that possess

¹³⁷ Josh Packard, and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done With Church but Not Their Faith*, Group Publishing, 2015, 109.

willpower and discernment. Through the implementation of these safeguards, churches should be able to prevent abusers from creating massive destruction, while actively supporting survivors of abuse.

Practical tips for church leadership will be offered throughout this chapter utilizing a variety of sources, articles and books. Additionally, insight has been gleaned from an interview conducted with Rev. Todd Bishop, Connections Minister at Brentwood Baptist Church in Brentwood, Tennessee. Brentwood Baptist is an independent megachurch with seven regional campuses that spent over two years crafting their leadership and accountability model. Brentwood Baptist is by no means a perfect church, but their model offers helpful and thoughtful critiques to the models of church leadership displayed in Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC.

Diffusing Power

After the moral fallout of Mark Driscoll, Bill Hybels, and James MacDonald, Mars Hill Church, Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC), and Harvest Bible Chapel (HBC) either dissolved completely or spent an extended time searching for a new senior pastor. As previously noted, a megachurch that depends on the reputation of their single leader is in a fragile state. Todd Bishop mentioned that a church that depends on a central figure violates the “Mack Truck Theory” – a term coined by insurance giant AIG and utilized in their leadership training curriculum. Bishop describes the Mack Truck Theory as a helpful benchmark for power in the church context – an organization “passes” the test if anyone in an organization a Mack semi-truck could hit anyone in an organization, and the organization can still function at full capacity. Many churches would not be able to pass such a test if their head pastor had a moral failure, health crisis, or unexpected departure. Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC did not function within the

Mack Truck Theory – Mars Hill entirely dissolved while WCCC and HBC struggled to keep pastors in leadership after their respective scandals.

The Mack Truck Theory touches on a characteristic that is worth considering in church accountability structures: built-in humility. When the entire church rests on the shoulders of one pastor, that particular pastor will likely acquire an inflated ego. Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald displayed, through their actions, a belief in their ultimate power and authority. This was not a false belief, however, because they truly did have ultimate power and authority in their church context. A church that has a single figurehead places itself in a dangerous place. On the other hand, a church that properly diffuses power teaches its staff humility. It prompts a senior pastor (and all other staff members) to believe, “This is not all about me.” A humble church leader remembers his/her limitations and that they are not the center of the organization.

Another way to establish humility and diffuse power is by implementing rest periods for staff members. Pastors who are constantly overworked, emotionally exhausted, and traveling frequently are not going to be able to serve their staff or congregations to their full potential. Bishop made it clear that at Brentwood Baptist, they strive to operate out of an *overflow* rather than an *underflow*. Bishop noted two main avenues that Brentwood Baptist employs in order to practice healthy rest. First, each pastoral staff member is required to take a “retreat day” once a month. Retreat days are not vacation days, but rather an opportunity to stop, rest, and be silent before God. Retreat days are mandatory and taken seriously; supervisors can even discipline pastoral staff if they work on retreat days. Second, the pastoral staff at Brentwood Baptist are also required to take an extended sabbatical period every five years, which lasts up to a month. Brentwood Baptist’s sabbaticals are designed to fill up the pastor emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually.

By acknowledging their limits, pastors become in touch with deep humility. Chuck DeGroat references a wonderful example of a pastor that has diffused his power properly. He tells a story when Eugene Peterson, respected pastor and Biblical scholar, once asked his church leadership for a year-long sabbatical period. DeGroat writes,

Not only did he get [a year-long sabbatical], but the church was fine without him. He disconnected and rested. They continued to worship and serve. Peterson didn't check in every few days to make sure the budget wasn't cut or to vet the substitute preachers or to find out whether people were attending. He stepped away.¹³⁸

Letting go of control and choosing the path of humility is critical for churches to be able to hold a healthy power dynamic. Brentwood Baptist also arranges its leadership structure in such a way that diffuses power. In addition to a ruling elder board (called the Board of Trustees), Brentwood Baptist has a Chief Executive Pastor that is on the same level of authority as the Senior Pastor. The two must be in agreement for decision-making, which effectively teaches humility and limitations by way of their leadership structure. The Chief Executive Pastor is also a counterbalance to the Senior Pastor. Typically, lead pastors of churches have insights that pertain to the vision and direction of the church body, but do not often have the strengths to organize staff and ministry teams properly, creating a chaotic atmosphere.¹³⁹ The Chief Executive Pastor is an administrative and strategic counterbalance that holds accountable and implements the Senior Pastor's visionary leadership style. By diffusing power properly in a local church, both staff members and congregants are taught humility that actively counteracts abusive leadership tendencies.

¹³⁸ DeGroat, 70.

¹³⁹ DeGroat, 78.

A Legitimate Accountability Structure

For independent megachurches to guard themselves properly from abuse and tragedy, they also must be willing to subject themselves to a legitimate accountability structure both internally and externally. Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC all failed to have proper accountability checks in place, letting Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald's abuse run rampant. Even when accusations came to light, it was a long and arduous process to discover the truth and to remove the pastor. A church must reevaluate its leadership model and accountability processes regularly.

A church must first have a healthy internal accountability structure. In many nondenominational churches, the senior pastor is often a member of the elder board (this was the case at HBC). An internal structure that lets the senior pastor be accountable to himself is hardly an accountability structure at all. Bishop noted the distinct separation between the senior pastor and the Board of Trustees at Brentwood Baptist. For Brentwood Baptist, The Board of Trustees is the accountability structure that takes care of everyday administrative tasks and holds the decisions of the senior pastor accountable. Although Brentwood Baptist has grown into a megachurch, they still honor their Baptist congregationalist roots by allowing members to vote on approving high-level pastoral staff as well as a yearly budget. Brentwood Baptist also publishes their budget and church bylaws online, something that Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC chose not to do. In this sense, Brentwood Baptist adopted the representative element of the Presbyterian model, despite lacking an external governance system. Furthermore, because of Brentwood Baptist's rapid expansion, they recently adopted a variation of the Episcopal model into their accountability hierarchy. Their campuses are divided by regions led by a regional pastor, similar to a diocese, which strengthens oversight and accountability with the involvement

of more leadership. This provides for greater oversight of each campus, ensuring healthy leadership practices for all staff.

Dedicated coaching that focuses on internal staff development creates another gauge of emotional/spiritual health and growth. Independent megachurches should consider adding a leadership coach position that is solely dedicated to cultivating a culture of servanthood and humility in each specific position. An essential part of this culture is naming clear boundaries for pastoral relationships with other staff and congregants. Procedures regarding drugs, alcohol, and staff relationships should be clearly defined in staff codes of conduct. Independent megachurches also must openly discuss hiring processes and priorities. Controlling leadership can easily be mistaken as visionary leadership potential.

An external accountability structure is also necessary for a church to maintain healthy leadership. Having a strong internal leadership dynamic is helpful, but every church has blind spots. If a church is steeped in a destructive culture, those inside the system may not be able to perceive such toxicity. Typically, a married couple that is willing to work out internal problems will go to an outside source for expertise. In the same way, a church should bring in outside experts in order to get a balanced review of their structures. The review process by such external systems should regularly be reevaluated to maximize effectiveness. Since nondenominational churches do not regularly answer to an outside authority, such a review process would be unique church to church. Regardless of how churches manifest external oversight, external oversight must be a part of investigations and reviews of leadership structures.

Chuck DeGroat offers several helpful practices about external leadership training from his work training pastors at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. He finds it essential that seminaries and church staff training programs participate in cultivating pastoral

well-being. His seminary specifically requires pastors-in-training to be assessed by outside psychologists, to learn the non-violent communication framework, and also to attend seminars about sexual abuse, racism, and addiction in the church.¹⁴⁰ By creating a safe space for hard conversations about failures in church leadership, the taboo surrounding such conversations is eliminated. In such a context, pastors that struggle with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) can own their illness and openly discuss their ministry roles in the future. It is better for a church to willingly discuss tough issues of sexual assault, bullying, and NPD instead of being forced to have such conversations after violations have occurred.

Although WCCC mishandled accusations and continued to struggle with honesty in the face of abuse claims, WCCC's Independent Advisory Group (IAG) presented powerful advice that can be applied to any independent megachurch:

The Independent Advisory Group recommends... Willow Creek Community Church and the Willow Creek Association separately establish clear written policies and procedures for external investigation and review of allegations made against any senior staff or board member. Because WCCC is an independent church and therefore does not have a relationship or accountability to a denomination, this policy and procedure should provide a level of external accountability similar to that provided by an established credible denomination. The principals engaged for this purpose should be recruited in advance of any call for their services and the list of principals should be annually reviewed and revised.¹⁴¹

WCCC's IAG suggested that the church must have *clear* procedures for external investigations before accusations are even raised. The external accountability provided by an independent group should match the accountability that a denomination provides. In addition, churches can regularly schedule external financial and leadership structure audits. Churches that have nothing to hide and actively seek church health will actively subject themselves to rigorous testing and investigation.

¹⁴⁰ DeGroat, 100.

¹⁴¹ Willow Creek Community Church, "Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report," 16.

Individuals with The Willpower to Enforce Accountability

The mere presence of a proper accountability system will not stop abuse on its own. For example, individuals within denominations that have comprehensive accountability systems can still perpetuate abuse even in their rigid system. Both internal and external accountability systems must be operated by individuals that have the willpower to enforce their power. Elders and investigators should be individuals that fearlessly name abuse and take accusations seriously. One precaution that the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) takes is mandatory investigation of *any* and *every* claim of abuse made against pastoral staff.¹⁴²

At Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC, whistleblowers were often silenced by elders which let conflicts of interest prevail over justice. Dr. Diane Langberg, an expert in Christian counseling and trauma, sheds light on how the church can tangibly love abusive pastors. In an interview with the podcast “A Third Way,” Dr. Langberg says that humans are predisposed to protect systems in which they participate.¹⁴³ Elders and members of accountability systems are often friends with pastoral staff and leadership, which is not unethical in and of itself. However, when friendships create an improper bias against accusations of an abuse survivor, the church fails to diligently serve and protect its congregation. Elders and members of accountability systems must be dedicated to loving both abuse survivors and abusive pastors themselves. Dr. Langberg says that “We are gifting a perpetrator when we turn on the light. We are saying ‘Come – come to the light... There is a different place for you to live.’”¹⁴⁴ Accountability systems that care about a pastor’s personal and spiritual health can provide them with the help that they need.

¹⁴² Conversation with Kevin Twit, PCA Pastor, Nashville, TN.

¹⁴³ Diane Langberg, “Diane Langberg (Pt. 1).” *A Third Way* (podcast), February 6, 2020. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/7G1VdHKR40RYuFPHWCBer0>.

¹⁴⁴ Langberg, “Diane Langberg, (Pt. 1).”

Independent churches have a dangerous ability to let whistleblowers “fall through the cracks” and be silenced. Elders and church leaders should commit themselves to honesty and transparency amid of accusations by pursuing truth rather than a narrative that benefits their image. SBC leaders are just now attempting to create such a truth-telling environment in the pastoral hiring process. They intend to manage a clergy sex offender database that alerts churches if their candidate has a predatory past. Churches must be faithful and honest about why pastors resigned or were fired. Churches often will attempt to be “kind” and give abusive former pastors glowing reviews to new employers, perpetuating hurt and abuse. When a former employer chooses to be dishonest about details in a hiring process, they refuse to participate in the protection of the global Church. Churches that force out staff members that are too vocal about abuse often coerce staff to sign a non-disclosure agreement and use severance as a bargaining item. Such a practice silences the truth, valuing the narrative of the powerful over an open conversation. Dr. David Dark, author and Assistant Professor of Religion and the Arts at Belmont University claims that “There are no non-disclosure agreements in the Kingdom of God.”¹⁴⁵ In the situations described above, non-disclosure agreements are threats designed to protect the shiny image of a powerful person. Dark implies that a Christian leadership ethic cannot coexist with a practice founded on threats.

Healing the Church

What should an independent megachurch do if they have experienced the tragedy of an abusive leader? How should churches love survivors of abuse? A church that has experienced abuse should respond in (at least) four ways: compliance, truth-telling, repentance, and growing

¹⁴⁵ David Dark, (@DavidDark), “There are no non-disclosure agreements in the kingdom of God,” Twitter, December 5, 2019, 12:45 p.m. <https://twitter.com/DavidDark/status/1202660160394711050?s=20>.

in empathy. By embracing these four ideals, churches embrace Biblical patterns of grace and justice.

A church that cares about its staff and congregation is going to be compliant with investigations and listen to survivors without judgment or pretense. Compliance is too often sacrificed in the face of an event that threatens a church's image. Especially in regards to the sexual assault of minors, churches are mandated by law to choose justice over protecting their image. According to Southern Baptist ethics leader Russell Moore, the Kingdom of God is also mandatory reporting state.¹⁴⁶ His comment suggests that the responsibility of Christians is to willingly submit to laws that protect the vulnerable.

Churches must also engage in truth-telling. Pastors and church members will be tempted to defend those that they love before knowing all the facts. The SBC's Caring Well 2019 Report prompts churches to protect people over institutions.¹⁴⁷ The report also encourages churches to protect the confidentiality of sexual assault survivors unless the survivor specifically wants to come forward.¹⁴⁸ Dr. Langberg believes that "the moment the church fails to respond with the character of God – to respond within the nature of who Christ is – is the moment they failed to be the Church."¹⁴⁹ Churches can either take a posture of arrogant resistance (protecting image) or humble compliance (protecting people).

Repentance is also a key action for churches that have encountered abuse. Repentance could involve several different steps depending on the situation. Regardless of the circumstances,

¹⁴⁶ Russell Moore, Phillip Bethancourt, and Trillia Newbell, "Sexual Abuse and the Southern Baptist Convention," Lecture, ERLC Leadership Luncheon, Southern Baptist Convention Building, Nashville, February 21, 2019.

¹⁴⁷ "Caring Well: A Report from the SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group," Caring Well, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, Accessed March 14, 2020, <https://caringwell.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Safe-Churches-Report.pdf>, 26.

¹⁴⁸ For more detailed statistics, best practices, and stories, read the full SBC Caring Well 2019 Report.

¹⁴⁹ Langberg, "Diane Langberg, (Pt. 1)."

true repentance seeks to be honest about sins committed against God and against a community.

DeGroat notes a specific heart posture that is required for repentance. He writes,

A good pastor will make mistakes—and then own those mistakes, once again with sincere repentance, and with a real curiosity for how [s]he’s hurt others. However, abusers intend to stay in a powerful, one-up position. Their abuse is more than a momentary behavioral lapse; it’s a pattern of violation or oppression or crazy-making. Their intent is revealed in a deep need to be in control, to remain invulnerable at the expense of the other.¹⁵⁰

True repentance also includes action – in some cases, that may mean removing a manipulating pastor. Church structure reevaluation, staff education, and putting resources towards supporting survivors are all parts of *active* repentance. Although there will be a time that the drama of the “event” will pass, the congregation will still live with the pain and trauma of abusive leadership for years to come.

Growing in empathy is the last and often forgotten step in healing churches post-abusive leadership. DeGroat asserts that the removal of an abusive leader may not be the end of toxic leadership. He writes, “Removing a narcissistic staff member does not necessarily remove the narcissistic infection.”¹⁵¹ The transformation process continues long after a leader is removed. In fact, it is often just the beginning. Supporting survivors post-abuse is essential to cultivating health in the church. One congregant from HBC notes the pain and trauma associated with the removal process of MacDonald. This person spoke, “It’s like finding out your wife is a serial killer. The disillusionment, betrayal, and loss can be excruciating. This is a very vulnerable time for a lot of people, and I am sure God weeps for every single wounded soul.”¹⁵² One must also note that growing in empathy does not always mean that the removed pastor can return to leadership. Churches must act with prayerful discernment whether they are comfortable with the

¹⁵⁰ DeGroat, 129.

¹⁵¹ DeGroat, 103.

¹⁵² Shellnutt, “James MacDonald Fired from Harvest.”

growth of a pastor that had previously exhibited abusive and toxic actions. As the WCCC IAG Report states plainly, “restoration should not imply return to any leadership position.”¹⁵³ Pastors that prey on staff and congregants willingly forfeit the opportunity to lead in such capacities again.

Everyone Is Vulnerable

After examining research and conclusions drawn regarding abuse in megachurches, it is tempting to condemn the independent megachurch entirely while affirming all smaller churches. In reality, toxic leadership and abuse do not discriminate based on church size. Although megachurches are often the focus of critique and conversation, the small independent church down the road may very well have the same problems. The *Houston Chronicle*'s articles about sexual assault in the Southern Baptist Convention show that the issues of church polity and accountability are pervasive regardless of church size. Abby Perry from *Christianity Today* remarks, “While the Willow Creeks and Harvest Bible Chapels of the world make the news when their leaders fall, megachurches are far from the only congregations in which abuses of power occur.”¹⁵⁴ Megachurches draw the most attention because of their influence and platform. However, abuse and toxicity can be present at any church. The church is full of broken people, yes, but a church's general brokenness does not permit believers to excuse or ignore specific and clear abuse. It is hoped that readers will take heed from situations in independent megachurch leadership to see the potential for abuse in any independent church scenario.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, abusive pastoral leadership in megachurches is ugly and more common than one might think. The abuse at Mars Hill, WCCC, and HBC was real and happened to real

¹⁵³ Willow Creek Community Church, “Elder Update, February 28: IAG Report,” 16.

¹⁵⁴ Shellnutt, “James MacDonald Fired from Harvest.”

church members. Driscoll, Hybels, and MacDonald built church systems that were bound to fail. Additionally, these men abused and took advantage of both staff members and parishioners emotionally, spiritually, and even sexually. They refused to steward leadership well, resulting in a concentration of power on one individual, a severe lack of accountability, and a system that struggled to call them out when it was most necessary.

The topic of abusive pastoral leadership in megachurches is often disheartening and sometimes hopeless. Despite such grim observations, there is great hope. The Lord is presenting the church a warning, as he gave to Israel in the time of Ezekiel. He beckons the church to (Ezekiel 14:6) “Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!” In order for the independent megachurch to thrive, it must walk in step with God’s model for honest, transparent, and self-sacrificing leadership and turn from practices that allow abuse to be perpetuated. By embracing ideals that legitimize accountability and diffuse power, the independent church can be marked by strong potential for spiritual health rather than strong potential for abuse.

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