

CHAPTER EIGHT

# Megachurches, Celebrity Pastors, and the Evangelical Industrial Complex

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Walking into a megachurch for the first time, I immediately felt lost and at home. Upon entering the lobby, I was in need of a map. The soft eggshell tone of the walls where members' artwork hung sharply contrasted with the cacophonous buzz of the crowd before service. Groups of people swarmed around shelves of theological books and urns of free coffee. As guitar chords began to swell from inside the dark sanctuary, cueing people to take their seats, parents dropped off toddlers at the children's ministry nestled down a hallway, undergraduates flocked to rows of friends bearing the same university logo on their gear, and greeters smiled hello at everyone who made eye contact. Although I was there to listen to a sermon, the dim lighting, large screens surrounding the amphitheater, and instruments onstage affected the atmosphere of a club rather than a church. While the wrought-metal cross looming above the worship band reminded me that I was there to see a pastor preach, the pulpit looked as though I was there to see a rock star perform.

Megachurch services can feel like music concerts held in high-ceilinged sanctuaries—the sense of anticipation and spectacle is very similar. However, those who sermonize from pulpits that look as though they were made for Grammy winners rather than ministry leaders are

not simply charismatic. On the contrary, celebrity pastors are created by numbers that measure success, such as growth metrics demonstrating increases in attendees, baptisms, or sermon downloads that convict Christian audiences of God's hand in congregational expansion. Profit and fame are common denominators that cut across religious and secular divides as tropes of popular culture and innovations in media technology are used to convey the Word, generate buzz, and garner tithes. From the revivals of Billy Sunday to Billy Graham, to the televangelists Pat Robinson and Jimmy Bakker, evangelism and celebrity have attracted audiences in vast numbers, generating monetary gain and cultural influence.

However, this essay argues that the accelerated ascendancy of megachurch celebrity pastors is best examined and understood in terms of marketing strategy and commodification processes specific to a digital age in which social media and interactive technologies are impacting the identity formation of Christians and non-Christians alike. This analysis demonstrates how relationships between celebrity pastors and their congregants are mediated by cultural and technological shifts as church branding has become integral to evangelical purpose. Congregants who volunteer their time and talent on behalf of congregational growth are not mere "followers" who idolize celebrity pastors<sup>1</sup> but laborers incorporated into the marketing practices that promote them. This form of industry is having an impact on evangelical subjectivity and institutional Christianity within the United States. During this participatory branding process, audiences are not passive consumers but active contributors to an "evangelical industrial complex"<sup>2</sup> that thrives on elevating megachurch pastors to media elite status.

In this analysis, I compare two campaigns to market books by celebrity pastors—Mark Driscoll's *Real Marriage* (2012) and Judah Smith's *Jesus Is \_\_\_* (2013). These publications earned Driscoll and Smith bestselling author status, while their marketing campaigns provided the platform for distributing free sermon guides and small group curriculums that promoted the purchase of further teaching materials. In effect, these bestselling books served as marketing tools that generated mone-

tary capital and cultural influence on behalf of the pastor's brand. In choosing these two campaigns as case studies, I focus on how pastors have managed to gain celebrity and inspire congregational growth in what is considered one of the least churched cities in the United States—Seattle.<sup>3</sup> By adopting a multisite model, congregations once too unwieldy to expand beyond a single sprawling location in the suburbs are now amenable to church plants in urban centers. This transformation enables megachurches to attract a younger demographic while repurposing pop cultural trends in music, video, and social media. Rather than the shopping mall, these facilities emulate a concert stadium.

#### MEGACHURCHES

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research defines a megachurch as “any Protestant congregation with a sustained average attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship services.”<sup>4</sup> While large congregations have existed throughout Christian history, megachurches have proliferated in the United States since the 1970s. Megachurches typically experience a growth spurt in less than ten years under the leadership of one pastor who, according to the conservative theology commonly used to structure leadership, is male. These men are considered “personally charismatic, highly gifted spiritual leaders.”<sup>5</sup> Through a variety of counseling ministries, opportunities for fellowship within homes, and cultural events that inspire a sense of community, megachurches incite personal commitment among devoted members, while affording new Christians or the curious a chance to maintain anonymity.<sup>6</sup> While these are among the general characteristics used to identify a megachurch by the Hartford Institute, it is in defining its “Protestant” character in contrast to large Catholic congregations that a more detailed description is offered:

it is a host of characteristics that create a distinctive worship style and congregational dynamic ... most [Catholic Churches] don't have strong charismatic senior ministers, many associate pastors, large staff, robust

congregational identity that empowers 100s to 1000s of weekly volunteers, an identity that draws people from a very large area (sometimes an hour [away] or more) and across parish boundaries, a multitude of programs and ministries organized and maintained by members, high levels of commitment and giving by members, seven-day-a-week activities at the church, contemporary worship, state of the art sound and projection systems, auxiliary support systems such as bookstores, coffee shops, etc. huge campuses of 30–100 acres, and other common megachurch characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

The keywords that register with particular timbre in this passage are “dynamic,” “robust congregational identity,” and “high levels of commitment.” These phrases indicate the vast amount of volunteer labor necessary to generate and maintain the distinctive worship experience through which a megachurch is branded, gains notoriety, and attracts new members. This collective and embodied labor entails self-sacrifice on the part of members who donate their time and talents to benefit the megachurch’s growth and the pastor’s brand. Such labor includes hours of service in support of community groups, information technology administration, and a host of ministries to counsel members in need, create and disseminate teaching content, and physically contribute to the maintenance and multiplication of facilities. Congregants not only contribute money to the megachurch by tithing but also generate capital by advertising their pastor’s name and legitimizing his spiritual authority: they buy his books, share his podcasts, “like” his *Facebook* status updates, and re-tweet his tweets. In effect, the very definition of a megachurch entails a marketing prerogative that is linked to the labor and sacrifice of members whose evangelical identity is constituted by said labor and sacrifice. The congregation’s ability to attract more people signals God’s hand in the church’s mission such that high levels of commitment and a robust, dynamic brand name become indicators of spiritual health and success.

This connection between capitalist endeavor and evangelistic spirit is furthered by the fact that “almost one half of all megachurches are independent and nondenominational ... which gives considerable freedom to

individual churches.” Such sovereignty affords the leaders of megachurches a great deal of spiritual and administrative authority to proclaim what the “vision” or “calling” of the congregation is through which its identity and image are established. Inasmuch as it appears that “these are not just churches, they are corporations,”<sup>8</sup> what is sorely needed is an examination of how a megachurch’s brand is cultivated. Its marketing entails a media industry, interactive technologies, and processes of mediation that constitute audience members not only as individual congregants or church volunteers but also as a labor force bodily, emotionally, and spiritually investing in the entrepreneurial evangelism of their pastor.

#### THE EVANGELICAL INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Skye Jethani, pastor and blogger for *Christianity Today*, describes the evangelical industrial complex as a systemic economic force of the digital age that has accelerated the rise and increased the number of Christian media elites. Jethani helpfully contextualizes his coining of this phrase by situating its language in relation to a national address by President Eisenhower in 1961 during which he warned about the effects of a “military industrial complex”—a permanent arms industry that by design perpetuates warfare. Jethani draws analogies between America’s militarism and a clerical celebrity class, while persuasively arguing that there is a self-sustaining evangelical industrial complex manufacturing celebrity pastors. In his formulation, the media industry creates and depends on megachurch pastors with thousands of congregants who will purchase their books. Thus, ministers from small or medium-sized churches are never on the main stage at conferences, where megachurch leaders who boast best-selling author status predominate.<sup>9</sup> In effect, the concept of the evangelical industrial complex pokes holes in pat descriptions of megachurch leaders that suggest that they are inherently charismatic or divinely ordained leaders deserving of their stature. Most people want to believe something that Jethani asserts is false, namely, that:

The most godly, intelligent, and gifted leaders naturally attract large followings, so they naturally are going to have large churches, and their ideas are so great and their writing so sharp that publishers pick their book proposals, and the books strike a nerve with so many people that they naturally become best-sellers, and these leaders are therefore the obvious choice to speak at the biggest conferences. As a result they find themselves quite naturally becoming popular, even rising to celebrity status.<sup>10</sup>

The keyword in Jethani's critique of the evangelical industrial complex is "naturally." The profit generated in the above hypothetical is due to "publishers eager for a guaranteed sales win offer the megachurch pastor a book deal knowing that if only a third of the pastor's own congregation buys a copy, it's still a profitable deal. The book is published on the basis of the leader's market platform, not necessarily the strength of his ideas or the book's quality."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Jethani adds, "wanting to maximize the return on their investment, the publisher will then promote the pastor at the publisher-sponsored ministry conference or other events. As a result of the pastor's own megachurch customer base and the publisher's conference platform, the book becomes a best-seller. Or if that doesn't work, sometimes sugar daddies purchase thousands of copies of the book to literally buy the pastor onto the best-seller's list where the perception of popularity results in more sales."<sup>12</sup> Finally, Jethani usefully breaks this system down in terms of specific figures:

Consider the scale of the evangelical industrial complex that survives by perpetuating this system. The Christian Booksellers Association, representing 1,700 Christian stores, sells \$4.63 *billion* worth of merchandise a year. And that doesn't count retailers like Amazon and Walmart. Some estimate the total evangelical market to be over \$7 billion a year. . . .

And this massive market has grown in conjunction with the rise of megachurches since the 1970s; they rely upon and perpetuate each other. Megachurch leaders offer publishers pre-existing customer bases (their own congregations), and publishers make megachurch pastors into celebrities to perpetuate and expand their bottom lines. As a result, evangelicalism is not a meritocracy where talent, gifting, character, or wisdom results in a broad-

ening influence. It is an aristocracy where simply having a platform entitles you to ever-increasing influence regardless of your talent, gifting, character, or wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

However, Jethani's discussion loses its critical rigor when he summarizes the social and political effects of this economic system in terms of creating an "aristocracy." Although he helpfully contextualizes the evangelical industrial complex with regards to transformations in the media industry, he does not pay the same careful attention to situating its effects. His concluding remark, "Should we be concerned? Yes, but at least they're not building nukes,"<sup>14</sup> is dismissive of the ways in which the congregants of megachurch pastors pay a cost for their participation in making these leaders celebrities. They are laborers socially incorporated into the process of creating media elites, affected by an evangelical industrial complex to which they are active contributors. Members of megachurches serve the evangelical industrial complex while laboring to popularize their pastor's image—volunteering as creative team members, marketing staff, musicians, or video producers—and participating in the cultural production of content that blurs distinctions between teaching and promotional material. ~~However, according to Jethani,~~ not only are those supporting the evangelical industrial complex on the ground ignored and unrecognized, but the effects of their labor are unaccounted for, leaving its cultural, social, and spiritual impacts unexamined. As an antidote, the analysis that follows entails the close examination of two campaigns that successfully bolstered the celebrity of two megachurch pastors.

#### MARS HILL CHURCH, MARK DRISCOLL AND THE REAL MARRIAGE CAMPAIGN

Mars Hill Church was co-founded in Seattle in 1996 by Pastor Mark Driscoll. By the time of its dissolution at the end of 2014, it had multiplied into fifteen facilities in five U.S. states, serving approximately 13,000 attendees. As the church multiplied into facilities and community

groups that spread from Seattle neighborhoods to places including Albuquerque, New Mexico; Portland, Oregon; and Orange County, California, Driscoll's preaching on topics such as "biblical oral sex" earned him a profile in the glossy *New York Times Magazine* and international celebrity through Christian and secular channels. However, by 2014 evidence had surfaced online that supported several charges against him: the use of a marketing ploy to erroneously achieve number one best-selling author status on the *New York Times* "How-to/Advice" list; inciting a "culture of fear" among staff through bullying, micromanagement, and shunning; and promoting a "culture of misogyny" through explicit teaching on biblical gender and sexuality that instructed wives to submit to their husbands' authority.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the book *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together* is a detailed account of the trials and tribulations of Pastor Mark's marriage to his high school sweetheart Grace, his co-author. The book is described for promotional purposes on Amazon as such:

[The Driscolls] believe friendship is fundamental to marriage but not easy to maintain. So they offer practical advice on how to make your spouse your best friend—and keep it that way. And they know from experience that sex-related issues need to be addressed directly.

Five chapters are dedicated to answering questions like:

Should I confess my pre-marital sexual sin to my spouse?

Is it okay to have a "work spouse"?

What does the Bible say about masturbation and oral sex?<sup>16</sup>

As this advertising shows, the book reads like a confessional memoir that details the Driscolls sexual relationship and its effects on their marital intimacy. While the church's expansion was considered empirical proof of God's hand in Mars Hill's mission to multiply, closer investigation into the media strategy and economic purpose of the *Real Marriage* campaign demonstrates a calculated plan to enlist congregants' labor and tithes in marketing "Pastor Mark" as a brand name with spir-



itual authority. One month prior to the publication of *Real Marriage* in 2012, Driscoll encouraged an assembly of Mars Hill Church Community Group leaders to join a surge of support: “over 2,000 churches have signed up to follow along with us in the sermon series and receive for free hundreds of pages of research, full marketing materials, counseling and worship guides. These biblical resources were advertised as: “Air war and ground war strategies to help you permeate the message from the pulpit throughout each aspect of your church and ministry,” including “full *Real Marriage* branding, design, and marketing plans and materials that you can edit for your local church for such things as postcards, posters, e-vites, video commercials, social media strategy, and more,” as well as “free use of Pastor Mark’s sermons for the series via DVD download if you want a week off.”<sup>17</sup> The air war and ground war strategies advanced by the *Real Marriage* campaign had long been a staple of Mars Hill’s ministry once the church went multi-site. A “Preaching and Theology Sermon Series Battle Plan” co-written by Driscoll described this air war / ground war approach to ecclesiology:

The air war is the Sunday pulpit and the preaching series that is tied to the pulpit. At Mars Hill, we generally lead our ministry with the air war of the pulpit. The ground war works in conjunction with the air war so that such things as community groups, redemption groups, training classes, biblical counseling etc. coordinates with the preached Word so as to be as effective and unified as possible. Since most of the Community Groups are sermon-based it is imperative that the CG [community group] brand and the P&T [preaching and theology] branch collaborate on every series. This collaboration includes joint branded content online and Pastor Mark pushing CG [community group] discussion points and family devotional points each week in the sermon.<sup>18</sup>

This “preaching and theology sermon series battle plan” signals how crucial the global communication of Driscoll’s voice was to suggesting, manipulating, and amplifying his audiences’ labor in varying capacities to ensure that the church stayed on mission to multiply. If Oprah professed “the prosperity gospel of a spiritual capitalism,” by “fusing her

charisma with a product's image and with connecting the message of her show to the slogan of a new brand,"<sup>19</sup> then *Real Marriage* was Driscoll's gambit to perform and brand his image as "authentic" so as to intensify the cultural and monetary value of "Pastor Mark" as a charismatic commodity.

In fact, the *Real Marriage* campaign was in preparation a year before the book's release, including the efficient and profitable coordination of a marketing ploy that belied Mars Hill's nonprofit status, unbeknownst to church members. Evidence concerning the strategies used to erroneously elevate Pastor Mark to best-selling author status would not surface until 2014, two years after the Driscolls embarked on their *Real Marriage* tour, which included speaking engagements in cities around the country and media appearances on programs such as ABC's *The View*. The paper trail of research that led to the public unveiling of Mars Hill's connection to a book-marketing firm started with the Christian publication *WORLD Magazine*, which announced "unreal sales for Driscoll's *Real Marriage*," noting that the company ResultSource was paid "to conduct a bestseller campaign" that included not only the *New York Times*'s "How-To Advice" list but also the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.<sup>20</sup>

While the details of this business transaction are complicated, when queried, Mars Hill representatives would not say whether these book purchases were made with church funds, but the contract showed that it was important that "the make up of the 6,000 individual orders include at least 1,000 different addresses with no more than 350 per state" to circumvent metrics used to prevent authors from buying their way onto lists.<sup>21</sup> This schema unveils a complex and far-reaching network of participants consisting of people both self-aware and oblivious to their role in its strategy. The varied addresses required by ResultSource were seemingly culled through a "pre-sale push" during which church supporters were asked to donate \$25 apiece to Mars Hill ministries in order to receive a "free" book.<sup>22</sup> This campaign was the first of its kind but not the last waged by Mars Hill as a way of offering free teaching con-

tent to churches throughout the world in order to enhance the media presence and spiritual legitimacy of Pastor Mark. One month prior to the publication of *Real Marriage*, Driscoll gave a video-recorded talk to an assembly of Mars Hill Community Group leaders:

[In the New Year] by the grace of God, I hope and I pray we'll do the biggest thing we've ever done. Some years ago as we were looking at the future I got a strange idea, and that is that usually what happens is that a pastor will preach a series and then write a book about it. And I thought, what would it be like if we wrote the book first, small group curriculum first, DVDs for small group curriculum first, research for all the community leaders first? What if we put together the whole thing, and then when the book launched, we did the media tour, and we did the huge campaign, and we push, push, push all together at one time? And so January 15 we're going to start the *Real Marriage* campaign. That same day, we're going to open four churches in three states ... [and] Grace and I are doing a media trip to New York for a few days. You can pray; we're trying to get on Colbert and the Today Show ... We have what we're calling a campaign which is about 300 pages of research and statistics that we've put together, as well as preaching tips, small group tips, [and] Sunday tips for other churches and we thought, let's invite them to go through this content and curriculum together. So far, over 2,000 churches have signed up to do so, and we praise God for that. I remember still the first day the campaign director, he said, "Well, I'm praying for 50." And the first day, I said, "Where are we at?" And he said, "1,500." Well, prayer got answered.<sup>23</sup>

Research concerning how much Driscoll personally pocketed from the best-selling moniker has yielded evidence that a tax vehicle called a Charitable Remainder UniTrust (CRUT) named "On Mission LLC" was established in Colorado a year prior to *Real Marriage's* publication, demonstrating a calculated plan to covertly manage a large income generated by "book royalties, printing, and publishing."<sup>24</sup> Subsequently, in 2016, four former Mars Hill members filed a civil racketeering lawsuit against Driscoll.<sup>25</sup> These charges included the misappropriation of church tithes to pay the book-marketing firm ResultSource \$210,000 to ~~cut~~ the buyer's lists necessary to achieve him best-selling author stature.

THE CITY CHURCH, JUDAH SMITH AND THE  
*JESUS IS\_\_\_* CAMPAIGN

While Mark Driscoll identified the Mars Hill brand as “me in the pulpit holding a bible,” and church-affiliated web sites like *pastormark.tv* supported this assertion in their design and content, Pastor Judah Smith’s stamp is markedly absent from the home page of The City Church, founded in Seattle by his pastor father Wendell Smith in 1992. Although Pastor Judah has been preaching from The City’s pulpit since 2009, the only mention of his name is under announcements concerning events and locations, all five of which are in the Seattle area, except for one facility in Guadalajara, Mexico. Rather than a massive archive of sermons, only a handful of a series of past video recordings are housed under the humble invitation to “watch a message.” Smith’s muted presence on the church’s web site seems a concerted effort to work against his reputation as a pastor to celebrities, most famously to the pop singer Justin Bieber and the Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson. While The City may be firmly situated in Seattle, Pastor Judah flies weekly to Los Angeles in order to preach a Wednesday evening sermon to people he calls “Jesus followers,”<sup>26</sup> rather than Christians, a distinction that disassociates him from strict doctrinal boundaries or heated theological debates. In turn, Pastor Judah’s physical, cultural, spiritual, and marketing mobility prompted the Hollywood talent agency Management 360 to sign him as a client in order to support his development of “faith-based projects” to attract “millennials across all areas, including television, digital, books, and branding.”<sup>27</sup>

Smith’s image is not sutured to The City as Driscoll’s was to Mars Hill, affording his brand name more fluidity on the information market as he shuttles around the world performing as a pop star in his own right. Meanwhile, the web site advertising his book *Jesus Is\_\_\_*, much like Pastor Judah himself, is constantly on the move. The *Jesus Is\_\_\_* campaign uses a participatory, user-friendly digital platform to simulate a perpetual process of branding that, in appearing seamless, demo-

cratic, and autonomous, serves to affirm his self-presentation as an approachably hip dude who is relatable despite his celebrity. Although that book was published in 2013, the platform advertising its campaign is “live,” animated by an interactive bingo-like board filled with a dozen smaller squares alternating in hue and message. One box in the top left corner, the only one that does not change in appearance, prompts visitors to “create your own” fill-in-the-blank response to the query invited by Smith’s book title. Interactivity is a consistent trope as viewer participation is elicited and demonstrated via neon squares that light up this promotional home page with pronouncements that proclaim Jesus is “the light of my life,” “a myth,” or “the invisible man. The words in each box shift in tone and color within seconds, as messages flash before the visitor’s eyes then disappear. Responses offer testimonials—“My light in a dark place”; attempt to be clever—“The master carpenter working on my heavenly hang out pad”; proselytize—“The answer. If you do not believe me, read the Bible yourself”; serve as a forewarning—“A gateway for the church to gain money”; or take the shape of Dr. Seuss rhymes—“Like sausage if you say it backwards.”<sup>28</sup>

While these dramatic transitions in appearance, language, and meaning may sound jarring, the palette and tenor of the boxes cultivate a soothing, authentic presentation. In effect, the web site affectively registers and visually recruits the viewer to participate in an ongoing branding process that is at once playful and seductive. Clicking on the “create your own” prompt leads to a page that leaves any identifying information such as name or e-mail address optional while affording audiences the creative license to choose background color, text color, and upload a distinctive background such as a photo. Submissions are reviewed and must meet certain terms and conditions, but on the whole this section reassures those participating that they will remain anonymous and retain their privacy. So long as a submission is not obscene or defamatory, it will meet the necessary criteria for publication on the web site, the explicit purpose of which is to give visitors a platform through which to express their opinion about who Jesus is.

For those curious, there is a “submissions” link that provides archival access to (presumably) all the messages posted—a total of 3,223 pages as of February 2016—each filled with eighteen responses. Under a link called “projects,” there are submissions stamped with “done” in red, signifying their materialization into “A Jesus Is Project”—a “one-time community service project done by City Groups that shows the love of Jesus to our community in a practical way. People are told to click on an individual project should they be interested in getting involved. While there are no future activities planned according to the web site, examples of former projects inspired by audience submissions include: “Jesus is serving dinner in low-income public housing”; “Jesus is helping a single parent recovering from cancer”; “Jesus is pulling ivy in the Seattle Arboretum”; and “Jesus is helping a senior widow move.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the viewer is shown how they contribute to the manifestation of Jesus’ love and mercy in real peoples’ lives by participating in this virtual tool promoting Pastor Judah’s book.

A link to “stories” leads to audio-visual recordings about a minute long that testify to the generosity of The City’s church community by demonstrating the motive behind particular Jesus Is projects. For example, one story called “supporting our sailors” describes how volunteers shipped care packages to sailors without family members, sending letters and sundries that expressed support and gratitude for their service.<sup>30</sup> While the projects and stories pages are full of completed activities, current information and events are listed on the “conversation” page powered by #tagboard, where people upload content via Twitter and Instagram. For example, this message by “consumed pastor” appeared under a picture of the cover of *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_*: “Just finished this awesome book by @judahsmith #JesusIs Read it today!!!”<sup>31</sup> In a video recorded message at the bottom of this website, Pastor Judah and his wife Chelsea, both of whom are listed as lead pastors of The City, respond to the question of who Jesus is. Pastor Judah states: “He is more than a good man, he is more than a miracle worker, he is the savior of the world, and he’s come to set you free.”<sup>32</sup>

However, the most prominent link is at the top of this home page, where consumer-contributors are told to buy the book *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_* at [Jesusisbook.com](http://Jesusisbook.com). One click leads to advertisements for goods offered via this site, including church curriculum and free resources, as well as endorsements of *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_* penned by an E! news correspondent and the founder of the A21 Campaign, a nonprofit organization that advocates for victims of human trafficking. While the specific pages associated with the publication of *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_* are no longer active, a book published by Smith in 2015 entitled *Life Is \_\_\_\_* is also promoted on this site. Clicking on this advertisement leads to “[lifeisbook.tv](http://lifeisbook.tv),” where Pastor Judah’s bestselling author status is noted in bold white and yellow lettering foregrounded by an automated video display in lavender sepia showing men paging through *Life Is \_\_\_\_* and discussing it; a woman picking up the book from a coffee-shop counter; and Pastor Judah speaking animatedly onstage and passionately in interview mode. In effect, the *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_* campaign has a life beyond its eponymous publication; it is as mobile and fluid in its promotional reach as Pastor Judah is in his celebrity.

The digital platform marketing *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_* serves a far bigger purpose than selling Smith’s books by offering potential readers and casual interlopers—Christians and non-Christians alike—a sense of ownership in defining who Jesus is to them. The site appears to provide any and all visitors with the creative license to vent against, testify to, and play with Jesus’ expression not only through language but also color and imagery. In turn, this public yet anonymous forum democratizes and singularizes how people relate to Jesus, providing a social outlet and safe space through which to identify with Him. Thus, even after its promotional materials are dated, the *Jesus Is \_\_\_\_*. Campaign succeeds in sustaining the consistency of the Pastor Judah brand name as he regularly travels from his home pulpit to preach from stages in churches and stadiums throughout the world. In effect, his image conjures openness, connectivity, and relationality by virtue of the interactive platform through which viewers perpetually participate in his self-promotion by filling in the blank.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has analyzed the structural and technological means through which celebrity pastors are created. By investigating how the media industry and interactive technologies enlist audience participation in their popularization, this examination offers a perspective on the dynamic relationships that link megachurches, celebrity pastors, and the evangelical industrial complex. I argue that the cultural and economic value of a given celebrity pastor's brand is dependent upon the people in the pews and at their laptops. These laborers voluntarily and inadvertently contribute to ongoing processes of production and mediation not only with monetary but also social effects. For evidence of the collective emotional and spiritual cost of serving the evangelical industrial complex, look to the testimonies of those who volunteered their time, talents, and tithes to the ministries of Mars Hill. These congregants not only supported the megachurch's expansion but also suffered in the aftermath of its fall. The swift dissolution of Mars Hill under the shadow of accusations of spiritual and administrative abuse against Driscoll by former leaders and members illustrates the importance of examining the specific ways in which relationships to megachurch celebrity pastors are negotiated by laboring and sacrificing for their brand.<sup>33</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Johnson distinguish a megachurch from other churches? In what ways is the megachurch shaped by popular culture? What does the rise of the megachurch suggest about what people want from religion?
2. What is the evangelical industrial complex and how does it create celebrity pastors?
3. How do megachurch congregants participate in the process of branding celebrity pastors?



4. Visit the Jesus “Is \_\_\_?” campaign online. Why do you think Pastor Judah does not answer this question himself? What do you observe about the interactive nature of the site? What does this suggest about how digital platforms might be changing religious practice?

NOTES

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