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

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Advertisement for Church Growth Conference: *Christianity Today Magazine*, July 1987, p. 62

1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

quoted in GIBBS 1981: 227

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

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

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

2 Encountering the Megachurch

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 The Rhetoric of Possibility – Church Growth and the Megachurch

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Megachurches in an Age of Consumerism and Market Branding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5 Critical Perspectives

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NEWBIGIN 1986: 38

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

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

NEWBIGIN 1986: 38

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

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

BARTH 1958: 648

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

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

GUDER 2015: 37

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

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

GUDER 2017: 37

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6 Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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