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Winter 2022

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Chad M Bauman



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# Global Megachurch Studies: The State, Evolution, and Maturation of a Field

CHAD M. BAUMAN

BUTLER UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT:** Over the past decade, the field of megachurch studies has matured and become global in its scope and orientation. The number of texts produced on megachurches since 2010 is nearly triple the number produced before that date, and many of the newest texts decenter North America. Megachurch studies today, therefore, is a properly international and cosmopolitan field. The article has four interrelated aims: (1) to provide a thorough overview of major themes and work in megachurch studies, with special emphasis on works emerging in the last decade; (2) to update two excellent state-of-the-field reviews by Stephen Ellingson (in 2008 and 2010); (3) to make visible the now thoroughly global nature of the field by attending fully to its international focus, something done only briefly and tentatively in Ellingson's reviews; and (4) to develop (in the ample footnotes) something of thorough bibliography of key texts in the field of megachurch studies.

**KEYWORDS:** megachurches, global Christianity, large churches, Pentecostal, evangelical

Over the past decade, the field of megachurch studies has matured and become global in its scope and orientation. (Megachurches are generally defined as churches with at least 2,000 people in attendance, across all worship services, on a typical Sunday.) The number of scholarly articles, books, and book chapters produced on megachurches since 2010 is nearly triple the number produced before that date. Moreover, while megachurch studies focused on North America—in reality, mostly the United States—comprised 78 percent of published texts on megachurches in the period before 2010, the share of such texts

DOI: 10.5325/jworlchri.12.1.0113

*The Journal of World Christianity*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2022

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dropped to 57 percent since that year (for the full data, and how these numbers have been calculated, see below). Far more is now also published on the transnational and often transcontinental connections of megachurches. Megachurch studies today, therefore, is a properly international and cosmopolitan field.

This article has four interrelated aims. The first is to provide a thorough overview of major themes and work in megachurch studies, with special emphasis on works emerging in the last decade. This first aim furthers a second, which is to update two excellent state-of-the-field reviews by Ellingson in order to better reflect the significant development of megachurch studies over the last decade, as well as to chronicle the field's substantially shifted thematic and geographic preoccupations.<sup>1</sup> The third aim is to make visible the now thoroughly global nature of the field by attending fully to its international focus, something done only briefly and tentatively in Ellingson's reviews, as well as in a more recent review of the field written by Hunt as an introduction to the *Handbook of Megachurch Studies* (2020).<sup>2</sup> Finally, the fourth aim of the article is to develop something of a thorough bibliography of key texts in the field of megachurch studies.

The review has several limitations. First, I focus only on texts written in English. This leads inevitably to an overemphasis on scholarship emerging from regions of the world where—whatever the mix of native languages—scholarship is regularly produced in English (e.g., North America, Western Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, Singapore, Anglophone Africa, and, to a lesser extent, Korea), though it must be acknowledged that the literature in English does represent the bulk of scholarly work on the topic. Second, I base the review on a bibliography of 300 reports, theses, books, book chapters, and journal articles, the majority of which I discovered through word searches in two scholarly databases: Academic Search Premier (Ebsco) and JStor. While these databases are both sizeable, and (in their differences) fruitfully complement each other, the materials they warehouse are overwhelming those found in journals and books produced in Europe and North America. For this reason, I also combed the references of texts found in these two databases for additional texts to include in my own bibliography. Still, my approach to developing the bibliography surely disprivileged scholarly material published outside of Europe and North America.

For more strategic reasons, I have placed other limitations on the review. For example, I included only studies that centered megachurches or a particular megachurch. The scope of the review would have swelled unmanageably if I had included all the material on evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic theology and practice drawn from studies of smaller churches (i.e., without reference to megachurches). There are also principled reasons for excluding such material from this review. An article on prosperity theology at a small church,

for example, tells us nothing about megachurches; moreover, including all material on Pentecostalism and evangelicalism in a review of megachurches would be to give the false impression that all megachurches are either Pentecostal, evangelical, or both (which is not the case). For this reason, I included studies on such topics in the bibliography *only if they derived their data primarily from megachurches*.

Second, I did not include emic accounts, unless they quite clearly engaged with and/or utilized etic scholarly disciplines (e.g., sociology). While this excluded all constructive theological work and straightforward critiques of megachurches from a biblical or theological perspective, it did not eliminate all research produced by insiders. Finally, I also excluded from my purview broad, general overviews of particular megachurches, if those overviews lacked more theoretical engagement with the churches *qua* megachurches. With these exclusions, I reduced “the field” to a more practicable size, but also no doubt introduced certain distortions, both objective and subjective.

The first and longest part of the article details the prime thematic and theoretical obsessions of megachurch studies today. As I reviewed the extant scholarship on megachurches, I coded each text in the bibliography by geographical focus and theme. I allowed individual themes to suggest themselves as I read the texts, and then later grouped similar themes into larger categories. I conducted the coding and content analysis alone, which may have introduced some bias and issues related to inter-coder reliability. However, as the coding was conducted in this case less for the purposes of precise scientific enumeration and more for the purpose of gaining a more general impression of the nature and development of the field, it seemed less important to involve other researchers in the process.

Over time, ten distinct coding categories emerged (the first organized by geography and ethnicity, the rest by theme):

1. Geographical focus and transnational connections
2. Growth, benefits, and sincerity
3. Worship
4. Leadership
5. Demographics/social context
6. Body, sex, sexuality, and gender
7. Theological orientation and spiritual gifts
8. Activities and practices
9. Administration/marketing of megachurches
10. Relationship of megachurches to political/social processes  
(e.g., secularism, modernization, neoliberalism)

See the appendix for the full list of categories and the themes grouped under them. This coding, while obviously somewhat subjective, allowed the field to speak for itself, helping to minimize the risk that I might overemphasize certain of its themes according to my own particular interests or disciplinary biases. The following discussion is organized around these ten themes. Subsequently, the article describes significant shifts in the field's geographical and thematic focus since 2010. Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss the geographical locations and disciplinary perspectives that dominate and—more importantly—are lacking from the field of megachurch studies.

The globalization of the field of megachurch studies over the last decade has led to a relative decline in the percentage of publications focused on the animating obsessions of the early, North American megachurch researchers who dominated the field (e.g., megachurch demography; the secrets of megachurch growth; the appeal of megachurches to suburbanites, the youth, and young families; and the effect of megachurches on the religious marketplace), and a related *increase* in themes of more global resonance (e.g., transnationalization and homogenization, migration and migrants). Several other significant thematic developments in the field are discussed below, all of them *reflecting a more sympathetic and/or nuanced turn in megachurch studies*. They include (1) a substantial increase in scholarly engagement with megachurch prosperity theology (in theory and practice), and a related backlash against earlier, almost universally negative, portrayals of prosperity theology as inherently illusory, selfish, and narcissistic, (2) a more positive reappraisal of the commitment, sincerity, and community engagement of megachurch attendees, (3) a shift in interest away from megachurches' flashy, charismatic leaders (the supply side) and their periodic scandals, in favor of those who sit in megachurch pews (the demand side), and (4) expanding attention to megachurches' construction and performance of gender and sexuality (a reflection of shifts in scholarly interest more generally).

## Themes and Theoretical Orientations

### *Geographical Focus and Transnational Connections*

Many of the coding subcategories under this heading were merely geographical. Having these geographical coding categories allowed me to track the proportion of studies focused on various regions of the world (e.g., "North America," "Southeast Asia"). I have already mentioned the (somewhat declining) dominance of North American studies within the field and, below I more thoroughly delineate the shifting geographical foci of megachurch studies. Therefore, no more need be said about geographical focus at this time.

However, this broad heading also included two prominent thematic emphases within the study of megachurches: transnational connections, which cuts across all the geographical categories, and African American megachurches, which represent a specific subset of the North American category. I review each of these themes below.

Research on transnational connections has grown considerably over the past decade, in part because of the pioneering work of scholars like Afe Adogame. Much of this research, however, has focused on a handful of massive megachurches with their own transnational network of church plants. Paul Freston, for example, has examined the growth of Brazil's Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) in Mozambique, South Africa, Peru, Colombia, Portugal, the United States, and England, arguing that the church's Brazilian roots give it unique access to Lusophone, Latino, and Black communities worldwide—something unavailable, for example, to South Korean megachurches—contributing to the UCKG's international expansion, and to its enjoyment of a level of political clout usually reserved only for Western churches.<sup>3</sup> Making a similar point from a fascinating ethnographic vantage point, Kathleen Openshaw traces the international path of a single blessed vial of oil connecting a Christian in Australia, through UCKG networks, to Brazil, Kenya, the holy lands, and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

Multiple authors offer insight into the transnational growth and connections of Nigeria's Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, the United States, Hong Kong, India, Haiti, Jamaica, South Africa, and elsewhere. Adogame terms the RCCG case an example of “transnationalization from below,” enabled as it is by the increasing global mobility of Nigerians and African Pentecostal preachers more generally.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars attribute the RCCG's particular appeal among global African migrant communities to its prominent prosperity theology and strong international networks that allow the church to interpret, shape, and provide hope within the migration process.<sup>6</sup> Others focus on the juxtaposition of the RCCG's self-understanding as a church for all peoples engaged in “reverse mission” to Euro-Americans, and the reality that, demographically speaking, it remains primarily a Black church.<sup>7</sup>

There is likely no more transnationalized church than Australia's Hillsong, and it naturally features prominently in the literature of megachurch transnationalization. Miranda Klaver, for example, describes the role of Hillsong technology in shifting Christians' conception of sermons from an embodied, local performance to a video-recorded “sermonic event” that can be “reproduced across limits of time, place and context.”<sup>8</sup> Mark Evans, meanwhile, considers the global diffusion of contemporary Christian music by Hillsong (but also Vineyard and Soul Survivor) a kind of colonizing force that spreads both by

destroying local musical markets and by projecting the image of a homogenized “global Christian culture” with which many Christians around the world now wish to associate.<sup>9</sup>

There is insufficient space in this article to adequately review all of the excellent work recently produced on transnational elements of the global megachurch phenomenon, and I can therefore only hint, in the following sentences, at some of the rich and stimulating scholarship I have so far neglected. A cluster of fascinating essays examine how various megachurches in Southeast Asia navigate their Christian identity in non-Christian (and at times Christian-phobic) societies by drawing carefully and selectively not only upon the resources of their respective local cultures, but also upon those found in both Asian and Western transnational Christian networks.<sup>10</sup> There is also, naturally, a fair amount of research on the influence of American megachurches and their missiological preoccupations and style (particularly through their emphasis on growth and the church growth movement), but also, perhaps less predictably, the influence of nonwestern megachurches on church life in the United States, and “pendular” migrations and routes of influence among Mesoamerican and North American megachurch networks.<sup>11</sup> Finally, several excellent studies have focused on the transnational standardization of megachurch worship, especially on the “glocalization” of Hillsong music, which, while objectively unaltered from location to location, can be experienced differently depending on myriad contextual factors.<sup>12</sup>

While research on the transnational connections of megachurches has expanded considerably in the last decade, much work remains to be done in this regard. For example, while the influence of US American megachurches abroad is often mentioned, it remains underdocumented and undertheorized, despite the fact that the international impact of such churches is discernible in everything from the websites and Instagram pages of megachurches in the Global South to the constant parade of American megachurch pastors in pulpits and on television sets abroad. Albuquerque’s work on “pendular” migration holds promise, if expanded to other contexts, for demonstrating not only the influence of Western megachurches in the Global South, but also what in other contexts has been called the “pizza effect,” that is, the ways that such influence returns, slightly altered, through processes of migration (e.g., in Korean megachurches in the United States, or among Brazilian megachurch attendees in Australia).

Though the proportion of megachurch research devoted to African American megachurches declined somewhat in the last decade (as compared to previous decades), the field has always prominently featured (and still prominently features) work on such churches. Much of this material considers (and, at times, critiques) the emergence of Black megachurch prosperity theology in the context of the Black church’s history of political activism. Many of the authors

writing on the topic presume and bemoan the fact that Black megachurches are less likely to engage in political activism than other Black churches.<sup>13</sup> For example, Michelle Beadle-Holder argues that Black megachurch pastors' "theology is basically conservative, which breaks with the Black helping tradition," and insists, along with others, that their frequent focus on individual prosperity and empowerment undermines the possibility of collective action for social justice.<sup>14</sup> Robert Gaines similarly suggests that Black megachurches' middle-class demographics and respectability politics prevent them from engaging in overt political action on matters of race.<sup>15</sup> Other authors, note, however, that in this sense Black megachurches may merely reflect shifting dynamics within African American Christianity more generally.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, excellent recent sociological surveys by Sandra Barnes, Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, and R. Drew Smith suggest that Black megachurch political practices are diverse, and that their pastors and members may be just as politically engaged as their non-megachurch counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Eddie Glaude cautions that the popular and scholarly presumption that Black churches *should* be politically active and oriented around the social gospel prevents scholars from taking seriously pentecostalized and prosperity gospel-oriented forms of Black Christianity, particularly megachurch Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Charmayne Patterson, meanwhile, argues that the prosperity orientation of megachurch pastors like Creflo Dollar and Joseph W. Walker III, is not entirely discontinuous from earlier Black church emphases on economic, personal, and relational empowerment.<sup>19</sup>

While the previous paragraph suggests disagreement regarding the nature and extent of Black megachurch political activism, there is a broad scholarly consensus that such churches are quite active and effective (in part because of their size and professionalized staff) in the provision of social services and in projects of community development. Jonathan Walton's excellent history of African American megachurches also covers their long legacy of providing social services to Black communities.<sup>20</sup> In fact, because of their size, their reach into rural areas, and the greater legitimacy (relative to government agencies) of Black churches in the view of many Black Christians, Anthony Campbell and Gail Wallace, and Javonda Williams et al. recommend greater collaboration between social workers and African American megachurches in the provision of social services.<sup>21</sup>

### *Growth, Evangelism, and Sincerity*

Accounting for the growth of megachurches has been an enduring obsession of scholars in the field, though less in the last ten years (as a proportion of the field overall) than in previous decades. Technically, megachurches are defined by their size. However, some scholars have argued that what truly differentiates megachurches from other churches is not their size or growth, but rather the



growth *mindset* they exhibit, a mindset that pervades every aspect of church organization and guides the actions not only of leaders but also of congregants.<sup>22</sup> Megachurches certainly define and appraise themselves by size and regularly engage in what Robbie Goh calls the “performance of the mega.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, with reference to Indonesia, Chao contends that for megachurches, “large numbers . . . are both the goal and the tool of proselytization.”<sup>24</sup> This may partly explain why, as James Twitchell puts it, megachurches make a “fetish out of the parking lot” (i.e., because a bustling parking lot connotes energy and success, and gives the impression that something exciting is going on).<sup>25</sup> Implicitly or explicitly, many megachurch Christians believe that church growth is a sign of God’s blessing.<sup>26</sup> The topic of megachurch growth is therefore not unrelated to the topic of prosperity theology discussed below.

Mark Mulder and Gerardo Martí credit Robert Schuller with introducing the success-oriented “gospel of growth” into American Christianity, but the broader church growth movement associated with Donald McGavran and Fuller Seminary provide an important inspiration for many megachurch (and aspiring megachurch) pastors.<sup>27</sup> Kip Richardson goes so far as to suggest that the far greater density of megachurches in North America than in Europe is related to the fact that the church growth movement never took root in the latter.<sup>28</sup> It is, of course, natural that churches that grow would do so intentionally, that is, that a growth mindset is a necessary if not sufficient condition of church growth. Megachurches’ emphasis on growth, however, also has the potential to produce a backlash. A bevy of recent scholarship on megachurches in Korea, where the American church growth movement became quite influential, criticizes their obsession with size and suggests that this obsession accounts for their declining reputation and (in some cases) numbers.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Asonzeh Ukah illuminatingly describes South African Christian perceptions of migrant Nigerian prosperity gospel pastors (many of them megachurch pastors) as money-hungry frauds.<sup>30</sup>

In his 2010 review of scholarly literature on megachurches, Ellingson outlined three prevailing theories regarding the growth of megachurches, focusing respectively on their creation of congregational cultures in tension with secular society, attentiveness to the needs and desires of religious consumers, and organizational dynamics oriented around and conducive to growth.<sup>31</sup> As a shorthand, we may refer to these as the church-sect, seeker-sensitive, and organizational theories of megachurch growth. Below, I consider each in turn.

Donald Miller, Ellingson notes, was the primary proponent of the church-sect theory, and drew upon Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, who had argued, among other things, that religious sects grew when they preserved continuity with other religious communities while “maintaining a moderate degree of tension with society.”<sup>32</sup> Such tension had the potential to create unity and

make congregants feel like part of an embattled minority, which in turn promoted what the duo considered a second important component of growth, that is, the ability to “generate a highly motivated, volunteer religious labor force, including many willing to proselytize.”<sup>33</sup> While few would dispute this latter point, the notion that megachurches grow because they generate the ideal amount of tension with surrounding society has fallen somewhat out of fashion, in part because of the abundant evidence of megachurch assimilation to certain kinds of (often bourgeois, middle-class, neoliberal) society, and in part—perhaps more important—because while the theory can explain the strength of evangelical Christianity more generally, it cannot as easily explain why *certain* evangelical churches grow while others do not (unless megachurches simply hit some magical sweet spot of tension that would be difficult to define). Since 2010, then, scholars have primarily advanced various versions of the seeker-sensitive and organizational theories of megachurch growth.

While there is widespread agreement that megachurches are particularly adept at identifying and meeting/satisfying the needs/desires of religious consumers, there is somewhat less agreement about how they do so.<sup>34</sup> One line of argument focuses on their ability to produce more powerful emotional (or “affective”) experiences than their competitors.<sup>35</sup> Scholars interested in North America, for example, often link the rapid growth of megachurches in the 1980s and ’90s to the perceived failure of other churches to offer a meaningful and relevant experience of God. Ellingson, for example, acknowledges demand-side shifts in the American religious consumer (e.g., in their decreasing denominational loyalty and increasing consumerism, individualism, and fondness for therapeutic religion) but contends that supply-side shifts—to wit, the way that megachurches better understand and adjust to consumer logic—provide a better account for megachurch growth.<sup>36</sup> Joseph Cruz additionally suggests that megachurches’ greater willingness to employ technology to create and disseminate powerful religious experiences is part of what sets them apart, as is the patina of modernity and rationality that high technology lends to their religion.<sup>37</sup>

Another seeker-sensitive theory emphasizes the ability of megachurches, because of their size, to offer a bewildering array of small-group experiences and social services. They offer each person a “customized spiritual experience,” and in so doing, megachurches are able to act like “small towns” that “practice a parochial cosmopolitan experience” and thereby replace the social services and opportunities for community lacking in North American suburbs, while acting as “functional villages” for global urban migrants (a rapidly increasing demographic) who have abandoned and lost the social support systems provided by their actual villages and small towns.<sup>38</sup> As Mairead Shanahan notes, the provision of such services has become globally important in the context of nations transitioning from welfare to neoliberal states; as neoliberal states abandon the

provision of services, religious groups step in to fill the gap (and megachurches, because of their size, are poised to do it well).<sup>39</sup>

While the versions of the seeker-sensitive theory described above emphasize the *value* of megachurch products, other versions stress their low *cost*. Megachurches have a low bar to entry. They reduce obstacles to participation (e.g., complicated liturgies or traditional iconography and architecture). They countenance free-riders and hangers-on.<sup>40</sup> They “subsidize” the cost of attendance by offering significant benefits (e.g., small groups) while requiring little by way of sacrifice or commitment, particularly at first.<sup>41</sup> People decide to commit further only after becoming certain the church offers what they want and need, and many do, since megachurches do indeed offer more benefits than most other churches.<sup>42</sup> For Michael Symons and Marion Maddox, this is the “consolation of profit.” Megachurches are like Starbucks or McDonald’s; we know what to expect, and we know they only ask of us our money. Nothing more is expected in terms of sacrifice, etiquette, or decorum, and we are comforted by this knowledge.<sup>43</sup>

As discussed above, others attribute the growth of megachurches to their prosperity gospel and, accordingly, to their appeal to middle-class and aspiring middle-class communities with significant social capital.<sup>44</sup> This, also, is a kind of seeker-sensitive explanation for megachurch growth. According to Jeaney Yip and Susan Ainsworth, for example, Singapore’s City Harvest inculcates among believers the conviction that membership has its perks in terms of material prosperity.<sup>45</sup> However, Ilana van Wyk, for her part, rejects theories that attribute megachurch growth to the crassest forms of prosperity theology or their ability to create community (in part because her research demonstrates that South African UCKG congregants are transient and don’t really know each other). Instead, she argues that Christians attend UCKG services because of the presence of rituals they believe help them restore their physical and spiritual health while ensuring providential blessings.<sup>46</sup> One could argue, however, that this is merely another, more expansive, form of prosperity thinking.

Theories accounting for megachurch growth on the basis of organizational dynamics tend to focus on their economy of scale, the rationalization of practices promoting church growth, and their ability to activate members to volunteer in service of the church. Mark Chaves provided an early, concise, and enduringly persuasive articulation of the economy-of-scale argument, according to which megachurches grow because the small profit margins in church administration favor those churches that can reduce per-member expenditures because of their larger size. Chaves’s theory also helps account for *when* megachurches began to appear more regularly on the North American landscape, that is, in the 1970s, a decade during which the costs of running a church continued to increase while church giving stagnated (making economic efficiency far more important).<sup>47</sup>

For Sanders, who articulates another organizational dynamics theory, one element of megachurch growth is their emulation of business practices, for example, employing marketing MBAs to pore over marketing research and articulate a strategy to increase growth. What is new, from this perspective, is not megachurches' attempt to appeal to the religious consumer but rather the rational and sophisticated ways in which they go about it.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in a twist that Max Weber would find intriguing, Young-Gi Hong contends that growing Korean megachurches allow for front-facing religious enchantment, or "charismaticization," while thoroughly bureaucratizing and rationalizing their back-end operations (which he calls "McDonaldization").<sup>49</sup>

The tolerance of megachurches for free-riding has often led to claims that they produce apathetic or uncommitted Christians. Various studies, however, have found that those who attend megachurches are more active churchgoers, and more likely to give more to their church than other Christians, while being equally likely to participate in community engagement activities.<sup>50</sup> According to another organizational dynamics theory of megachurch growth, then, megachurches know how to activate members to work within the church. The key to megachurch growth, Twitchell contends, is "a lot of people giving a little money but doing a lot of work for the brand."<sup>51</sup> Some church leaders generate greater commitment by constructing a sense of tension or conflict with the world outside (see, e.g., the discussion of Mark Driscoll's militaristic language below).<sup>52</sup> Others do it, paradoxically, by periodically slimming down, encouraging the uncommitted to leave, and thereby increasing the commitment of those who remain, as in Canada's The Meeting House, which hosts annual "Purge Sundays."<sup>53</sup> Megachurches succeed, therefore, not only in attracting congregants but in increasing their commitment over time.<sup>54</sup>

A final form of the organizational theory of megachurch growth focuses on social and cultural capital. The vast array of small groups established by megachurches paradoxically create myriad cohesive subcommunities connecting parishioners to one another and to the broader church community. This network can provide a surrogate family or a sense of belonging, but also interpersonal support networks (thus the "social capital") that aid congregants in navigating migration, securing jobs, negotiating politics, and so on.<sup>55</sup>

As these studies suggest, then, there is a great deal of disagreement about the secret to megachurches' success. Even the seeker-sensitive studies emphasizing how megachurches better meet the needs of their congregants disagree on how they do so, and therefore fail to identify which of various factors is the primary key to megachurch growth (likely in part because the key to growth differs in each particular time and place). For the most part, all of these studies—church-sect, seeker-sensitive, and organizational—tend also to suffer from an additional weakness, which is that most of them draw exclusively from qualitative

analysis. Such analysis has much to offer but would be strengthened by large-scale quantitative analyses surveying the reasons that megachurch congregants themselves report for their attendance.

### *Worship*

Rarely does a text with any general description of megachurches not mention their tendency toward high-production and highly polished worship services, and in particular their ability to produce a moving musical experience. Donald Miller's groundbreaking *Reinventing American Protestantism* argued that megachurch Christianity represented a reformation defined not so much by doctrine as by particular methods of using media and mediating the divine, while both Miller and Kimon Howland Sargeant (in *Seeker Churches*, another influential early text) separately argued that megachurches grow at least in part because they are consumer-oriented and in tune with the religious consumer's modern desire for therapeutic religion, a desire that can be particularly well met through the production of emotionally powerful music. Or, as Ellingson has put it, "Megachurch worship . . . is largely an organised response to religious consumers' demands for novel, emotionally powerful, and relevant religious experiences."<sup>56</sup>

More recent research provides further data and evidence for these assertions. Kate Bowler and Wen Reagan, for example, assert that arena rock is the special ingredient that, when combined with prosperity theology, is the secret to megachurches' success.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, drawing upon research on Singapore's megachurches, Yip and Ainsworth use the term "spectacularization" to denote "the process whereby church services are scripted and performed in a purpose-built setting," involving "the staging of goods and services to increase consumption by blurring institutional spheres."<sup>58</sup> Asserting more or less the same, but in an alternative idiom, Jill Stevenson argues that megachurches exploit their amphitheater style, bulletins, greeters, ritual accessibility, lighting, sermons, multiple screens zoomed in on performers' faces, in a totalizing "dramatic structure" that creates "hypermediacy" (a term borrowed from Andy Lavender) in order to "construct an affective intimate script that aims to solve people's problems."<sup>59</sup> While it is clear, then, that moving worship plays an important role in megachurch life, Scott Thumma and Dave Travis note that no church is founded with a congregation large enough to produce the dramatic worship experiences of megachurches, and therefore caution against presuming that megachurches "grow because of the show," that is, that megachurch worship is the prime reason for megachurch growth.<sup>60</sup>

Scholars such as Cruz (drawing upon research among churches in the Philippines, Singapore, Australia, and the United States) have emphasized the importance of technologies of sight and sound in the production of megachurch

worship (an importance exaggerated by the lack of typical high-church liturgical and iconographic sights and sounds in evangelical and Pentecostal churches). Similarly, Goh argues that megachurches utilize sight and sound (and particularly their large screens) in a “performance of the mega” in order—in the absence of the dramatic and miraculous healings on display at other Pentecostal churches—to manifest God’s presence and blessing and thereby assert their own legitimacy.<sup>61</sup>

A fascinating cluster of recent publications centers on the critical participation of megachurch congregants in the production of powerful affect in their own dramatic services. Katja Rakow, for example, asserts that the poignant “affective atmosphere” of megachurch worship emerges from the triangular relationship of light (and other media), worship leaders, and audience members.<sup>62</sup> Matthew Wade and Maria Hynes argue that Hillsong

produces and mobilises affect in order to attain the collective experience of the spectacle, which is so crucial to Hillsong’s visibility as a social phenomenon and also to its recruitment of the individual member into the logic and ethos of the church as a whole.<sup>63</sup>

In turn, this affect contributes to Hillsong’s success at

producing particular kinds of subjects, namely, subjects who are at once comfortable, enthusiastic and loyal. By recruiting its followers as *affective labourers* towards a shared evangelical cause, the embodied and vaguely felt sense of potential of members is mobilised towards the spectacular phenomenon that is the Hillsong church.<sup>64</sup>

Wade has also spoken of megachurch audience members as “prosumers” (consumers *and* producers) who both produce the enchantment of megachurch worship through their own affective labor *and* later consume the CDs, videos, and even worship services that they themselves help produce. Megachurches have an advantage over other “cathedrals of consumption” (e.g., cruises, theme parks) where consumers participate in the production of the experiences they then consume, because the sacred content makes the consumer feel better about their consumption.<sup>65</sup>

Thomas Wagner adds that the branding of Hillsong music is not extraneous to, but is rather part and parcel of the experience of Hillsong music because it produces the expectation of having a certain kind of religious experience that—because of the expectation—one is in fact more likely to have.<sup>66</sup> Essays by Martí and by Yip and Ainsworth make similar claims, the former with reference to Tia DeNora’s “musical entrainment,” and the latter with reference to Foucault’s

concept of governmentality.<sup>67</sup> The production of “prosumers” socialized to expect and help produce the very experience they are similarly socialized to have, however, has limits. Working with data from South African Hillsong churches, for example, Ibrahim Abraham argues that “the question of Protestant sincerity, understood following [Webb] Keane as emphasizing individual moral autonomy and suspicion of external material religious forms for expressing one’s inner state, is particularly acute in the case of the Hillsong megachurch” because of the tension between the normativity of the “authentic” experience and the reality that Hillsong worship services are inescapably scripted (or, to put it more provocatively, *emotionally manipulative*).<sup>68</sup>

These theories, which stress the participation of megachurch congregants in the construction of their own emotionally powerful spiritual experiences, represent an absolutely critical recent intervention. Among other advantages, conceiving of megachurch worshippers as affective laborers and “prosumers” helps us better understand how megachurches are able to so effectively activate members. By offering opportunities for congregants to have such experiences, to slake what Mircea Eliade call the religious person’s “ontological thirst” or “thirst for the real,” megachurches create loyalty and the expectation of powerful future experiences that are then repeatedly met, a kind of virtuous upward spiral that can lead to greater and greater commitment.<sup>69</sup>

### Leadership

Given the widespread presumption that megachurches grow because of the charisma of their central pastor/s, it should come as no surprise that charisma itself features prominently in the literature on megachurch leadership. Interestingly, recent literature on charisma in megachurches ties it to the discussion just above (on the affective labor of audience members in the production of the emotionally powerful worship services they consume) insofar as this literature insists that charisma is also *relational*.<sup>70</sup>

For example, Jessica Johnson agrees with the authors discussed above that megachurch congregants are “laborers” in the production of the very products they consume. Rather than focus on worship, as these other authors do, however, Johnson explores the labor involved in creating and sustaining megachurch pastors’ celebrity. Drawing on data from two megachurch pastors in Seattle (Mark Driscoll and Judah Smith), Johnson describes how, through a kind of self-reinforcing cycle, congregants help promote their own pastors by buying their books, sharing their podcasts, liking their social media posts, and so on, which in turn contributes to the pastors’ charisma and makes it more likely their congregants will support them in these and other ways.<sup>71</sup>



Similarly, James Wellman, Katie Corcoran, and Kate Stockly-Meyerdirk draw on Randal Collins's interaction ritual theory—an elaboration of Durkheim's theory of *collective effervescence*—to assert that large assemblies like those offered by megachurch worship are capable of producing high levels of positive emotional energy if and when (1) there are few barriers to participation, (2) there is a mutual focus of attention, and (3) there is a shared emotional mood. According to this theory, the charismatic pastor, as an “energy star,” plays a particularly important role in generating energy, establishing the mood, and focusing attention. Energy stars have surplus energy, and because of this their followers can derive emotional energy by becoming their disciples, allowing themselves to be directed by them, or even just by admiring or fashioning themselves after them from afar.<sup>72</sup>

Another theme within the emerging literature on charisma in megachurch settings is the importance of affirmation. A “Theology of Self-Esteem (an understanding that humans needed affirmation in their dignity rather than criticisms for their sins)”<sup>73</sup> was central to Robert Schuller's charisma, according to Mulder and Martí, and among the constitutive elements of megachurch pastors' charisma more generally is their ability to affirm our worth, name and help provide solutions to our particular problems, and plausibly present themselves as an example of someone who struggled with and conquered those very same problems.<sup>74</sup> Relatedly, based on research at three Indian megachurches, Y. A. Reddy asserts their charismatic pastors become popular in part by tapping into Indian folk religious expectations that spiritually advanced “men of God” have the power, in uncertain times, to ensure others' success and heal them physically, spiritually, and emotionally.<sup>75</sup> Despite the putatively supernatural powers of many global megachurch pastors, Corcoran and Wellman draw upon data from a survey of twelve megachurches in North America to suggest that charisma may in fact be confirmed and intensified when followers detect failings or other signs of ordinary human character among their leaders, such as with the enigmatically scruffy Bruxy Cavey, pastor at The Meeting House in Ontario, Canada, whose rhetorical anti-institutionalism, personal antiformalism, and theological antinomianism contribute, according to Schuurman, to his “ironic charisma.”<sup>76</sup>

While compelling, these theories seem incomplete, in part because they disagree on what precisely creates this magical thing we call “charisma.” Is it the rapt attention and consumeristic support of their congregants? Is it their ability to effectively direct or absorb worshipful attention (and if so, how)? To relate to and show empathy for their congregants? To recognize, synthesize and satisfy local religious desires? And what about their eloquence? Their physical energy? Their ability to emote enthusiasm? Their physical beauty? Their proven, useable



wisdom? Perhaps the problem—as implied by my use of the term “magical”—is that this thing we call “charisma” (whether at megachurches or elsewhere) is really a *gestalt* impression that would be best studied by breaking it down into contributing traits—intelligence, eloquence, empathy, beauty, energy, and so on—before building back up to a more thorough and complete theory.

### *Demographics and Social Context*

Interest in mapping the demographic and social context of megachurches has declined somewhat since the early decades of research in the field. Over the last decade, Thumma and others have continued to produce the kind of excellent surveys produced in prior decades, but they constitute a shrinking proportion of the field overall. Still, in the past decade, important research on the demographic and social location of megachurches has continued to emerge.

Not surprisingly, these studies largely confirm the impression of an earlier era that while megachurches are primarily an urban affair globally, they remain predominantly a suburban and exurban phenomenon in North America (with particularly dense representation in the US Sunbelt).<sup>77</sup> A common theory accounting for the apparent elective affinity of megachurches and North American suburbs is that they help compensate for what the suburbs lack in terms of identity and community. John Lindenbaum argues, for example, that suburban Sacramento megachurches help reconfigure the suburbs as places of community rather than social alienation, while Charity Carney describes southern US megachurches as self-contained communities offering the services often lacking in suburbia, and doing so in a safe, nonthreatening environment (i.e., in precisely the way suburbanites want them offered).<sup>78</sup> Others have similarly argued that the allure of suburban megachurches is their “pastoral theology”—pastoral in the literary sense, though the double entendre is intentional—which draws people out from urban into suburban areas so they “cannot recognize their complicity in social inequality” and can thus remain free of inner moral conflict.<sup>79</sup>

The affinity between megachurches and American suburbs is of course not perfectly consistent. Not only are there urban megachurches in North America—according to one study, 55 percent of predominantly Black megachurches in the United States are in urban areas—but there is opposition within some megachurch quarters (e.g., the Emerging Church movement) to the suburbanization of American Christianity and all that it entails in terms of mission and the provision of charity to those who need it most.<sup>80</sup> While the relationship between megachurches and North American suburban locations has been a fruitful site of theorizing, the urban location of megachurches outside of North America is presumed to such a degree that few scholars feel obligated even to remark on it (let alone explain it).

Early research on megachurches, which was focused primarily on North America, noted their particular appeal to middle-class Christians.<sup>81</sup> Over the last decade, research conducted all over the globe has merely reaffirmed the point. In North America, megachurches largely remain a middle-class phenomenon among both predominantly white and predominantly African American congregations, where megachurch architecture, decor, sermons, and activities often reflect and address middle-class interests, concerns, and aspirations.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, megachurches have been shown to have a primarily middle-class constituency in Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Kenya, and elsewhere.<sup>83</sup>

While middle-class megachurch constituencies are surely the most common, they are not, of course, universal. Terence Chong's research from Singapore, for example, suggests that many megachurches there target stable working-class communities, that is, the *emerging* rather than established middle class.<sup>84</sup> At the same time, at least one megachurch in Singapore—City Harvest—explicitly positions itself as the church for entrepreneurs and society's producers, movers, and shakers.<sup>85</sup> Studies on Korean megachurches demonstrate similar class diversity,<sup>86</sup> while Joel Tejedo's research in the Philippines suggests that megachurches oriented around miracles, signs, and wonders are particularly appealing to lower-class Filipinos (while still remaining capable of attracting middle- and upper-class congregants).<sup>87</sup>

More research is necessary to establish why these geographical differences in the class orientation of megachurches exist. In fact, so little *comparative* research has been done on class in megachurches around the world that it is difficult to know whether these differences flagged by researchers discussed in the previous paragraph are real or merely reflect the idiosyncrasies of the particular churches or subnational locations on which scholars have so far decided to focus. If the last ten years have seen the proliferation of research on megachurches in the nonwestern world, perhaps the next ten might witness the emergence of larger, more explicitly comparative research projects. The large-scale, survey-oriented Global South Megachurch Project (with which I am associated) is promising in this regard. Still, if we wish to better understand the role of class in megachurches globally, we will need largescale projects comparing megachurches both *inter-* and *intra-*nationally.

Research by Thumma and Bird had established early in the development of the field that megachurches were particularly appealing to youth and young adults, who were disproportionately represented among their ranks.<sup>88</sup> Research in the last decade has done nothing to dispel this general impression, and has in fact confirmed it with more global studies (though few have attempted to theorize the megachurch appeal in any thorough way). Ditto the appeal of megachurches to young families.

Much has been written about race and ethnicity within the context of megachurch research. The first thematic section (above) discussed research on African American megachurches and their approach to combatting racism, an early interest of scholars working on North American megachurches. The past decade, however, has witnessed an effusion of analyses centering on race and ethnicity. For example, several studies in Southeast Asia note the proliferation of megachurches among ethnic Chinese communities, though the presence of megachurches among ethnic Chinese outside of China is likely merely a reflection of Southeast Asian Christian demographics more generally.<sup>89</sup> Several recent studies also foreground issues of ethnicity within migrant Latinx megachurches on both sides of the southern US border. Angela Denker, for example, examines the immigration politics of those who attend borderland Latinx megachurches, and how their relatively liberal views on the topic periodically conflict with the more typically conservative views of their white megachurch neighbors.<sup>90</sup> Aida Ramos, Martí, and Mulder describe the performative Mexicanness of an American-born, white pastor of a border town megachurch attended primarily by Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and suggest it helps congregants negotiate their own religious and cultural identities.<sup>91</sup>

The effect of megachurches on their local religious demography has been a regular focus of both recent and earlier research in the field. An early and important intervention in this regard was Nancy Eiesland's "Contending with a Giant," which argued that successful innovators in a religious market (like megachurches) provoke an enduring and diverse response, and that this effect is exaggerated by the decline of denominationalism, which forces churches to attend more closely and adjust to the moves of local competitors.<sup>92</sup> Arguing against what was at the time (and to some extent remains) the prevailing opinion that megachurch growth led inevitably to the decline of neighboring congregations, Jason Wollschleger and Jeremy Porter provided a nuanced statistical analysis indicating that while megachurches do tend to provoke decline among smaller evangelical churches in their environs, their effect on Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations is minimal.<sup>93</sup> Relatedly, Nancy Ammerman notes that Catholic megachurches tend to siphon fewer congregants from neighboring Catholic churches than is the case in evangelical contexts because of Catholicism's local, nonoverlapping parish organization.<sup>94</sup>

The nondenominational (or only loosely denominational) nature of most megachurches has been so often observed that it bears no further comment. Russia provides the exception that proves the rule, since Russian law suppresses churches founded after 1983, essentially outlawing nondenominationalism and forcing new megachurches to affiliate with older denominations.<sup>95</sup> In recent years, scholars have also begun to describe the way that some larger megachurches are now functioning more or less like denominations, either because

of the loose associations that revolve around them (e.g., the Willow Creek Association), or because of the transnational church-planting prowess of megachurches like Brazil's UCKG or Nigeria's RCCG.<sup>96</sup>

*Body, Sex, Sexuality, and Gender*

Sexuality and gender are topics of increasing scholarly interest in megachurch studies. While there are few studies that thoroughly examine megachurch teachings on sexuality per se, research on ancillary topics abounds. A number of recent studies, for example, dispute both the presumption that Black megachurches are universally conservative in their approach to HIV and AIDS (a kind of litmus test for perspectives on sexuality and homosexuality), and the presumption that their conservatism on this issue is driven by widespread homophobia. Tucker-Worgs and Donn Worgs analyze the responses of Black megachurches in Maryland to the issue of gay marriage in the early 2010s in order to demonstrate their diverse political positions and mobilization, while Barnes contends that Black Baptist megachurches are more welcoming with regard to LGBTQ+ issues than their white Baptist counterparts are.<sup>97</sup> Beadle-Holder, however, acknowledges that conservative political views on issues of sexuality and homosexuality remain the norm among Black megachurches, as they do in other megachurches, and Arnold Fleischmann and Laura Moyer's statistical analyses of county-level data from twenty-two states reveals a correlation between the presence of megachurches and opposition to same-sex marriage.<sup>98</sup>

Still, according to Dyer, American megachurches did become globally engaged in HIV/AIDS work, especially in Africa, in the period between 2000 and 2008, in part because of the new "centrist" leadership of megachurch pastors like Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Franklin Graham, and Max Lucado (who were themselves in many cases inspired by the activism of Bono).<sup>99</sup> As this review indicates, most of the megachurch research analyzing perspectives on sex and sexuality focuses on North America. A fascinating exception to this general rule comes from Chong and Yew-Foong Hui, who draw upon survey data from twenty-four megachurches in Singapore to demonstrate that despite their relatively more conservative sexual ethics, megachurch evangelicals there are more likely than other Protestants to have and socialize with queer friends.<sup>100</sup>

This research raises a further question, one that reveals a significant blind spot within megachurch research. The question is whether the conservative tendencies that most megachurches display with regard to issues of gender and sexuality (as well as on other social/political matters) are unique in any way to megachurches, or are rather simply a reflection of their evangelical and Pentecostal orientation. Chong and Hui's research is the only study of which I am aware that attempts to compare the views of *megachurch* evangelicals

with evangelicals more generally. Obviously, there can be no general rule here. Megachurches vary significantly in their approach to such social and political issues. While some are more conservative, others adopt a laissez-faire attitude, while still others intentionally position themselves in contrast to and against the conservative views of other evangelicals (witness the recent threat of megachurch Cornerstone Baptist Church to leave the US Southern Baptist Convention over the latter's conservative stance on systemic racism). Still, more studies like Chong and Hui's may allow us to further refine our understanding of megachurch theological, ethical, and political positions.

Quite a bit more has been written on gender performance and gender norms within megachurch contexts, almost all of it within the last decade. In one of the rare studies to appear before 2010, Omri Elisha described the contradictory pressures experienced by women in wealthy suburban Knoxville megachurches, who were expected to be emblems of conservative family values while also presenting themselves and their families as successful and beautiful, and who were similarly expected to fiercely promote and advocate for their family members while at the same time demonstrating compassionate concern for others.<sup>101</sup> More recently, in a chapter provocatively titled "Bibles and Boob Jobs," Denker describes similar tensions among megachurch mothers in Orange County, California, arguing that because of its wealth and fame, gender norms in the county had a disproportionate influence among evangelicals elsewhere.<sup>102</sup> Other studies of gender in North America have focused on African American churches. In a study of fifteen Black megachurches, Barnes, for example, discovered that while gender complementarian thinking was common among them, their respective pastor's theological orientation was largely determinative of their views on women's leadership in the church. Liberation theology was common among the pastors; however, those who embraced womanist theologies were the most likely to also embrace women's leadership.<sup>103</sup>

Studies of normative femininity in megachurch contexts have often focused on Hillsong's Bobbie Houston and the church's women-centric Colour Conferences, both because of the global prominence and influence of Hillsong and because of the unabashed gender-norming in which Houston and the Colour Conferences engage. In a series of insightful articles, Maddox, for example, argues that Hillsong promotes "envy evangelism," encouraging women to look good, conform to conventional beauty norms, and have good and frequent sex (with their husbands, of course) in order to make the Christian life attractive to others.<sup>104</sup> Another aspect of this messaging is consumption-oriented self-pampering as a way of manifesting one's worth before God.<sup>105</sup>

There are global echoes of these American and Australian performances of megachurch femininity. Yip traces similar social processes aimed at creating

fashionable and beautiful Christian women in an Assemblies of God church in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>106</sup> Meanwhile, Joy Tong Kooi Chin uses Foucault's "disciplines of the self" to describe regimes of normative and obligatory self-beautification at Singapore's City Harvest, and Chong explores the gendered dynamics of the geisha-girl persona adopted by City Harvest pastor Sun Ho to further her pop star career (more on this below).<sup>107</sup>

According to Maddox, gender complementarity is a prominent feature of the Hillsong message, in which men make the money women spend.<sup>108</sup> The Colour Conferences promote sisterhood and solidarity with an antifeminist streak, and yet there is a paradox at the heart of the male "headship" teachings of churches like Hillsong. On the one hand, Bobbie Houston is a powerful pastor; on the other, she asserts that her authority derives from that of husband and co-pastor.<sup>109</sup> Exploring this paradox, Bowler examines female megachurch pastors (including Houston) as they navigate two significant forces in their lives—evangelical complementarian theology and capitalism—and argues that constraints placed on them by the former (i.e., within the church) encourage and even enable them to become wildly successful in the context of the latter (i.e., the market).<sup>110</sup>

Compared to the corpus of work on normative femininity, significantly less has been written about masculinity within megachurch contexts, and nearly all of it focuses on North America. Rarely is Willow Creek Church discussed without reference, for example, to the famous insight of its pastor, Bill Hybels, that getting "Unchurched Harry's" (i.e., unchurched men in general) back to church was key to church growth, or to the way that the church accordingly oriented its programming around attracting men who did not like to be religious in public, but who did crave the company of other men. In catering to such men, Twitchell argues, megachurches like Willow Creek (and movements like Promise Keepers) have come to play a social role similar to that of declining male-only fraternities like the Masons, Moose, Elks, and Lions.<sup>111</sup> Hybels's insights found perhaps their most extreme articulation at Mars Hill Church, where former pastor Mark Driscoll inspired men to volunteer and provide service to the church by framing such service as engagement in a spiritual battle for which only manly men were suited.<sup>112</sup> In a thoughtful ethnographic analysis, Johnson describes "how the affective ecology of Mars Hill inspired processes of militarization and sexualization that enlisted affective labor and self-sacrifice" through "voice, tone, mood, atmosphere, image, imagination, demons, and [other] technologies."<sup>113</sup>

In addition to studies of Hybels and Driscoll, masculinity emerges as a theme in many analyses of Black megachurch leadership in the U.S., such as in Todne Chipumuro's work on Eddie Long's sexual scandal in the context of popular evangelical and Black Christian tropes of manhood, masculinity, and mentoring that

position Black leaders as spiritual “fathers” (a positioning vulnerable to abuse).<sup>114</sup> Sexual scandals involving megachurch pastors more generally are also a regular theme of literature in the field, but they were rarely the focus of or analyzed in any systematic or theoretical way, reflecting a general shift to more sympathetic treatment of megachurches in recent scholarly literature (as opposed to journalistic accounts, which remain disproportionately focused on megachurches’ well-publicized financial and sexual scandals). Though megachurch scandals tend to make headlines in ways that such scandals in smaller churches do not, no evidence has so far been produced to suggest that megachurches are proportionally more prone to them than their smaller counterparts.<sup>115</sup>

Once again, while these studies are fascinating and nuanced, they rarely allow us to differentiate the gender dynamics at megachurches from that at evangelical and Pentecostal churches more generally. Are the gender views and norms at megachurches different in any way, or are they merely like that of other theologically similar churches, except that they play out on a grander scale with the added element of celebrity? Only broader, more comparative work will enable us to answer such questions.

#### *Theological Orientation and Spiritual Gifts*

Among articles appearing before 2010, prosperity theology was a central but not dominant thematic concern of research on megachurches. Publications focused on small groups, social services, class, politics, and the effect of megachurches on the Christian religious marketplace appeared at roughly the same frequency as those that emphasized prosperity theology, while publications treating all of these themes appeared less regularly than those examining race and the reasons for megachurch growth. Since 2010, however, and by a fairly wide margin, no topic has received such regular treatment in the megachurch literature as prosperity theology. An entire article could easily be devoted to reviewing this literature on megachurch prosperity theology, which of course is only part of the broader literature on prosperity theology in evangelical (and other) religious contexts. Here, therefore, I highlight only those publications that offer novel or intriguing perspectives on the topic, leaving aside texts already discussed (such as those on whether the prosperity gospel blunts Black megachurches’ political activism).

No one has written more sensitively and thoroughly about the prosperity gospel in North American megachurch contexts than Kate Bowler. Her book, *Blessed*, traces the history of the prosperity gospel, and its diffuse roots in a variety of prior religious movements (e.g., new thought, Christian Science), before engagingly examining its manifestations in dozens of contemporary American megachurches.<sup>116</sup> In other publications, Bowler also describes the paradoxical emergence of prosperity theology among traditionally simplicity-oriented



Hutterite and Mennonite migrants to the city of Winnipeg, as well as the symbiotic relationship of prosperity theology, televangelism, and arena-style rock church music in American and Australian megachurch contexts.<sup>117</sup>

While the prosperity gospel has certainly demonstrated a particular affinity with North American culture, it is not a uniquely North American phenomenon, and many excellent recent texts examine its emergence in Southeast Asia. In a study of Calvary Church in Kuala Lumpur, for example, Yip describes congregants' perception of giving money to missions as an "instrumental exchange," while Chong's sophisticated survey research demonstrates that megachurch Christians are far more likely than their non-megachurch counterparts to believe that giving to the church will lead to spiritual and material blessing (and also, not surprisingly, to actually give more to the church).<sup>118</sup> Tejedo suggests that Manila's Word of Hope Christian Church and Jesus is Lord Worldwide Church deploy a distinctive, subtly Christian nationalistic brand of prosperity that focuses on prosperity for the entire nation.<sup>119</sup> Fewer scholars have analyzed megachurch prosperity gospel in other parts of the world. However, an excellent early study on the prosperity gospel in Nigeria suggests that it may be particularly appealing in a Yoruba ethnic context because of pre-Christian presumptions that the purpose of religion was to ensure and remove obstacles in the way of worldly success,<sup>120</sup> while Adogame, working with materials from the RCCG, has insightfully traced the indigenization of prosperity theology in this Nigerian context.<sup>121</sup> As for Latin America, in an intriguing study from Colombia Rebecca Bartel examines the use of church donations given by credit card, to ethnographically detail "the debt upon which the prosperity rests."<sup>122</sup>

A common theme of global research on prosperity theology is how megachurches have responded to the therapeutic turn in religion by focusing on the "satisfactions and psychological fulfillment that Christian faith offers," that is, on *applied* religion, or "how belief in God makes a difference to one's happiness, family, self-esteem, [and] direction in life."<sup>123</sup> Employing Paul du Gay's language of "the enterprise self," Yip and Ainsworth show, for example, how Hillsong frames the self as a project, and inculcates in the churchgoing self particular kinds of needs, aspirations, and desires. Megachurches don't just satisfy such needs, aspirations, and desires; they help *create them*.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, the sensitive ethnography of David Snow et al. examines a megachurch support group for those "suffering" from same-sex attraction, demonstrating how the support group successfully frames both the problem (diagnostic framing) and the solution (prognostic framing) in particularly Christian ways. Martí refers to this as the power-surrender dynamic in megachurch worship.<sup>125</sup> Come to church, surrender to its forms of socialization and reorientation, take of its bountiful resources, and be *empowered*. In this fashion, and with a force multiplied by



dozens of differently oriented small groups, megachurches can therefore provide “an alternative to the more conventional self-help market.”<sup>126</sup>

As a trickle-down effect of their therapeutic orientation, megachurches, scholars note, also promote individualism and consumerism. Yip examines Hillsong music, for example, to show how it centers the individual and the individual's desires, both spiritual and material.<sup>127</sup> Having centered the individual's desires, megachurches then focus intently on meeting them (in part by stripping away any potential obstacle to enjoyment, including even potentially troubling symbols like the cross, and thereby becoming religious “non-places”), treating those in attendance like customers, turning them into consumers of church “products” (symbolic and literal), and even legitimizing and encouraging their consumerism more generally.<sup>128</sup> For example, Maddox contends that Hillsong's “theology of consumption”—the idea that there is a Christian obligation to consume—is a prime reason politicians in increasingly secularizing Australian society are drawn to it.<sup>129</sup> Meanwhile, Wade portrays Hillsong as a “total institution” that blesses consumerism and individualistic self-improvement by bringing it within the realm of the sacred and surrounding it with enchantment.<sup>130</sup> While acknowledging the consumerism promoted by megachurches, James makes reference to de Certeau to argue that there is no “outside” of consumerism, and therefore looks for subtle ways in which megachurches subvert consumerism from within a hegemonically consumeristic culture.<sup>131</sup> And, as noted above, James Bielo and others have noted the rhetorical rejection of megachurch consumerism emanating in particular from Emerging Church circles.<sup>132</sup>

Appraisals of prosperity theology by Christians who do not espouse it are nearly universally negative, and even many academic studies on the topic subtly (or not so subtly) betray their authors' repulsion and indignation. Perhaps in response, several more recent publications seem to push back against the nearly universally negative portrayal of prosperity theology, either by adopting a more neutral, descriptive tone or by arguing, as Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly do, that the consumers of prosperity theology should be taken seriously when they report that they are happy with the “return” on their “investment” in prosperity-oriented faith commitment and financial giving.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, resisting the claim that prosperity gospel encourages individualism, Richard Burgess argues that within the RCCG in Britain, prosperity theology redirects wealth outwards (even beyond church members) by encouraging the accumulation of wealth *for the purpose of giving to others*.<sup>134</sup> Eun Young Lee Easley makes nearly precisely the same claim with regard to Korean megachurches.<sup>135</sup> In a somewhat earlier article, Alan Greenblatt provides a useful review of scholars who resist the stereotypical portrayal of megachurches as crassly consumeristic.<sup>136</sup> Still, scholarly coverage of megachurch prosperity theology is so thorough (and scholarly engagement with megachurch theology beyond it so sparse) that one

could get the impression that megachurch theology uniformly begins and ends with it. There is also shockingly little in the literature on megachurch biblical hermeneutics. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the one significant study of biblical hermeneutics in a global megachurch context—Matthew Engelke’s *A Problem of Presence*—is actually about a Zimbabwean megachurch that explicitly forbids the use of the Bible in worship and argues that it gets in the way of a direct, unmediated experience of the divine.<sup>137</sup>

Research on megachurches also clusters around the place, within them, of spiritual gifts and spiritual warfare, but noticeably less so than would be the case if one were to focus on Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity more generally, where such literature is ubiquitous. To give just one illustrative and striking example: Only one among the 300 texts reviewed for this article deals with the topic of glossolalia in megachurches in any significant way. The dearth of research on glossolalia in megachurches may suggest that in removing obstacles to participation and catering largely to respectable middle-class and upwardly mobile communities, megachurches have downplayed the more radical beliefs and practices associated with their evangelical and Pentecostal roots. Still, many megachurches around the world (and particularly in the Global South) feature glossolalia, and many megachurch pastors regularly recommend the practice from the pulpit. So the lack of scholarship on this issue is a puzzle. As a general rule, we could perhaps observe that much of the research on megachurches focuses on what makes them distinct (e.g., their larger size, greater social and political impact, more grandiose worship) to the neglect of those things that they share with other, smaller Pentecostal and evangelical churches.

There has been somewhat more scholarly engagement, however, with spiritual warfare and spiritual healing in megachurch contexts. Even here, however, the literature is limited primarily to megachurches in Africa and the African diaspora. Van Wyk argues, for example, that the UCKG in Durban, South Africa, grew primarily because of effective rituals and spiritual practices that helped congregants “restore the physical and spiritual balance that they believed necessary to ensure a flow of blessings from the invisible.”<sup>138</sup> Such practices also have the potential, however, to provoke accusations of and conversations about fakery, as Jesse Shipley notes with regard to the deliverance ministries of megachurch pastors in Ghana.<sup>139</sup> In terms of the African diaspora, Burgess notes that Afro-British megachurches are more likely to engage in deliverance ministries than other British megachurches.<sup>140</sup> Other studies demonstrate the presence of spiritual warfare practices outside of Africa, in places like the Philippines and Guatemala.<sup>141</sup>

A softer emphasis on spiritual healing through divine intervention (but often without the explicit and more dramatic rituals of spiritual combat associated with certain Pentecostal churches) can be found more broadly in megachurch

communities. Joel Osteen's "prosperity gospel of the body" has already been discussed, and his more subtle practices of spiritual healing manifest in comparable ways among megachurches in Korea, India, Australia, and elsewhere.<sup>142</sup> Still, several scholars engage the topic only to note the distinct absence of spiritual warfare and spiritual healing practices at large, influential megachurches like Hillsong (where the only echo of such practices is in the rhetorical use of "the enemy" to cover all threats to the community and individuals within it).<sup>143</sup> For these reasons, if it was indeed the case, as John Vaughn asserted in his very early (1993) appraisal, that North American megachurches grew in part because they were "major interpreters of urban spiritual warfare," that element of megachurch life appears to have declined dramatically since.<sup>144</sup>

### *Megachurch Activities and Practices*

Much has been made of the extensive network of small groups offered by typical megachurches, and I have already reviewed scholarship on their role in (1) creating "total environments" that replace secular alternatives, (2) addressing middle-class and (in some places) suburban interests, needs, and aspirations, (3) framing human problems in Christian ways and providing appropriate Christian solutions, (4) allowing congregants to customize their spiritual experience, (5) addressing and perhaps promoting the therapeutic turn in religion (through small groups with self-help orientations, etc.), (6) "subsiding" the cost of megachurch attendance, and (7) increasing members' commitment.<sup>145</sup> Scholars have additionally investigated how small groups function to socialize diverse constituencies into the culture of a church, as well as to inculcate faith through repeated rituals intended to develop virtue through relationship with God.<sup>146</sup>

Some small groups are oriented around social service engagement, and a variety of recent studies contradict the earlier, widespread presumption that megachurch attendees were self-obsessed and disengaged beyond the limits of their own church properties.<sup>147</sup> Andrew Davies, Sophie Bremmer, and Burgess, for example, have separately described a form of prosperity gospel emerging at Afro-British megachurches in London that promotes and encourages social engagement and altruism.<sup>148</sup> Similarly, through excellent ethnographic analyses, Elisha shows how wealthy megachurch Christians in Knoxville, Tennessee, assuage the guilt of their wealth through "servant evangelism" and intentional "downward mobility."<sup>149</sup> A large number of researchers have documented the engagement of Black megachurches in the realm of health services and community development, and megachurches more generally in migrant ministries (which should come as no surprise, since particularly outside of North America, megachurches often serve international or urban migrant communities).<sup>150</sup>

Most of the literature on what might be called megachurch foreign missions focuses on the international church-planting activities of massive churches like

RCCG and UCKG.<sup>151</sup> Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe and Tim Hoiland, however, have traced a growing interest among US megachurches in the kinds of international aid projects formerly associated primarily with liberal Christianity, while also noting that megachurches tend to spurn older mission networks, develop relationships directly with other churches abroad, and go it alone.<sup>152</sup>

The breadth of scholarship on institutional megachurch practices is clear from the previous paragraphs. Significantly less has been written about their bodily and material practices, in part because there has been so little formal ethnographic work focusing on megachurches (as discussed below). However, the interaction ritual chain theory of Wellman et al. does investigate the bodily and psychological effects of corporate worship, while Johnson highlights the role of voice in the construction of masculinity at Mark Driscoll's Mars Hill.<sup>153</sup> Relatedly, Kevin O'Neill provocatively discusses the bodily expression of spiritual warfare by way of urging greater attention to ritual behavior in megachurch contexts.<sup>154</sup> In terms of material practice, Simon Coleman and Saliha Chattoo apply art historian Colleen McDannell's theory to megachurches in order to highlight how the consumption of cheap material goods (e.g., t-shirts, bumper stickers, jewelry, and CDs) materialize megachurch identity, constituting a "visible and tactile means through which to enact a religious subculture."<sup>155</sup> Meanwhile, Openshaw and Maria Frahm-Arp, in separate research projects, demonstrate the importance of material objects—holy oil, sashes, cords tied around the waist, and so on—in both maintaining interpersonal transnational connections and carrying out successful spiritual warfare, while Engelke describes how Zimbabwe's Friday Apostolics construct the Bible as *material* object and downplay its spiritual efficacy because of this materiality.<sup>156</sup> Still, the focus on ritual, practice, materiality, and embodiment in megachurch contexts remains diffuse and tentative, and more ethnographic work would be welcome in this regard.

#### *Administration/Marketing of Megachurches*

Early research on megachurches often noted how they effectively learned and deployed business strategies and marketing techniques (so effectively, in fact, that some business scholars have asked whether business leaders should now be learning from megachurches).<sup>157</sup> In terms of business/church similarities, I have already discussed the consumer ("seeker") orientation of most successful megachurches, their ability to meet the demands of diverse "customer" constituencies through small groups of various kinds, their employment of congregants' "affective labor" to construct and promote the church brand, their effective rationalization ("McDonaldization") of operations, and their exploitation of sophisticated marketing research, both formal and informal (remember Hybels's neighborhood visits, from which he derived Willow Creek's orientation around "Unchurched Harry"). Scholars have also noted how megachurches

blur presumed church/business distinctions by establishing for-profit business ventures to raise revenue or skirt restrictive zoning laws, by allowing external organizations to market among their congregants, or by borrowing the “non-place” utilitarian big box architecture of business offices and malls.<sup>158</sup> Some have gone so far as to argue that the megachurch tendency to curate a corporate identity combining “spirituality with market logic” is part of their global appeal, particularly among the aspiring middle classes.<sup>159</sup>

A great deal has been written specifically on megachurch marketing and branding. In addition to noting megachurches’ general consumer orientation, the literature explores their marketing of community, prosperity, ecstasy, and size itself, as well as how the consumer/seeker orientation of megachurches means that once *inside* the church the consumer/worshiper has little power (e.g., to hire and fire pastors) and is left with a choice only about which church products to consume.<sup>160</sup> Most of the literature on megachurch branding focuses on Hillsong, as easily the most prominent global megachurch brand. For example, Tanya Riches traces shifts in Hillsong branding as it grew from a local to global product, while Tom Wagner argues (as noted above) that the *branding* of Hillsong music is inextricable from the *experience* of it. The brand is the experience and the experience, once marketed, builds the brand.<sup>161</sup> Other authors have argued that megachurches are particularly adept at employing media (e.g., television or radio) in their marketing and branding efforts.<sup>162</sup> While some of this research examines new media, like websites, research on megachurch marketing focusing intensively on *social* media remains somewhat surprisingly sparse.<sup>163</sup>

Scholars have also examined both the quotidian and more scandalous financial aspects of megachurch management. In separate contexts, Twitchell and Imchen Sungjemmeren, for example, describe the great sums of money that flow into and out of megachurches, contributing to their appeal and fame.<sup>164</sup> Relatedly, Martí and Mulder consider Robert Schuller’s theory that intentionally straining resources to grow and demonstrate success would attract larger donations, and suggest that both the theory and the precarious existence (“megachurch strain”) it entails are relatively common among megachurches.<sup>165</sup> Chin examines the way that Singapore’s City Harvest surveils church member giving in order to encourage more of it.<sup>166</sup> However, in contradictory findings from different parts of the world, Thumma and Bird found that megachurch parishioners in the United States tithed less than Christians attending other kinds of churches, while Chong and Hui discovered the reverse in their survey of twenty-four churches in Singapore.<sup>167</sup> Megachurch pastors’ opulence, financial mismanagement, and scandal also feature prominently in the work of scholars like Dennis Smith and Leonildo Campos, Yip and Ainsworth, and Swanson.<sup>168</sup>

That most megachurches espouse conservative politics is a truism. While some megachurch pastors, like Joel Osteen, package their traditional theology with political quietism (or at most a kind of implicit political advocacy), many megachurch pastors are more assertive in their politics, and research by Warf and Winsberg shows a positive correlation between the presence of US megachurches and the degree of political conservatism nearby.<sup>169</sup> In addition, many megachurch pastors have been criticized for their support for conservative or nationalistic Christian politicians.<sup>170</sup> Scholars have also documented megachurches' generally ameliorative approach to social problems, an approach that holds individuals accountable for their own success and failure, and that accordingly seeks change through individual conversion and transformation rather than structural social change.<sup>171</sup> As with evangelical Christians more generally, this approach, in combination with the implicit promotion of consumerism and the prosperity gospel (as discussed above), inclines megachurch Christians toward support of neoliberal policies and capitalist economies.<sup>172</sup> Still, there are other situations in which megachurch Christians demonstrate a willingness to critique capitalist economic systems, and, as noted above with regard to African American and borderland Latino megachurches in the United States, megachurch politics are diverse and complex.<sup>173</sup> As noted above, the literature on megachurch politics generally fails to identify what is peculiar to megachurches, as opposed to a politics that megachurches have in common with most other evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

Scholars have also analyzed megachurches in the context of social and historical processes. As noted above, research suggests that megachurches contribute to processes of rationalization, and studies from around the world indicate that part of the appeal of megachurches is their embrace of the modern, their use of technology, that is, their techno-spirituality, and their promotion of social modernization more generally to link themselves to "a new religious modernity."<sup>174</sup> Wanjinu Gitau contends, for example, that in the context of a rapidly modernizing Africa where older spiritual maps have failed and where millennials experience "structural worldview dissonance," a Nairobi megachurch, Mavuno, helps Kenyans develop ways of being "Christianly modern."<sup>175</sup> Modernization can take a particularly Western form, and given transnational megachurch connections and the influence of Western megachurches more generally, it should come as no surprise that some global megachurches also manifest and promote westernization (or even Americanization).<sup>176</sup>

Scholars have also examined the relationship of megachurches to pop culture. The contemporary Christian music (CCM) utilized in many megachurches of course appropriates pop musical styles, quite explicitly in the case of Hillsong, Vineyard, Soul Survivor, and other CCM producers. Perhaps no church has

appropriated pop culture as intentionally or aggressively as Singapore's famous megachurches, including Faith Community Baptist Church and City Harvest Church. Faith Community's founding pastor, Lawrence Khong, is also a magician and continued performing magic and running an entertainment company that produces magic shows even after establishing the church. Sun Ho, co-pastor and wife of City Harvest's founding pastor, Kong Hee, embarked with the church's blessing (and what turned out to be illegal financial support), on a career as a Mandopop star, making a name for herself (and her geisha persona) in Asia before attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to break into the US American market. In this way, such pastors express a sense of obligation—the "cultural mandate"—to appropriate pop cultural forms. As Chong puts it,

Unlike conventional seeker churches that adopt the *form* of pop culture but empty out the secular meaning to replace it with Christian content, such as Hillsong Church, the charismatic churches of Khong and Ho see the very secularity of pop culture as a crucial vehicle for penetrating the economy of unsaved souls. The magician and the geisha are better interlocutors of Christ than straight-up pastors.<sup>177</sup>

Chattoo and Coleman argue that this kind of intentional "encroachment" into popular culture can be found among megachurches around the world, as they explicitly attempt to

move into and aggressively (re-)moralise secular realms, seeking fresh markets alongside new converts as believers carry out their evangelical duty of reaching out to non-believers, not merely through testimony but also through product placement of such goods as music, films, theatrical performances, or even clothes.<sup>178</sup>

### Shifting Geographical and Thematic Emphases

Figure 1 demonstrates the growth of megachurch studies over the last thirty years, while figures 2 and 3 indicate that this growth has been concentrated more in certain areas than others. As indicated in the introduction, within my sample the number of texts (220) published since 2010 nearly triples the number (80) produced before that date (and this despite the fact that the databases on which I most relied were not reflecting the full range of 2020 studies when I conducted the review).

Figure 2 compares the geographical focus of texts written before and after the beginning of 2010, by percentage, and indicates a 26.6 percent decline in the percentage of studies focused primarily on North America. (Note that all of the



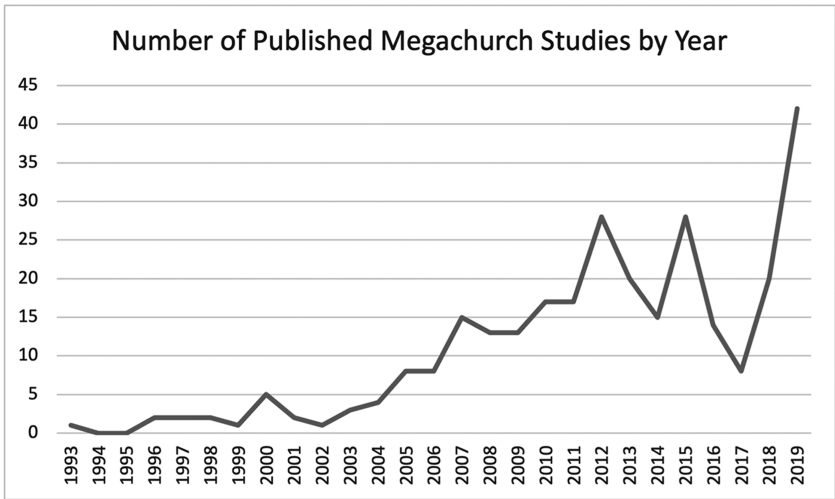


Figure 1 | Number of Published Megachurch Studies by Year  
*\*Chapters in edited volumes were counted as their own unique publications.*

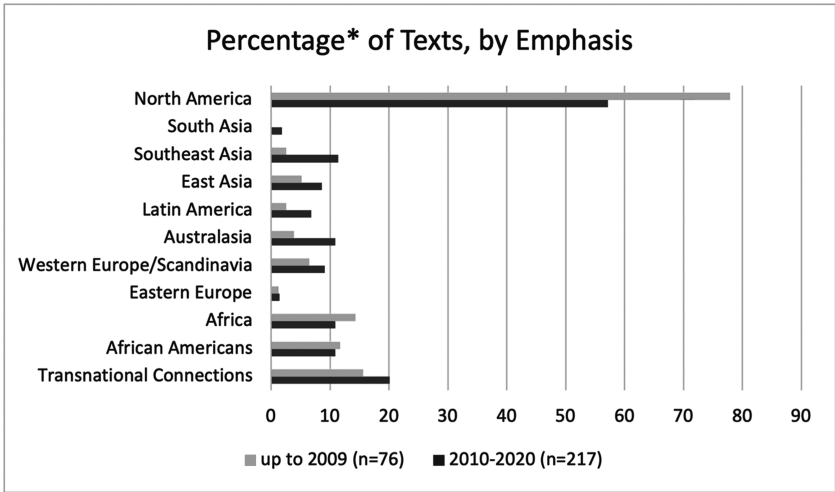


Figure 2. Percentage of Texts, by Emphasis  
*\*Some studies focused on more than on region, such that the sum of these percentages exceeds 100.*

data given here are given in terms of percent growth/decline of the *percentage* of texts focusing on X region or topic.) The only other region to see a decline was Africa, and—for reasons I can’t fully explain—by a similarly wide margin (23.8%). Conversely, all other regions experienced substantial growth in the percentage of texts devoted to them, with increases in Southeast Asia (338.5%),



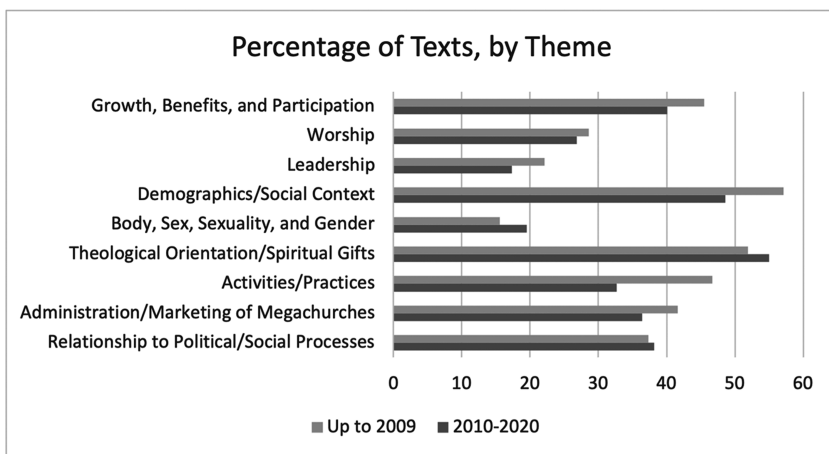


Figure 3. Percentage of Texts, by Theme

*\*Many studies focused on more than one theme, such that the sum of these percentages exceeds 100.*

Australasia (179.5.6%), Latin America (161.5%), East Asia (65.4%), and Western Europe/Scandinavia (40%) leading the way.

That Southeast Asia and Australasia should appear at the top of this list is unsurprising, since my more subjective impression of recent scholarship in the field suggests that a large portion of the most sophisticated research on megachurches now focuses on megachurches, and emerges from scholars in these two regions.

Figure 2 also displays a 6.8 percent decline in studies on African American megachurches (again, as a percentage of all works in the two periods), though this is less than the decline in North American studies more generally, suggesting that research on African American megachurches is actually increasing as a proportion of work on North America. Finally, figure 2 illustrates a 28.8 percent increase in the proportion of texts emphasizing transnational megachurch relationships, a reflection, presumably, both of the globalization of the field and of growing interest in transnationalism in the context of the humanities and social sciences more generally.

Figure 3 compares the level of scholarly interest in nine thematic categories—the same reviewed above—in the periods before and after 2010. (See the appendix for the full list of categories and the coding subcategories included within them.) Here, also, there have been a number of appreciable shifts. For example, the percentage of texts discussing megachurch activities and practices declined by 30 percent, a continuing testament, perhaps, to the dearth of ethnographic interest in the field. Interest in a subtheme within this category, small groups (8c in the appendix), declined by 54.3 percent, though the percentage

of texts on embodiment (8g), another subtheme, increased by 145 percent. The percentage of studies focused on the demographic and social context of megachurches also declined (by 14.9%).

Megachurch demography was a particular emphasis of early studies on North American megachurches (and remains so today); therefore, the declining percentage of publications focused on megachurch demography, and subthemes like race/ethnicity (5b in the appendix) and suburban location/appeal (5g) is likely a function of the decline of North American studies as a proportion of the field overall. The percentage of studies focused on the nature of megachurch leadership declined by even more (21.7%), confirming my subjective impression that, relative to studies in the earlier period, work on megachurches over the last decade has focused less on their charismatic leaders (the supply side) and more on their congregants (the demand side). This shift is driven in large part by the growing proportion of more sociological work emerging from Asia. There was a 25 percent increase in the percent of publications emphasizing the body, sex, sexuality, and gender, a reflection, no doubt, of a more general increase in scholarly interest in such topics within the last decade. This increase would be even more impressive if we accounted for the 30 percent *decline* in the subtheme of masculinity (6e), since there were substantial increases in the subthemes of Body image/Beauty standards (6a; 63.3% increase) and Sexuality (6b; 80.8% increase). Finally, there was also an increase (but only by 12.5%) in the percentage of research on the administration and marketing of megachurches category. All other thematic categories experienced only relatively insignificant growth or decline in scholarly interest.

Though interest in the category of Worship declined mildly, two subthemes within it, Preaching/Sermons (3g; 57.5 increase) and Emotion/Production of emotion (3k; 45.8% increase) saw substantial growth. The 7.9 percent increase in texts in the category of Theological Orientation and the spiritual gifts was driven almost entirely by the rapidly burgeoning literature on the subtheme of prosperity theology (7b). The percentage of texts considering megachurch prosperity theology increased by 50 percent over the two periods. The related subthemes of Empowerment/positivity/therapeutic orientation (7c) and Aspiration (7f) increased by 52.5 percent and 180 percent, respectively.

## Conclusion

If nothing else, this article has demonstrated the bewildering and increasing breadth and depth of the field of megachurch studies, as well as the variety of ways in which the field has changed over the last ten years in terms of both geographical and thematic focus. Sociological approaches, both qualitative

and quantitative, continue to dominate the field, though scholars now more regularly engage the field from other disciplines, including political science, business, marketing, health, historical theology, media, communication, and rhetoric. Relatedly, the last decade has witnessed decreasing or flat interest in some of the animating obsessions of early scholarship on North American megachurches (e.g., the secrets of their growth; their appeal to families, the youth, and suburbanites; their music; their effect on the religious marketplace; their charismatic leaders), as such obsessions were displaced by the emergence of novel scholarly preoccupations (e.g., with sexuality, embodiment, materiality, media, and social media) and the globalization of the field, which led to greater emphasis on topics of more global relevance (e.g., transnational connections, the transnationalization/homogenization of megachurch music, multi-ethnic congregations, migrants/migration, the commodification of religious goods, financial scandals).

The amount of ethnographic work on megachurches remains small and likely reflects the well-documented aversion of anthropologists to working in Christian contexts. There is, however, hope that ethnographic studies of megachurches might increase along with ethnographic research on Christianity more generally (e.g., in the work of Joel Robbins, Webb Keane, Fenella Cannell and, more recently, Nate Roberts), since thirteen of the sixteen studies that in my estimation featured traditional anthropological methods and theories were published in the last decade. Still, fifteen studies in a sample of 300 constitutes only 5 percent. A related weakness in the field is that much of the research on megachurches continues to be produced from a distance, on the basis of mailed or online surveys, external landscape or architectural surveys, or websites, social media posts, and/or sermons available online. Such research may be the only kind possible over the next year or two, due to the effects of COVID-19, but one hopes that when (if?) things return to normal, a greater proportion of research on megachurches will be published by those who have actually spent a good deal of time *in* them.

Thematically, there remains a great deal of potential for further study of gender and sexuality in the context of megachurch culture, leadership, teachings, and socialization. (On the matter of gender, however, it bears mentioning—as a cursory review of my footnotes will attest—that women are engaged in the scholarly study of megachurches to a surprisingly high degree, and far more than is true in most scholarly fields.)

There is also a dearth of historical studies; while many publications include an introductory overview of the historical emergence of megachurches, only four of the texts I surveyed provide a substantive general history of megachurches, and these were divided over whether megachurch Christianity ought to be considered a continuation of, or as distinct from the revival movements

of an earlier era. None of them, moreover, took the entire global scene into consideration. Surely, therefore, there remains need for book-length, historical examinations of the megachurch phenomenon, particularly examinations that pay close attention to the transnational relationships of megachurches around the world. In addition, apart from the strong scholarly emphasis on prosperity theology, there has been shockingly little written about megachurch theology or biblical interpretation (as discussed above).

Geographically, studies of North American megachurches have always been represented well in the literature, and over the last decade the number of studies of Southeast and East Asian megachurches has increased substantially as well. Within the study of North American megachurches, however, there are gaps. Much of the scholarship focuses on megachurches in the US Sunbelt, Southwest, and West, with very little research emerging from studies of the US Midwest (aside from those focused on Willow Creek), East, and Northeast. African American churches have received a fair amount of attention relative to the fact that they comprise only about 10 percent of the American megachurch landscape. However, research on African American megachurches has primarily explored a distinct and narrower range of topics—like social activism, health, and community development—than is the case for research on their predominantly white counterparts. Within the scholarship on East Asia, there are similarly significant gaps; not a single study in my sample, for example, focused on Chinese or Japanese megachurches. Aside from two or three significant publications, the many South Asian megachurches (primarily in India and Sri Lanka) have also received almost no coverage at all, despite the fact that I, along with colleagues in the Global South Megachurch Project, have catalogued nearly one hundred megachurches in India alone.

The megachurches of Eastern Europe have been similarly neglected. African megachurch studies are somewhat well represented, but (as indicated above) seem to be declining as a proportion of the field overall. Latin America is particularly poorly represented relative to the number of its megachurches, though this may be due to the fact that much of the scholarly literature on Latin America is produced in Spanish, which may, to some extent, dilute the literature in English. Finally, particularly influential or large churches—what we might call gigachurches—have received a disproportionate amount of attention. So large a proportion of the scholarship on megachurches emerges from studies of just a few churches, like Willow Creek, Saddleback, Mars Hill, Lakewood, Potter's House, and World Changers in North America, along with RCCG, UCKG, City Harvest, Hillsong, and Yoido Full Gospel elsewhere, that there remains a distinct need for scholarly research on the thousands of less powerful and influential (but also more typical) megachurches around the world. There is also a need to revisit the minimum megachurch definitional threshold of 2,000

attendees on a typical Sunday. In countries with large populations and high population density (like India, for example), a church of 2,000 is not particularly remarkable.

In his 2008 and 2010 reviews, Ellingson noted the field's tendency to focus on megachurch pastors far more than megachurch congregants (i.e., on the "supply" rather than "demand" side), to such an extent that scholars in the field couldn't persuasively account for "why people attend; why they join, stay, or leave; and how they experience worship."<sup>179</sup> Ellingson also argued that the field remained "inchoate," overly descriptive, and inadequately theorized. "It is time," he wrote, "for scholars to move beyond descriptive research and develop more systematic and robust explanations that bring the study of the megachurch into the animating debates within the sociology of religion and within organizational and cultural sociology."<sup>180</sup>

Research emerging since 2010 suggests that the tide may be turning on the first of these issues, that is, on the paucity of demand-side scholarship. The lack of theorization, however, remains an issue. There have been no real advances on theories of megachurch growth, for example, beyond those noted in Ellingson's earlier reviews (i.e., the church-sect, seeker-sensitive, and organizational dynamics theories). Moreover, the single most concise and coherent theory of megachurch growth, the economy of scale argument advanced by Chaves (as described above) is now nearly fifteen years old.

As the discussion above suggests, however, the greatest need at this particular time is for comparative research comparing megachurches in one national location with megachurches in another, and megachurches in one location with theological similar but smaller churches in that same location. Only comparative projects like these will help us determine the truly distinctive nature of megachurches (aside from their mere size), as well as the extent to which the nature and growth of megachurches is peculiar to time and place or more generalizable across national borders. In addition, at least some of these projects must be quantitative and focused on congregants' perspectives, as the research thus far has been overwhelmingly qualitative and—when involving quantitative survey work—derived from the perspective of church leaders.

The field of megachurch studies is at this moment in time a well-developed and thoroughly globalized field that can boast of engagement from an impressively wide range of disciplinary perspectives. The data are pouring in from nearly every corner of the globe. Still, as in any field, there is much to be done, and the primary remaining challenge is to develop these data, culled from disparate national and cultural contexts, into more coherent and persuasive theories of megachurch dynamics.

**Chad Bauman** is Professor of Religion at Butler University, a Senior Fellow at the Religious Freedom Institute, and a Research Fellow at the Center for Religion and American Culture. He is author or co-editor of five books: *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947* (Eerdmans, 2008), *Constructing Indian Christianities* (Routledge, 2014), *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (Oxford University Press, 2015), *Anti-Christian Violence in India* (Cornell University Press, 2020), and *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations* (Routledge, forthcoming). He is currently engaged in a John Templeton Foundation-funded project investigating megachurches around the globe.

## APPENDIX

### Coding Foci and Topics

1. Geographical Focus and Transnational Connections
  - a. North America
  - b. South Asia
  - c. Southeast Asia
  - d. East Asia
  - e. Latin America
  - f. Australasia/The Pacific
  - g. Western Europe/Scandinavia
  - h. Eastern Europe
  - i. Africa
  - j. African Americans
  - k. Geography of megachurches
  - l. Transnational connections
  - m. Regional differences among megachurches
2. Growth, Benefits, and Participation
  - a. Growth/numbers/theories about growth
  - b. Evangelism
  - c. Participation, encouraging voluntarism
  - d. Inconsistent attendance
  - e. Sincerity/authenticity
  - f. Belonging/Community
  - g. Social capital

3. Worship
  - a. General elements of worship
  - b. Excellence (of megachurches) in worship
  - c. Transnational standardization of worship
  - d. Theology of music
  - e. Music in worship
  - f. Contemporary Christian Music
  - g. Preaching/sermons
  - h. Liturgy
  - i. Technology in worship
  - j. Light in worship
  - k. Emotion/production of emotion/experience
  - l. Performative aspect of worship
4. Leadership
  - a. Leadership in general
  - b. Charisma
  - c. Succession
  - d. Celebrity
5. Demographics/Social Context
  - a. Demographics in general
  - b. Race/Ethnicity
  - c. Multi-ethnic congregations
  - d. Religious marketplace
  - e. Effect of megachurches on religious marketplace
  - f. Urban location
  - g. Suburban location/megachurches and suburbia
  - h. Middle-class/bourgeois orientation of megachurches
  - i. Families/family ministry
  - j. Youth/youth ministry
  - k. Catholic megachurches
  - l. Denominational affiliation (or lack thereof)
  - m. Effect of size on nature/capability/growth of megachurches
6. Body, Sex, Sexuality, and Gender
  - a. Body image/beauty standards
  - b. Sexuality
  - c. Gender
  - d. Femininity

- e. Masculinity
  - f. Sexual scandal
7. Theological Orientation and Spiritual Gifts
- a. Theology, general
  - b. Prosperity gospel
  - c. Empowerment/positivity/therapeutic orientation
  - d. Consumerism/consumption
  - e. Individualism
  - f. Aspiration
  - g. Social Gospel/social engagement
  - h. Spiritual warfare
  - i. Health/healing/miracles
  - j. Fakery in healing
  - k. Tongues
  - l. Faith/belief
  - m. Liberation/womanist theologies
  - n. End times/dispensationalism
  - o. Diversity/different forms of megachurches
  - p. Emerging/missional/relevant churches
  - q. Altruism
8. Activities and Practices
- a. Missions
  - b. Migration/ministry to migrants
  - c. Small groups
  - d. Education/socialization
  - e. Bible study
  - f. Social services/ministries
  - g. Embodiment
  - h. Material practices
  - i. Testimonials
9. Administration/Marketing of Megachurches
- a. Business/church similarities
  - b. Financial aspects
  - c. Debt
  - d. Commodification of religious goods
  - e. Architecture
  - f. Impact on environment/zoning issues



- g. Financial scandal
  - h. Marketing/branding
  - i. Media
  - j. Social media
  - k. Televangelism/radio evangelism
  - l. Stigmatization of megachurches/responses
10. Relationship to political/social processes
    - a. Support for neoliberalism
    - b. Critique of neoliberalism
    - c. Conservative/ameliorative policies
    - d. Nationalism
    - e. Modernity
    - f. Rationalization
    - g. Secularism/secularization
    - h. Westernization/Americanization
    - i. Postmodernism
    - j. Israel/Palestine
    - k. Pop culture

#### NOTES

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16. For example, see Cheryl Hall-Russell, “The African American Megachurch: Giving and Receiving,” *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising* 48, no. Summer (2005): 21–29.

17. Sandra L. Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper: How Black Megachurches Address HIV/AIDS and Poverty in the Age of Prosperity Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Barnes, "Black Megachurches: Social Gospel Usage and Community Empowerment," *Journal of African American Studies* 15 (2011): 177–90; R. Drew Smith and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, "Megachurches: African-American Churches in Social and Political Context," in *The State of Black America 2000: Blacks in the New Millennium*, ed. National Urban League and Lee A. Daniels (New York: National Urban League Publications Unit, 2000), 171–98; Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); and Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs, "Black Megachurches and the Paradox of Black Progress," in *The Black Church Studies Reader*, ed. Alton B. Pollard III and Carol B. Duncan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 189–204.

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21. Anthony D. Campbell and Gail Wallace, "Black Megachurch Websites: An Assessment of Health Content for Congregations and Communities," *Health Communication* 30, no. 5 (2015): 557–65; and Javonda Williams et al., "Black Megachurches and the Provision of Social Services: An Examination of Regional Differences in America," *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 38, no. 2 (2019): 161–79. Another important thematic focus of the literature on African American churches is music. While few scholars have worked on the topic, Birgitta Johnson has issued several articles based on research at Black megachurches in Los Angeles, arguing that one thing that makes many Black megachurches distinct from their white counterparts in the United States is the fact that they mix gospel with contemporary Christian musical styles. See Birgitta J. Johnson, "Singing Down the Walls of Race, Ethnicity, and Tradition in an African American Megachurch," *Liturgy* 33, no. 3 (2018): 37–45.

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61. Cruz, “A Spectacle of Worship”; Goh, “Hillsong and ‘Megachurch’ Practice.”

62. Katja Rakow, “The Light of the World: Mediating Divine Presence through Light and Sound in a Contemporary Megachurch,” *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (2020): 84–107.

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64. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

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66. Thomas J. Wagner, “Hearing the Hillsong Sound: Music, Marketing, Meaning and Branded Spiritual Experience at a Transnational Megachurch” (Ph.D. thesis, Royal Holloway University of London, 2013).



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68. Ibrahim Abraham, “Sincere Performance in Pentecostal Megachurch Music,” *Religions* 9, no. 192 (2018): 1.

69. o Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959; San Diego: Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 57 and 80.

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72. Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk, “God is Like a Drug,” 652–53. See also Wellman, “Turning Word into Flesh”; and Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly, “Megachurches as Total Environments.” On interaction ritual theory see Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004)..

73. Mulder and Martí, *Glass Church*, 6.

74. See, for example, Christine Miller and Nathan Carlin, “Joel Osteen as Cultural Selfobject: Meeting the Needs of the Group Self and Its Individual Members in and from the Largest Church in America,” *Pastoral Psychology* 59 (2010): 27–51; and Helje Kringlebotn Sødal, “‘Victor not Victim’: Joel Osteen’s Rhetoric of Hope,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25, no. 1 (2020): 37–50.

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80. James S. Bielo, "Purity, Danger, and Redemption: Notes on Urban Missional Evangelicals," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 2 (2011): 267–80. On Black megachurches in urban areas see Smith and Tucker-Worgs, "Megachurches."

81. See, for example, Scott Thumma, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: Megachurches in Modern American Society" (doctoral diss., Emory University, 1996); Thumma and Bird, *Not Who You Think They Are*; and Hall-Russell, "African-American Megachurch."

82. On African American megachurches, see Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch*. On megachurches as a reflection of evangelical middle-class privilege and sermons addressing middle-class concerns, see, respectively, Lyz Lenz, *God Land: A Story of Faith, Loss, and Renewal in Middle America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), chap. 10; and Carney, "Sanctifying the SUV."

83. On Malaysia, see Yip, "Reaching the City of Kuala Lumpur." On Indonesia, Hoon, "Pentecostal Megachurches in Jakarta." On India, Reddy, "Nurturing Globalized Faith Seekers." On Kenya, Wanjiru M. Gitau, *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millenials and Social Change in African Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018).

84. See Chong, "Megachurches in Singapore." See also Chong and Hui, *Different Under God*.

85. Yip and Ainsworth, "Whatever Works."

86. Young-gi Hong, "The Backgrounds and Characteristics of the Charismatic Mega-Churches in Korea," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000): 99–118; and Sebastian Kim, "Mega Churches in South Korea: Their Impact and Prospect in the Public Sphere," in *A Moving Faith*, ed. James, 85–105.

87. Joel Tejedo, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Megachurches in the Philippines," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chong, 156–79. Cf. Jayeel Serrano Cornelio, "Jesus Is Lord: The Indigenization of Megachurch Christianity in the Philippines," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chong, 127–55.

88. Thumma, "The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory"; and Thumma and Bird, *Not Who You Think They Are*.

89. Choong, “Pentecostalism in Klang Valley, Malaysia”; Hoon, “Pentecostal Megachurches in Jakarta”; and Yip, “Reaching the City of Kuala Lumpur.”

90. Angela Denker, *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), chap. 12.

91. Aida I. Ramos, Gerardo Martí, and Mark T. Mulder, “The Strategic Practice of ‘Fiesta’ in a Latino Protestant Church: Religious Racialization and the Performance of Ethnic Identity,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 1 (2020): 161–79.

92. Nancy L. Eiesland, “Contending with a Giant: The Impact of a Megachurch on Exurban Religious Institutions,” in *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*, ed. Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy Eiesland (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 1997). For a more recent, book-length confirmation of the thesis, see Stephen Ellingson, *The Megachurch and the Mainline* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). On how the strong market for religious materials packaged and sold by successful megachurches exaggerates their influence on all forms of Christianity, see Ellingson and Martikainen, “Packaging Religious Experience.”

93. On the idea that megachurch growth affects other congregation, see, e.g., Samuel L. Perry and Cyrus Schleifer, “Are Bivocational Clergy Becoming the New Normal? An Analysis of the Current Population Survey, 1996–2017,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 2 (2019): 513–25. Jason Wollschleger and Jeremy R. Porter, “A ‘Walmartization’ of Religion? The Ecological Impact of Megachurches on the Local and Extra-Local Religious Economy,” *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 3 (2011): 279–99. Though for a somewhat different and more anecdotal argument from the perspective of Willow Creek’s Catholic neighbors, see Amy Florian, “My Neighbor, the Evangelical Megachurch,” *Liturgy* 19, no. 4 (2004): 25–32.

94. Nancy T. Ammerman, “Studying Parishes: Lessons and New Directions from the Study of Congregations,” in *American Parishes: Remaking Local Catholicism*, ed. Gary T. Adler Jr., Tricia C. Bruce, and Brian Starks (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 47–66.

95. Torsten Löfstedt, “Megachurches in Russia and Other Parts of the Former Soviet Union,” in *Handbook of Megachurches*, ed. Hunt, 284–301.

96. See Ellingson, “New Research on Megachurches.”

97. Tamelyn Tucker-Worgs and Donn C. Worgs, “Black Morality Politics: Preachers, Politicians, and Voters in the Battle over Same-Sex Marriage in Maryland,” *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (2014): 338–62; Barnes, *Live Long and Prosper*.

98. Beadle-Holder, “Black Churches Creating Safe Spaces”; Arnold Fleischmann and Laura Moyer, “Competing Social Movements and Local Political Culture: Voting on Ballot Propositions to Ban Same-Sex Marriage in the U.S. States,” *Social Science Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (2009): 134–49.

99. Jennifer E. Dyer, “The Politics of Evangelicals: How the Issues of HIV and AIDS in Africa Shaped a ‘Centrist’ Constituency in the United States,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 4 (2014): 1010–32.

100. Chong and Hui, *Different Under God*.

101. Elisha, “Sins of Our Soccer Moms.”

102. The chapter appears in Denker, *Red State Christians*.

103. Barnes, "Black Megachurches."
104. Promotional videos for the 2020 Colour Conference, for example, feature conventionally beautiful models in slinky dresses prancing about the desert, while the words "beautiful, captivating, irresistible" flash across the screen. The video is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qKrJWZc\\_EQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qKrJWZc_EQ) (accessed September 16, 2020).
105. Marion Maddox, "Prosper, Consume and Be Saved," *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 1 (2013): 108–15.
106. Yip, "Reaching the City of Kuala Lumpur."
107. Chin, "McDonaldization and the Megachurches"; Terence Chong, "Speaking the Heart of Zion in the Language of Canaan: City Harvest and the Cultural Mandate in Singapore," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chong, 207–34.
108. Marion Maddox, "'Rise Up Warrior Princess Daughters': Is Evangelical Women's Submission a Mere Fairy Tale?," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 1 (2013).
109. Elizabeth Miller, "Women in Australian Pentecostalism: Leadership, Submission, and Feminism in Hillsong Church," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (2016): 52–76.
110. Kate Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
111. James B. Twitchell, *Where Men Hide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). See also Twitchell, *Branded Nation*.
112. On "manly men," see also Sinitiere's analysis of Joel Osteen's fitness-oriented "prosperity gospel of the body." Phillip Luke Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile: Joel Osteen, Lakewood Church, and American Christianity* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).
113. Johnson, *Biblical Porn*, 11. See also Jessica Johnson, "The Citizen-Soldier: Masculinity, War, and Sacrifice at an Emerging Church in Seattle, Washington," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 33, no. 2 (2010): 326–51.
114. Todne Thomas Chipumuro, "Pastor, Mentor, or Father? The Contested Intimacies of the Eddie Long Sex Abuse Scandal," *Journal of Africana Religions* 2, no. 1 (2014): 1–30.
115. But see, e.g., Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly-Meyerdirk, "God Is Like a Drug."
116. Kate Bowler, *Blessed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a shorter history particular to Joel Osteen's influences, see Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*.
117. Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder."
118. Yip, "Reaching the City of Kuala Lumpur"; cf. Yip and Ainsworth, "Whatever Works." Chong, "Megachurches in Singapore"; and Chong and Hui, *Different Under God*.
119. Tejedo, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Megachurches in the Philippines."
120. Stephen J. Hunt, "A Church for All Nations': The Redeemed Christian Church of God," *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 24, no. 2 (2002): 185–204.
121. Afe Adogame, "Reconfiguring the Global Religious Economy," in *Spirit and Power: The Growth and Global Impact of Pentecostalism*, ed. Donald E. Miller, Kimon Howland Sargeant, and Richard Flory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 185–203.

122. Rebecca C. Bartel, "Giving Is Believing: Credit and Christmas in Colombia," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2016): 1007.
123. Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 13, 179. Miller also makes this claim. See Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*.
124. Yip and Ainsworth, "You Need 'Help for the Journey.'" Cowan similarly writes of the "hyperpersonalism" of Hillsong music; see Cowan, "Heaven and Earth Collide." See also Sophie Bremmer, "Black Majority Megachurches in London: Aspiring to Engender Change," (Department of Theology and Religion: University of Birmingham, 2013).
125. Martí, "Maranatha."
126. David A. Snow et al., "A Team Field Study of the Appeal of Megachurches: Identifying, Framing, and Solving Personal Issues," *Ethnography* 11, no. 1 (2010): 165–88.
127. Jeaney Yip, "Marketing the Sacred: The Case of Hillsong Church, Australia," in *A Moving Faith*, ed. James, 106–26. See also Paul Vermeer, "Church Growth and Appealing Sermons: A Case Study of a Dutch Megachurch," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 28 (2015): 1–22.
128. Stewart M. Hoover, "The Cross at Willow Creek: Seeker Religion and the Contemporary Marketplace," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Forbes and Mahan, 145–59; Sanders, "Religious Non-Places."
129. Maddox, "Prosper, Consume, and Be Saved."
130. Wade, "Seeker-Friendly."
131. Aaron B. James, "Rehabilitating Willow Creek: Megachurches, de Certeau, and the Tactics of Navigating Consumer Culture," *Christian Scholar's Review* 43, no. 1 (2013): 21–39.
132. James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); and Bielo, "Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among U.S. Emerging Evangelicals," *Ethos* 40, no. 3 (2012): 258–76c.
133. Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly, *High on God*.
134. Burgess, "African Pentecostal. Growth." See also Bremmer, "Black Majority Megachurches."
135. Eun Young Lee Easley, "Taking Jesus Public: The Neoliberal Transformation of Korean Megachurches," in *Encountering Modernity*, ed. Albert L. Park and David K. Yoo (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press), 47–67.
136. Alan Greenblatt, "Rise of Megachurches: Are They Straying Too Far from Their Religious Mission?," *CQ Researcher* 17, no. 33 (2007): 769–92.
137. Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
138. van Wyk, *Universal Church of the Kingdom of God*, 29. Cf. Frahm-Arp, "Rise of the Megachurches"; and T. Borgvin-Weiss, "In the Midst of a God-forsaken Jungle: Domesticating Disorder at Redemption Camp, Southwest Nigeria," *Material Religion* 16, no. 1 (2020): 128–30.
139. Jesse Weaver Shipley, "Comedians, Pastors, and the Miraculous Agency of Charisma in Ghana," *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (2009): 523–52.
140. Burgess, "Megachurches and 'Reverse Mission.'" On healing ministries in African American megachurches, see Walton, "TV 'Profits.'"

141. Tejedo, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Megachurches in the Philippines"; Katharine L. Wiegele, "Populist Movement to Mega Church: El Shaddai in Manila, Philippines," in *A Moving Faith*, ed. James, 127–42; and Kevin Lewis O'Neill, "Pastor Harold Caballeros Believes in Demons: Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion," *History of Religions* 51, no. 4 (2012): 299–316.

142. Sung-Gun Kim, "The New Face of Large Congregations," *Korea Journal* 57, no. 4 (2017): 14–41; Chin Hong Chung, "Phenomena and Structure of Rapid Growing Megachurch: A Case Study on Yoido Full Gospel Church," *Korean Journal of Religious Studies* 16:203–41; Reddy, "Nurturing Globalized Faith Seekers"; and Openshaw, "The Universal Church."

143. Wade, "Seeker-Friendly."

144. John N. Vaughn, *Megachurches and America's Cities: How Churches Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 111.

145. Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly, "Total Environments." In addition to resources noted earlier, see Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, "A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2011): 91–111.

146. Mark J. Cartledge, "Megachurches as Educational Institutions," in *Handbook of Megachurches*, ed. Hunt, 172–92; Omri Elisha, "Faith beyond Belief: Evangelical Protestant Conceptions of Faith and the Resonance of Anti-Humanism," *Social Analysis* 52, no. 1 (2008): 56–78.

147. See, for example, Hoon, "Pentecostal Megachurches in Jakarta."

148. Andrew Davies, "'The Evangelisation of the Nation, the Revitalisation of the Church and the Transformation of Society': Megachurches and Social Engagement," in *Handbook of Megachurches*, ed. Hunt, 214–41; Bremmer, "Black Majority Megachurches"; and Burgess, "African Pentecostal Growth."

149. Elisha, "Sins of Our Soccer Moms."

150. Beadle-Holder, "Black Churches Creating Safe Spaces"; Tucker-Worgs, *The Black Megachurch*; Hall-Russell, "African-American Megachurch"; Williams et al., "Black Megachurches and the Provision of Social Services"; and Smith and Tucker-Worgs, "Megachurches." On migrant ministries, for example, see Burgess, "Megachurches and 'Reverse Mission'"; Burgess, Knibbe, and Quaas, "Nigerian-Initiated Pentecostal Churches"; Jin-Heon Jung, "The Religious-Political Aspirations of North Korean Migrants and Protestant Churches in Seoul," *Journal of Korean Religions* 7, no. 2 (2016): 123–48; Rocha, "Transnational Pentecostal Connections"; Rocha, "God Is in Control"; and Onyiah, "Pentecostalism and the African Diaspora."

151. See Adogame, "Transnational Migration and Pentecostalism"; Burgess, "Megachurches and 'Reverse Mission'"; and Freston, "Transnationalisation of Brazilian Pentecostalism."

152. Sharon Gramby-Sobukwe and Tim Hoiland, "The Rise of Mega-Church Efforts in International Development: A Brief Analysis and Areas for Further Research," *Transformation* 26, no. 2 (2009): 104–17. See also Priest, Wilson, and Johnson, "U.S. Megachurches."

153. Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly, *High on God*; and Johnson, *Biblical Porn*.



154. O'Neill, "Pastor Harold Caballeros Believes in Demons." I have, additionally, already mentioned what Sinitiere calls Joel Osteen's physical health-oriented "prosperity gospel of the body." Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*, 11.

155. Simon Coleman and Saliha Chattoo, "Megachurches and Popular Culture: On Enclaving and Encroaching," in *Handbook of Megachurches*, ed. Hunt, 90.

156. Openshaw, "The Universal Church"; Frahm-Arp, "Rise of the Megachurches"; and Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*.

157. Peter A. Maresco, "Can Business Leaders Learn from Leaders of Today's Megachurches?," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal* 6, no. 1 (2008): art. 5.

158. On for-profit businesses, see Samuel Okanlawon, "Churchpreneurship in the Nigerian Socioeconomic Space with Particular Reference to the Redeemed Christian Church of God and Living Faith Church," *International Journal of Religions and Traditions* 4, no. 1 (2018): 32–41; Yip and Ainsworth, "Whatever Works"; and Marti and Mulder, "Capital and the Cathedral." On external organizations see Anonymous, "Product Placement in the Pews? Microtargeting Meets Megachurches," *Knowledge@Wharton* 2006, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/product-placement-in-the-pews-microtargeting-meets-megachurches/>; and Greenblatt, "Rise of Megachurches." On big box architecture see Sanders, "Religious Non-Places"; Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003); Paul L. Knox, *Metroburbia, USA* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), chap. 8; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, "Urbanization and Transformations in Religious Mission and Architecture," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22, no. 2 (2004): 13–32; Abraham, "Sincere Performance"; and Hoover, "Cross at Willow Creek." An interesting subset of studies on megachurch architecture focuses on how their size and multipurpose buildings raise thorny issues and sometimes result in scandals related to zoning laws. See Ju Hui Judy Han, "Urban Megachurches and Contentious Religious Politics in Seoul," in *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2015), 133–51; Adam J. MacLeod, "A Non-Fatal Collision: Interpreting RLUIPA Where Religious Land Uses and Community Interests Meet," *The Urban Lawyer* 42, no. 1 (2010): 41–93; and Jennifer S. Evans-Cowley and Kenneth Pearlman, "Six Flags over Jesus: RLUIPA, Megachurches, and Zoning," *Tulane Environmental Law Journal* 21, no. 2 (2008): 203–32.

159. The quotation comes from Chong, "Megachurches in Singapore," 215. See also Jeaney Yip, "'To Build a Generation of Stars': Megachurch Identity, Religion and Modernity in Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 4 (2016): 477–91; and Andaya, "Contextualizing the Global."

160. Twitchell, *Branded Nation*; Cruz, "A Spectacle of Worship"; and Goh, "Hillsong and 'Megachurch' Practice"; Jeaney Yip and Susan Ainsworth, "'We Aim to Provide Excellent Service to Everyone Who Comes to Church!': Marketing Mega-Churches in Singapore," *Social Compass* 60, no. 4 (2013): 503–16.

161. Riches and Wagner, "Evolution of Hillsong"; Wagner, "Hearing the Hillsong Sound"; and Wagner, "Branding, Music, and Religion."



162. Sinitiere, *Salvation with a Smile*; Freston, "Universal Church of the Kingdom of God"; Walter C. Ihejirika and Godwin B. Okon, "Mega Churches and Megaphones: Nigerian Church Leaders and Their Media Ministries," in *A Moving Faith*, ed. James, 62–81; Dennis A. Smith and Leonildo S. Campos, "Concentrations of Faith: Mega Churches in Brazil," in *A Moving Faith*, ed. James, 169–89; Wiegele, "Populist Movement to Mega Church"; Bowler and Reagan, "Bigger, Better, Louder"; and Walton, "TV 'Profits.'"

163. E.g., Kirsteen Kim, "Ethereal Christianity: Reading Korean Mega-Church Websites," *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007): 208–24.

164. Twitchell, *Branded Nation*; and Imchen K. Sungjemmeren, "Indian Mega-churches' Centripetal Mission," *Lausanne World Pulse Archives*, January 2011, <https://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/perspectives-php/1360/01-2011>.

165. Mulder and Marti, *Glass Church*. See also Yip and Ainsworth, "Do Business Till He Comes."

166. Chin, "McDonaldization and the Megachurches."

167. Thumma and Bird, *Not Who You Think They Are*; Chong and Hui, *Different Under God*.

168. Smith and Campos, "Concentrations of Faith"; Yip and Ainsworth, "Whatever Works"; and Douglas J. Swanson, "The Beginning of the End of Robert H. Schuller's Crystal Cathedral Ministry: A Towering Failure in Crisis Management as Reflected through Media Narratives of Financial Crisis, Family Conflict, and Follower Dissent," *Social Science Journal* 49, no. 4 (2012): 485–93.

169. Warf and Winsberg, "Geographies of Megachurches." On a similarly apolitical movement in Argentina, see Joaquín Algranti, "Megachurches and the Problem of Leadership: An Analysis of the Encounter between the Evangelical World and Politics in Argentina," *Religion, State and Society* 40, no. 1 (2012): 49–68.

170. On Korea, for example, see Han, "Urban Megachurches"; and Kim, "Political Empowerment of Korean Protestantism." On the Philippines, see Cornelio, "Jesus Is Lord"; Jayeel Serrano Cornelio and Ia Maraño, "A 'Righteous Intervention': Megachurch Christianity and Duterte's War on Drugs in the Philippines," *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 2 (2019): 211–30; and Tejedo, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Megachurches in the Philippines." On Southeast Asia more generally, see Chong, "Introduction."

171. See Chong and Hui, *Different Under God*; Chong, "Megachurches in Singapore"; and Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*.

172. The theme is pervasive, but particularly prominent in the following: Easley, "Taking Jesus Public"; Elisha, "Faith beyond Belief"; Maddox, "Prosper, Consume and Be Saved"; Richardson, "Gospels of Growth"; Paula L. McGee, "The Wal-Martization of African American Religion: T. D. Jakes and Woman Thou Art Loosed" (Ph.D. thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2012); Stephanie Martin, "Recession Resonance: How Evangelical Megachurch Pastors Promoted Fiscal Conservatism in the Aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crash," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2015): 39–78; Bartel, "Giving Is Believing"; Yip and Ainsworth, "Whatever Works"; and Naomi Klein, Peter Cahn, and

Misha Klein, "Shock Waves: How Free-Market Economics Spread across the Globe: An Interview with Naomi Klein," *World Literature Today* 82, no. 2 (2008): 30–33.

173. On critiquing capitalist systems see, for example, Elisha, "Sins of Our Soccer Moms"; and Omri Elisha, *Moral Ambition: Mobilization and Social Outreach in Evangelical Megachurches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Relatedly, for a somewhat tendentious but illuminating examination of diverse megachurch (and more generally evangelical) perspectives on the conflict between Israel and Palestine (another typical litmus test of political views in the United States), see Dexter van Zile, "Evangelical Anti-Zionism as an Adaptive Response to Shifts in American Cultural Attitudes," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, nos. 1/2 (2013): 39–64. See also Davis Bunn, "Evangelical and Post-evangelical Christianity," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 38, no. 1 (2005): 3–6.

174. The quotation comes from Andaya, "Contextualizing the Global," 179. See also Yip, "To Build a Generation of Stars"; and Cruz, "A Spectacle of Worship."

175. Gitau, *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered*, 7, 1.

176. See, for example, Andaya, "Contextualizing the Global"; Connell, "Hillsong"; and Choong, "Pentecostalism in Klang Valley, Malaysia."

177. Chong, "Speaking the Heart of Zion," 208.

178. Coleman and Chattoo, "Megachurches and Popular Culture," 85.

179. Ellingson, "New Research on Megachurches," 264.

180. Ellingson, "The Rise of the Megachurches," 28.

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