

**Bruxy Cavey and The Meeting House Megachurch:
A Dramaturgical Model of Charismatic Leadership
Performing “Evangelicalism for People Not Into
Evangelicalism”**

by

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A thesis
presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfilment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Religious Studies

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2016

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Megachurch pastors—as local and international celebrities—have been a growing phenomenon since the 1960s, when megachurches began to proliferate across North America. Why are these leaders and their large congregations so popular in an age of increasing “religious nones”? Commentators in both popular and academic literature often resort to characterizing the leadership with stereotypes of manipulative opportunists along the lines of Sinclair Lewis’ *Elmer Gantry* (1927) or narrow characterizations of savvy entrepreneurs who thrive in a competitive religious economy. Similarly, writers assume megachurch attendees are a passive audience, or even dupes.

This dissertation challenges the Elmer Gantry stereotype and the religious economic perspectives by examining one particular megachurch pastor named Bruxy Cavey in the context of his “irreligious” megachurch community called The Meeting House. It argues that charismatic leadership, not calculated management and branding techniques, best explains the rapid growth of this megachurch as well as the deep commitments many people make to it. While the concept of “charisma” is often used equivocally, in the tradition of Max Weber I contend that charismatic authority is best understood not only as an extraordinary individual quality but as a form of cultural authority that arises when traditional and institutional forms have lost their plausibility and people experience uncertainty, dissatisfaction, or distress. People attribute exemplary powers to someone who offers them a way out, and intellectually and emotionally bond with the visionary and their vision. This charismatic authority I portray as a dramatic production, what I call a “dramatic web” that draws followers into its scene and script, offering some resolution to their worries. The complex, compelling nature of this drama is best understood in the context of Wendy Griswold’s “cultural diamond,” which proposes four elements in the analysis of a cultural object: the cultural object itself, its creators, its receivers, and the social world that encapsulates them all.

I investigate the four elements as part of a “charismatic diamond”: the cultural object is the “dramatic web” of Cavey’s church, marketed as “a church for people who aren’t into church”; the creators are Cavey and his staff, who employ a variety of media to generate and disseminate the drama; the social world is a Canadian culture ambivalent about religion and which stigmatizes right-wing evangelicals; the receivers are various concentric circles of audience who participate in the subculture of the church to varying degrees.

Following the dramaturgical themes of Erving Goffman, I investigate the “dramatic web” of The Meeting House in two parts—as a deconstructive, satirical project displayed on Sunday mornings and then as a re-constructive, romantic adventure that is exemplified in weekday Home Churches. For the first, I show Cavey deliberately takes “role distance” from the stereotype of a right-wing evangelical pastor, using satire to deconstruct the mores of North American evangelical culture and create an “alienating effect” in his audience. The negatively oriented opening acts create a space in which a new script can be constructed, and I demonstrate next Cavey’s two core romantic narratives that champion “relationship, not religion”—a script that is to be enacted through their weekday Home Churches. Not all attendees are caught up in this dramatic web to the same degree, however, as attendees select elements from it for their own purposes, some embracing and identifying with the whole script, while others take pieces from it to arrange into a more eclectic religious life.

The final chapter explores moments of “dramaturgical trouble,” including the question of what happens when Cavey retires, dies, or is deposed. In other words, how might this religious performance come to an end? I offer a typology of possible endings and their sequels—three scenarios of charismatic succession I developed from Weber’s writing on the routinization of charisma. The dissertation concludes by suggesting that, contrary to predictions of the megachurches demise, if megachurches indeed are a compelling drama co-produced by leader and follower that brings meaning, purpose, and joy to followers’ lives in the midst of cultural tension, megachurches are not just a passing fad or vulnerable personality cult, but a viable and likely enduring North American religious institution.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank the members of The Meeting House who opened their doors to me, answered my questions, and fed me well. I have a deep appreciation for Tim Day, who gave me permission to explore the church network and ask questions, and Bruxy Cavey, who was gracious enough to find time for a graduate student in his weekly schedule on multiple occasions. Other key leaders and dozens of other members of the church, such as site pastor Phil Shamas who was my first insider contact—they all were friendly and helpful to me in my research. I hope what follows is a constructively critical engagement with their passion and practise.

Learning is a social endeavour, and I am glad I decided against a distance Ph.D. in favour of one done in residence. I am grateful to my supervisor, Doug Cowan, who challenged me to greater depths of scholarly relevance, precision, and erudition; to Jeff Wilson, who was available and helpful, modeled first-rate *ethnographic* scholarship and underscored the foundational nature of historical research; Paul Freston, who gave me the bigger picture, an open door, and periodic references and lunches; and Jeremy Bergen, who was my gracious Anabaptist theological guide. Lorne Dawson was generous with his time and advice, especially early in my doctoral career. Michel Desjardins offered his home and French tutoring to a number of us graduates and modeled the posture of a critical scholar who honours his research subjects.

I want to recognize a broader network of academic support. James Bielo was a pleasure to have in collegial dialogue, and he demonstrated in his writing a great example of ethnographic work on evangelical groups. It was also a delight to have my long-time mentor, Bill VanGroningen, think along with me for another season. The megachurch experts Scott Thumma and Warren Bird were only an email away and were helpful with responses to my questions about the broader megachurch landscape. Jim Wellman took me out for lunch, gave me a copy of his book on the charisma of Rob Bell, and inspired me to capture some of the “collective effervescence” that buoys up a megachurch. At the end of my first year Gerardo Marti lead a scholarly seminar on congregations and social change that gave me a good grounding in congregational research. Peter Erb, Mary Kooy, James Bielo, Norm Klassen, and Paul Joosse were also encouraging and helpful scholarly voices along the way.

I would like to acknowledge the Ontario Graduate Scholarship program, as their two grants helped sustain and encourage me through two cycles of the seasons in the program. Additionally, I am grateful for the grant that allowed me to participate in Calvin College’s Summer Seminar in

Christian Scholarship entitled “Congregations and Social Change: Adaptations and Innovations in Religious Communities” for four weeks in the summer of 2011.

I am deeply grateful to my small Ph.D. cohort of Denis Bekkering and Leah McKeen; these two exceptional colleagues kept me in touch with the program and its schedules, and helped me get into shape for its comprehensive exams. Other supportive colleagues include David Feltmate, Siobhan Chandler, Katie Riddell, Jonathan Vandersteen, and members of the “evangelicalism research group” (including David Haskell, Mark Chapman, Adam Stewart, Suzanne Armstrong and Brian Carwana). Brian was well-studied in Caveyism, keen on sharpening my analysis of *The Meeting House*, and has provided lots of fodder that has gone into this dissertation. Scott Wall has sent me hints and badgered me with significant questions. I am also grateful for friends who attended TMH with me: Mark Hofstee, Paul Adema, Robb Thomas and Dirk Schouten, who also graciously edited my final draft. Esther Schletz saved me countless hours as my always-dependable and easily-recommendable transcriber.

My Jesuit mentor, Eric Jensen, was both a guide and a grace, warning me of the perils of academic ambition. Brian Bork was a supportive campus minister, always available for a meal and conversation, not to mention offering me venues to test some ideas. My friends Glen, Jamie, and Mark—the men who encouraged me as I leapt into this PhD program—have been a stable, critical reference point in the midst of many transitions, and their Cavey-banter offered light-hearted and critical perspective. Mark Wallace and James Vanderlaan, as the international vehicles of my colourful library, I am in your debt. My own church small group (Jim and Nicole, Rich and Nadine, Paul and Freda, Lisa and Jeff, Dirk and Mary-Ann) offered encouragement as well as a megachurch pastor video-study in the midst of a long and intense program. In sum, if there is any leadership demonstrated in my dissertational assertions, it is a co-production of many people; there are no self-made scholars.

My family was forever a welcome and healthy distraction. During my PhD we had our third child, moved house across Guelph, and weathered serious illness and church conflict. Joseph, Petra, and Grace, you were a happy alternative to the computer screen, even if it proved to be stiff competition for my attentions. I would like to thank all our baby-sitters, too, including grandparents, John and Nellie and John and Jean, who relieved my watch so that I could focus on this monumental project. Without this gracious support, there would be nothing in your hands to read.

Finally, I’d like to thank my wife Joy for encouraging the whole Ph.D. endeavour in the first place and then strongly encouraging its completion. In spite of the constant demands it placed on me, she picked up the slack to allow me time in my reading and writing cave, walled-in by the rubble of

countless books. Her illness during my draft-writing phase was a sobering reminder of how precarious all our performances can be. I dedicate this dissertation to her.

Dedication

For Joy Christina Schuurman

“... in face of the opposition between orthodoxy and unbelief, many, and among them the best and most sensitive minds, were cross-pressured, looking for a third way. This cross-pressure is, of course, part of the dynamic which generates the nova effect, as more and more third ways are created.”

-- Charles Taylor *A Secular Age*

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Charisma Beyond the Caricature

I would say he's certainly one of the most compelling—one of the most compelling apologists and teachers of the gospel I think the world has ever seen. I don't think that's an understatement. Every preacher needs to be able to speak into his own culture, and Bruxy certainly can do that.

- university professor, former lay leader at TMH

Sinclair Lewis' satirical portrayal of a narcissistic and adulterous preacher as his title character in *Elmer Gantry* (1927) offered a contemporary image of the ancient false prophet that has since developed into popular stereotype—the manipulative, if not fraudulent evangelist. The popular discourse on megachurch leaders—measured by the volume of popular and academic media that carry this legacy forward—often portrays them with a comparable cliché: as savvy CEOs if not monarchs¹ of vast empires, powerful and dangerous, prone to sexual scandal, living luxuriously off the sweat and generosity of their faithful but foolish followers. The TV show *Preachers of L.A.* (2013)² sensationalizes the lavish lifestyles of a number of megachurch pastors in California, and a growing list of fiction on megachurch preachers play with the stereotype of the ambitious clerical egomaniac (Raabe 1991; Pollard 2007; Stennett 2008; Strobel 2011; K. C. Boyd 2012; Willimon 2012; Cable 2012; Cullen 2013; Cron 2013).³

K. C. Boyd's novel *Being Christian* (2012) presents a vulgar reproduction of Lewis' Gantry. John Christian Hillcox is a violent, alcoholic, crude-talking, philandering megachurch pastor. His followers are equally distorted cartoons, summarized by the phrase, "the simple are easily led." Pastor Christian's charisma enables him to rouse these followers into emotional hysterics, and he creates a religious service "perfectly orchestrated to manipulate the human spirit." Boyd describes the Sunday

¹ Although 99 percent of megachurch pastors are male (Thumma and Travis 2007:60), I generally use gender-neutral language. Bird's (2009) study of 232 megachurch lead pastors was 100 percent male, although he made an extra effort to recruit female subjects.

² Recent Hollywood films such as *Salvation Boulevard* (2011) and *Megachurch Murder* (2015) take place in megachurch communities but highlight criminal activity rather than sexual misconduct. Steve Martin's *Leap of Faith* (1992) features a travelling evangelist charlatan that plays with the Elmer Gantry stereotype while not giving into it completely in the end.

³ Sorensen (2014) examines numerous themes in clergy films, shows, and novels, including the holy fool, the failure, the detective, the suffering hero, the counselor, and the lover. Her last chapter specifically examines clergy portrayals in Canadian fiction, which she summarizes as—appropriate to this dissertation—"mildly iconoclastic" (2014:241).

morning services as calculated performances: “This was his show and he was in control—producer, director, writer, star. Entitled to everything, he took it all” (2012:164).

This caricature of the powerful and sexually abusive megachurch pastor finds its way into academic texts such as Starks’ *Sexual Misconduct and the Future of Megachurches* (2013), which assume without evidence that megachurch leaders are more liable to sexual impropriety than other pastors, not to mention other leaders in business, politics, or the media. Using terms such as “personality cult” to describe megachurch leaders and their followers similarly shapes assumptions of calculated manipulation and docile compliance (Quebedeaux 1982; Balmer 2006; Kyle 2006). At best, writers and scholars are aware of the charismatic power of these pastors and approach them with a necessarily critical, even satirical, eye. At worst, these commentators do not take megachurch pastors or their followers seriously, and they rely on pejorative labels, clichéd terminology, and gross generalizations that do not delve into the dynamics of megachurch leadership in its various contexts.

Another discourse available on megachurch pastors can be found in autobiographies and the equivalent of hagiographies often authorized by the megachurch leaders themselves (Billington 1972; Penner 1993; Hurston 1994; Hybels and Hybels 1995; Schaap 1998; Myung and Hong 2003; Vick 2003; Patterson and Rogers 2005; R. Young 2007; Falwell 2008; Sheler 2009; Keith 2011; Rawlings 2013). These books generally follow a common narrative template: humble beginnings with a small group in a living room suddenly mushroom through the pastor’s virtue, ambition and vision to become a prominent megachurch. A few counter-narratives attack such promotional literature by exposing and denouncing the dark side of a particular pastor’s charisma (Goodman and Price 1981; Glover 1990; Gregory 1994; Kaifetz 2012; Henderson and Murren 2015).

Together, both authorized accounts and unauthorized exposés contribute to the notoriety and celebrity of megachurch pastors. Moreover, both appreciative and critical narratives reinforce the misunderstanding that a pastor’s charisma is simply a possession of the person and that followers are passive players under the spell of their gifted or manipulative personality. Susan Cain’s bestseller on introverts blindly states that it is particularly extroverts with a big personality that evangelical churches require for their leadership (Cain 2013:65). In leadership studies such assumptions reflect a trait-based or behaviour-based theory of leadership (Daft 2014)—which ignores the relational, situational and cultural contexts that sociologists such as Max Weber (1968) emphasized. In other words, these accounts essentialize charisma, suggesting it is an inherent characteristic of an individual person rather than than the product of a relationship or social situation.

Stereotypes reduce people to an essence—in fact standardizing a simplified mental picture of an entire group of people. Stereotypes use an extreme type to characterize a whole group, and engender a form of confirmation bias: people downplay information that contradicts the stereotype—

including contextual factors—and emphasize information that confirms its caricature (Bordalo, Gennaioli, and Shleifer 2014). In spite of the flood of media stories highlighting megachurch leadership scandals, with approximately 1700⁴ megachurches in North America today, if only a small percentage of the leaders of these churches do not fit the Gantry stereotype, such generalizations fail to do justice to the social landscape. Some more nuanced analysis of the figure on the megachurch front stage becomes vitally important.

1.1 Consumer Religion and Religious Performance

This chapter introduces the central focus of my thesis—the iconoclastic charismatic authority of megachurch pastor Bruxy Cavey. An extreme introvert offstage, but a witty and gregarious speaker on stage, Cavey draws testimonies from attendees who recognize him, as one lay leader said, as having “an amazing sense of the Spirit” that makes him “one of the most compelling apologists and teachers of the gospel... the world has ever seen.” Quick to distance himself from televangelists and other evangelical figures, Cavey consistently explains to inquirers that he’s “in the ministry of busting up stereotypes, breaking up the line of expectation” for those with prejudices about Christians. I investigate his charismatic appeal from the discipline of cultural sociology—as a dramatic performance and joint production of leader and followers in a situation of cultural tension. This comes with debts to both Max Weber and Erving Goffman. But that was not how my study began.

When I began my Ph.D. program, my curiosity had been piqued by the popularity of Cavey’s megachurch called The Meeting House. In a country where church attendance is waning, this Canadian church was expanding at a rapid pace under the leadership of its central icon, Bruxy Cavey and his staff of approximately 60 people (full and part-time). The megachurch had about 10 regional sites at the time (17 by 2015) meeting in movie theatres across southern Ontario, Canada, with its headquarters or main “Production Site” in Oakville, Ontario, where the largest proportion of the church gathers on Sunday morning. Growth has started to slow of late, with about 5500 people typically attend Sunday services in 2014 (and approximately 8000 people identifying the church as their home congregation). About 45 percent of these attendees also attend a Home Church during the week—a group of 10 to 30 people who meet in someone’s home to discuss the Sunday teaching, pray together, and plan recreational and service activities together.⁵

⁴ The latest official number is 1,611 (S. Thumma and Bird 2011), which I am updating by rounding up to 1700 to include recent American churches that have since broken the 2000 weekly attendance mark and the Canadian megachurches, which would include about 27 more (according to Warren Bird’s Leadership Network list 2015).

⁵ For more detailed notes on the history of TMH, see Appendix C.

The church had grown by leaps and bounds in the early years of the millennium, and it was full of energy and enthusiasm, and often the subject of conversations in wider evangelical circles in Canada. My focus question became: in the midst of declining church attendance, why is this church growing?

I began with a grounded theory approach, seeking to allow the data to shape the theoretical context for my work. Theory creates an intellectual structure or model that explains and interprets empirical observations. The framework for my initial answer came under the rubric of consumer religion, a subject investigated by both enthusiastic and critical observers—social scientists, theologians, and church marketers. In a nutshell, the expanding post-war spiritual marketplace, which includes the proliferation of religious options and the softening of denominational boundaries, favours the consumer. In this context, religious “firms” will grow that appeal to the “felt needs” of consumers, and offer an experience resonant with popular culture, including multiple programming options as alternate entry points. Megachurches are considered to be the epitome of such religious firms, crudely marked by a focus on entertainment, marketing, and choice, with a pastor-as-CEO leading the whole enterprise—a “McDonaldized” form of religion.⁶

The language, marketing, and structure of The Meeting House provided evidence for such a framework, but as my fieldwork progressed, I became less satisfied with this approach. I noticed the marketing embraced consumer culture, but some of the teachings critiqued it, and the practises of the Home Churches strived to subvert it (including Anabaptist practises of plainness, simplicity, and generosity). The megachurch connection with consumer culture became much more complex in my view (James 2013). Other aspects of the consumer rubric became problematic to me: the language of “firms marketing their customers” captured the competitive and transactional dimensions of what I was observing, and certainly offers some explanation of the macro-situation in North America, but it tended to reduce the relationships I saw on the micro-level to economic terms driven by a rational calculus or matters of scale. If human beings are moral, believing animals (Smith 2003) and not only motivated by cost-benefit analysis, there must be more to what I was observing. Attendees’ accounts of their experiences spoke of a fascination for Cavey, a depth of identification with his “irreligious” message, and a shift in their posture towards institutional religion. Some accounts contained consumer language like “church shopping” but they would not agree that a consumer frame is the best way to characterize their church. Besides, consumer culture has affected most modern institutions, including both smaller churches and even the Eastern Orthodox Church (Roof 2001; Slagle 2011). I was

⁶ Chapter 2 investigates this literature in detail.

becoming less convinced that economic models offered fresh insight into megachurches like TMH, and I became less impressed with metrics and more intent on uncovering the meaning of it all.

Most significantly, all my data seemed to point specifically to Pastor Cavey rather than more diffusely to consumerism as the central dynamic—the primary icon and agent—of the church.⁷ Cavey appears as no typical cleric: long hair, earrings, thumb rings, and a uniform of T-shirts and jeans. Pudgy in body shape, he is not a sex or success symbol; rather, he is iconoclastic in both appearance and message—that Jesus Christ came to “shut down religion” and create faith communities of simplicity and generosity. Religious entrepreneurship in the organizational sense disinterests him: he is as administratively challenged as he is pedagogically gifted. He eschews the role of CEO and happily hands it over to his executive pastor, Tim Day.

Yet Cavey draws the crowds to see and hear him. His central role became more evident as I listened and observed the life of this church. First, all of my 82 interviewees pointed to Cavey, and specifically his teaching, as the reason they first came to TMH. Sixteen interviewees also mentioned either family, friends or the community emphasis of the church as important to them, and one identified with the Anabaptist roots. No one mentioned the music. Cavey was always mentioned, if not as the main draw to the church, then as a reason to keep coming (see Appendix A). Even Home Church meetings centre around his teachings and the questions he designs to accompany them. Secondly, when Cavey was at his first church, Heritage Fellowship Baptist Church, the attendance numbers—which had been stable for years—suddenly rose from one hundred to one thousand. When he abruptly left, the numbers returned to their previous levels within weeks. A similar story has played out at TMH: when he arrived, attendance had been at around one hundred for about ten years. Within a few months of his arrival, attendance began to climb and within a few years the numbers topped 2000. Now, almost twenty years later, around 5500 attend weekly. Weekly attendance often sags when it is known Cavey is away on a tour or vacation.⁸ Thirdly, TMH has an elite status when it comes to North American megachurches: only 1.2 percent of U.S. megachurches have more than 10 sites (Bird and Walters 2009:21). With 17 satellite campuses (also called regional sites) and two

⁷ Meeting Housers may object to this premise of the thesis, insisting Jesus is the centre of TMH, not Cavey. Many churches, however, would say that Jesus is the centre of their life and worship, and they do not thrive like TMH. This dissertation focuses on the cultural formation of contemporary religion, and thus with The Meeting House, I am investigating the socio-cultural forms through which The Meeting House promotes their understanding of the spirituality of Jesus. Cavey may be a rival to Jesus for some, but my focus is an analysis of the sociological dynamics of the church, not a recording of its religious beliefs.

⁸ In an interview, one former chair of the Overseers (board of trustees) insisted that there was a direct correlation between the number of times Cavey preached per year and attendance numbers. “The more he preaches, the greater the numbers on Sunday morning.”

additional sites planned per year for the near future, TMH is extremely rare.⁹ Most megachurches (77 percent) have planted or helped plant churches—meaning they launch a new congregation with a new pastor (Thumma and Bird 2008:8). TMH has more recently supported a few church plants but they characteristically focus more intently on creating new regional sites rather than church plants. This suggests that its growth rests not in leadership development but in the extension of Cavey’s charismatic authority—as far as it will be stretched. In the less obvious language of the leadership, “We want to get the message out as much as possible.”

My focus question then shifted from “Why is this church growing?” to “How does Cavey’s charisma draw these Canadian crowds?” I wanted to understand what were the mechanisms by which Cavey’s charismatic authority was generated, distributed, and expanded to wider audiences.

TMH is not a one-man show but a team performance. By saying that the charisma of Cavey is the key to the dynamic growth of the church is not to assume his individual talent alone accomplished it, nor that he is the master of the charismatic situation. The second significant observation I made was that being a dedicated member of TMH was not the life of a passive consumer. Certainly, there are numerous free-riders in any megachurch, but the regular participants at Home Churches committed much of their week to volunteering in the work of TMH. I saw them pursuing their perceived spiritual and therapeutic needs but also becoming emotionally caught up in the identity and teaching of their church. They were—in varying degrees—captured by the image and ideas of Bruxy Cavey and his promise of a “church for people not into church.” He inspired them in their faith, turning it from a private affair into a dramatic production in which they longed to play a part. I began to see the church less as a measured economic venture and more as an *aesthetic*—a holistic impression that engaged the imagination and emotion of attendees; more specifically, a grand theatrical performance that garnered people’s interest, enthusiasm, and willingness to serve. In the context of a country where Christian faith is becoming an object of disinterest or disdain, Cavey made it a credible, if not desirable and meaningful drama for life.

Two moments in Cavey’s presentation illustrate this. The first is an occasional practise of Cavey’s, in which he invites members of his live audience to come up on stage with him. Some come up for prepared interviews, mostly focused on some practise in their Christian lifestyle. But other times Cavey is just asking for volunteers, and they come up on stage not knowing what brief drama they will be asked to participate in, but they enthusiastically run on stage and trust Cavey’s spontaneous direction. He choreographs them according to some point he’s illustrating—such as the

⁹ Bird (2014a) reports only one third of global megachurches have multi-sites, and multi-sites are more likely to grow and have more conversions than church plants. Only 10 percent of multi-site churches have a satellite campus that became a church plant. These statistics suggest to me a dependence on the charisma of the megachurch senior pastor.

mechanics of salvation from an Anabaptist versus Calvinist perspective. This brief dramatic moment demonstrates not only Cavey's key orchestrating role, but symbolically shows how his followers are not just spectators, but also actors in the religious performance. This interactive dimension is reinforced by the regular "Q. and Eh?" session at the end of Cavey's teaching, where Cavey fields two or three spontaneous questions from the audience by roving microphone or cell phone texting.

A second telling moment was my experience of what is affectionately known as "Purge Sunday" (explored more thoroughly in chapter 4). A few times a year, Cavey will pause in the service and encourage all those who are mere consumers of the church services and teachings to go find an alternative church where they might more fully participate. He suggests something at TMH must be preventing their full involvement—either his long hair, the contemporary music, the Home Church structure or the Anabaptist teaching—and so rather than simply sit as critical spectators, they should move on to a church they can truly own.

Because Cavey himself puts the event in the language of consumer religion, it appears as the obvious framework for analysis. But the more I reflected upon this ritual, the more I began to see it as a performance—an act intended to further emphasize the identity of the church in contradistinction to the very megachurch stereotype that pervades North American media. It was a reverse altar call, a challenge to the consumer framework, and an invitation to be more fully committed to the church. In effect, it suggests an evangelical church for those seeking to distance themselves from the right wing, high pressure evangelical stereotype. The moment was more about staging an identity—a negative identity—than about purging the church of spectators. And Cavey was the charismatic star of the show, an icon of irenic, self-conscious Canadian evangelicalism (Reimer 2003).

This frame made better sense of what I was witnessing: people attend a church not merely because of the consumer options it generates, but because it provides them with a compelling drama within which to play a role, a script that offers them meaning, and most significantly, a star actor who models a credible, attractive, and inspiring vision for their lives. The megachurch is not the evangelical Home Depot (Cimino 1999:56) as much as it is an evangelical Silver City—or more accurately, evangelical interactive theatre. This shift in frame was further supported by Cavey's history as an actor and the structure of their "meeting house"—rented movie theatres or their headquarters, a warehouse renovated to feel like a movie theatre.¹⁰ Significantly, the cinema setting

¹⁰ Ronald Glassman, in an analysis of manufactured charisma and movie stars, writes that "the darkness of the theater puts the individual into a dream-state in which fantasy projections and identifications become easy to attain" (1975:631).

retains commercial dimensions, while emphasizing the significance of cultural narratives and personalities.¹¹

The “irreligious” nature of the drama helps explain why the church attracts primarily middle-class Caucasians. Evangelicals from visible minority groups would not likely feel the same need to distance themselves from the religious establishment or from notorious white American televangelists such as Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Ted Haggard, or Mark Driscoll. TMH offers a drama for those seeking an idiosyncratic evangelicalism that assumes a backstory with a particular social location.¹²

1.2 The Charismatic Diamond and the Dramatic Web

Popular depictions of megachurch leaders such as those mentioned at the beginning of this chapter suggest both their shrewdness and big personality attract the crowds. Charisma can be popularly understood as a personal possession that comes as a divine gift, a heroic vision, or a manipulative marketing ploy—all of which can cultivate an intense devotion in followers. Images of religious “cult” leaders, political cults of personality, and celebrity fan cultures overlap and blur in popular imagination, aided by the spectres of Jim Jones, Hitler, and the more benign Elvis and Lennon, all with their train of devotees. Charisma is admired, desired and simultaneously suspect.

This project aims to find an approach to megachurch leadership that avoids both naive admiration and easy cynicism while including both appreciation and criticism. Without critique of the religious power of these leaders, an analysis fails to contribute to the ongoing conversation about megachurch cultural influence; but without some appreciation for their appeal, research fails to understand the reason for the growing popularity of these churches and their leaders. If approximately 1700 megachurches now dot the landscape of North America, some recognition of the diversity of characters that populate their leadership ranks is essential. While I argue that qualitative research is the richest form of investigation on megachurch pastors, a growing list of surveys, critical appraisals and case studies offer some foundational work that sets the context for my own case study.

This dissertation will show how charisma—as an individual quality—becomes charismatic authority, understood as a joint effort, a co-production that arises in opportune cultural conditions for

¹¹ The metaphor of drama also has theological use, configuring the Bible as drama, theology as improvisation, and faith as performance (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014; Vanhoozer 2014).

¹² Scott Wall pressed me on the racial question, and his upcoming dissertation investigates the social factors contributing to young Chinese-Canadians moving from ethnic congregations to large, multi-ethnic communities. The whiteness of TMH, carried by its hippie image and Anabaptist heritage, suggests unspoken social privilege that allows for such things as the church’s apolitical stance. This aspect of the church was not covered in my dissertation and deserves further exploration.

the particular narrative the leader creates. This suggests that Cavey would not be celebrated in every age and culture, and that his charismatic authority is precariously situated even within southern Ontario and Canadian evangelicalism. Such vulnerability gives TMH an air of possibility and excitement—attendees perceive their church as a venture into new religious territory through Cavey’s creative vision. His mission also prompts routinization by ardent followers, suggesting Cavey’s agency may be curtailed with time, as the brand sediments and routinization runs ahead of him. The prime agent becomes a potential victim of his own success.

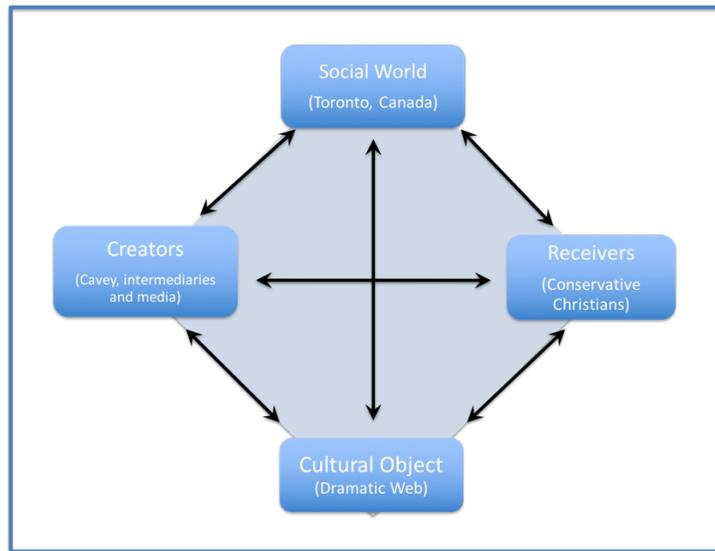
It was Max Weber who explained charismatic authority as a bond between leaders and their followers. He also insisted that charismatic authority was a direct challenge to bureaucratic and traditional authority, and Cavey exemplifies this posture. His “irreligious” message and mission are consistently couched in terms that follow the anti-institutional rhetoric of the counter-culture. His critique of religion, tradition, and institutions in favour of organic relationships—along with his use of revolutionary language—parallel Weber’s descriptions of the charismatic leader’s appeal (Weber 1968:52).

My approach requires an extended participant observer investigation that uncovers the lived religion of megachurch attendees and gives consideration to their voices. It also requires a more sophisticated understanding of charismatic authority, building on Weber’s conceptualization of the phenomenon. Weber postulated charisma not only as a personality trait, but as a process that involves the confluence of three variables—a talented leader, followers who recognize the extraordinary, if not divine qualities of their leader, and a situation of crisis or distress. This “charimatization” process has been illustrated as a “charismatic triangle” of leader, follower and situation (Pinto and Larsen 2006:252). However, what I am suggesting here is that such charismatic authority is a cultural object taking the form of a dramatic production or what I will explain as a “dramatic web” of images, stories, and practises, which is analytically distinct from both leaders and followers—forming a fourth element in the charimatization process. Additionally, in the era of press agents, marketing departments and electronic media, the leader cannot be seen as solely in control of the creation of this drama. He or she is an image, a persona, a product as well as an agent, and this additional intermediary agent—epitomized in TMH communications and marketing department—needs to be recognized alongside the leader.

Wendy Griswold’s (2008) “cultural diamond” offers a template in which to place these four different elements of charisma—Weber’s three elements plus the fourth dimension of the dramatic web (see Figure 1.1). In effect, charismatic authority is a dynamic social power and a cultural product, a creation of various parties in a particular setting—not one individual’s spellbinding essence. This places the discussion of charisma squarely in the broad context of cultural sociology rather than

psychology—a “charismatic diamond” of cultural variables that relate to each other in specific ways while together in a “perfect storm” create a new subculture of captivating meanings, symbols and practises. In a social context characterized by some tension and uncertainty, a leader inspires followers into a promising mission and movement, and their “reciprocal interdependence” (Bryman 1992:194) generates an emotionally and intellectually solidified charismatic bond.

Figure 1.1 Griswold’s Cultural Diamond Applied to The Meeting House
 Derived from Griswold, Wendy. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World 3rd ed.* Pine Forge Press, 2008.

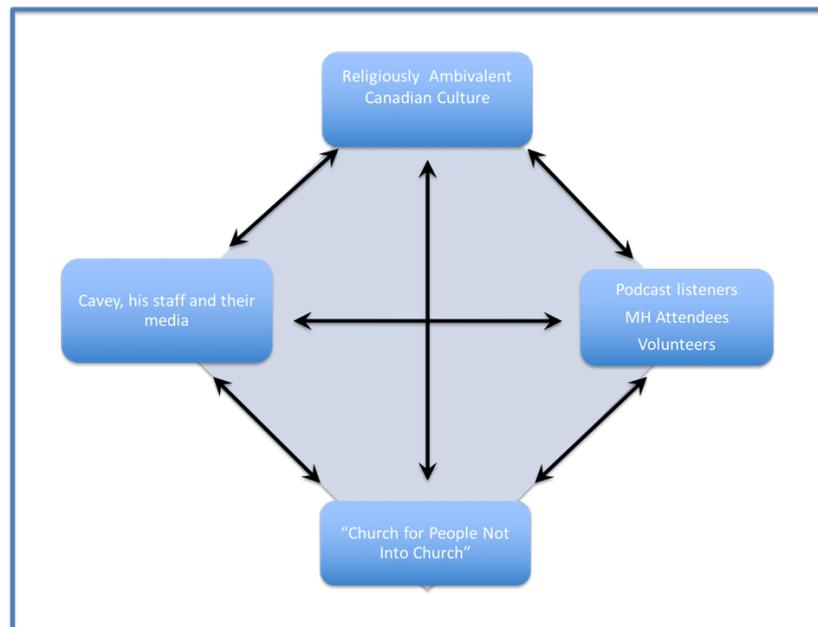


The discipline of cultural sociology highlights the role of meaning, identification and moral order in the study of religion, challenging the major sociological frameworks of secularization theory and religious economy (Edgell 2012). In line with Max Weber, it insists that “to explain social action, one has to interpret culture” (Reed 2009:3) and this includes demonstrating how people produce and use culture as a tool for meaning-making and as a contested practise (Swidler 2001). Building on some of the classical sociologists, and leaning heavily on Geertz, the discipline is currently growing from being an “eccentric outlier” of “interdisciplinary bricolage” in the discipline of sociology to a coherent subfield with its own set of academic handbooks (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012:9; see also Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005; Hall, Grindstaff, and Ming-Cheng 2010).

Because I want to emphasize charisma as a cultural product, I deliberately shift the theoretical framework of megachurches from religious economy to dramaturgical analysis. Put in performance terms, Bruxy Cavey’s charismatic performance is the cultural object, which is co-produced by the communication department of TMH, and received by the audience of attendees, empowering them in the midst of some cultural stress or tension. In four words: the show, the stagecraft (including the

star), the spectators and the setting. One must remember that the audience is not passive: they are also part of the production process by their attendance, volunteerism, and social media activity, even if they seem separate according to Figure 1.2. This is what makes the crisscrossing arrows especially important, suggesting a multi-faceted diamond rather than just a square.

Figure 1.2 The Cultural Diamond as the Charismatic Diamond



My project offers four propositions about the nature and dynamics of charisma in a megachurch which in some respects are contrary to the popular discourse as well as some academic works. Little of what I am proposing is new for anyone conversant in the field of charismatic leadership; but it is innovative in what it weaves together to specifically investigate megachurch leadership.

1. *Charismatic relations* are “an intrinsic part of the human condition” as people naturally are attracted to and identify with other individuals (Dawson 2006:15). Some leaders especially radiate a *charisma* (understood in common usage as exemplary individual character or “gift of grace”) in which the charismatic relations are magnified and some group recognizes and respects this character—whether it be manipulative, flamboyant, benevolent or any other mix of attributes of human personality. *Charismatic authority* is a singularly important factor in the life of some megachurches—more so than the executive power of leadership. This charismatic authority is a *social*

phenomenon, a legitimated, asymmetrical power relationship between a leader and followers based on the recognition of charisma in the leader.¹³

2. In line with Weber, charismatic authority manifests as a co-produced cultural artifact in the face of cultural crisis or tension. It is more than a bond between leader and followers, however; it is a dramatic production that draws people in through narratives and images carried by media, word of mouth, and community practises. This “dramatic web” is conditioned by the interaction between its cultural context, its group of creators, and its varied audiences—conceptually configured as a “charismatic diamond.”¹⁴ Thus the dominant metaphor of the corporate CEO in megachurch literature can be both contrasted and complimented with the image of the theatre and its dramatic production—generated by teams of actors, support crews, and audiences (Goffman 1959). Especially if understood as interactive theatre, this approach modestly de-centres the charismatic lead actor, who may also be a director and script writer, but who is simultaneously bound to the recognized narratives and images as well as the responses of various audiences.
3. Found together, the four elements of the charismatic diamond are sufficient for charismatic authority to be established but not necessarily appropriated by every audience member to the same extent. I view attendees at TMH not just as dupes or victims of spellbinding personality, but rather in line with Swidler (2001), *bricoleurs* who see the drama of The Meeting House as a resource for their own personal project of shaping their religious identity (Lyon 2000:32; Wuthnow 2010:14). Followers participate in the church to various degrees as they appropriate and perpetuate the central narratives of the church, as they gauge their participation in its rituals and consume its cultural products, and to the extent they rest their identity and security in its future. Charismatic authority draws a diverse crowd, and individuals in the crowd draw on its drama in diverse ways.
4. Because of the pervasiveness of electronic media, charismatic authority today is not solely produced by a charismatic leader, but becomes shaped by and liable to the vicissitudes of media agents and relations. Although it is common for some charismatic leaders to have no immediate contact with their followers (Dawson 2011:125), media can facilitate charismatic relations which resemble the para-social relationships discussed in celebrity studies (Boorstin 1961). Megachurches primarily maintain the charismatic authority shaped within an organization; but because they are so heavily invested in electronic media, celebrity culture also conditions megachurch charismatic relations within the organization and beyond.

These conceptual touchstones will bring more precise articulation to what *charisma* means and how

¹³ Hofmann (2015:7-9) also helpfully distinguishes charismatic *leadership* from charisma, as the “real-world exercise of power that is legitimated by followers’ recognition of charismatic authority.” Ingram (2014:27) especially emphasizes the asymmetrical quality of charismatic authority.

¹⁴ Weber did write that a charismatic leader must demonstrate some on-going success to his followers or his charisma would wane (1968:22). I am assuming success as the result of the production rather than including it as a separate variable.

charismatic leadership originates and expands its influence through a megachurch community. The dramatic web offers a model for understanding the generation and expansion of charisma, its routinization and its distribution. My goal is neither to disenchant nor to mystify, but to offer some complexity, context, and clarity to the discussion of megachurch pastors and their charisma.

1.3 Charismatic Authority and Dramaturgical Analysis

In this section I want to elaborate on my two main concepts: charisma and performance. First of all, why focus on the *charismatic leadership* (the exercise of charismatic authority) of The Meeting House? For one thing, nothing has been written that focuses exclusively on The Meeting House.¹⁵ From the start, I wanted to do fieldwork, and I chose TMH because it was a curiosity. It drew attention and attendees, including some acquaintances of mine. Initially, my goal was to examine the lived religion¹⁶ of the community—not just the ideology of the leadership. My focus shifted to charismatic authority because of Cavey’s central iconic role, but I still kept the lived religion of the institution in focus, forming a dialectic with the narrative, symbols, and practices cultivated by the leadership.

In terms of the wider literature, some say “congregations rise and fall on the quality of their leaders” (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015:155) and, more specifically, the charisma of the pastor is often listed as one of the seminal aspects of a megachurch (Schultze 1991). Malick suggests seeing the pastor as the main agent is both the popular and academic perception:

The person and the institution are inextricably bound, for either condemnation or affirmation... One reason may be because the growth of megachurches is most often attributable to the current pastor. He is understood as the reason for that megachurch being there. It is either his fault or his crown. He is regarded as the source of the explanation for its presence, either way you choose to look at it (Malick 1996, 26–27).

¹⁵ Matthew Masters (2007) wrote his M.A. in communication and popular culture focusing on two Emerging Church cases (one of which was the Hamilton East site of The Meeting House). He typifies the churches as “decompartmentalizing” communities, meaning holistic, de-differentiated religious groups that reclaimed wider portions of members’ lives. Furthermore, using the work of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, he examines them as “paraliminal” communities within the counterculture; they resist routinizing and solidifying into conventional religious forms. My work dovetails with Masters’ research as I show how charisma functions to create this “betwixt and between” state beyond both traditional and rational-legal cultural forms—except that I argue from a Weberian perspective that it does get routinized and centralized.

¹⁶ “Lived religion” is an American term for cultural and ethnographic approaches to the study of religion derived from French sociology (Hall 1997; Orsi 2003; McGuire 2008; Nancy Tatom Ammerman 2013). Hall, one of the leaders of the movement, explains “while we know a great deal about the history of theology and (say) church and state, we know next-to-nothing about religion as practices and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women” (Hall 1997:vii).

This is not just public perception; attendees report on national surveys that the senior pastor is one of the three main reasons they attend.¹⁷ Still, both public perceptions and attendee reports can simply suggest that the charismatic megachurch pastor may be the most visible agent in megachurch vitality; he could be a visible sign of a more complicated, invisible process which I call the charismatic diamond.

How do the different elements of the charismatic diamond interact? Scholars put different weight on different points of the diamond: some emphasize the leader (Willner 1984), others the followers (Schiffer 1973), and yet others focus on their interdependence (Tucker 1968). Still, there are those who would highlight the social context and its tensions (Wilson 1975; Bourdieu 1987) or, in celebrity studies, the role of the media and intermediaries (G. Turner 2006, 2010). One of my goals is to provide a model for understanding charismatic authority which leaves the precise interaction of the four elements to particular instances of charisma and even more narrowly, particular moments in a single case. I will show how the four elements interact, but keep the relations tied to the particulars of my case study rather than generalize for all instances of a charismatic bond.

Cavey reflexively approaches his own charismatic leadership, specifically managing an identity as a pastor intended for those “not into church.” Wellman (2012) offers a biographical investigation into the former megachurch pastor Rob Bell, a similar reflexively charismatic leader and “rogue pastor.” Wellman argues that the evangelical rogue pastor is a combination of characteristics found in charismatic leaders and spiritual virtuosos but Bell is “most fully himself as a performance artist.” Bell is a religious entrepreneur, a theological provocateur, and a union of “the court jester, the prophet and the Socratic figure to poke, prod, and provoke conventional thinking” (2012:23-24).

Cavey’s charisma takes a similar, although less polemicized, Canadian posture. His “rogue pastor” character also chooses to affiliate with a different subculture: Bell exemplifies the contemporary hipster culture and Cavey identifies with the hippie era. Yet both styles are cool, embracing outsider status, and suggesting counter-cultural themes that have popular appeal in North America (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2005; Hale 2011). In effect, there is a rebellious charisma to Cavey, and it resonates with particular subcultural streams that flow across national borders. In chapters 4 and 5, I will show that the first impression of his performance is ironic in style, playing with the paradox of being a megachurch for people not into megachurches; but at heart the drama is

¹⁷ Thumma and Bird (2009) surveyed 24,900 megachurch members from 12 megachurches, and their top three reasons for initially attending their respective megachurch were the worship style, the senior pastor, and the reputation of the church in that order, although each of these three reasons were just one decimal point different (on a scale of 1-5). It is also in the top three reasons pastors of large churches report growth in their own churches (Warren 2015:7).

a romantic narrative, promising adventure, fighting monsters (institutional religion) and finding love (in intimate community).

Charisma as a concept has been assessed as passé, dissolved in the manipulations of electronic media (Bensman and Givant 1975; S. Turner 2003) or considered unempirical and too mystical to measure (Burke and Brinkerhoff 1981; Bourdieu 1987; Oakes 1997; Kotter 1999; P. Smith 2000; Joosse 2014). Yet the term has cultural currency (Potts 2009:5) because of the observation that certain individuals are able to elicit the love and loyalty of many people. While I shy away from a mystical view, I appreciate that there can be room for something extra-sociological. Weber himself put it outside rational and traditional frames, suggesting something with creative, ahistorical qualities. Charisma—like religion—can have an *a priori* quality that is not merely a reflection of social forces—of post-suburban life, technological change, or market logic (Pals 1987). Nevertheless, I am following a scholarly tradition that contends charisma is sociologically constructed, and thus it is not simply mysterious—that is, not without noticeable patterns or identifiable contributing variables (Dawson 2011).¹⁸ It is largely created, channelled, directed, and managed through social dynamics that I characterize here as dramaturgical.

Avoiding a cynical view of megachurches and their pastors in an academic context is a difficult task.¹⁹ I must admit I see good reasons for dismissive cynicism in the megachurch—some megachurches more than others. But the anthropological dictum of honouring the subject calls me to something with more discipline, a task that takes the parishioner seriously and tries to understand the megachurch in phenomenological terms.

This is why my second main concept is drama—understanding social action as people taking roles within a larger narrative ordered by constructed settings. I want to understand what it is that inspires people to follow a charismatic authority, and I believe there is something aesthetic in the charismatic bond that garners people’s enthusiasm and loyalty. A long history of evangelists and preachers has been described in dramaturgical terminology: “the divine dramatist” George Whitefield (Stout 1991); the “theatrical quality” of Billy Sunday’s on-stage athleticism (Martin 2002:*xiii*); and the weekly spectacle of Aimee Semple McPherson at her Angelus Temple (Sutton 2007). Cavey’s

¹⁸ Dawson (2011:115) writes: “An element of mystery clings to the idea of charismatic authority, which is more than the by-product of our ignorance. In its very conception charisma is designed to capture and express our profound and repeated sense that certain leaders have an uncanny ability to win and hold our attention, to persuade and motivate us, to earn our approval. Like it or not, mystery is a defining feature of the phenomenon, and when social scientific explanations become too complete or reductive in nature, there is a sense that we are no longer dealing with charisma *per se*.”

¹⁹ For example, when presenting a conference paper on my dissertation, one professor’s immediate response was to suggest my study was naïve, and that I needed to find out if Cavey was having an affair with his secretary. See also Starks (2013).

iconoclastic wit lacks the flamboyance of these American historical examples, but his performance is tempered for a more modest Canadian disposition and a more professional audience. His minor celebrity status makes him a good object for study, as larger celebrities are often less accessible for research (Ferris 2010). Furthermore, the dramaturgical metaphor fits the nature of a preacher whose image is enlarged to the jumbo screen and podcast on the internet. Schultze (1991) says that megachurches are characterized by a television-style worship—or more relevant for TMH, for the video podcast—and they are deliberately structured as performances. The stage often includes backdrops, props, and a supporting cast of staff and guests, as well as supplementary acts in the form of movie clips, in-house commercials, and visual aids of various sorts.

The concept of “dramatic web” suggests a performance that captivates an audience. This approach characterizes charismatic authority primarily as an aesthetic (Ladkin 2010)—a felt sense, an embodied sensory impression that engages both emotion and imagination, mobilizing followers for a mission and movement that empowers them and increases their sense of self-worth. I imagine the moments when I was “caught up”²⁰ in the creativity and excitement of the church as an experience more consistent in attendees’ career at TMH. I began to picture the image of Cavey and the stories by Cavey, of Cavey’s life, and about Cavey’s gifts, lifestyle, and vision to be the threads that held people, who are otherwise coming from very different backgrounds, together. Cavey spins this dramatic web, with its satirical critique of religion buttressed by a romantic promise of authentic relationship, but as soon as he lets loose with this narrative, it leaves his control and is reproduced in myriad ways—by attendees and other media. In fact, it is not only a religious drama, it is a religious drama *about* religion, a reflexive interrogation of its own subject matter, forming a paradoxical orientation: an “irreligious” drama about religion. Or more accurately, a paradoxical irreligious and anti-institutional drama which becomes its own centralized religious institution.

The web image suggests the criss-crossing communication lines of the internet, but simultaneously refers to Clifford Geertz’s classic quote, which he links to the work of Max Weber: “...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” The webs, he says, are culture, and the project of analysis is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1977:5). My early sociological training was in the work of Peter Berger and communicates something similar in different words: human beings create a culture that in turn impinges upon them as if an objective fact. In terms of this project, the world of TMH is shaped by Cavey and his followers within a cultural matrix; this world, in turn, shapes them,

²⁰ Stromberg (2009) argues that play is something into which we are “caught up,” and the immersion shapes us in subtle ways. Theatre is a form of play; a feature some argue is one of the elements of religious life (Berger 1997; Durkheim 1995; Droogers 2011; Bellah 2011).

restraining them but also offering them some social stability in the midst of a highly mobile postsuburban setting, caught in the wider matrix of what Giddens (2003) called the modern “runaway world.” This project, however, is not just about meaning and interpretation but also about institutions, structures, authority, and human agency (Swidler 2001). A dramatic web, as a welter of intersecting lines and layers, suggests something attractive, fragile, untidy, sticky, and constantly being re-spun.

1.4 Contribution to the Literature: A Canadian Megachurch Hybrid

Why is a case study of The Meeting House worth extended investigation? This project is important because it demonstrates that within a broadly “secularizing” context like Canada, where church declension is the norm, there are niches in which Christian congregations are growing and thriving. Secondly, my study offers an in-depth qualitative investigation of the charismatic authority of one particular megachurch leader that problematizes the Elmer Gantry stereotype. Stereotypes misrecognize people—in this case both megachurch leaders and their thousands of followers. One way of mitigating stereotypes is by offering new information that contradicts the extreme type (Bordalo, Gennaioli, and Shleifer 2014), and Cavey certainly offers something more nuanced.

Thirdly, this dissertation takes the megachurch beyond the economic model of the pastor-as-CEO and his consumer followers and into a more culturally based model—that of the dramatic arts. The consumer model has its advantages, especially in an age of globalization. But if this theoretical frame weighs too heavy on the data, and rational choice becomes the singular operating mechanism, it becomes reductionistic and myopic, suggesting people flock to megachurches drawn by clever entrepreneurs and their marketing, or that such followers are shallow self-interested customers. This is an unsatisfactory explanation, and not least to megachurch attendees themselves; many people come to megachurches not only because its cheap, easy, entertaining, and rewarding, but because it draws them into something larger than themselves, into a performance that intrigues them, a narrative that gives their life meaning and delight. Participation is ignited by an emotional bond with the leader which in turn calls followers to self-sacrifice and service. In sum, I am suggesting megachurches are first of all cultural institutions (Chaves 2004; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015), not economic exchanges in religious guise, and this approach provides a much deeper and more satisfactory explanation of what goes on within them.

Not only does this case study challenge simplistic renderings of the charismatic evangelical leader, and offer a dramaturgical model for understanding this charisma in terms of a local evangelical celebrity, but it fills a gap in four other areas of scholarship on religion that I will proceed to unpack: as a Canadian congregational study; as a case study of a megachurch and its leader; as an investigation

of a megachurch anomaly on the global religious landscape; and as a demonstration of a new “strategic religiosity” (Marti and Ganiel 2014).

First of all, while there are some 30,000 Christian congregations in Canada, there is hardly any research on their activity (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Studies of religion in Canada often focus on individual beliefs and practices (Reginald Bibby’s work) or national movements and groups and their political activities (Miedema 2006; Flatt 2014). Much Christian religiosity, however, takes place in the ordinary day-to-day life of congregations, the mediating institutions in-between individual believers and macro social systems such as the state and economy (Berger and Neuhaus 1977). Surprisingly, in-depth fieldwork study at this level of analysis remains novel, and in Canada rather scarce when compared with the United States.

Only recently, Nancy Ammerman’s landmark work firmly established the field of congregational studies and laid out its basic parameters (Ammerman 1987, 1994, 1996, 2005; Ammerman et al. 1998; Ammerman and Dudley 2002). Others have contributed significantly to the field, either through congregational case study or more quantitative and theoretical work (Neitz 1987; Warner 1988, 2005; Becker 1999; Wellman 1999; Harding 2001; Tamney 2002; Ault 2004; Chaves 2004, 2011; Marti 2005, 2008, 2012; Marti and Ganiel 2014; Fulkerson 2007; Bielo 2009, 2011). Still, scholarly books on Canadian congregations remain much more sparse and disparate (Lyon 1995; Poloma 2003; Duncan 2008; Bean 2009; W. C. James 2011; Stewart 2012; Wilkinson and Althouse 2012; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015).²¹

As one of the largest Protestant churches in Canada, TMH is one of the first to shift to a multi-site model, and features one of Canada’s most popular religious voices. As such, it begs for some close scholarly investigation. It is remarkable that in a country that has seen such a steep incline in the number of religious “nones” and such a steep decline in church attendance that TMH has grown steadily in the last 20 years. As an evangelical²² or “conservative Protestant” church (as it would be

²¹ There have been a number of unpublished theses at the Masters and Doctorate of Ministry level that examine Canadian congregations (Skinner 2009; Penney 1980; Sam 1982; Bacon 1982; Day 1982; Wildeboer 1983; Millin 1988; May 1989; Vautour 1995; Spate 1996; Cummerngen 1997; Carroll and Jarvis 1997; Harding 1998; Gowing 2003; Aicken 2004; Van Holten 2005; Ko 2008; Kao 2009; J. G. Smith 2009; McMenamie 2009; Hinds 2013).

²² I maintain that Cavey falls within the broad sweep of the evangelical network because of his affiliations with mainstream Canadian evangelical agencies and because his faith and practice fall easily within Bebbington’s (1989) quadrilateral of historical evangelicalism. Cavey also self-identifies as an evangelical—in his own way: “I wear that label with them because they know what it means. I don’t wear it with non-Christians because they don’t know what the word means, but they do know what the subculture means to them... right wing with a certain subculture of Christian cheese... Go and ask non-Christian friends what words come to mind when you say the word ‘evangelical.’ See how many words get listed before they say Jesus or gospel” (Stiller 2007). Cavey is clearly ambivalent about the label, and in an interview with me he more readily accepted the label of post-evangelical, reminding me that his Anabaptist denomination would be different, because “they never were evangelical.”

I shall show later in the dissertation that post-evangelical does not necessarily mean “beyond” evangelicalism, for the prefix “post” can assume continuity with its root word. Often taken as a synonym for the

classified in many national surveys), with its larger share of the very committed and younger generations in Christian churches, it is part of a new “dominant force” in Canadian Protestantism, displacing the formerly hegemonic mainline (Bowen 2004:50).²³ TMH can also be classified as a “niche” congregation—a church not grounded in a geographically bounded parish as much as in a particular cultural identity; it is evidence of a growing trend for a “mobile, cosmopolitan culture in which congregational choice is the norm” (Ammerman 1996:130; see also Mardis 2003). The Meeting House niche is not only conservative Protestant, however, and it has an even more particular Christian identity that I elaborate on further below. (For a more detailed history of the church, see Appendix C).

Congregational studies remain too broad a category for megachurch research, and slowly, following in the work of church growth institutes and more recently Scott Thumma at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and Warren Bird at The Leadership Network, a scholarly conversation based specifically on megachurches has begun to emerge. This is a second scholarly area in which my research fills an important gap, and I will take a number of paragraphs to elaborate on the significance of this innovative religious institution.

American megachurches have received some academic attention (Vaughan 1993; Eiesland 1999; D. Miller 1999; Sargeant 2000; Twitchell 2004, 2007; Thumma and Travis 2007; Marti 2005, 2008; Elisha 2011; Wilford 2012), including black megachurches with their distinctive cultural history (Johnson 2008; Drewery 2008; Barnes 2010, 2012; Tucker-Worgs 2001, 2011; Benson 2011; McGee 2012; Barber 2011, 2012). Beyond North America there is growing research (Hong 2000, 2003; J. Y. Kim 2001, 2011; Fath 2005, 2008; Gustafsson 2005; Coleman 2007; K. Kim 2007; O’Neill 2007; Tong 2008, 2011; Algranti 2012; Barnes 2012; Agadjanian 2012; Maddox 2012, 2013; Hey 2013; Kay 2013; James 2015) but there have been no studies of Canadian megachurches as yet.²⁴ Thus my case study of a megachurch offers a timely window into the everyday religion that inhabits these new congregational giants.

A megachurch is understood as a Protestant congregation whose weekly attendance at one or more locations totals over 2000 people (Thumma and Travis 2007). Debate continues as to whether

Emerging Church Movement, it more properly designates evangelicals who wish to distance themselves from mainstream evangelicalism—more specifically conservative megachurch evangelicalism. So if evangelicalism is a centred set, a post-evangelical would be more marginal to the core while not being out of its orbit.

²³ Evangelicals make up about 10 percent of the Canadian population while their 11,000 congregations account for about one-third of the total number of congregations in Canada (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015:18). Section 3.1 of my thesis gives more detail on these numbers.

²⁴ There is Poloma’s (2003) study of the Toronto Airport Fellowship, an international hub of charismatic revival which had megachurch status during its peak. Her study focuses more on the transnational charismatic spirituality of the church than its megachurch character. It is noteworthy that she reports it was a large, dynamic gathering of people without a charismatic leader at the centre.

a megachurch constitutes continuity with large churches of the past or is a new form of congregational life that has arisen since the 1970s (Malick 1996; Eagle 2012). My preference evaluates individual megachurches on a spectrum of continuity and discontinuity with the past, and I would argue TMH would fall somewhere closer to discontinuity. The theatre-like architecture, multi-site structure, electronic media-dependant communications, and consumer-oriented culture suggest qualitative shifts in addition to the quantitative expansion from previous models of church. Moreover, the exponential increase in the number of megachurches begs for the new terminology of “megachurch” and corresponding research specialization (Malick 1996).²⁵

Megachurches are a significant window into modern religious institutional forms, although this reality can be overstated. *New York Times* journalist Gustav Niebuhr suggested years ago that megachurches are “the new model of how church is done” (1995) while *The Atlantic Monthly* called megachurches “The Next Church” (Trueheart 1996). More recently they have been labeled “brand central of the Next New Thing” (Twitchell 2004:80). Management guru Peter Drucker declared that megachurches “are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years” (1998:169) and sociologist Marion Maddox endorses a colleague’s book, saying, “Megachurch means more than numbers: it means the biggest story in global Christianity today” (Hey 2013).

Some of the qualities of megachurches also describe smaller churches today, not only because of a shared cultural context, but because megachurches have become *the* model for evangelical congregational life, as well as for some mainline denominations, religions and even atheists (Ellingson 2007; MacNair 2009). “Their influence cannot be exaggerated,” says Scott Thumma. “They set an example for other congregations that stirs them to experiment” (Lampman 2006). Their resources are “consumed en masse” by smaller churches, church small groups, and by individuals²⁶ (Thumma and Bird 2008), including mainline churches (Robinson 2013). Reimer and Wilkinson’s national study of Canadian evangelical churches documents pastors’ reports of their respective congregation’s identity, and 16 percent classify their church as “purpose-driven” after Rick Warren’s megachurch brand, and another 12 percent follow the model of Willow Creek’s seeker-sensitive

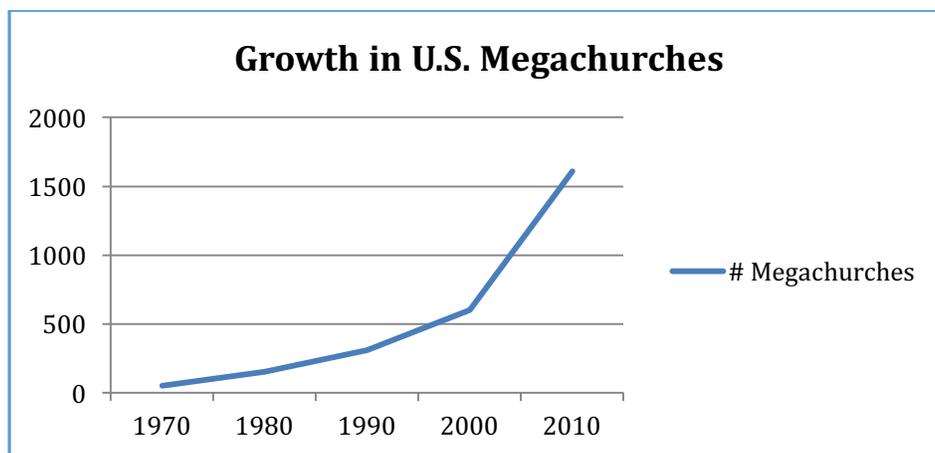
²⁵ A family resemblance theory approach suggests some flexibility on exactly what features exemplify a megachurch. The Faith Communities today website (faithcommunitiestoday.org) offers five characteristics beyond the numerical: a conservative theological position; a charismatic, authoritative senior minister; a very active seven-day a week congregational community; a multitude of social and outreach ministries; and a complex differentiated organizational structure. Schultze (1991:220) suggests five similar elements: a charismatic preacher, entertaining TV-style worship, attendee anonymity, a smorgasbord of programs, and a readiness to adapt to market changes.

²⁶ For example, Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold over 30 million copies worldwide. Anecdotally, the smaller congregation I attend is permeated with the influence of megachurch celebrity pastors. The youth group has used a Francis Chan video series, the women’s group has purchased and used Rob Bell *Nooma* videos, the board has used Bill Hybels’ leadership material, and a small group I attend spent a year following a video program from Andy Stanley. My parents’ congregation occasionally uses Charles Price (The People’s Church, Toronto) sermon videos for their Sunday afternoon services.

approach (2015:131). Roman Catholic leaders are eyeing the success of these cathedral-like communities (Fath 2008), and Jews and atheists have sought to translate some megachurch structures and methods into their own vernacular (Freedman 2007). With reference to Gladwell's (2005) exposé on the growth of Rick Warren's Saddleback church, Bader (2009) recommends the megachurch model to the widest audience: "Any organization that wants to grow and really energize its membership should look at the mega-churches." Church leaders flock to megachurch conferences and eagerly purchase their resources because they promise numerical success.²⁷ So significant is this megachurch influence, that rather than saying they have "won the market," Ellingson (2007:179) critiques it politically as a form of "colonization" of American congregational life and imagination, a characterization that highlights its pervasiveness while pejoratively implying manipulative, if not coercive means.

To illustrate the remarkable rise of megachurches, statistics show over 50 percent of the 1611 megachurches in the U.S.A. were founded after 1970, and while they make up only half a percent of churches, they draw over 10 percent of those who attend church on a Sunday, making megachurches together larger than America's second largest denomination (Thumma and Bird 2011; Bird 2012).²⁸ Megachurch growth compared to population growth is equally revealing: there were 0.13 megachurches per million people in 1900, which steadily grew to 1.2 in 1990 but then jumped to 4.0 in 2005 (Thumma and Travis 2007).

Figure 1.3 Growth in U.S. Megachurches
(From Thumma and Travis 2007 and Bird and Thumma 2011)



²⁷ The irony is, if as I suggest much of megachurch numerical success is due to the confluence of four variables in a charismatic diamond, formulaic ecclesiological advice in megachurch pastors' books may be pragmatically helpful but not reflect the complete picture of the reasons for the author's own congregational growth and personal renown.

²⁸ A later study shows that 7 percent of those who worship on a Sunday are in a megachurch, but if all churches with over 1,000 in attendance are included, the percentage jumps to 23 percent (Bird 2014a).

Scholars attribute growth of the megachurch model to a number of factors: to a broadening spiritual marketplace (Einstein 2007; Lee and Sinitiere 2009); to the marketing genius of church growth-influenced pastors and their publicized successes (Guinness 2003; Twitchell 2007); to shifts in urban ecology that have facilitated the development of these regionally-based exurban churches (Eiesland 1999; Wilford 2012); to changes in architecture design that allow for large audiences surrounded by high quality sound and light technology (Loveland and Wheeler 2003; Kilde 2006) and to a sense of familiarity in a populace socialized by “big box” institutions (Thumma and Travis 2007:176). Chaves (2006) shifts the explanation to the preacher, in a cultural context where there are diminishing rewards for clergy: larger churches offer larger rewards for talented, entrepreneurial leaders with higher salaries and, I would add, potentially wider social influence than smaller churches or most denominational positions can offer. I would extrapolate further by saying the megachurch model, in effect, offers opportunities for ambitious personalities who may have otherwise sought careers in other professions. In sum, the spiritual marketplace opens up space for religious entrepreneurs or “holy mavericks” (Lee and Sinitiere 2007) to find a niche for themselves, and changes in urban planning and electronic media allow for more efficient routinization of their creative missions and visions.

Not everyone is sanguine about the megachurch trend. Some consider them a blight on the religious landscape and critique them as a commercialized form of church that entertains more than challenges attendees while being too dependant on one charismatic leader with little accountability (Rosin 1995; Robinson 2013; Starks 2013; J. D. James 2015). The proliferation of megachurches across the continental landscape has been pejoratively described in much discourse as the McDonaldization, Disneyfication or Walmartization of congregational life (Drane 2001; Twitchell 2004, 2007; Tong 2008; Crowe, McWilliams, and Beienburg 2010; Wollschleger and Porter 2011). As Richard Cimino put it: “the megachurch is evangelicalism’s answer to Home Depot” (Cimino 1999:56). Critical theorist Maddox concludes, megachurches—and specifically prosperity gospel-oriented megachurches—are “capitalism’s cathedrals” (2012:155), obsessively fixated on growth (2013).²⁹ Conservative, calculating, and consumeristic, the megachurch invites both cynicism and dismissal, with some scholars assuming they are a form of “internal” secularization of Christian

²⁹ Maddox’s focus is Hillsong Church in Australia, a megachurch that has significant influence through its production and sale of worship music and which has garnered the attention of numerous academics. Given their reports on the prosperity theology promulgated by the church (pastor Brian Houston’s book, for example, is entitled *You Need More Money*, (2000), the economic framework for analysis seems apt (Connel 2005; Goh 2008; Riches and Wagner 2012; Hynes and Wade 2013). I will argue, however, that these studies reinforce stereotypes based on a megachurch that mirrors many—but not all—others of its kind.

religion—a corruption from within (Sargeant 2000; Bruce 2002; Kyle 2006; MacNair 2009). Already in the 1990s, Martin Marty (1995) considered them a fad soon to pass—“they will be gone with the snows,” he predicted.³⁰ From the beginning of their growth in the 1960s, megachurches have caused controversy:

What we have so far is a secular and religious scholarly dialogue of articulate polarities on whether the megachurch pastors and the megachurches are or are not true expressions of doing quality religion. Both sides of the dialogue seem to be writing not to each other, but to a large, listening, confused audience still ambivalent over the question of megachurches and their pastors. Both sides of the dialogue yoke the actual good and validity of the megachurch pastor and the megachurch in a single appraisal... There are those who watch and are for them, cheering them on, yet at a distance, and there are those who watch and are against them, booing them, also at a distance (Malick 1996:27).

This polarized debate, suggests Malick, creates a siege mentality that draws megachurch pastor and congregation closer together.

The controversy over the scale and culture of megachurches continues. Jethani (2014) has written a popular blog calling megachurches the “cruise ships” of congregational life, focused on connecting non-believers to the therapeutic offerings of their church rather than to God. In the wake of the conflict and bankruptcy of the Crystal Cathedral, and more recently the implosion of Mark Driscoll’s Mars Hill Church, some suggest megachurches are on the wane (Marty 2010; Jethani 2011; C. Carroll 2011; Harris 2012; Hinch 2013). Sometime a saturation point in the religious market may be reached, but those who follow the trends most closely, such as Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, do not offer such conclusions. In fact, the exponential growth in U.S. megachurches seems to be continuing, as 74 percent of large churches (with over 1000 attendees) reported up to 30 percent growth from 2012 to 2014 (Stetzer 2013; Bird 2014). Given the uncertain future of evangelical congregations, prospects may be less optimistic for Canadian megachurches (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015:205), but as of 2015 the evidence seems to show megachurches are not dissipating in Canada.³¹

The debate about megachurches makes a dispassionate investigation important—investigation beyond the drive to assess whether it is “good” or “secularized” religion.³² Ellingson’s (2010) seminal review of megachurch research declares that “the emergence and rapid growth of megachurches in North America and Asia represent one of the most significant changes to

³⁰ Fifteen years later, while the number of megachurches continued to soar, Marty was still writing about “megachurch decline” (Marty 2010). His antipathy is thinly veiled.

³¹ A 2015 survey of large congregations in Canada, led by the Leadership Network’s Warren Bird, shows over a hundred congregations are in the 1,000 to 2,000 attendance range and may soon rise to megachurch status (Warren 2015).

³² I discuss in the next chapter why labeling commercialized religion as inherently secular is a misnomer—religion always takes on forms that resemble some aspect of culture while culture simultaneously takes on certain aspects of religion. That is how religion disseminates, and “traditional” churches are no less complicit in this contextualizing process—they merely take the form of other aspects of culture, such as the nation-state bureaucracy.

Christianity in the past twenty to thirty years” and when it comes to research on megachurches there “is no shortage of work to be done” (2010:247, 263). Significantly, megachurch research offers “an opportunity to extend accounts of how religion is being reshaped or restructured in the 21st century and develop new explanations of religious innovation, change, and power” (2010:264). Ellingson contends that studies need to focus “beyond descriptive research and develop more systematic and robust explanations” that engage debates in the sociology of religion, as well as organizational and cultural sociology. This means, for example, engaging how megachurches affect other congregations and denominations (Ellingson 2007; Eiesland 1997) and, more methodologically, drawing on self-reports from church members and not just key leaders. At present, the literature does not adequately explain “why people attend; why they join, stay, or leave; how they experience the worship, fellowship, or theology of megachurches” (Ellingson 2010:264). In sum, Ellingson calls for detailed data on megachurch attendees to determine “if and how megachurch programs resonate with the interests of audiences” (2010:264). While I would argue that attendance numbers suggest little question of “if,” there is certainly a need for qualitative research on how people come to participate in these large churches.

So far in this section I have established the importance of my case study as an evangelical congregational study and as a fieldwork-based investigation of a multi-site megachurch. TMH is part of the evangelical seeker-sensitive megachurch trend, and bears the marks of such scale and popular culture contextualization that is common to the type. But this study is important for two other, almost opposite, reasons: first, that it is not a megachurch like the majority of megachurches and shows a break in the global pattern; and secondly, for its anti-evangelical and anti-megachurch sentiments, which demonstrate a “strategic religiosity”—a process of religious identity formation that seeks out certain legitimated forms while shunning undesirable—and I would add stigmatized—forms (Marti and Ganiel 2014:60).

The Anabaptist character of TMH addresses the first proposition—that TMH represents a global anomaly as a megachurch. As a member of the Brethren in Christ (BIC) denomination, TMH cultivates a contrasting ethos to many megachurches within North America and to the speculated majority of megachurches outside of North America, which promulgate a charismatic prosperity gospel (Bowler 2013; James 2015).³³ The teachings of TMH follow general Anabaptist values—on

³³ There are no systematic studies on the global prevalence of prosperity gospel megachurches, but some experts estimate that about 80-95 percent of megachurches around the world feature some degree of prosperity gospel culture, with about 35 percent being significantly weighted towards prosperity gospel and the rest being more or less amenable to it, with a small leftover percentage actively resisting it (from correspondence with Scott Thumma and Warren Bird). James (2015) includes prosperity teaching as one of the seminal characteristics of megachurches in the global south. This is in contradistinction to the U.S.A., where approximately only 10-20 percent of American megachurches embrace prosperity gospel themes (Bowler 2013:239). The Meeting House is a global anomaly, fitting in more closely

simplicity, pacifism, voluntaristic membership, and adult baptism.³⁴ This includes a strong aversion to participation in state institutions, especially government jobs and any work in law enforcement, security, or the military. Historically, Anabaptists drew converts from the other churches into their fold because membership was not dependant on birth or national ties, although ethnic and family ties eventually became part of the community fabric, at times even impregnable to potential converts (Weaver 1987). Now, as ethnic and family affinities fade inside their congregations and shadow establishment denominations weaken in Canada, Anabaptists are structurally poised to be a competitive option in the spiritual marketplace once again (Driedger 2000). This key shift in the social context of TMH is in part what allows the church to draw from a well of common meanings with their attendees regarding “church.” A church severed from political establishment has become legitimized—in Weberian terms, its sect-like structure is a cultural advantage. So Cavey’s charismatic authority is buttressed by traditional authority at the same time—the restorationist vision of Anabaptism.

A growing movement of Anabaptist advocates called The Anabaptist Network consists of leaders originally from outside the tradition (like Cavey) who champion the Anabaptist relationship with the state as a model for all Christian denominations to follow (Murray 2010; Shenk 2011). As Christian establishment continues to fade in the West—what some have called the end of Christendom or post-Constantinianism (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989)—these advocates promote a form of “naked” Anabaptism as the natural alternative (“naked” meaning stripped of its cultural/ethnic traditions). The movement simultaneously capitalizes on urban nostalgia for a simpler life (Kraybill 2003; Weaver-Zercher 2013). Promoting themselves as “Mennonites with electric guitars,” The Meeting House employs their Anabaptist tradition to attract busy professionals who long for a deeper sense of stability, community, and connection to the land while sacrificing few of their urban conveniences. As Cavey declared in a sermon, “Plain is the new cool.” In effect, TMH engenders a form of Anabaptism for those not into Anabaptism. As a global megachurch anomaly that is part of a wider ecumenical Anabaptist movement, TMH offers an opportunity to see in detail how this trend is developing among the urban middle-class.

with a minority of the American megachurch portrait, promoting a gospel of downward mobility rather than individual prosperity. Springs Church, a megachurch in Winnipeg, Manitoba, fits the global pattern of Pentecostal prosperity theology more closely (Bowler 2013).

³⁴ Some of the values of Anabaptism such as simplicity, plain living, and community seem at first to contradict the very idea of a megachurch. A megachurch pastor and mentor-friend of Cavey has written a defense of his own Anabaptist megachurch, arguing the small group structure of the megachurch imitates the Anabaptist meeting house (G. Boyd 2013). That he would have to justify his megachurch suggests some recognized tension with his Anabaptism (see also McCoy 2011). This is the sort of tension that The Meeting House enjoys embodying—evidenced by its choice of name.

Finally, this case study offers a window into a particular “strategic religiosity.” TMH intends to shed the appearance and shun some of the practices of right wing evangelicalism in order to embrace a more legitimated form of religiosity—the “spiritual but not religious.”³⁵ Evangelicals have a long history of disdain for formal religion (Hatch 1989) but now there is growing ambivalence not only for religion in general but for evangelicalism in particular.³⁶ The Meeting House’s slogan promising “a church for people not into church” demonstrates a heightened reflexivity (Marti 2015)—not only toward the rules, roles and rituals of religion (as Cavey often says) but also towards public perceptions of evangelicals. Like many Canadian evangelicals (Reimer 2003; Patrick 2011), Cavey distances himself from clean-cut, angry evangelicals who seek to legislate their morality through political means—by his rhetoric, his appearance, and his theology.³⁷ Christian Smith (1998) contends that evangelicalism thrives because of a subcultural identity that both engages and sets boundaries against other traditions and broader society; this case study demonstrates that some evangelicals are engaging and setting up boundaries against their own evangelical culture. In effect, Cavey offers evangelicalism for those not into evangelicalism, and a megachurch for those not into megachurches (for a discussion of TMH’s evangelical and Anabaptist identities, see Appendix E).

This posture towards religion suggests affinity with the Emerging Church Movement, a network that TMH has engaged while rhetorically distancing itself from it.³⁸ The Emerging Church

³⁵ Various called “monism,” “the new spirituality” and the “metaphysical tradition,” this historical stream of North American religion has achieved increased prominence and legitimation since the 1960s (Porterfield 2001; Fuller 2001; Tacey 2003; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Schmidt 2006; Herrick 2006; Chandler 2008; Heelas 2008; Albanese 2008; Mercadante 2014).

³⁶ There is a plethora of books by evangelicals who echo the “spiritual but not religious” rhetoric (Arterburn and Felton 2000; D. Miller 2003; G. Boyd 2004; Palmer 2006; Schmelzer 2008; Young 2008; Farley 2011; Wolsey 2011). As Hatch demonstrates, while evangelicals have a long history of rebellion against ritual and formal religion, Fuller (2001) argues that of late they have been influenced by popular metaphysical spiritualities. The genealogical lines are blurry, as evangelicals will claim origins in Jesus’ anti-Pharisaical approach; but their practice of contextualizing with culture—and just being habituated in a culture where metaphysical religion has a long and at times significant presence—certainly suggests Fuller has a point.

³⁷ Cavey perpetuates and reinforces the stereotype he resists through his constant reference to and differentiation from it. Bird (2009:9) reports that actually only 22 percent of megachurch pastors ever pray for political leaders, although 58 percent identify as Republican.

³⁸ Essentially, the emergent project translates “the way of Jesus” into postmodern forms (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:44), which means epistemologically “deconstructive” (Marti and Ganiel 2014) and post-foundationalist (Middleton and Walsh 1995), politically embracing a post-Christendom model, and ultimately post-evangelical (Tomlinson 2003). In other words, it embraces a more narrative than rationalistic apologetic, sees the church as a subculture rather than as part of the political establishment, and operates as a protest movement to the world of pragmatic Boomer megachurches (Bielo 2011:13). Books by social scientists (Gibbs and Bolger 2005; Bielo 2011; Packard 2012; Labanow 2009; Marti and Ganiel 2014) and dissertations that have studied the movement (Teusner 2010; Chia 2010; Duncan 2011; Steele 2012) follow on the wave of “emerging” networking that began in the late 1990s with key writers following in the millennium, such as Brian McLaren (2001, 2003, 2006), Tony Jones (2008), Dan Kimball (2003, 2007), Spencer Burke (2003, 2007), Doug Pagitt (2004, 2008) and Peter Rollins (2006). McLaren has spoken at TMH and endorsed Cavey’s 2007 book, but like other Anabaptists, Cavey does not seek to identify publicly with it (Claiborne 2011).

is characterized as a movement to deconstruct conservative evangelical forms of church—especially those associated with evangelical megachurches (Bielo 2011; Marti and Ganiel 2014).³⁹ This “post-evangelical” posture puts TMH in a paradoxical position, a space that they seem quite comfortable to occupy. You might say the goal of their vision is to create an incongruity in the mind of its audience—between what visitors anticipate experiencing in church and what they actually encounter when they enter TMH on Sunday. In the fall of 2013, Cavey explained the vision of the church to a small gathering of Anabaptist academics in this manner:

We are looking for a target market or niche of people who have had a negative church experience, or indirectly, what they’ve seen on TV is stock Christian characters who just want money, or they’ve read certain authors that highlight certain [appalling] things in church history. For those who have a negative image of church, we want to create a safe place; for those who are frustrated with religion as a concept, clear away all the rubble. Not everyone will respond, but if they can have a clear vision of Jesus they’ll have that “aha!” moment. So we want to let church get out of the way so they can meet Jesus...

Cavey strategizes a highly reflexive approach to ministry; he makes the assumed prevailing Canadian cultural consciousness his starting point and then constructs a church culture that contradicts its assumptions about church. As I have already quoted, Cavey puts it quite concisely: “We are in the ministry of busting up stereotypes, breaking up the line of expectation.”

In sum, The Meeting House makes a valuable case study because it offers a helpful window into an alloy of three models of congregational life while investigating a new strategic form of religiosity within a Canadian cultural context. First, it plays with the Anabaptist tradition of the “meeting house”—in its name and in its motivation for Home Churches. Secondly, TMH exemplifies the seeker-sensitive megachurch model, derived mostly from church growth resources⁴⁰ and Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek Church.⁴¹ Thirdly, Cavey shapes a public identity that is “spiritual but not religious” but according to the post-evangelical sentiments of the Emerging Church Movement,

³⁹ “Emergents would much rather be part of a megasubversion than a megachurch, for they are more interested in critiquing the status quo than reflecting it” (Snider and Bowen 2010:109).

⁴⁰ The history of the American church growth movement can be discerned from some dissertations (Works 1974; Tucker 1998; Bates 2005; Middleton 2011; Walters 2011), the historical accounts of its leaders such as Donald McGavran and the role of Fuller Theological Seminary (Wagner 1980; Glasser 1986; McIntosh 2005; Stetzer 2008) and from the commentary coming from its critics, which include Lutheran (Scudieri 1996), Baptist (Wise 1995), Reformed (Conn 1977; Newbigin 1995), Pentecostal (McClung 1985), liberationist (Terry 1997), and other quarters (Shenk 1983; Inskeep 1993; Roozen and Hadaway 1993; McIntosh 2004). The church growth movement literature itself is extensive, flowing out of a large industry of publishers, consultants, agencies, and church planting networks, and includes all manner of manuals on everything from marketing to management to measurement. Many denominations, including mainline denominations (Kelley 1972; Hoge 1979) have made some foray into this church growth field.

⁴¹ There are many different ways to label the seeker-sensitive congregational form: “the new Reformation” category (Schaller 1996), “new paradigm churches” (Miller 1999), “faith brands” (Einstein 2007), and the postdenominational designation (Wilford 2012). Each category label emphasizes different characteristics of what is essentially a post-1960s baby boomer-shaped Protestant ecclesiology.

which disdains right wing evangelical beliefs, practices, and styles, echoing some themes from the Jesus People Movement.⁴² The paradox in the church's motto, self-described as "irreligious" in character, harbours a performative contradiction, coming from a Christian group that meets on Sundays for singing, prayer, offerings and a sermon. This further incongruity gives the church an ambivalent, but also clever, playfully ironic identity that appeals to three types of people: the de-churched, who may be attracted to a fresh expression of faith; the unchurched, who have been socialized in a secular society; and the over-churched, who have been burnt-out on religious activity. This vision for the Christian faith, however, attracts attendees mostly because its celebrity pastor, Bruxy Cavey, embodies it in his image, lifestyle and teaching.

In essence, Cavey has engendered a style and vision that resonates with Canadian evangelicalism.⁴³ The irenic, politically ambivalent yet evangelistically-focused character of the church, with its persistent cues distancing it from aggressive American evangelical culture epitomizes Canadian evangelicalism (Reimer 2003; Patrick 2011; Bean 2014). Cavey's virtuosity comes in his ability to make this religious identity blend with a popular culture style—the hippie revolutionary. Cavey deftly offers historical evangelicalism fashioned in a rebellious "spiritual but not religious" narrative and image, orchestrating a dramatic experience that is both ironic and romantic. It suggests an anti-institutional authenticity that inspires those weary or disillusioned with church. In a phrase, his charisma flows from this creative, iconoclastic performance as rogue pastor.

Although the dominant discourse (as I will demonstrate fully in the next chapter) characterizes megachurches as commercial enterprises, I want to demonstrate these large churches are a place of cultural production, offering meaning and belonging through teachings and practices that capture the imagination and commitment of thousands of Canadians (Ammerman 2005; Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Chaves (2004) contends that congregations are more cultural than political bodies, and they focus on worship arts and religious education. In fact, he presents congregations as places where the arts thrive, making my choice of a dramaturgical framework especially apt. In short, TMH is a dramatic web that critiques traditional evangelical forms of religion and inspires a mostly

⁴² Histories of the Jesus People Movement began early with some initial coverage (Plowman 1971; Streiker 1971; Moody 1971; Enroth, 1972; Ortega 1972; Ellwood 1973) followed by a few dissertations (Heinz 1976; Douville, 2011; Young 2011) and continue today in historical studies (Shires 2007; Schafer 2011; Eskridge 2013; Bustraan 2014). Most of these accounts begin with charismatic characters that have a passion to reach out to the hippies and begin by evangelizing youth right on the street and beach. Prominent figures include Ted Wise in the Haigh-Ashbury district of San Francisco, Don Williams and Arthur Blessitt in Hollywood, Jack Sparks at Berkley, Chuck Smith and John Higgins in Costa Mesa, and Linda Meissner in Seattle (Guffin 1999:195-215). Some JPM missions disappeared as quickly as they were started, but specific ministries, such as John Higgin's Shiloh commune in Oregon, spawned Youth Revival Centers across thirty states. Groups such as Jesus People USA and Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel movement also grew and flourished well into the 1980s and beyond. For connections to the emerging church, see Olson (2014).

⁴³ Brian Carwana graciously helped bring this theme to the surface of my writing.

Christian crowd through an alternative aesthetic towards a more legitimate Canadian “post-evangelical” identity.

1.5 Investigative Methods: Fields and Postures

Some say a case study is a method or research strategy (Denzin and Lincoln 2011) while others see it more as an approach or simply a choice of what to study (Stake 1995). Because I employ various research methods, I see the case study as a choice of subject matter. My method more specifically consists of the ways in which I investigate the particular case. Creswell (2007:73) defines case study research as “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system” (which may be one or several individuals, groups, programs, or activities). My megachurch study blurs the distinction between “within-site” and “multi-site” case studies, as I focused on one church spread across 17 regional sites with over 180 Home Churches.⁴⁴

Case studies cannot offer much in terms of summaries of broad social patterns as they draw from a sample size of one. However, they can disprove the generalizations of others by demonstrating a case that does not fit the presumed pattern. Additionally, something of the general situation must rest in the particular case. Durkheim noted the privilege often given to general ideas and remarked:

... it is inadmissible that logical thought should be characterized exclusively by the widest scope of the representations that constitute it. If there is nothing logical about the particular ideas, why would the general ones be any different? The general exists only in the particular; it is the particular, simplified and stripped down. The general, then, cannot have virtues and privileges that the particular does not have (Durkheim 1912/1995:434).⁴⁵

So I hope some of the general situation may be revealed in the particulars of this case study, and I do occasionally venture comment on wider patterns, especially as I compare my findings with other quantitative and qualitative research on megachurches and their charismatic leaders.

While some congregational studies include lengthy historical research (Warner 1988; Thumma 1996; Wellman 1999) and others include a study into the local religious ecology (Eiesland

⁴⁴ I did entertain the idea of doing a comparative study between TMH and Mars Hill Church, in Grandville, Michigan, where Rob Bell was pastor. More cases offer more “generalizability,” but it would also mean going less in-depth in one particular case (Creswell 2006:76). Time proved the wisdom of this decision, as pastor Rob Bell left his post at Mars Hill in 2011, and a fine book on his charismatic leadership was published by James Wellman in 2012, offering a comparative analysis for my own study.

⁴⁵ This quote arises out of a discussion on the epistemology of Durkheim in Stewart (2012:26), a qualitative study of three Pentecostal congregations. Stewart summarizes Durkheim’s thought as a median position between the empiricism of Hume and the innate categories of Kant: that is to say, our concepts are social constructed—from our everyday experience, but according to categories that are universally accessible to humans. Thus it is possible to study the particular as Durkheim did (aboriginal religion in Australia) and distil some of the universal elements of religion in general.

1999), this study depends on a recent sociological snapshot in order to examine the congregation's relationship with its pastor. The church began in 1986, has had only two successive primary pastors since that time, and while I trace some of this history, as well as the biography of Bruxy Cavey, my focus is mostly on the current culture of the church.

One of my goals was to learn the craft of fieldwork study, in which one immerses oneself in a subculture in order to understand it from the inside out (Creswell 2007). I wanted to investigate the lived religion of The Meeting House—not just its official ideology. It has been said that the goal of such study is “not to crack a cultural code, much less to expose the internal contradictions present in any social group so that its members might try to resolve them. Rather, it is to bring to light the myriad ideas and actions, the relationships and rituals, that together give communities their structure” (Haynes 2013). In this case study, however, it would have been difficult to avoid the performative contradiction that shapes the central identity of the congregation: it is “a church for people not into church.” Nevertheless, I do not emphasize the contradiction in order to prove the church to be incoherent or a sham or to call it to logical consistency, but precisely to uncover the lived “paradoxical” dynamics of its rhetoric and practice as well as structure and action.

Some have said that case studies like this can be “critical”—a means of social activism or advocacy, of giving a voice to the marginalized and advocating for their cause (Creswell 2007:70; Scharen and Vigen 2011). Attendees at The Meeting House are not marginal in terms of class, race, or education, but I do argue in chapter 3 that they are a stigmatized group in Canada—as conservative evangelicals. I did not choose this research project to advocate for them. Neither did I seek to critique them as a bourgeois group mainly perpetuating larger systems of social inequality. I wanted to understand (Weber's *verstehen*) what drew so many people to the church and so observe the performance of their religion—sympathetically but not simply in their own terms. I sought to create a cultural portrait of The Meeting House through a “literary, almost storytelling approach” that characterizes some of the best qualitative research (Creswell 2007:72). I can identify with the “hermeneutic” approach, which requires a “sympathetic appreciation of other's realities” in order to find what meanings its patrons find compelling within it (Spickard 2007:127). This does not negate explanatory approaches or other critical perspectives; however, it does scrutinize dismissive labels that would hardly be recognizable to the persons being studied.

My method consists of six basic fields, similar to other megachurch studies (O'Neill 2010:xvii-xxii). First of all, I was an participant observer at many of their larger events for about two years. I attended over 38 Sunday services, often at Oakville headquarters but also visiting most of the 17 regional sites for at least one Sunday morning. Other events I attended included two all-site rallies

at a large sports arena, New Year's Eve dance parties, baptism events, recreational events, various external speaking events for Cavey, and general membership meetings.

A second, more intimate field of research was their small groups, internally known as Home Churches. I visited five different groups associated with three different MH sites for eleven weeks each—for a total of 68 group meetings. The general venue was a review of Cavey's Sunday teaching followed by snacks and then a time of prayer. My Home Church visits also included various other events: I worked alongside church members at their volunteer activities, exchanged presents at Christmas, joined in football, soccer, and bowling activities, and attended games nights, a pool party, and a progressive dinner.

My third field of research consisted of formal interviews with over 82 people using an open-ended interview style guided by some standard questions (See Appendix A and B). Most interviewees were attendees or staff, and represented ten different sites but over-represented the Oakville, West Hamilton, Kitchener and Waterloo sites. Many interview contacts emerged from my Home Church visits, although there were numerous interviews I obtained through snowball sampling. For example, I wanted to talk to someone who was explicitly converted to the Christian faith through TMH, and I asked around for referrals. To get a wider perspective I interviewed two pastors from neighbouring churches, six ex-MH attendees (also obtained by referral), and one former BIC pastor now Member of Parliament for Kitchener-Conestoga (Harold Albrecht). Ten interviews were done with couples who attended TMH together, but I interviewed no families or focus groups. I conducted dozens of casual interviews as well, which are included in my field notes but not tabulated as are my formal interviews.

There were 27 female and 55 male interview subjects in my sample, a ratio of 1:2, although according to 2011 statistics gathered by the church the proportions of attendees are 56 percent female and 46 percent male (including children).⁴⁶ I had at least three interviews with each of the top

⁴⁶ The disproportion in my sampling reflects staff gender imbalances: 17 of my 21 staff interviewees were male. In 2013 there were 10 times as many male pastors as female pastors, if you exclude the associate pastors, which includes more females than males. Pastoral designation is given to those who manage one of the regional sites and to numerous administrative and executive staff according to their level of responsibility (it requires taking a summer course on Brethren in Christ doctrine and polity). So my desire to get a read on the different sites from the regional pastors meant seven interviews with male leaders (there were no female lead pastors at the time of my interviews). All but one of my executive leader interviewees were male as well, reflecting the senior leadership gender ratios. I interviewed many staff because while their interviews sometimes reflected the "promotional" rhetoric of TMH, some staff I would classify as "key informants" and became quite valuable to my work—for data, news, and references (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015:11). Of my interviews with attendees, the gender imbalance is significantly decreased—35 interviewees were male and 25 were female. The remaining discrepancy can be attributed to the effects of my own gender, as I found it much easier to strike up rapport with male attendees. In two of the Home Churches I attended, for example, the group was segregated into gender-specific sub-groups for prayer, so I developed deeper relationships with the male participants. Still, a sample size of 25 female attendees gives me a reasonable representation of that gender.

executive leaders, pastors Bruxy Cavey and Tim Day, as well as multiple interviews with other executive leaders, and two former Overseer chairmen. Other imbalances include the fact that all but two of the total number of formal interviews were with Caucasians, which reflects the constituency of the church but not the demographic context of the Mississauga/Oakville/Brampton area. While the age range of interviewees did not include anyone under 18, my sample generally fits the demographics of the church, in which two-thirds of attendees fit in the 26-55 age range. I have used aliases for attendees' narratives but not for executive staff such as Tim Day and Bruxy Cavey. (Appendix D contains longer profiles of interviewees.)

The interviews, the list of interviewees, plus numerous participant observation notes, were uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative software program that allowed me to code the material and analyze some of the data. I could then print out the coded material, with attached references to context, in order to focus on certain themes, such as Purge Sunday, anti-evangelical remarks, or critiques of Cavey, for example.

A fourth source of data came generously to me from Meeting House staff. They conduct in-house surveys of their attendees every fall and spring, and they made the results of these surveys available to me without conditions attached. The surveys cover basic demographic data such as gender and age, but also frequency of attendance at Sunday services and Home Church, length of time they have been with The Meeting House, and their general religious identity before and since coming to the church (Christian, non-Christian, other religion). These surveys generally had a very high response rate and gave me a good indication of the bigger picture of the constituency. I made suggestions for supplementary questions that were of particular interest to me, but they were not used. I did no surveys of my own beyond the questions asked of my 82 interviewees.

A fifth field of study included textual analysis of various primary data in the form of diverse media, including over 112 sermons, numerous websites and social media texts, Cavey's "bestseller" *The End of Religion* (2007) and Tim Day's *Plot Twist* (2014).⁴⁷ TMH reveals an oral culture, as Cavey and Day do not spend much time writing, and Cavey relies on significant editorial help from specific staff people such as Rick Maranta, who ghost-writes some of Cavey's blogs. The church operates around their video podcasts more than any particular texts, creeds, or polity documents. In fact, most attendees I interviewed had not read Cavey's book. In this sense, it is more a church of the new media than a church of the book; it is a community lived in rental spaces and on-line, connected by regional site Facebook pages and a podcast archive of almost fifteen years of sermons. The "teaching archive"

⁴⁷ There is one academic article co-written with Cavey on "the house church model" (Cavey and Carrington-Phillips 2012).

or what I call their electronic oral tradition was a primary source for understanding their theology, and especially helpful was the search engine they included when they developed a new website in 2012, which allowed me to search for teaching topics and key words through about 15 years of teaching by Cavey.

Finally, I collected some secondary material on The Meeting House as a sixth field of study—from newspapers, blogs, and one Masters thesis (Masters 2007). This is not a large volume of commentary, as TMH operates under the radar of many mainstream journalists' vision in Ontario. There are copious amounts of journalistic material on megachurches and their leaders in North America and beyond, and this secondary material forms much of my contextual understanding of TMH and the general discourse that surrounds it—especially my discussion on succession and the future of TMH in chapter 6.

I began listening to Bruxy Cavey's teaching podcasts in February 2010, and my first interviews took place in October of that year, when I began attending a Home Church at the same time. I personally asked Senior Pastor Tim Day for permission to study the church and interview attendees. I then sought the consent of site pastors who were responsible for the Home Churches in which I was a participant observer. Then I connected with the Home Church leaders and introduced myself, explaining the channels I had already gone through. My participant observation intensified in June 2011 as I began regularly attending the Sunday services and other special events, including new member classes and new regional site promotion evenings. This tapered off in June 2012 as I began to analyze my data and write my thesis but continued with sporadic attendance into the summer of 2014.

I enjoyed relatively free reign in the social network of The Meeting House. Senior Pastor Tim Day was always gracious and helpful, as was Cavey when I was able to get an audience. The staff varied in terms of their enthusiasm for my project, some becoming key informants and a few others reticent, perhaps protective of their church and workplace, making email connections and interviews difficult. As for attendees, except for a Canadian Broadcasting Company journalist, two gay members and the odd logistical impasse, my requests for interviews were always accommodated. The CBC journalist was quite busy with work and family and I assume did not want any extra attention. While I did interview two gay attendees, there were two others who I knew only through other contacts and who did not welcome the inquiry into their personal and religious life.

Many social scientists today identify themselves with regards to their location on an insider-outsider spectrum. Raymond L. Gold wrote of four potential roles for the qualitative researcher: the complete participant, the participant-as-observer, the observer-as-participant, and the complete observer (Gold 1958:217-223; Stewart 2012). While I would suggest that the two poles of the

spectrum would be difficult to inhabit in any pure way, my research falls quite directly in the camp of observer-as-participant. Unlike others who studied a church in which they were members or even associate leaders (Thumma 1996; Wellman 1999; Poloma 2003; Marti 2005; Stewart 2012) I began my research with a church I had never set foot in before choosing it as an object of study.

I had a brief encounter with Cavey many years ago. While I never attended any Sunday services in which he was preaching, I interviewed him in 1992 for an undergraduate sociology paper on the vocation of pastors (a cassette-taped recording I unfortunately no longer have). He was pastor at Heritage Fellowship Baptist church at the time, a few years before his divorce and his ministerial migration to the Brethren in Christ. Although I have a Master of Divinity degree from a Baptist seminary (McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton is affiliated with the Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec), I do not identify as Baptist. Nor have I ever been formally connected to an Anabaptist church or Anabaptist para-church body. I was raised in a branch of the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition and continue to participate in a local Reformed congregation with my family, a tradition with particularly “deep differences” with Anabaptism (Bolt 1984:131). Cavey’s feelings for my particular tradition range from gracious to pugnacious, and during my fieldwork of The Meeting House he actually presented an entire teaching series (seven Sundays) that rigorously critiqued Calvinist soteriology (specifically, the five points of Calvinism). So while I am an insider on the basis of my general Christian identity, I am an outsider on the basis of my affiliation with a rival Christian tradition and as a religious studies graduate student at a public university.

Research Posture

Fieldwork is prone to challenge the conventional wisdom, bring nuance to neat theory, and allow for contradictions and partial accounts because it examines religion in its messy and diverse particularity (Becker and Eiesland 1997:19). One goal of this project was to introduce an evangelical megachurch without resorting to the McDonaldization epithets, and more specifically, investigate a megachurch congregation that deliberately differentiates itself from the rigid caricature of the militant, patriarchal, anti-intellectual, right-wing Moral Majority evangelical megachurch, what some have called “the 800 pound gorilla in the voting booth” (Einstein 2007:190; Teel 2008).

Scholars press for a conscientious approach to research on evangelicals, as they have been subject to academic bias that characterizes them as aberrant or duped subjects (Harding 1991; Bramadat 2000; Bielo 2009). As mentioned earlier, megachurch pastors similarly battle the cynical stereotype of Elmer Gantry, and popular discourse often portrays them as powerful demagogues doomed to scandal and career collapse. I would not feign objectivity, but I did guard myself against

the dismissive attitude towards megachurches and their pastors, as well as the air of moral superiority that surrounds the quick epithets of “McChurch.” I also noticed a mixture of resentment and envy lacing some conversations I had with pastors about my research subject. Others sought a more instrumental approach, querying me for tips that would offer some secret formula for numerical success.

Unlike McCarthy-Brown (1991), Salomonsen (2002), and Moon (2004), whose participation in their host communities involved initiation, submersion, and for Moon, constant confrontation, I kept to a “minimal participation” research ethic that aspired to inconspicuousness. When at Home Church, if I was in line to pray, I prayed. If it was my turn to bring snacks, I brought the food. I learned from the very first Home Church I attended that complete silence on my part was experienced as eerie by others, especially if it was accompanied by scribbling notes to myself. A better approach I came to realize was freely offering bits of myself in discussions as to assuage any uncertainties about my character and purpose. Furthermore, as tempting as it was to use the gathered Home Church as opportunity for focus group-like questions, I restrained myself and observed the twists and turns of the discussion as it wandered where it did. Home Church leaders did not permit recording devices in their Home Churches, so I would scribble the odd note and work backwards from memory immediately afterwards in my car.

My attitude fluctuated from being critically distant to a mild enthusiasm for certain events. Like Griffith (2000), who investigated an evangelical women’s group, I strove to be respectful but critical, empathetic but not a convert. There were times when I felt like Harding (2001:58), caught up in the stories people tell, or caught up in the excitement, either when Cavey was especially witty or profound, or when certain congregational milestones were celebrated, such as the 25th anniversary dance party. The emotional energy of this community could be compelling and contagious, which evoked Durkheim’s idea of collective effervescence (Wellman and Corocan 2012; Draper 2014). As one religious studies PhD colleague, who does not identify as Christian but attended TMH for his own research purposes, said to me: “At times I was caught up in the excitement of their mission, and Cavey could really touch my heart.”

There were times I felt duplicitous, voyeuristic, or even ashamed that I was just observing, gathering data, and not genuinely involved in the prayers, testimonies, and intimate sharing of personal struggles. There were also moments I felt severely critical of this church: the highly centralized ecclesiology, its obliviousness to current events and the arts, and Cavey’s contentious caricature of Calvinism—all grated against my own convictions regarding Christian faith and practice. I consciously tried to keep these biases from distorting my observations and kept reminding myself that this was not a theological critique but social science. The boundary between theology and

religious studies, however, can be quite blurred (see for example Cady and Brown 2002; Kunin and Murphy 2003; Ford, Quash, and Soskice 2005; Warriar and Oliver 2008; Scharen and Vigen 2011). I am under no illusions of impartiality, although I hope I have been fair, if not charitable, in my critical characterization of the people and practices I investigated. In sum, I pursued a reflexive form of fieldwork (Goulet 1998), and at points in the study I do integrate my own reactions to the events I witness.

Evangelical research subjects have been known to constantly ask their scholarly investigators about their religious identity (Bramadat 2000; Bielo 2009; Elisha 2011). Meeting Housers (as they call themselves) were only mildly interested in my background and purpose, and usually a brief summary of my affiliations would satisfy the casually curious. Once they discovered I was Christian and taught part-time at a recognized Christian liberal arts university, the conversation often freely moved to other topics. I do not recall anyone trying to convince me to transfer my allegiances to TMH, although a few were interested to hear if I had a critical perspective on Cavey's teaching. Overall, I do believe my own Christian identity helped Meeting Housers relax, trust me, and confide in me with their thoughts, hopes and fears concerning their life and growth in this megachurch.

1.6 Overview of Chapters

Because the charismatic leader is the catalyst of the charismatic relationship (Willner 1984), the majority of my dissertation focuses on the performance of Bruxy Cavey, with consistent notes on the responses from attendees and on the degree of their participation in the dramatic web. There are many aspects of TMH that I do not cover in this dissertation, including its thriving youth ministry and children's programs, its local community work and significant connections with AIDS relief and community development in East Africa. Elisha (2011) already offers a rigorous examination of the social activism of two megachurches in Tennessee, and the world of megachurch youth programs would require special research ethics clearance I did not have. Likewise with the financial operations of the church: I did not have access to the inner workings of its money management, although I did attend annual general membership meetings and asked a few questions of some of the accounting staff.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ On average, Canadian large church budgets are 30% smaller than American large church budgets (Bird 2014). TMH budget hovers around ten million dollars and typically, to name a few budget items from their annual spring reports (2011-2013), 6-8 percent goes to communications, 13-14 percent funds compassion agencies (local and African charities), 11-13 percent pays for children's programs, and 14-22 percent is needed for the main facility in Oakville and movie theatre rentals (the rest is mostly staffing salaries and regional site resources). For the tax year 2013 the average weekly attendance was 4,990 and 3000 tax donation slips were issued (of which 750 or 25 percent were on automatic withdrawal). The total general fund donations came to \$7,398,000, which comes to \$1,483 per

My focus is the charismatic performance of Bruxy Cavey, his team, and their audience. The structure of this dissertation follows an argument for the dynamic interplay of four elements in a charismatization process. Chapter 2 sets up my project by reviewing the literature, demonstrating how the dominant public discourse characterizes the megachurch as “McChurch” and sets it within economic language that views the megachurch leader as a CEO—what I suggest follows Weber’s rationalization thesis except in commercialized terms. I argue that Weber’s theory of charismatic authority offers a complimentary but more telling window into the growth of megachurches, and although the terminology of charisma has been often used, it is poorly understood and employed in equivocal terms. I then delineate some fine distinctions in a definition of charisma, elaborating on an approach couched in dramaturgical rather than economic terms.

The rest of the dissertation investigates the various elements of the dramatic web. The third chapter sets up the scene and introduces the characters of the charismatic performance that is TMH. This means giving an account of the main elements that shape the dramatic web—the socio-cultural context, the receivers or audience, Bruxy Cavey himself, and the intermediaries of his renown.

For now, I offer a brief summary of those elements. The current socio-cultural climate for religion in Canada is marked by declension in the churches and a sharp rise in those who self-identify as religious “nones” or “dones” (Packard and Hope 2015); a parallel culture of de-Christianization marginalizes those who are highly committed to their evangelical faith. Formerly part of the Canadian establishment, this community has been stigmatized since the 1960s. This drop in status is coupled with the disembedded nature of postsuburban living, consumer culture, and new electronic media to create conditions in which a charismatic leader with an “irreligious message” can offer a sense of empowerment.

A second point on the diamond, the receivers in the charismatization process, are the attendees at The Meeting House. I maintain that the line delineating between audience, team and actors can be a fine one, and so I describe concentric circles of attendees at TMH in terms of the depth of their participation and agency. They are a mix of free riders and free agents, and can be seen as *bricoleurs* who use Cavey and TMH as a resource in the construction of a faith pastiche. I also demonstrate how attendees match the profile of white, upwardly mobile urban dwellers. I end with a short reference to the Goffmanian “underlife” of TMH, describing how some individuals “work the system” for their own benefit.

attendee or \$2466 per tax receipt (this does not include the receipts for compassion fund or their growth fund). I was told that yes, there are a number of “large donors” which would skew the data, but I could not obtain the details on such giving. Reimer and Wilkinson (2015:92) have a chapter in their book on evangelical budgets. In summary, they say if you “follow the money” it leads to social welfare programs rather than politics. Given TMH’s Anabaptist commitments, this is certainly the case.

Cavey is both a creator of the dramatic web and its star performer. The second half of the chapter contains a short biography of Cavey that emphasizes his history as a performer and his penchant for irony, as well as an elaboration on the various media by which his charisma is extended. Cavey is not alone as a creator, however, as he has an inner circle that help generate and disseminate the main narratives of the dramatic web. The media they employ are not just neutral tools of promotion but a series of devices that give the impression that Cavey has multiple selves (hippie, DJ, intellectual, Anabaptist, revolutionary, comedian, Zombie fan, father), and people can choose the Cavey that suits them while also critiquing the Cavey that they disdain.

The next three chapters examine the dramatic web itself, showing how the various points of charismatic diamond interrelate. These chapters respectively examine the dramaturgical themes of performance, narrative, and regions. Chapter 4 shows the very deliberate way performances at TMH address the stigmatization of evangelicals in North America, highlighting a ritual known as “Purge Sunday.” Chapter 5 uncovers the narratives of the dramatic web, which captivate attendees with their irreligious promise of a “pure relationship” with others and with God. Finally, every performance must have an end, and chapter 6 will address the question of what happens when the performance is threatened—first by an examination of discrepancy in Cavey’s front stage and backstage self-presentation, and then by his inevitable exit from the stage someday. If people no longer recognize Cavey as extraordinary—or he leaves and his legacy withers—the charismatic aura of the church will wane. But if people continue to recognize his legacy as inspiring and empowering after he leaves or dies, his charismatic authority can be routinized even beyond his life, and the show goes on.

The charismatic authority carried by TMH in Bruxy Cavey is precarious, not only because the life of its main character is vulnerable. The charisma that draws so many to the church is unstable because it rests on so many factors—the socio-cultural context, the recognition of attendees who reproduce the charisma through word of mouth and their participation in the on-going “irreligious” performance, and the creativity and persistence of intermediaries who structure Sunday services and promote Cavey’s vision through a vast web of electronic media. For some people such insecurity can be troubling; but it gives the church motivation to perform, and it offers an intensity of emotion and energy not unlike that of actors on a stage.

Chapter 2

Literature Review: Bureaucratic and Charismatic Authority in the Theatre of the Megachurch

“Charisma... by now is not only the name of a perfume and the title of a pop tune, the name of a laundry, and a shirt brand, but also widely applied to virtually every situation in which the popularity of a political or any public personality is involved.”

- Bensman and Givant (1975:570)

“...that which is accepted at the moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a celebration... The world, in truth, is a wedding.”

- Erving Goffman (1959:35)

Although writers who examine megachurches today may not read Max Weber, the writing on megachurch leadership falls into one of two of Weber’s three ideal types of authority (Weber 1968:46): observers either view megachurches as evidence of the extension of rationalized bureaucratic authority—that is, in contemporary terms, commercialized religion developed by an ambitious CEO pastor—or they characterize megachurches as built upon the power of charismatic authority, centering on the extraordinary message and mission of a spellbinding personality. Weber’s third type of authority, traditional authority, observers typically assume to be the nemesis of megachurch structures, but this is not necessarily the case with many megachurches, TMH included. All three types of authority in Weberian thought have some bearing on the megachurch phenomenon; in this chapter, however, I weigh the literature in light of the two ideal types that characterize the discourse, favouring closer attention to charismatic authority.

This chapter begins with an investigation of the spiritual marketplace and the dominant discourse that either enthusiastically or critically views the megachurch through the lens of economic culture—the modern equivalent of Weber’s rationalizing bureaucratic authority (Ritzer 2010). While this discourse has explanatory value and critical utility in the context of globalization, it has either become a dismissive cliché or tinged with assumptions about secularization. In effect, it puts too much weight on the characterization of a megachurch pastor as a shrewd entrepreneur or ambitious CEO figure who builds and manages a large corporation. I shift the analysis towards studies of the megachurch pastor as a charismatic authority—that is to say, less as a calculating organizational

presence and more as an individual recognized as an extraordinary personality with an extraordinary mission in a time of cultural uncertainty.⁴⁹ Charismatic leaders are not just good managers who know how to get a task done; they motivate people to participate far beyond the call of duty and inspire them for a revolutionary social movement. To be sure, charisma is an ideal type and routinizes as soon as it is manifest—rational-legal authority and charisma almost always co-exist (Shils 1965; Eisenstadt 1968). However, not enough detailed, qualitative research has been done to explain the origins of charisma or to investigate the mechanisms by which it originates and expands in megachurches. This is part of my project of shifting the language of megachurch study from economics to culture.

Literature that does discuss the charisma of megachurch pastors often assumes the terminology of charisma without elaborating on its development and meaning. I investigate charisma as understood in three analytically distinct but empirically overlapping ways: through St. Paul, Max Weber, and Daniel Boorstin. I argue these three notions of charisma—the spiritual, the situational, and the contrived—need to be analytically distinguished, as they are so often blurred in the literature and in popular use. Then I propose to study megachurch charismatic authority by including aspects of all three meanings but drawing primarily from the social constructionist tradition in line with Weber—and positing what I call the “dramatic web” of the charismatic community. I use the perspective of performance studies and its theatre metaphor rather than economic terminology, relying primarily on the writings of Erving Goffman. This performance approach draws attention away from religion as a calculated, rational exchange and towards religion as an affective, even playful theatrical experience that manages one’s subjective and social identity, provides a guiding narrative for life, and simultaneously raises some theatrical performance anxieties—matters discussed in chapters 4, 5, and 6. The chapter concludes with a dramaturgically-based social constructivist definition of charisma.

2.1 The Dominant Discourse of the Spiritual Marketplace

Undeniably, the dominant discourse today in both popular and academic writing on congregations and especially megachurches focuses unequivocally on the spiritual marketplace—that is, the open market on religion formed since the 1960s when the established church’s cultural hegemony was significantly weakened by baby boomer quests for spirituality, waves of new immigrants from other

⁴⁹ George Packer’s (2008) contrasting portraits of Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama offers a good illustration, respectively speaking, of the difference between executive and charismatic images of leadership.

religious traditions, and competitive upstart evangelical groups. While Weber feared the rationalization of cultural life by bureaucratic forms, rationalization in religious institutions became more deeply shaped by this competitive spiritual marketplace and its consumer-focused culture (Berger 1967; Wuthnow 1998; Roof 2001; Einstein 2007; Lee and Sinitiere 2009; Slagle 2011).

The original question for this study of TMH was “Why do such crowds attend here, given the lack of cultural reinforcement for church attendance?” Those operating within a marketplace framework generally answer that megachurch leaders are shrewd entrepreneurs who create and market an experience that resonates with broader commercial culture. There are five currents of contemporary literature which employ such economic language for their examination of the current situation for Christian congregations—many directly investigating the megachurch and evangelical celebrity pastors as their prime examples.

The first stream of such literature directly links megachurches to the image and logic of the commercial enterprise, often pejoratively labelled as “McChurch.” The link between commercial culture and Weber’s notion of rationalization was made explicit in George Ritzer’s *The McDonaldization of Society* (1982/2010). He argues that the contemporary fast food restaurant, epitomized by McDonalds, functions as an apt analogy for modern rationalized behaviour as it cultivates four specific values: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These values engender processes that allow for mass production and distribution, but they simultaneously depersonalize human interaction, becoming irrational arrangements: the products are of lower quality, the work less satisfying, and the culture less creative. When applied to the megachurch—a church defined by growth and scale—these large corporate religious structures become evidence of Weber’s worst fears for human civilization.

Drane (2009:198) directly applies Ritzer’s theory to the modern church, maintaining that the “four marks of McDonaldization [are] present in the structures and attitudes of most churches” but are epitomized in megachurches. The McDonald analogy is echoed by other writers, but other large culturally hegemonic companies have similarly served as analogies of the megachurch including the retail giants Home Depot (Cimino 1999) and Walmart (Wollschleger and Porter 2011; McGee 2012), as well as the family theme park Disneyland (Aycock 2003; Twitchell 2004, 2007; Crowe, McWilliams, and Beienburg 2010). These studies emphasize megachurches as the evangelical equivalent of large corporations, drawing attention to such things as scale, merchandizing, competition, branding, and entertainment.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The various commercial images highlight different sociological features of megachurches. I would argue there are distinct advantages to the Disneyland metaphor over the other options with regards to megachurch research, as

A second overlapping stream employs similar economic language while suggesting sympathies with critical theory: these scholars deplore what they perceive as the crass commercialization of religious institutions at the expense of human flourishing (Ellingson 2007; Maddox 2012, 2013). They insist that competitive markets fragment, isolate, and break down the social fabric of community life and reinforce structural inequalities. Tradition forms communities of memory that provide people with an identity and a sense of solidarity, says Ellingson, but megachurches, with their superficially attractive evangelical resources, are “colonizing mainline Protestantism,” reducing congregations to communities of shared interest (2007:178).

Critical theorist Maddox (2012, 2013) intensifies Ellingson’s critique by arguing that many megachurches are better described as “growth churches” because of their “relentless emphasis on growth” (2012:148) and their “theology of guilt-free—indeed, obligatory—consumption” which mirrors and reinforces the structures of late capitalism (2013:108). “They are the corporations that sell the religion of corporations,” she declares, as “they reproduce, naturalize, enlarge, enchant and, to some degree, civilize [capitalism]” (2013:108). Maddox collapses the diversity of megachurches across the globe into “capitalism’s cathedrals” because she narrows the definition of megachurch to those that espouse a prosperity theology (based on her research of the Hillsong megachurch in Australia). As shown in the previous chapter, this does represent the majority of megachurches outside North America. Nevertheless, such critical approaches reduce megachurch religiosity to an alienated cultural reflection and extension of neoliberal economics, which while highlighting isomorphic tendencies with capitalism overlooks other cultural aspects of the megachurch, some of which resist such alienating social forces.

These critiques find sympathetic company with theological critiques of the commercialized church—a third stream of economically-framed church literature. These Christian writers directly critique the megachurch for its preoccupation with method, metrics, marketing, therapeutic faith, and, in some instances, a prosperity theology (Guinness 1993; Packer et al. 1997; Wells 2005; Tucker 2006; Horton 2008; White and Yeats 2009; MacArthur 2010). Others direct their analysis towards church marketing more generally, toward consumer culture in the church, or seeker-sensitive orientations that lacks a depth of commitment (Webster 1992; Shelley and Shelley 1992; Dawn 1995; Kenneson and Street 1997; Cimino and Lattin 1998; Gilley 2002; Middelmann 2004; Wells 2008; MacDonald 2010). “The church isn’t a business,” says MacDonald, and it “needs to serve the higher purpose of *transforming* what its ‘customers’ want” (2010:xiii italics in original). Some of this literature contains prophetic critiques of the crass efforts of manipulation through marketing and the

Disneyland suggests more attention to image, narratives, performances, and technologies of late modern cultural life (Lyon 2000; Bryman 2004).

idolizing of matters of scale, but little if any of the writing contains qualitative research. Some of the writing simply reflects a common false dichotomy which pits the supposed essential holiness of prayer, clergy, scripture, ancient traditions, and churches against the assumed mundane, or even profane, character of markets, advertising, celebrities, brands, entertainment and the shopping mall, its symbolic centre. This presumed dualism suggests that religion ought to transcend cultural life—that it is too precious or pure to be sullied by the work-a-day world of everyday consumer life. What is academically assumed in religious economy theory and enthusiastically championed in church marketing literature is decried by critical theorists, McDonaldization critics, and theological writers as evidence of secularization.

A fourth stream takes the opposite tack, exemplified by writers and consultants eager to promote this new technology of church marketing and growth—often assuming an insider Christian perspective (Barna 1988; Barna 1992; Reising 2006; Cooke 2008; Meyer 2009; Hutchins and Stielstra 2009; Dixit 2010). “A way to best describe the Christian faith in the West is as a brand,” writes Dixit (2010:10), arguing that church branding is a form of cultural contextualization. “God uses marketing to build his church,” argues Barna (1992:12), and even Jesus’ ministry becomes an example of savvy promotional practises (Reising 2006:25). In this context, megachurches become the exemplars of successfully marketed and strategically organized Christian entrepreneurialism. While more instrumental and opportunistic in focus, these books build on the insights of branding gurus, popularizing commercial strategies for congregational growth with little sense of how the language and techniques of the market re-shape religious groups and their practises.

A final and prominent stream of literature in this vein reflects a similar endorsement of market economies. It has been called the “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion (Warner 1997) and has close ties to religious economy and rational choice theories (Stark and Finke 2000). Their distinctive language of churches as “firms” or “faith brands” that sell religion as a “product” to impressionable “consumers” has become its own tradition with its own terminology (Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000; Twitchell 2007; Einstein 2007; Stark 2008; S. Lee and Sinitiere 2009). They assume that growing churches such as megachurches are “winners” on the religious market because they are savvy cultural leaders that know how to address the religious needs of modern North Americans. While at times bordering on tautology (successful churches are those that appeal to the largest share of the market), this approach offers explanations on a macro-scale that have ignited fierce debates and expanded significant research programs (Young 1997; Bruce 2000, 2002; Jelen 2003; Imber 2007; Foltz 2007; L. Clark 2007; Ekelund, Hébert, and Tollison 2008; Kitiarsa 2008; Janes 2008; Witham 2010; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Usunier and Stolz 2014).

The volume of this spiritual marketplace literature suggests a dominant discourse in academic, journalistic, and Christian literature. While the first three streams assume some version of secularization theory, the last two suggest other possibilities. While religious economy perspectives, for example, imply a view of human nature that is too weighted towards a calculating rationality, their view of a competitive spiritual marketplace allows for views of modern culture that include both secularizing and sacralising trends (Stark 1999). In other words, they challenge the inevitabilities of the older notions of secularization theory (Bruce 2002). A spiritual marketplace need not assume totalizing secularization patterns.

This notion of institutional secularization is a significant assumption for megachurch study that requires further comment. Pattana Kitiarsa explains that to commercialize something means to take it out of its given context and put it into the context of a market, which re-contextualizes the entity as a commodity. Commodities are, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ordinary or commonplace. Religion, on the other hand, suggests something special, set apart, and this transformation “has brought many religious traditions into trouble” (2010:565). Yet she goes on to say that religious commodification and the mixing of money and religion are perennial, and the growing “worldliness” of religion has become only more evident in the last two hundred years due to advances in electronic media. This commercializing of faith traditions, she insists, has not secularized as much as *proliferated* religiosity across the globe. Megachurches are one example of such “worldliness,” especially in the globally prevalent form of prosperity theology (Bowler 2013).

Kathryn Lofton similarly writes: “The secular is not an absence of religion; rather, the secular is religion’s kaleidoscopic buffet” (Lofton 2011:209). She resists approaches that speak of popular culture *in, as* or *in dialogue* with religion because they pit religion against culture. “If only we didn’t imagine culture and religion as neatly divided, we may be less surprised by their ceaseless commingling” (2011:10). While careful not to annihilate traditional understandings of the “the religions,” Lofton contends that “to force a division between [religious and consumer culture] is to compel a false distillation from a quagmire of commingling processes... we demonstrate just how enfolded we’ve become in the supposition that we are, somehow, without [religion]; that we are, somehow, apart from it; that we can, somehow, separate ourselves from it” (2011:12).

It is the working assumption of this thesis that “religion” is a multi-layered phenomenon and any boundaries between it and broader culture are blurred at best. That is to say that not all religion is good, decent, and hermetically-sealed away from the hustle and bustle of the street or plaza (Cowan 2008:8) and neither is all religion bad, repugnant and poisonous (Hitchens 2009). Religious activity itself can be “profane” (to use a classical religious studies term) or even playful (Berger 1997; Drooger 2011), but more often than not, it simply integrates with the everyday mundane. In fact, as

historian R. Laurence Moore has said, “Either religion keeps up with other cultural aspects of national life, including the commercial forms, or it has no importance” (Moore 1995:65). This means challenging the inevitable equation of religious competition, commercialization, and entertainment with secularization—a refusal championed in the “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion (Warner 2005). To reiterate, commercializing religion—including the sacralization of popular culture and celebrities—may be its primary means of global proliferation today (Kitiarsa 2010).⁵¹ While some global megachurches may exemplify this commercialization of religion, it is by no means isolated to megachurches: the language of consumer preferences and markets has even permeated Eastern Orthodox churches in North America (Slagle 2011).

2.2 Megachurch Pastor as CEO

The cultural context of a spiritual marketplace forms the backdrop for any discussion of the megachurch, and it determines much of the dominant discourse on megachurches. In my evaluation, this discourse demonstrates the transposition of Weber’s rational-legal authority type into the context of corporate capitalism, and the corresponding image of the pastor becomes the calculating, efficient, controlling CEO (Griffin 2010).⁵² Put differently, if the dominant metaphor for understanding the megachurch is a big box store, the corresponding comparison for the pastor would be an ambitious executive leader and entrepreneur. In what follows I investigate studies of megachurch pastors that proceed along the lines of this leadership model.

This model has become a stereotype—assuming megachurch pastors primarily to be ambitious organizational managers and empire builders. A *New York Times* article entitled “The Minister as Marketer” reported that many, if not most, megachurches were led by “extraordinarily talented pastor-entrepreneurs.” The journalist quotes a professor who declares: “These are men who, if they had gone into business, would have been C.E.O.’s. If they had gone into politics, they would have been senators” (Niebuhr 1995). According to this popular type, megachurch pastors are clever promoters, power brokers, and savvy negotiators for their institutional goals.

One indication of a stereotype is its facility to satire. In a spoof of megachurch pastoral vision, William Willimon’s novel *Incorporation* (2012) has a successful megachurch pastor at Hope Church

⁵¹ This suggests a broader academic program to which I am sympathetic, the “post-secular” (Habermas 2005; Habermas 2010; Knauss and Ornella 2007; B. S. Turner 2010; Nynas, Lassander, and Utriainen 2012; Gorski et al. 2012; Casanova 2012; Beaumont and Baker 2011).

⁵² Even Jesus has been transformed into the image of a CEO, as Jones (1996) characterizes him as a business model who built a disorganized staff of twelve into a global enterprise. This is not new: see also *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925) by Bruce Barton.

counsel two thousand pastors at a church conference: “Once, it was enough for a pastor to counsel the troubled and preach on Sunday. That day is as dead as John Wesley. Richard Niebuhr’s vision of the ‘pastoral director’⁵³ has finally been realized. Here at Hope, results—results—is our religion. We baptize what American business management has learned and claim these insights as God-given means of grace for the church today!” (2012:25). With a mantra of “leadership, management, entrepreneurship” and most of all “excellence,” the megachurch pastor inspires both hope and envy among his peers.

The CEO and entrepreneur images are common in theological critiques of megachurches (Guinness 1993:53; White and Yeats 2009:77) but also in the scholarly literature. In their introduction to their American megachurch database, Thumma and Travis (2007:67) lean in this direction, stating that the size and complexity of megachurch organizations, coupled with the social distance between pastor and members, make the pastor-as-CEO analogy an apt one. Similarly, James (2015:10) maintains a CEO pastor with “loose accountability structure” forms one of the nine characteristics of megachurches in the global south.

Sargeant’s (2000) book on seeker churches presses the comparison more firmly, emphasizing how megachurch pastors seek training in business techniques from management gurus such as Peter Drucker in order to further streamline the effectiveness of their large operations. He describes how megachurches often hire people with more business experience than seminary training, whose role is less pastor than director, more focused on technique than care for members (2000:126). His exemplar is Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, and he begins his book with the sign posted on pastor Bill Hybel’s office door: “What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?” Sargeant’s aim is to show how seeker churches, modeled after Willow Creek, have shifted interest from theology to methodology, pursuing the promise of secular organizational methods rather than traditional forms. He argues that rationalized, utilitarian approaches based on a managerial model that emphasizes effectiveness and results eclipses the deeper traditional notions of moral order, leaving the seeker church driven by the “ideology of the shopping mall”—a form of internal secularization (2000:131, 156).

Richard Kyle similarly uses the CEO metaphor, stating that megachurch pastors direct the operations of their church like a large business corporation (2006:221-227). He argues that the megachurch pastor relies more on “managerial expertise” than pastoral and teaching gifts, exchanging prophetic sermons for entertaining spectacles. While the megachurch CEO has negligible

⁵³ Niebuhr coined this term in his 1956 book *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*. The term is not central to the book and equates the pastoral director role with the historical role of a bishop or overseer.

accountability, the church itself displays a clear chain of command descending down from his or her post. Echoing Sargeant, Kyle says many megachurch staff lack credentials from outside their congregation and their training consists mostly of “practical management skills.” Accountability to wider ecclesial bodies such as denominational networks are minimized, as they are “primarily accountable to the market.” That is, people vote with their feet and a megachurch’s fate rests on whether the people leave or keep coming for more (2006:228). The megachurch has become one more piece of evidence for Kyle of a “Christianized counterfeit culture” that is more American than it is Christian (2006:320; see also Lee 2005).

Not all assessments of megachurch pastors take a critical stance. While the CEO moniker emphasizes management themes, the neologism “pastorpreneurs” captures the innovative and “very market savvy class of speculators” who lead the megachurches of America and whose calculating rationality leads them to success (Twitchell 2007:3). John Jackson is a university president, church growth ministry director, and a former megachurch pastor and has written the pragmatically-oriented book that demonstrates Twitchell’s type. *Pastorpreneur: Creative Ideas for Birthing Spiritual Life in Your Community* (2011) defines *pastorpreneur* as “a pastoral innovator, a creative dreamer willing to take great risks in church ministry with the hope of great gain for Christ and his kingdom... he or she assesses goals, opportunities, and risks very carefully but willingly attempts great things for God” (2011:2). “Business as usual” will not suffice for Jackson, who offers a formulaic, technique approach: five key strategies for growth to see “God-sized dreams become reality.” This book enthusiastically combines large-scale proselytizing ambitions with mainstream business terminology and calculated growth strategies. While Jackson never uses the word “charisma” or “charismatic,” there are certainly in this book elements of the creative visionary leader meshed with his primary orientation, the business model and its instrumental, pragmatic motivation and approach.

The comparison with commercial culture receives more rigorous investigation in Lee and Sinitiere’s (2009) examination of numerous megachurch personalities they call “holy mavericks.”⁵⁴ The authors argue from a religious economy perspective that competition in a spiritual marketplace sparks vitality and innovation, which leads to expansion and further renown. Religious change comes more specifically “through innovators who bridge or collapse the distance between religion and culture by offering a more relevant and appealing message than their institutional counterparts” (2009:18). While the bureaucratically bulky mainline Protestant churches become complacent in their cultural dominance and lag behind cultural shifts, the more responsive and agile evangelicals

⁵⁴ Lee and Sinitiere use the word “charisma” once in passing (2009:18). Their understanding of “maverick” is defined by competitiveness in branding, not in Weberian heroism.

energetically pursue adaptation with technology and taste to garner a larger portion of the religious market. An intuitive, pragmatic cultural shrewdness characterizes these megachurch leaders and gives them power and prominence on the American landscape.

This religious economy perspective has some explanatory value in its macro analysis, but when it comes to particular megachurch leaders, it follows hindsight logic, asserting that those who successfully capture media attention and garner large numbers of followers are the competitive and creative stars. Yet there are evangelical pastors who are mavericks but flounder in incompetence or failure. As a macro-view, this book lends itself to explanations of broad patterns, but it remains dependant on the analysis of texts about the celebrities and neglects an in-depth qualitative examination of the origins and meaning of charismatic leadership—although like Jackson, their description of a “holy maverick” suggests an unarticulated overlap with the meaning of charisma as well.

This comparison of megachurch leaders to business executives or entrepreneurs highlights the hierarchical structure of the megachurch and the singular power concentrated in a megachurch leader. This emphasis on administrative or executive authority, however, is problematic for a number of reasons. For example, many megachurches such as The Meeting House have a central pastoral figure who does not oversee the daily operations of the church or manage its employees or larger growth campaigns (Hong 2000; Thumma and Travis 2007). Team leadership is becoming more of a trend, and thus in The Meeting House, for example, the role of CEO (Senior Pastor) and Teaching Pastor are distinct, and the iconic leader is the Teaching Pastor, not the CEO. Similarly, boards play some role in the governing of megachurches, and marketing teams often take care of all the marketing and communications. In short, people do not attend a megachurch because it has a pastor who acts like a CEO or institutional entrepreneur.⁵⁵

Investigating the rationalization of megachurch life, in fact, demonstrates how discipline regimes are necessary to expand a pastor’s charismatic appeal to a wider public (Weber 1968:29). For example, the fact that there may be two or three services on Sunday morning requires a highly efficient process for parking, and individuals are needed to work the parking lot to ensure people move in and out fast enough so that the multiple services can run on time. Services are usually timed down to the minute or even second, and this calculated precision in terms of timing allows for more

⁵⁵ Team membership is a trend, and comprehensive micromanagement is difficult in such large organizations, but Thumma (1996:502) warns the reader not to take megachurch leadership team rhetoric too seriously: the lead pastor is a team player, but he is still “the quarterback.” Cavey may represent a younger demographic, as Surratt and Smith (2011) say the younger the church, the more likely it is to adopt a fluid and collaborative model of leadership.

orderly experiences for greater numbers of attendees. This is the routinization of charisma: people do not come for the management but the “man.”

An analysis that looks solely at rational-legal authority, however, makes a number of assumptions that limit what can be seen in a megachurch. It assumes that religious life revolves around a matter of rational exchange, that authority resides in impersonal rules rather than a personal figure, and that analogies with business practices are a compromise that leads to secularization. But as mentioned above, this is due to the culturally contextualized nature of the church, which breaks with nostalgic notions of a nationalized church—a church modeled after the loyalties of citizenship rather than the shifts in consumer taste. The most significant weakness of weighing too heavily on this rationalizing type of authority in the Weberian tradition is that it too often assumes secularization without the simultaneous possibility of de-secularization or sacralization (Demerath 2007). It also misses Weber’s assumption that both rational-legal and charismatic authority are types, and rarely exist in pure form. As Shils (1965) makes clear, even large bureaucratic institutions have at least an attenuated connection to some form of charisma.

I argue that rational-legal authority in the form of commercialized religious practices does not on its own explain the recent proliferation of the megachurch, and on its own does not offer a deep understanding of The Meeting House and its attendees. First of all, commercialized religious practices affect churches of all sizes—not just megachurches. Secondly, such characterizations do not offer fully satisfying reasons for why people go or stay; they offer a reductive economic approach to analysis that would be rejected by many who participate in such churches. The megachurch is more than an extension of the homogenizing, rationalizing legacy of modernity: it is also a reaction to the bureaucratic forms of modern denominational churches. In the case of TMH, charismatic authority is the central animating force, and rationalizing practises more accurately reflect the routinization of Cavey’s charisma.

2.3 Megachurch Pastor as Charismatic Leader

Weber examined a distinctively different type of authority from rational-legal authority, and that was charismatic authority. In fact, “pure” charisma unleashes disruption, instigating revolutionary change. Followers of megachurch leaders recognize charismatic authority as being a gift of grace, and it often has revolutionary potential, challenging the legitimacy of the rational-legal and traditional authorities (1968:24). This precarious form of authority many see present in the proliferation of megachurches and, I argue, better explains its drawing power. The rationalizing influence of capitalist culture remains significant to our study, as for Weber the different types of authority are dynamically

related—charismatic authority is often being routinized while rationalizing structures are being challenged and reformed by charismatic authority. These categories are ideal types, and they socially manifest in hybrid forms. From a different angle, the magnetism of a powerfully charismatic figure will require some organizational machinery in order to mobilize, direct, and contain large groups of people. As Weber insisted, some success—including numerical success in terms of membership—is necessary in order for charismatic authority to be legitimated; this requires some routinization (1968:20-23). As the adage suggests, nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd.

Charisma suggests an aura in a pastoral leader that is less associated with the role of CEO or entrepreneur in the marketplace as much as the role of a spiritual authority in a religious institution—an extraordinary leader on an extraordinary mission. The answer to the original question, “Why do people go to megachurches such as TMH?” is they go because they perceive an exceptionally gifted visionary who provides them with a compelling sense of purpose in the midst of some malaise. This is not so much a rational choice as an emotional bond rooted in a sense of promise and hope that arises from the pastor’s public performance. Wellman puts it quite vividly: “these ‘energy stars’ attract and create a fusion of joy, delight, and motivation that create congregations that glow with what they call the ‘spirit’ of God... skilled leaders generate a collective effervescence that buoys groups and charges crowds with a kind of delirium that humans want—and even need” (2012:6). In Shils’ (1965) explication of Weber, charismatic individuals have the power to bring a new order that connects followers more intimately with the heart of the cosmos—in this megachurch scenario, it is the divine figure of Jesus.

While charisma, on one hand, can too quickly be associated with primitivist caricatures or the supposed lighter fare of sports and entertainment, and thus lack full legitimacy in modern institutions (Robbins 1998), it has on the other hand become the key in a new paradigm of corporate leadership studies called “transformational leadership” that leverages charisma for the benefit of the organization and its people rather than just for the interests of the leader (Bass and Avolio 1994). The range of meanings for charisma and diversity of attitudes towards it make it a slippery subject, equivocally used, and in what follows I will examine three different ways in which charisma has been understood in the West, ending with a dramaturgical definition of megachurch leader charisma.

The Equivocations of Charisma

The literature on charisma spans a diversity of disciplines, including anthropology (Lindholm 1990; Lindholm 2013; Csordas 1997; P. Smith 2000; Falco 2011; Dyer and McDonald 2002), celebrity studies (Dyer and McDonald 2002), cultural studies (Horn 2011), history (W. Clark 2007; Potts 2009;

Berenson 2012), management studies (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Conger 1989; Khurana 2002), philosophy (Bro 1955), political science (Madsen and Snow 1991; Aberbach 1996; Horvath 2013), psychology (Oakes 1997; Schiffer 1973), religion (C. R. Smith 2000), and sociology (O’Dea and Yinger 1961; Berger 1963; Shils 1965; Eisenstadt 1968; Friedland 1964; Tucker 1968; Downton 1973; Wilson 1975; Barnes 1978; Zablocki 1980; Wallis 1982; Wallis 1993; Glassman and Swatos 1986; Bryman 1992; D. N. Smith 1998; S. Turner 2003; Rieff 2008; Feuchtwang 2008; Carter 2010; Dawson 2011; Hofmann and Dawson 2014). While often the Weberian definition of charisma takes precedence, in megachurch studies especially the intended meaning of the word can be ambiguous. In what follows, I examine what I contend to be the three most common meanings of the word in order to bring some clarity to its equivocal use. First, I will examine the *spiritual* meaning of the term found in New Testament texts as interpreted by John Potts (2009). Then I will elaborate more fully on Weber’s derived *situational* meaning of the term—charisma as the confluence of an extraordinary leader and devoted followers in a time of social distress. Finally, using Daniel Boorstin as a resource, I will describe what I am calling the *contrived* charisma of celebrity culture, which is created to a large degree by the proliferation of images through electronic media.

“Charis” is an ancient Greek term that was used to describe the favour of the gods falling on someone, bestowing them with an attractiveness, beauty or charm, which in turn made the recipient beholden to the god (Potts 2009:13). A form of this word appears in the Septuagint version of the Hebrew scriptures (Zech. 12:10) where God says he will pour out a spirit of grace (“*pneuma charitos*”) on the house of David. But since the original manuscripts are in Hebrew, the use of the Greek word comes from a much later period. Still, scholars consider the concept of charisma as analogous to moments in the Hebrew scriptures when the “Spirit of God” falls or rests on a prophet or a judge such as Samson in Judges 14:19 (Sanders 2000; Potts 2009:15).

It is not until Paul’s letters in the New Testament,⁵⁶ however, that the word “charisma” receives more definitive meaning. Potts (2009:35) cites numerous references to demonstrate a scholarly consensus that while derivatives of the word “charis” were in use before Paul’s time, Paul adapted the word “charisma” in an original way for the early Christian context (Dunn 1975:206; Schatzmann 1987:4; Harrison 2003:280). While the term “charisma” appears 16 times in New Testament texts (such as Romans 1:11, 5:15-16, 12:6-8, 1 Timothy 4:14, 2 Timothy 1:6), the most frequent and extended discussion comes in the first letter to the Corinthians. Chapter 12:1-11 is a key

⁵⁶ I recognize there are debates on the historicity and authorship of the New Testament epistles, as well as the nature of the Pauline tradition, but I am following the interpretation of Potts, which resonates with assumptions of charisma in some of the megachurch literature.

text in the letter, where Paul explains the democratic distribution and diverse character of spiritual charisma (charisma₁):

Now about the [*charisma*] of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed... 4 There are different kinds of *charisma*, but the same Spirit distributes them... 7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another... knowledge... 9 to another faith... to another *charisma* of healing... 10 to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues... and to still another the interpretation of tongues... 11 All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines (NIV with Greek term *charisma* in italics).

“Charisma” in this passage refers to spiritual gifts or talents not innate to the person but which are perceived to come from the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ. These *charismata* (plural) are given not to one particular leader but to *everyone* in the spiritual community—as interdependent gifts in a “pneumatocracy” (Joose 2014:269). Finally, the charismata are characterized not as attractiveness or charm—or even leadership per se—but as different “gifts of grace,” including faith, wisdom, healing, and miraculous powers.⁵⁷

After the time of the early church, as Christianity spread and developed institutionally, the terminology of charisma (understood as a *spiritual charisma* I call “charisma₁”) finds marginal use in the church (Potts 2009:51-84). Almost two millennia pass before the word resurfaces in a significant way, partly because of the wave of charismatic movements begun in the early 20th century but spreading most visibly in the 1960s and 1970s (Cox 2001). Since then, use of the word “charismatic” in discussion of megachurch leaders in some cases means both “spiritually gifted” and potentially “member of the charismatic movement.” One example would be the language in the edited book honouring the pastor of the world’s largest church: *Charis and Charisma: David Yonggi Cho and the Growth of Yoido Full Gospel Church* (Myung and Hong 2003). While Max Weber is mentioned twice in passing (2003:181, 197), most of the implicit meanings of the word “charisma” refer to an inner spiritual authority possessed by Rev. Cho. I would argue this is actually not Paul’s broader meaning of the many “charismata” but specific reference to just one charisma: the charisma of leadership mentioned in Romans 12:8.

Because charisma₁ refers to a diversity of spiritual gifts distributed through the church and intended for harmonious interdependence within the church, it lies on the periphery of my analysis of megachurch charismatic leadership. It is important, however, in understanding the history of the word

⁵⁷ The Romans 12 text includes more ordinary gifts such as teaching, mercy, aid, service, and encouraging. Because the lists are different, I would argue they are not intended to be considered as rigid lists or exhaustive in their scope.

“charisma” and it also informs the perceptions of many of those who follow megachurch leaders: they perceive their pastor as having the spiritual gifts of teaching, administration and/or leadership.

My investigation lies more firmly in the sociological tradition of Max Weber, who is another reason for the popularization of the word “charisma,” as his works were translated into English by the mid-20th century. Weber borrowed the word from the theological writings of Rudolf Sohm and transposed the meaning into a universally applicable secular political key and “value-neutral” typology (D. Smith 1998; Weber 1968:19). The Christian term describing the gifts of grace to all believers was both broadened and narrowed by Weber: broadened to apply to all extraordinary leaders but narrowed insofar as it referred only to leadership ability, not other talents or graces such as those named in the New Testament epistles. Weber defines charisma (charisma₂) as a form of authority:

... a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them, the individual concerned is treated as a leader (Weber 1968:48).

Weber contrasted this charismatic authority with two other kinds of legitimate authority: bureaucratic authority (also called rational/legal) which is based on rules and efficient procedures such as those found in democratic governments; and traditional authority—customary ways of doing things as seen in families, religious groups and monarchies (Weber 1968:46). Charismatic leadership challenges these other two stable, if not sterile, authorities with revolutionary force, upsetting the “iron cage” of bureaucracy and legalistic tradition and ushering in a new social order. Whether prophets, shamans, war lords or heroes, charismatic leaders disrupt the given rules and rituals to emancipate people into a creatively inspired future. They have both an extraordinary mission and extraordinary powers by which to complete their mission (S. Turner 2011). Weber said charisma₂ always proceeds from the declaration: “It is written... but I say unto you...” (Weber 1968:24).⁵⁸

If we stop our analysis of Weber here, charisma₂ appears as a spellbinding personality trait that elicits deep devotion in people, and it comes with a Romantic (anti-modern) bias.⁵⁹ This is too simplistic for Weber, who elaborates immediately after the above definition of charisma: “What is

⁵⁸ Even within the Weberian concept of charisma₂ are numerous distinctions and debates. For example, Riesebrodt (1999) claims Weber is inconsistent, and subsequent interpretations have defined Weberian charisma as heroic leadership (Joas 1996) or as an impersonal sacred force (Eisenstadt 1968; Shils 1972). While I can imagine an argument for some overlap between the two, my definition rests more in the former notion.

⁵⁹ Many uses of the word “charisma” do in fact understand it to be a form of personal magnetism. While some find traces of this in Weber (Friedland 1964; Horn 2011:7) and others level the charge at social psychology (P. Smith 2000), it is best compared to the “Great Man” theory of history, a theory dating back to the 1840s and the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle, who declared, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men” (and he meant “males”). His book entitled *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840/1993) assumes that by learning about Great Men, one might come to find one’s own inner hero.

alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his ‘followers’ or ‘disciples’” (Weber 1968:48). Charisma₂ is thus not as much a personality trait as it is a bond, a strong emotional tie between leader and followers that obligates followers to obey the leader, whom they see connecting them more directly with the fundamental order of the cosmos (Shils 1965). In other words, there are no charismatic leaders apart from the recognition and submission of followers. Not a gift of grace, “the locus of power is in the led, who actively (if perhaps unconsciously) invest their leaders with social authority” (Joosse 2014:271).

For Weber, this relational understanding of charisma₂ is more accurately understood by what I am calling “situational” charisma, for the charismatic bond is strongest in the context of social crises— “times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress” (Weber 1968:18). When social tensions rise and people feel anxious or uncertain, they look for someone who can connect them to the core of reality and empower them with a vision of a hopeful future. The charismatic leader is a hero with extraordinary gifts who compels people to follow and obey as part of a journey towards a new social order. Weber did not make clear that charisma₂ can have oppressive, if not horrific, manifestations, such as in the cases of Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson and Jim Jones (Lindholm 1990; Feuchtwang 2008). Significantly, Weber’s notion of charisma as a legitimate form of authority was used by political theorist Theodore Abel to make a “persuasive case” in 1938 for Hitler’s rule, even if Weber himself may have objected to such use if he had lived to see the rise of the Nazi regime (Potts 2009:129).

This completes what Pinto and Larsen (2006) have called the “charismatic triangle”—the dynamic interplay of the individual leader, followers, and a triggering event or crisis at the core of the charismatic moment. In fact, they use the term “charismatization”,⁶⁰ to communicate that charisma is both a process and event—a dynamic interplay of these three factors that cannot be precisely predicted or controlled. This makes Weber’s notion of charisma inherently unstable, and its precariousness generates motivation for the “routinization” of charisma into either bureaucratic or traditional forms of authority. Again, because Weber’s three concepts of legitimate authority are ideal types, they rarely empirically appear in pure form, and the notion of “the routinization of charisma” effectively demonstrates their overlapping social dynamism.

As introduced in chapter 1, I have turned the charismatic triangle into a diamond, re-conceptualizing the “leader” as the creator along with a production team, and adding the dramatic web as the cultural object in question. Three points of the diamond—social context, creators, and followers—form the structure of the next chapter and demonstrate the complexity and dynamism of

⁶⁰ This term is also used by Barker (1993) and Glassman (1975).

charismatic authority; it is fundamentally a show in which star, stagecraft,⁶¹ spectators, and setting work in concert. To illustrate, consider Rick Warren, who was a young man with some exceptional leadership skills and an ambition to lead a megachurch. He grew a following of people who saw him as a man with exemplary vision, as he was able to address the malaise of postsuburban middle-class life in the region of southern California (Wilford 2012). But it was not until he published *The Purpose Driven Church* (1995) and even more significantly *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002) that his charismatic authority exploded to international range. The role of media—books, magazines and all electronic forms—become especially important when examining an additional popular meaning of charisma: celebrity aura.

Before shifting to the next meaning of charisma, however, it is significant to note megachurch literature often invokes a form of Weber's notion of charisma₂. A study such as Donald Miller's (1997) explicitly states the relevance of the routinization of charisma for the Calvary, Vineyard, and Hope church movements. While all three aspects of the charismatic triangle are implicit in Miller's discussion of charisma, he emphasizes charisma₂ as a prophetic revelation that is routinized by disciples over time (1997:25-26, 123, 148). In other parts of the text, he refers to "personal charisma" as a personality trait of a leader (1997:14, 149, 163). Yet in other places he refers to charismatic gifts and charismatic worship in a clearly Pauline sense, in one instance stating that their religious expression was "too charismatic" (1997:36, 43, 48). In sum, Miller uses three different meanings of charisma—as a personality trait, as a movement led by a spiritual leader, and as a tradition of expressive worship. In terms of usage, this is certainly legitimate; my goal in this chapter, however, is to bring these variations to a higher level of awareness.

This leads to my third meaning for "charisma" (charisma₃)—one derived originally from Daniel Boorstin but elaborated through much of the growing discipline of celebrity and fandom studies (Dyer 1987; Gledhill 1991; Lewis 1992; Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Braudy 1997; Rojek 2001; Dyer and McDonald 2002; G. Turner 2004, 2010; Ferris 2007). Boorstin's lament, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961), is an original and seminal text in celebrity studies and serves here as a paradigmatic model and prototypical expression of a late-modern form of charisma. The book elaborates on a series of contrasts—between illusion and reality, images and ideals, and, mostly significantly here, celebrities and heroes. Heroes, argues Boorstin, have charisma, understood as "divine favour, a grace or talent granted them by God" (1961:50). The historical presence of such "greatness" has been recently levelled by democracy, cynically undermined by the social sciences,

⁶¹ Bensman and Givant (1975) use this term in a discussion of the fabricated nature of charisma in mass media. They believe Weberian charisma belongs to a previous age, while I suggest the potential blurring of charisma₂ and charisma₃ as the latter can shape and magnify the former, while making it more vulnerable to critique.

forgotten by literature, and, most importantly, “lost in the congested traffic of pseudo-events” (1961:54).⁶² Pseudo-events are social happenings manufactured artificially to meet the extravagant expectations of the modern public, says Boorstin, and their main character is the celebrity, defined as “a person who is known for his well-knownness” (1961:57). As “human pseudo-events,” these people are creations of press agents and mass media for an Age of Contrivance.⁶³ Summarizes Boorstin:

The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name... While heroes are assimilated to one another by the great simple virtues of their character, celebrities are differentiated mainly by trivia of personality. To be known for your personality actually proves you a celebrity. Thus a synonym for “a celebrity” is “a personality” (1961:61, 65).

Boorstin does not use the term “charisma” to describe celebrities, for celebrities’ charisma is at best contrived, or pseudo-charisma, the illusion of divine gifting.⁶⁴ Spiritual charisma is a gift, and situational charisma precariously rests on follower recognition, but contrived charisma arises from calculated marketing and manipulation.⁶⁵

One need not accept all the sharp binaries of Boorstin’s critique nor its normative assumptions about heroism in order to agree that there is another meaning to the word charisma that has flourished in the last few decades, one which is related but distinctly different from Weber’s heroic notion (Friedman 1990; Furedi 2010). Potts includes a chapter on charisma and celebrity, suggesting the tension between the two, and maintaining that charisma as the aura of fame is part of popular usage even if some commentators distinguish between the manufactured⁶⁶ notoriety of celebrities and the

⁶² Forms of celebrity as public renown have existed to some degree as long as there has been media, from Caesar’s face on a coin to the portraits of Louis the XIV, but the advent of electronic media allows celebrities to be more immediately known, more pervasively displayed, and more frequently described and discussed (Inglis 2010). Early modern celebrity first emerged in print culture as a moral touchstone for readers, as writers highlighted people of renown as examples of virtue (First 2009:9).

⁶³ Boorstin says: “Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God’s purpose in him; today we look for his press agent” (1961:45). In contemporary terms, there is a large industry of agents, coaches, public relations experts, marketers, bloggers, and journalists who did not exist in previous eras in such numbers or with such readily accessible and transnationally mobile powers of communication. Already mid-century Boorstin was saying the “premium on quickly impressive, attractive images” has created a “new Iconography of Speed” (1961:199). See also Kurzman et al. (2007:363): “Celebrity is status on speed.”

⁶⁴ The “pseudo” prefix is not used by Boorstin but fits his consistent use of the prefix in the book. Bensman and Givant (1975) used the term in the context of a discussion of modern charisma and media, with reference to Boorstin’s book. See also Hofmann and Dawson (2014:353).

⁶⁵ Boorstin’s dualistic approach continues in a brief article in *News and World Report* (1988) entitled “Beware of Charisma.” He urges suspicion of those who appear to have “superhuman” qualities and endorses instead the “authentic leader,” who is trustworthy, “what he seems to be,” and who is “not trying to be something he is not.”

⁶⁶ Glassman (1975) distinguishes between “natural” and “manufactured” charisma, arguing that in late tribal society struggles for succession in leadership lead to “artificial attempts at stage-managing the charismatic process” which have become exacerbated in modern times (1975:618). Yet he also posits an increase in a cynical, scientific rationality that sees through the media-packaged leader (which Glassman exemplifies in his characterization of followers of charismatic leaders as “alienated” and “irrational, infantile”). This suggests the diverse audience to charismatic performance I discuss in section 6.2.

“true” charisma of the elite stars (2009:178). Regardless, I call this “contrived” charisma because, in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it means “ingeniously or artfully devised or planned.” There is an aesthetic dimension to charisma₃, carried by media and marketing but primarily popularized through narratives that provide existential reference points for people’s lives (Gabler 2001, 2009; Tataru 2012), an argument critical to my notion of charisma as a dramatic web fleshed out in subsequent chapters. As Boorstin makes clear, celebrities are not merely media constructions—they are a response to the “extravagant expectations” of the American public. Celebrities exist because they fulfil a popular demand for glamour and spectacle. Moreover, the term “contrived” carries some of the critical tone found in Boorstin, which is appropriate not only as a contrast with the positive connotations found in Paul and in Weber, but because writers in megachurch literature can use the terms “charisma” and “celebrity” in pejorative ways. Charisma₃ may seem benign in its public presentation, but it is often construed as a pathology such as narcissism (Pinsky and Young 2009), political oppression that supports the capitalist *status quo* (Marshall 1997), a screen for hidden interests (Bensman and Givant 1975), or manipulative, degrading performance (Schickel 1985/2000). Lawler simply states: “Celebrity is the lowest form of fame. Being a celebrity is a sort of gift of public opinion, which is formed by no one in particular” (2010:419).

Philip Rieff (2008) pejoratively labelled this sort of contrived charisma as “spray-on charisma,” and its synthetic nature derives from the fact that, unlike Pauline or Weberian charisma, it is generated through instrumental design. In fact, authors of self-help resources promise that charisma can be learned if readers practise specific techniques of communication as well as certain virtues of other-centredness (Carnegie 2010; Alessandra 2000; Benton 2005; Morgan 2008; Mortensen 2010; Cabane 2012). Charisma₃ in this context is not a spiritual gift of grace intended for the common good, nor is it necessarily about heroic leadership towards social transformation in the midst of crisis. Rather, it is about self-development for personal advancement or even a form of rationalized politics (Bensman and Givant 1975).⁶⁷ This variation of charisma₃ reflects what Boorstin called superficial “charm” (1961:44). “Charm,” coming from Latin meaning “song or verse” developed into the Middle English meaning of “spell or incantation” and, significantly, has no etymological relation to the Greek word *charisma*. Yet “charm” harkens back to the ancient Greek meaning of charisma as an attractiveness or beauty. Our analysis of the meanings of charisma thus comes full circle.

⁶⁷ Alessandra’s book says it most starkly: charisma is not an “effortless gift of the gods or something you are born with” but a tool that lies within you, waiting to be honed (2000:7).

MacNair’s (2009) exposition of the megachurch as an ideal type focuses on this last understanding of charisma. The megachurch, argues MacNair, arises from the confluence of three cultural streams: frontier evangelism, commercial civilization, and celebrity culture. Celebrity culture surfaces in the megachurch insofar as the leaders are first of all star performers whose “most distinctive attribute is that they are *known*... Fame is the beginning point, not a result or a reward for being worthy” (2009:6). In the one instance where MacNair uses the term “charisma,” he pairs it with “personality” in a way reminiscent of Boorstin: “the personality and the *charisma* of a person are the centre of the church’s life” (2009:12). MacNair omits any mention of either Pauline and Weberian notions of charisma throughout the book because his disdain for the megachurch runs deep, and he concludes that although “the term *Christian* properly spreads a wide net,” a megachurch “is *not* a Christian church” but rather a false assertion of church, in effect, a pseudo-church (my term) subject to the vagaries of the market (2009:224 all emphases are in original). If MacNair observes any charisma in the megachurch, it is neither a divine gift nor even heroic, but rather simply contrived and shallow, the result of power personalities exerting control over unreflective, if not manipulated audiences.

Table 2.1 *Three Notions of Charisma*

Type	Charisma ₁	Charisma ₂	Charisma ₃
Description	<i>spiritual</i>	<i>situational</i>	<i>contrived</i>
Author	Paul (interpreted through Potts)	Max Weber	Daniel Boorstin
Source	gift of grace/God	confluence of social factors	media and marketing
Embodiment	church community	heroic leader	celebrities
Meaning	a diversity of talents	revolutionary leadership	manufactured fame

To conclude this section, I stress that while my three types of charisma follow a general historical progression—from Paul (via Potts) to Weber to Boorstin—the categories are not entirely mutually exclusive. Charisma₁ is most distinctively in its own category, as it is a theological term; writers and followers continue to use it to assert that divine grace has given a particular leader spiritual gifts. My dramatic web controversially suggests the blending of charisma₂ and charisma₃—contending that the pervasiveness of mass media and social media has blurred Weberian heroes with celebrities. Boorstin himself writes at length about how heroes degenerate into celebrities (his main example is Charles Lindbergh, the first pilot to make a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean). So the purpose of my investigation of usage was to uncover the multiple meanings that lie within the term as writers use it in the megachurch literature (see Table 2:1) and set my own trajectory in a synthesis of Weberian and celebrity studies.

Yet there is also a difference in emphasis on the origins of each meaning of charisma. Charisma₁ is understood as a gift from God; charisma₂ emerges from extraordinary characters and circumstance; charisma₃ is intentionally and artfully packaged to rouse attention and curiosity. Again, these need not be mutually exclusive, but the first is theological while the latter two are sociological, with the last being more critical than the other two.

The three uses of the word “charisma” are also three dimensions of charisma, as evident in Bruxy Cavey’s role at The Meeting House. Most of my interviewees spoke admiringly of Cavey’s “gift of teaching” (charisma₁), demonstrating the New Testament understanding that informs the perceptions of attendees. Cavey’s message and mission resonate with Canadians who seek some religious experience that addresses cultural scepticism towards religion, and they develop an emotional bond with him (charisma₂). His hippie costume, however, and the extensive apparatus of cameras, podcasts, and television appearances facilitated by a marketing and communications staff of seven people, implies a layer of celebrity (charisma₃). My approach is at heart a Weberian framework, as his interpretation of charisma can encompass elements from the other two meanings: he included the perception of the gift of grace as described in charisma₁; and when I add the role of media into his sociology of charismatic authority, I open investigation into the influence of charisma₃, which can be seen as an intensification and routinization of charisma₂. As a hero, a person acts as a leader of a movement; as a celebrity, they are an object to an audience. Media shape, magnify, and distribute charismatic authority for wider exposure; this, however, makes the persona more vulnerable to critique, parody, and cynicism.

Charisma and Megachurch Pastors: A Critical Appraisal of Research

Most academic studies on megachurches do not examine charismatic leadership in detail. Donald Miller (1997), Sargeant (2000), Marti (2005, 2008), Elisha (2011) and Wilford (2012), while studying megachurches founded by charismatic personalities, do not focus on the role of the celebrated pastor as the central icon and institution builder in Weberian fashion. They focus more on the influence of cultural context, the process of conversion, social activism, and, in Miller’s case, the rise of lay leadership. In what follows, I survey the literature that particularly focuses on evangelical and, more specifically, megachurch pastors, and I examine the scholarly lacuna and equivocations in the usage of the term “charisma.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Phil Sinitiere’s (2015) historical analysis of Joel Osteen’s career as “the smiling preacher” was released too late to be included here.

Randall Balmer's (1989/1999, 2006) studies of evangelicalism offer some detailed and diverse vignettes of the subculture and its leaders. He asserts that evangelicals have a "weakness for celebrity" that "leaves the subculture vulnerable to self-aggrandizement and egomania" and "the cult of personality." More so than other Christian groups, evangelicals "galvanize around a personality who articulates—and even defines—the faith of his followers according to his own idiosyncratic reading of the Bible," in effect "constructing a reality for his followers." This construction, he elaborates with some bias, is "a place of retreat and escape" smugly bathed in "a kind of orgy of dualistic rhetoric" that cocoons them safe in a "good," "righteous" but contrived community of the "saved," set apart from the "evil," "secular," "damned" world outside (2006:339-342; 1999:69).

While the long legacy of evangelical celebrity evangelists gives credence to much of Balmer's description, and Cavey does certainly offer an idiosyncratic reading of the Bible, the pejorative connotations of "cult" and "orgy" belie the prologue to his popular and successively revised 1989 book, where he pledges to avoid stereotypes and caricatures and to downplay the big stars and televangelists because the attention paid to them is disproportionate to their real influence (2006:8). In later editions of the book, however, he adds chapters on Jimmy Swaggart, Rick Warren and the popular Christian music band Jars of Clay, suggesting that a thorough study of evangelicalism cannot bypass some analysis of significant personalities. Balmer does offer a colourful kaleidoscope of evangelical subcultures in America, yet his journalistic vignettes struggle to reflect beyond evangelicalism as "formula," "cult of novelty," and "Disneyland," which imply evangelical superficiality, compromise, and, ultimately, an emphasis on charisma³. In sum, his analysis of charismatic leadership remains unsystematic and scattered through his examination of diverse evangelical communities across America, reinforcing aspects of the Elmer Gantry stereotype of megachurch leaders.

A highly-detailed historical analysis of the career of Bishop Earl Paulk Jr. and his popular Chapel Hill Harvester Church could have played into the stereotype quite easily, as Paulk's ministry was scandal-ridden, especially in its later years. But Scott Thumma (1996) provides a nuanced portrait of the charismatic authority of Paulk, focusing on the rise and fall of this megachurch pastor paying careful attention to the images, narratives, and social context of the church as they are embraced and rejected by followers. Not only do some aspects of Paulk's career (specifically his ambivalence about his Pentecostal youth and an early set back in his ministry) parallel Cavey's life, but Thumma's approach shares a micro-sociological focus with my own analysis of Cavey. The one major difference is that I combine most of the charismatic variables that Thumma examines into a dramaturgical whole that is sympathetic to celebrity studies; Thumma stops short of this synthesis.

Shayne Lee (2005) investigates the black megachurch and television pastor T. D. Jakes. Lee's emphasis, similar to his 2009 book, draws on the spiritual marketplace framework, and so while the term "charisma" never appears in the text to describe Jakes, the word "savvy" appears twenty times throughout the text to impress the reader of Jakes' skills as a "spiritual entrepreneur." Jakes has built an "entrepreneurial machine by commercializing spirituality" and offers "a trendy message with no prophetic edge" (2005:141). Lee emphasizes Jakes' networking acumen, his therapeutic, culture-affirming prosperity theology, and his merchandizing genius, all of which "personify American ideals" and have skyrocketed Jakes to international fame (2005:4). Based on an analysis of sermons, books and internet data as well as interviews with friends and fans of Jakes, the closest Lee comes to discussing charisma is a section on celebrity pastors in the black church, which he describes not in terms of media as much as in terms of luxury and glamour. "Charisma" and "charismatic" appear only in reference to the charismatic movement and its magazine of that name (charisma₁). So while the book is strong on religious economy, offers an important window into the black megachurch and its distinct history, and highlights a significant pastor and his connections with cultural context, it is conceptually weak in terms of investigating charisma₂.

A previously mentioned anthology investigating the life and work of the leader of the largest church in the world, Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, offers more extensive investigation of one megachurch leader (Myung and Hong 2003). The book is part festschrift and part hagiography and dedicated to and endorsed by the celebrated pastor David Yonggi Cho. Entitled *Charis and Charisma*, the analysis of his charismatic leadership blurs the sociological meaning of charisma with spiritual meanings, and the collection lacks critical analysis (additionally, the translation to English is very poor). It celebrates Cho's "dazzling organizational genius," his "powerful inspirational messages... that provide answers to real problems people face in everyday life," and his "message of blessing" (prosperity theology)—all channelled by the power of the Holy Spirit (2003:28, 168, 184). The book reads as a monument to the accomplishments of Cho, with the last two chapters elaborating more constructively on the sociological context of Cho's ministry, including a discussion of the significant role of post-war demographic change around the church and a comparison of Cho with Ju-Young Jeong, the former president of Hyundai Enterprises and Jung-Hee Park, the former president of Korea. This illustrates the socio-cultural context of charisma, as post-war was a time of "developmental dictatorship" in the nation and in the religious culture of Korea. Cho brought hope in the midst of social upheaval. Such an investigation of Cho's career certainly has potential for an application of the dramatic web, but Weber's notion of charisma is only mentioned in passing (Park 2003:181). Co-editor Hong Young-gi offers a short but more objective approach to Cho's charisma in an earlier writing (2000): although Hong is a life-long member of Cho's church and he wrote this

article in a Christian mission journal, he surveys the sociological literature to highlight Weberian themes of divine gift (charisma₁), the pseudo-charisma manufactured by media (charisma₃), and the routinization of charisma₂ with its accompanying dilemmas. Recent news of Cho's prison sentence for embezzling millions of dollars from his church, however, adds an additional layer to Cho's legacy and demands that his charismatic leadership is due for a more critical examination (M. Lee 2014).

Hey (2013) offers a sustained academic introduction to the growing phenomenon of Pentecostal megachurches in Australia and their leaders. Hey teaches in the School of Ministry Studies at Christian Heritage College and addresses the topic from a mixture of "outsider" sociological theory and "insider" missiological perspectives. He seeks to explain the origin, growth, and future of the megachurch in Australia as the result of three converging influences: the excitement of Pentecostal revivalism, the genius of new organizational management methods, and the charisma of bold pastoral leaders. Hey's research is historically detailed, surveys diverse literatures, and includes advice on how a careful balance between innovation and decentralization on one hand and centralized control and institutional structures on the other hand can both grow and preserve these "megabusineses" (2013:33, 191). Hey's discussion of charismatic leadership begins with Weber and the charismatic bond but shifts and settles on an explanation of charisma as a matter of individual psychological development and the personality traits of the individual leader. He gives special weight to Erik Erikson's identity formation model (Erikson 1958, 1968), arguing that charisma can be understood through a biographical analysis, especially one that shows unresolved identity issues such as unmet needs for recognition (Hey 2013:88). If left unattended, he continues, these needs may develop into pathologies that undermine the success of the megachurch, such as an unquestioned authoritarianism that prevents followers from maturing into self-aware and self-reliant members. Hey recommends charismatic leaders aspire to higher levels of self-awareness, integrity, and service through accountability structures (2013:116).

Hey follows this prescriptive advice with an analysis of the early life and career of megachurch founder Clark Taylor and the Christian Outreach Centres that grew from his ministry. This investigation is rich in detail and follows a decades-long history of Taylor's charismatic leadership and institutional expansion from local to transnational arenas. The story of Taylor's leadership is riddled with sexual scandal—in the midst of numerous other megachurch leadership scandals in Australia and beyond—and provides fodder for Hey to discuss ways of creating accountability structures for megachurch leaders while simultaneously recognizing that centralized institutional structures can stifle innovation and expansion (2013:216). In sum, Hey's study is a valuable contribution to understanding charismatic authority in megachurches, and his emphasis on psychological and organizational theory can be complimented and contrasted with my own

dramaturgical model. Because of the dominance of Pentecostalism in Australian megachurches, he also demonstrates the significance of charisma₁ in megachurch growth—a valuable window into the dominant megachurch culture outside North America, without the bias of critical theory that can systematically reduce charismatic₁ “blessing” culture to religious capitalism (Wade 2010; Maddox 2012, 2013). Additionally, his emphasis on the dynamic between charismatic₂ leadership innovation and its institutional routinization is particularly insightful in its historical and theoretical analysis. When he endorses a “great man” view of history, however, he loses sight of the charismatic bond and the cultural tensions that shape charisma—such as the rugged frontier individualism that characterizes Taylor (2013:85, 94, 213). Moreover, Hey gives little theoretical consideration to the role of media and its celebrity culture (charisma₃), although Taylor broadcast his own television program (2013:136).

Another significant study of a megachurch leader is Wellman’s (2012) timely study of Rob Bell (who as of 2012 left his role as pastor to seek a new vocation in Hollywood, and in 2014 joined Oprah Winfrey on a special cross-country “The Life You Want” tour). Congregational studies often overlook what media studies see as central: the magnetic charm of celebrity, and Wellman invokes celebrity at the beginning of his study and then frames the book around a Weberian notion of charisma (with special reference to Madsen and Snow 1991). Wellman’s notion of charisma is similar to my own Weberian definition: “The charismatic bond builds on social crisis and a talented leader who can communicate the thoughts and feelings of followers and can offer, in word and in action, a way out” (2012:48). He emphasizes the bond with followers along with the cultural context: “a person or group in crisis meeting someone who empathizes and communicates the feelings of that crisis and who can then respond, with deep empathy, about how they have gotten through” (2012:51). The charismatic figure for Wellman is a “proxy” or “mid-wife” who models the journey to liberation for followers: “a figure who takes a common and recognizable mess and frames it in poetic and moving words, calling forth a transcendental vision to a new horizon” (2012:67).

Although he does not break down the different components of charisma in the way that I do here, Wellman comes close to my own sociological take on megachurch pastor charisma. The two limitations of his study are, first of all, its neglect of the literature on celebrity; and secondly, its lack of in-depth qualitative investigation of followers’ role in the construction of charisma. Wellman’s study of Bell offers a detailed chronology of Bell’s rise to fame, highlights Bell’s image as a theological rogue, and describes successive theological phases in Bell’s still relatively short biography. There are scattered interviews with random Mars Hill Church members, but the focus remains on Bell’s personality, intellectual development, and critical reception in the media and at his

church. So, although Wellman forgoes a theoretical discussion of charisma, there are few better investigations of a megachurch pastor's vocational development and charismatic character.⁶⁹

“Too little quality research has been done on the nuances of megachurch leadership,” say Thumma and Travis (2007:68) who devote a chapter to myths about the personality cults of megachurches. Their contentions about team leadership trends, board governance, and lay participation are significant for a critique of the CEO stereotype but do not explain *why* people come to megachurches. As mentioned in the introduction, Thumma and Bird (2009) surveyed 24,900 megachurch members from 12 megachurches, and the top three reasons people gave for initially attending their megachurch were the worship style, the senior pastor, and the reputation of the church in that order, although each of these three reasons were just one decimal point apart (on a scale of 1-5). Writing on megachurches reveals varying degrees of awareness of the vagaries of charismatic authority in megachurches, and Thumma and Davis (2007) respond to cultural critique by matching the sense of precariousness in charismatic leadership with suggestions of how to prevent the abuses of power and organizational conflict.

In sum, both popular and academic literature describe megachurch pastors as charismatic personalities, a meaning that ranges from the pejorative “personality cult” to a complimentary assumption of their “gifts” as an inspiring leader. No doubt individual personalities play a large role in religious change and development (Wach 1944:131; Berger 1999:13), but their tremendous influence comes with the confluence of other factors, including follower recognition, cultural pre-conditions, and the shaping power of media. Charisma is fundamentally a performance, and performances require promotion, a stage, props, teams, and an audience. The dramatic web metaphor comes with its own limitations, yet it provides an angle that illuminates some aspect of megachurch leadership and charisma that both religious economy and critical theory overlook. Rational-legal authority proceeds from a calculated and controlling approach to institution-building, but performance is a form of aesthetics and play that provides meaning, entertainment, and a sense of belonging within a larger narrative—qualities that overlap with research in celebrity studies. Moreover, performance studies can bring the four elements of the charismatic diamond into a conceptual whole and generate a more specific meaning for charisma—one formed by the metaphor of theatre.

2.4 Charismatic Leadership as a Performance

⁶⁹ Wellman intends to release a much more comprehensive academic study of megachurch leadership in the near future, hinted at in Wellman and Corocan (2012).

So far I have demonstrated how a popular account of megachurches and their leaders depends on religious economy language, epitomized by analogies with big box stores and Disneyland, managed by CEO pastors. I suggested this reflected Weber's rational-legal type of authority, while other writers construe megachurches primarily as manifestations of charismatic authority—Weber's contrast to both rational-legal authority and traditional authority. The use of "charisma" in discussions of megachurch pastors, however, is generally both superficial and equivocal, and I teased out three distinct meanings of the term. In what follows I argue that performance studies offer a helpful approach to understanding the sociology of megachurch pastors' leadership, which is not entirely inimical to the religious economy framework but offers a different, more culturally grounded language for analyzing charismatic authority. More specifically, while I am critical of economic metaphors and their assumed anthropology of persons as primarily rationally motivated, I agree with religious economists in their depiction of the current religious landscape as a spiritual marketplace that belies many assumptions of secularization theory. The megachurch is not only a system of economic exchanges between rational agents, however; it encompasses a grand theatrical production, a performance that generates seminal narratives for mobile audiences, manages identity in a post-Christian cultural context, and often generates "dramaturgical trouble." These three aspects of megachurch dramaturgy are examined in detail in chapters 4, 5, and 6 and form the core of the dissertation. My goal is to move beyond simply asserting charismatic leadership drives megachurches and instead elaborate on the culturally-situated mechanisms by which it originates and expands within a spiritual marketplace. In short, megachurches are inspiring religious performances as much as they are competitive businesses.

The discipline of performance studies is a growing and contested interdisciplinary field (Schechner 1988; Schechner 2013; Butler 1988; Strine, Long, and Hopkins 1990; Alexander 2004; Alexander 2006; Madison and Hamera 2006; Fenske 2007; Fuist 2014). The writings of Canadian-born sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963, 1967, 1981, 1986) and, specifically his notion of dramaturgical analysis, form a foundation for performance studies in sociology and have navigated to use in numerous other disciplines, including social-psychology, theatre studies, performance theory, organizational management studies, and religious studies (Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015). Along with Clifford Geertz and Kenneth Burke, Goffman wanted to highlight the cultural element in human action, the manner in which human activities are "expressive rather than instrumental, irrational rather than rational, more like theatrical performance than economic exchange" (Alexander 2006:2). Alexander has championed this perspective and advanced its theoretical rigour to form a "cultural pragmatics" which shows "how social actors, embedded in collective representations and

working through symbolic and material means, implicitly orient towards others as if they were actors on a stage seeking identification with their experiences and understandings from their audiences” (2006:2).

This dissertation relies primarily on Goffman for its dramaturgical approach, in part because of his seminal role in a sociological approach to performance studies but also because his performance concepts have proven fruitful for fieldwork studies such as my own (Lewin and Reeves 2011; Puroila 2013; Faccio 2013). Unlike the certainties offered in a positivistic sociology, Goffman exemplifies an interpretive form of sociology that employs “the novelist’s eye for the detail and particularity of human conduct” by using “observational skills to uncover the ironies and discrepancies” of social interaction (G. Smith 2006:2). While criticized for lacking a coherent sociological system and for idiosyncratic research hard to identify with one particular theoretical paradigm, Goffman’s conceptualization of the self in relationships with others and in the context of organizations has been sufficiently intellectually sophisticated to warrant his legacy as one of the seminal sociologists of the 20th century (G. Smith 2006; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015).

Shakespeare’s line in *As You Like It*—“All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players”—finds sociological elaboration in Goffman’s dramaturgical writings from his early works and in his final writing (1959, 1981).⁷⁰ His consistent focus was “the interaction order” of face-to-face encounters, and any meeting of persons, he explains, must entail some co-production of the “definition of the situation.” People inevitably take roles as they relate to each other in a particular setting, says Goffman, by “giving” and “giving off” certain expressions to each other. He defines performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (1959:15). Consciously and unconsciously, people become skilled in the arts of impression management, over-communicating some information and under-communicating other information, depending on their preferred definition of the situation or “frame.” Structurally speaking, performances are customarily done in teams before an audience, and span both a front and back region as well as an “outside” beyond the immediate performance, within a larger particular cultural context.

Although Goffman came from a family of Ukrainian-Canadian Jews and did some of his research in religious hospitals, he never intensively studied religiosity or religious institutions.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Not all Goffman’s works focus on dramaturgical metaphors. Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015) maintain Goffman’s academic development proceeds through “metaphorical spirals”—proceeding through dramaturgy to game, ritual, and frame metaphors.

⁷¹ G. Smith (2009:50, 52) gives some small clues that suggest Goffman may have embraced some form of the now debunked and revised secularization theory. In *Interaction Ritual* Goffman concludes, “many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance” (1967:95).

There are multiple mentions of such things as shamans, priests, Hindus, evangelicals, and “sacred persons” in his books, but they are all brief illustrations of general interaction principles. In their introduction to the sociology of religion, Furseth and Repstad (2006) include a section on Goffman, remarking on the marginal position of religion in his writing but noting that his interest in the ritualized patterns of human interaction as well as the trust and moral character necessary to it offer a contrasting model of social life from the “atomistic ‘economic man’ of rational choice theory” (2006:55-57). Goffman’s writings, they continue, offer a “bridge to the sociology of religion,” a claim supported by those who have used his concepts to investigate religious subjects (Harrison 1977; Ingram 1982, 1986, 1989; Schultz 1999; Marti 2009; Marti and Ganiel 2014; Donnelly 2011; Joosee 2012). While not strictly a dramaturgical concept, Goffman’s notion of a “total institution” has specifically been used to describe some megachurches (Kilde 2006:240; Marti 2009:60; Ellingson 2010:264; Wade 2010).

Suspicion of the theatre as a place of pretence and deceit has a long history, especially by religious institutions (Moore 1995), yet religious groups ironically rely on performances for much of their ceremonial life. Similarly, Goffman’s whole project was to unveil “the distinctive moral character” of everyday social interactions—to demonstrate the ceremonial quality of social interaction (1959:13, 249). For Goffman, this entails celebration as much as pretence, the celebration of communally held moral claims and promises: in sum, “the world, in truth, is a wedding” (1959:36). Goffman also uses the metaphor of a game to describe social interaction, and this complements what Schechner (2013) has said about performance as play and what other sociologists have said about ritual and religion as play (Durkheim 1912/1995; Berger 1997; Bellah 2011; Droogers 2011).⁷² Rather than emphasize only the insincerity of human life, Goffman’s observations of performances reveal subtleties of respect, poise, esteem and the avoidance of embarrassment, which suggests a depth of human meaning and dignity (C. Smith 2010:483).

Readers may misunderstand the dramaturgical approach to religion. Goffman has been accused of implying people are by nature insincere—managing and manipulating impressions based on a calculating approach to face-to-face interactions, not unlike the confidence man he sometime studied (Gouldner 1970; Garfinkel 1976; Habermas 1985; Tseelon 1992; Pettit 2011). This is a matter of debate, and my reading (along the lines of Manning 1992; Kristiansen and Jacobsen 2015) suggests the early Goffman may have emphasized this cynical side of human character, but the later edition of *The Presentation of Self* already clarifies that people perform their roles in diverse ways: “with ease

⁷² Jennifer Dyer (2007) includes a short section in which she describes megachurch worship as a form of play, using Donald Winnicott (1971) and Victor Turner (1982).

or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith” (1959:75).⁷³ Put differently, “although all deceptive presentations are staged, not all staged presentations are deceptive or geared towards obfuscation or distortion” (Chriss 1995:562). We must remember that “dramaturgy is a conceptual framework for interaction analysis, not a model of the interactant’s consciousness”—in other words, the researcher cannot directly observe a person’s motivations (G. Smith 2009:44). In sum, Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015:115) describe the Goffmanian actor as a “strategic, morally engaged self”—with morality as subjectively and inter-subjectively conceived. Put in terms of my case study, Bruxy Cavey and his staff are not necessarily any more manipulative or duplicitous—or sincere and unconsciously habitual—than the impression management that goes on in the family kitchen, the university lecture hall, or anywhere else. Their performance is just writ large, or mega-sized for a large audience. Megachurches are a performance that potentially contains all the nuances and foibles of human cultural activity—good and decent as well as deceptive and cruel.⁷⁴

The self for Goffman is both an agent who projects an image and a product of social negotiation—a “dramatic effect” (Goffman 1959:253; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015:113). There is an underlying psychobiological reality (Goffman 1959:252, 254) but dramaturgical analysis can only unveil what actors *do* and *develop* into through particular scenes—to what extent they embrace their role and how the audience supports or negates it (Manning 1992:44; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015:105-118). In effect, we have multiple selves constituted by various roles in different social situations (Goffman 1972:133), and this will become evident in my investigation of the performances of Bruxy Cavey, which I maintain demonstrate *identity* management as well as impression management. He is not just shaping the ideas others have about him; he is also creating a corporate identity.

Having chosen this theoretical frame for my study, I risk being misunderstood as suggesting the religious activities I investigate are either superficial, manipulative or “just an act.” For numerous reasons the risk is justifiable: as mentioned in the first chapter, Cavey’s history as a performer, the setting of movie theatres, and the heavy reliance on electronic media lend themselves to dramaturgical analysis. So while analogies with Walmart and McDonalds highlight the religious consumerism that permeates religious institutions today, the language of theatre has direct associations with The Meeting House, and highlights its distinctively performative character. Metaphors offer fresh

⁷³ Raffel (2013) explains that Goffman would be understood with a more complex view of actors if authentic/false dichotomies of performance were understood in light of intimate/non-intimate relations. Some measured disclosure is proper and necessary, depending on the depth of relationships involved.

⁷⁴ Goffman himself maintained that the dramaturgical metaphor should not be taken literally, as the theatre is a professional vocation where roles are rehearsed and understood to be contrived (1959:254). He continues to say the analogy is “in part a rhetoric and a maneuver,” which like scaffolds, can be taken down once they have served their purpose (1959:246). Still, it has proven to be a “richly productive metaphor” for sociology (G. Smith 2009:45).

perspectives insofar as they illuminate one thing by writing as if it were something else (McKinnon 2013; Shoemaker and Simpson 2014; Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015:55). Metaphors have their own limits and blind spots, and this charge of cynicism or superficiality signals one of them. Yet I would argue that there are moments in congregational life that are mere role playing; and I will demonstrate in chapter 4 how Cavey deliberately plays with his role as evangelical pastor. In fact—and this is Goffman’s contention—it is not just that church culture is like a performance that can sometimes come with pretence; all of our social life has a performative dimension with such liabilities.

A related issue suggests itself: if church is a performance, are congregations mere audiences, or even fans of a celebrity pastor? Attendees would object to such passive and potentially pathologically-weighted language,⁷⁵ and some writers have argued that fandom ought not to be applied to religious groups (Cavicchi 1998:5). I would suggest that a variety of characters populate megachurches: some as fans, others as spectators (Schultze 1991) and others in supporting actor roles—as volunteers, Home Church attendees, or lay leaders. My preference in terms of language derives from the voluntary nature of megachurch congregations and their loose understanding of membership, which suggests “attendee” or “audience” are the most appropriate and inclusive terms for this project.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, attendees can be seen theologically as charismatic agents in their own right (charisma₁), followers of a heroic leader (charisma₂), or as fans of a celebrity pastor (charisma₃). The terminology describing the crowd needs to be as flexible as the notion of charisma—including the language of fans. “Cavey has his groupies,” I was assured by a close associate, and so celebrity studies and fandom research offer some explanatory power and reinforce the appropriateness of my dramaturgical approach. To illustrate, fan culture research suggests that fans can be drawn initially to the celebrity but over time develop primary bonds with the fan community (O’Guinn 2000; Cavicchi 1998; Jindra 2000) just as curious visitors to see a celebrity megachurch pastor can gradually come to identify deeply with the people from a small group in which they regularly participate. There are concentric circles of audiences with varying levels of identification and participation surrounding Cavey and his inner circle.

Performance and Megachurches

⁷⁵ Ferris (2007), for example, argues that much of celebrity and fandom discourse is couched in the language of pathology—as psychological deviance, as cultish activity, or as evidence of the destructive commodification process of capitalism. See also Cavicchi (1998:6) and (Jenson 1992).

⁷⁶ See also section 6.2 below for a discussion of the diversity of audiences at TMH.

I am not the first person to bring performance theory to a study of megachurches. In what follows, I summarize what has been written about megachurch performances, demonstrating the recognized value of such an approach while also pointing out that none have focused primarily on the celebrity pastor as of yet.

Jennifer Eaton Dyer's (2007) dissertation examines the social-psychology of Southern megachurches, delving into object-relations theory, psychoanalytic theory, and cognitive therapeutic approaches. Her chapter on the sociology of megachurches critiques Roof's (1999) implicit rational choice theory approach. She maintains that the language of the market conjures up images of the mall, which assumes instrumental themes and traces of secularization theory. Her argument contends that communities of memory, transformative experiences, rich narratives, and enhanced lives and worldviews (language she borrows from Roof) are sparsely available in such a commercial setting (Dyer 2007:97).

While this normative view of religion contrasted against commercial structures demonstrates the faulty assumption that all religion must be good, decent and moral (and transcend commercial culture) in order to be religion (Cowan 2008:8), I agree that a reductive pragmatism taints rational choice explanations for religion. Dyer's alternative model opens fresh perspectives on the megachurch that move beyond economic metaphors while not necessarily negating them. She correctly adds that a theatre model includes a consumer context, where individuals can choose to spend their money and time on select performances, but the model is not like a religious economy model "limited to the front door" (2007:98). That is to say, a theatre, once entered, offers roles, scripts, audiences, directors, and themes—a diversity of concepts from which to lend insight into religious experience that more directly invoke notions of memory, mysticism, sacredness and narrative. As I have already stated, I find this to be a significant argument insofar as it emphasizes how performance approaches open analysis to cultural influences in the life of social institutions.

Performance language is more conducive to the use of Victor Turner's (1969/1995, 1982) concept of liminality in ritual, the transition point of ambiguity between pre-ritual and post-ritual identity. Dyer sees liminality in the transitional nature of "third space"—the opening between private and public space, a kind of liminality that evangelicals often inhabit as they gather in schools, warehouses, and other unchurch-like spaces that capture the spirit of the revival tent (Dyer 2007:108; Soja 1996). That is to say, in terms of the megachurch experience, entering the non-traditional space of a movie theatre or a vast auditorium modeled after a movie theatre takes attendees outside of the everyday world. Here they mix with diverse others and sing songs that use the romantic language of desire and longing and are transported into a state that is "betwixt and between," potentially offering

attendees a new configuration of their identity.⁷⁷ I would add that liminality is carried not just by space but by persons and, specifically, charismatic persons. Wellman applies Turner's notion of the prophet as a liminal figure or "edgeman" to former megachurch pastor Rob Bell—an artistic character who strives to move beyond conventional forms toward more vital and intense relationships with others (Turner 1969; Wellman 2012:23, 29-43).

Dyer's analysis of the sacred space of megachurches reflects the importance of setting and props for performances. In terms of architecture alone, megachurches (as well as smaller churches) have patterned themselves after the theatre and cinema in significant ways, a historical trend that follows on shifts in the 19th and early 20th century, breaking from earlier patterns configured by the ancient Roman basilica (Kilde 2005, 2006; Dauer 2014). The small platform or pulpit designated for a preacher in earlier church architecture has been replaced by a wide and deep stage for dramatic effect, with special spotlighting, amphitheatre seating, and jumbotron screens where pop culture video clips are shown. These observations are telling, but beyond such dramaturgical investigations and other psychological analyses, Dyer's discussion of numerous southern evangelical celebrities stops short of including a dramaturgical analysis of their charisma.

Performance is shaped by its environment but driven by action. David Bebbington (1989) wrote that activism was one of the four key themes of historical evangelicalism, and John Fletcher (2013) transposes that idea into performance terminology. He studies "performances that aim to change the world" and contends that evangelicals' motivation to proselytize parallels other performances of activism. A former evangelical himself, he examines right-wing evangelical performances such as door-to-door evangelism, "hell houses," the Creation Museum, ex-gay ministries, and megachurch "seeker services" as examples of activism that provide opportunities for understanding evangelicals, as well as lessons about activism for his left-wing activist colleagues. Although he does not turn his attention to the role of celebrity pastors, his work is evidence that a natural affinity exists between historical evangelicalism and performance.

Jill Stevenson brings her theatre studies background to develop what she calls "evangelical dramaturgy"—"a system of performative tactics designed to manipulate the physical, rhythmic encounter between user and medium" (2013:24). She offers a number of tactics that demonstrate this affective and embodied form of piety, including the appropriation of secular popular culture forms for sacred purposes, the realistic re-representation of religious images or narratives, and the use of affective, intimate scripts. Examining a number of evangelical institutions, including a creation

⁷⁷ Turner's notion of liminality was of central importance to an earlier study of emerging churches in Hamilton which included participant observer forays into one regional site of The Meeting House (Masters 2007).

museum and a Holy Land experience, Stevenson's last chapter focuses on the structures and expressions of a megachurch worship service, based on her five visits to four megachurches. Stevenson offers something to build on, for fieldwork needs to extend beyond a few Sunday services and involve more contextual qualitative work. Another limitation of her work lies in her linking of evangelical dramaturgy to the politics of the Tea Party movement. For understanding other evangelical communities such as The Meeting House, a more nuanced portrayal is required—one that includes evangelicals whose ideological commitments lie beyond Republican politics.

Justin Wilford's (2012) fieldwork-based social geography of Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California offers the most in-depth study of a megachurch from a performance perspective. Using the theoretical tools of Jeffrey Alexander rather than Goffman, Wilford maintains that "postdenominational" evangelical megachurches such as Saddleback exist in a pluralist, secularizing context that does not legitimate religious rituals, and thus local religiosity is "de-fused" from wider cultural codes. These churches seek to "re-fuse" background codes and local narratives and symbols, and they do this not just with aesthetic maneuvers that appropriate popular culture, but with a religious performance that "enacts the spatial fragmentation of postsuburbia" by becoming as "diffuse, localized and fragmented as its urban environment" (2012:14). By looking at these re-fusing performances, says Wilford, analysis can move beyond the elaboration of "effective marketing campaigns" that religious economists focus on and uncover the spiritual meaning and self-transformative moments that make the megachurch space so vital for so many people.

Wilford's case study is theoretically dense and highlights the influence of social geography in the megachurch phenomenon. Explaining the connections between macro-structures and mezzo-level performances, he makes a strong argument for seeing the megachurch as an amalgamation of secular and religious dramaturgies. The charismatic leader Rick Warren, however, Wilford relegates to the role of rhetorical reinforcement for this amalgamated performance, as Warren mixes evangelical religious tropes with suburban themes of individual self-development. Wilford comes close to making all aspects of the megachurch subservient to the individualistic moulds of postsuburban space and downplays the countervailing communitarian dimension of evangelical culture. Omri Elisha's ethnography of two Kentucky megachurches, for example, centres on evangelical moral ambition rooted in the justice and peace of "the kingdom of God," leading him to argue that "American evangelicalism cannot and should not be reduced categorically to notions of individualism" (2011:21). Kingdom theology presses members to "expand their cultural influence and authority" and "complicate (but not completely erase) the conventional boundaries of religion and secularity" (2011:212, 220). Religious and secular performances blur in the megachurch—as they do in most modern religious institutions—and one set of performances should not be reduced to a

form of the other, as Wilford implies. Furthermore, could not postsuburban structures be not just corrosive of faith, but also function as the vehicle of its adaptation and proliferation?

In sum, research shows an affinity between evangelical megachurches and performance theory, but so far no studies have specifically used Goffman or extended the dramaturgical metaphor to a study of the megachurch leader and his co-creators. Some studies have brought Goffman's dramaturgical concepts to bear on studies of leadership in management studies (Gardner and Avolio 1998; Sosik, Avolio, and Jung 2002; Sharma and Grant 2011) and in the study of new religious movements (Joose 2006, 2012). These studies will inform my own analysis of Bruxy Cavey in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

The significance of the dramaturgical model lies in its explanatory power regarding the mechanism by which charismatic authority is transmitted to others. My model claims that it is not magic, brainwashing, or the result of some psychological weakness on behalf of followers—such as unresolved issues with one's father that are projected onto the leader that generate the charismatic bond (Camic 1980; Kets de Vries 1988; Lindholm 1990). Rather it is entering into the dramatic production—first as audience, then as participant, and finally as committed volunteer and evangelist—that draws people into identifying with the language, symbols, and narratives that animate the charismatic bond. The dramatic elements—props, characters, scripts, and scene—carry the charisma through the immediate presence and performance of the leader, but also via their dissemination through electronic media to attentive followers. The aesthetic experience of the play catalyzes a suspension of disbelief, and attendees are caught up in the drama and the charismatic aura that it carries. Charisma is an energy, a legitimated power, that entertains and enlivens followers by giving them pleasure, meaning and a mission for their lives.

Performing Three Types of Authority in the Megachurch

This chapter has highlighted two general approaches in the literature on megachurches: one stream that emphasizes the rationalizing forces of capitalist enterprise and its manifestation in megachurch development and leadership, which takes the form of characterizing the pastor as a calculating CEO figure or “pastorpreneur”; and a second stream of analysis that gives singular explanatory weight to the power of the pastor's charismatic authority. While I argue that the second approach better explains why people are primarily drawn to megachurches in such larger numbers, the term “charisma” is used carelessly in various ways. Three ways in particular I tease out are as follows: spiritual, situational, and contrived meanings. While all three have value for megachurch research, my model brings the situational and contrived meanings together under the rubric of a “dramatic web.”

There have been studies of charismatic megachurch leaders and performance analyses of megachurches but no dramaturgical analyses of charismatic megachurch leaders and their inner circle of co-creators. Because megachurch life and architecture revolve so much around performances, a dramaturgical analysis of a celebrity pastor is apt and will uncover narratives, symbols and rituals that would not be as visible within a framework of religious economy. Using Goffman's dramaturgical concepts especially will allow for a detailed and nuanced approach to the social life and identity of Bruxy Cavey and his church.

In sum, charismatic authority is a social phenomenon; a legitimated, asymmetrical power relationship between a leader and followers based on the recognition of "gifts of grace" in the leader. These charismatic relations are best understood as a "dramatic web"—a theatrical production whose narratives, images, language and practises draw an audience into participatory roles which empower them in the midst of some cultural tension. Various media distribute and magnify the performance, expanding its influence while simultaneously making it vulnerable to critique and dissolution. This approach will be fleshed out through the rest of the dissertation and applied to the case of The Meeting House megachurch and its pastor Bruxy Cavey.

This summary combines aspects of all three kinds of charisma, but because its core reference is leadership, it leans most heavily on Weber's meaning. It includes the perception of charisma as a divine gift, which was included in Weber but originates in Greek narratives and New Testament texts. What is not in Weber explicitly⁷⁸ is the role of media in intensifying, expanding, and potentially challenging charismatic authority. This production point of the charismatic diamond receives concentrated consideration in celebrity studies, which I will reference on occasion along with organizational studies. In effect, I am suggesting that both cultural (celebrity studies) and social (organization studies) aspects of megachurches are important for a full understanding of their charismatic leadership, and a dramaturgical approach encompasses both. Charisma for my purposes is always charisma₂ but is ambivalently blurred by the culture of charisma₃.

One additional point: few of the writers of megachurches take into account the role of traditional authority, Weber's third type of cultural authority. This at first makes sense, as charismatic authority and rational-legal authority often function to eclipse traditional authority. Moreover, in a broad assessment of megachurches in the United States, Thumma and Travis (2007:31) maintain that the trend in most megachurches veers towards non-denominational status, a good indicator that both history and tradition are being downplayed, if not denied. Yet, of the four different types of

⁷⁸ Weber's concept of routinization certainly gives a rubric under which to place mediation. But Weber's optimistic view of charismatic authority lacks the critical perspective that comes with media and celebrity studies.

megachurches they list, only the first type, “old-line/program based” (about 30% of megachurches) would be potentially drawing on traditional lines of authority. The other three types (seeker, charismatic/pastor-focused, and new wave/re-envisioned) all have some anti-traditional posture forming the core of their vision.

Things are different in Canada and have been for much of its history, as tradition and innovation work in more of a dialectic—not as weighted to innovation as the United States, nor as weighted to tradition, as in Europe (Grant 1998:209). In this light it is not surprising that from a list of the 21 Canadian megachurches,⁷⁹ more than 60 percent are connected with denominations, and generally the denomination is evangelical in character. The Meeting House is no exception in this trend, as it regularly champions its connection to the Brethren in Christ and unapologetically touts its Anabaptist values. This link to tradition exists in tension with rationalizing impulses in the church, as strict positions on pacifism, for example, limit their potential membership market. But it simultaneously lends legitimacy to the group in the context of the wider tradition-friendly and peace-keeping oriented Canadian public and can even add to its charismatic presence. Being Anabaptist, as I discuss in chapter 5, connects TMH with popular TV shows and books about the Amish and actually adds to the church’s romantic “counter-cultural” appeal.

Thus, a modified version of Weber’s typology of authority will help keep my analysis of leadership in the megachurch within broad sociological categories and prevent it from falling into a myopic singularity of focus—either towards reductive rationalization or charismatic determinism. Rationalization and charismatic authority engage in a dialectical relationship, as charisma becomes routinized and encroaching rationalization can elicit charismatic disruption; only rarely is one without the other (Shils 1965). Using a metaphor of theatre and corresponding dramaturgical analysis will help keep Weber’s three types of authority in view, as theatrical performances, centred in the charisma of the actors, are usually constructed with the support of both tradition and bureaucratic procedures. The next chapter introduces the three contextual elements of the charismatic diamond as they shape the dramatic web of charismatic authority: the social setting, the creators (Cavey and his co-producers with their various media), and the various audiences. The three chapters following investigate the performance proper and relate the ways in which the four elements of the diamond interact to create, expand and disrupt the charismatic authority of Bruxy Cavey.

⁷⁹ <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/canadian-megachurches.html>. Accessed April 13, 2015. Bird (2015) claims there are 50 megachurches in Canada now.

Chapter 3

Introducing the Scene and its Characters

“[Canadian Protestants] are habitually overlooked. In spite of their historical dominance, they welcome invisibility, present an image of embarrassment, tolerate their belittlement by others, and quietly suffer neglect by scholars of religion.”

--C. T. McIntire (2012:76)

“Christianity has an image problem. If you’ve lived in America for very long, I doubt this surprises you.”

- David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (2007:11)

Building on Weber, my goal is to demonstrate how charismatic authority arises and spreads in a particular evangelical megachurch. I have investigated the equivocations around the use of the term “charismatic” and teased out three distinct understandings—“charismatic” as a divine gift to all Christians, as a circumstantial bond between a leader and their follower, and as a contrived media creation. I concluded that pieces of all three perspectives could be included in one dramaturgical understanding of charisma—that it is perceived as a divine gift that bonds a lead actor and his audience, enlarged through the magnifying effects of various media. In sum, charismatic authority today can blend different proportions of the images of saint, hero, and celebrity in their on-stage persona, even if the images clash at certain points.

In what follows, I introduce in more detail the three contributing elements of the charismatic diamond at TMH: the cultural context, Cavey and his co-creators, and the audience who show up at the rented theatres, eagerly taking notes of his teachings, and sharing their enthusiasm with their social networks. These various elements in the production and distribution of Cavey’s charismatic authority are not necessarily discrete entities, as audience and intermediaries, for example, often overlap when attendees carry TMH narrative through word of mouth and their own social media activities. However, the analytical distinction between elements clarifies the sociological theme that charisma is not simply a personality trait, but a relationship generating a production mediated in a specific cultural context.

How do the four elements of the diamond relate to each other? As I explained in chapter 1, this is a complex question, and different moments in a performance would weigh disproportionately on the various elements of the diamond. How they operate together can only be elaborated through

the details of the particular situation, and thus generalizations can only be cautiously suggested. The particular performances I examine in subsequent chapters best demonstrate the dynamics *in situ*. For now, our model suggests that the socio-cultural context sets up conditions for charisma to arise, and the charismatic leader dramatizes some issue or tension within that context. The audience, however, must resonate with the performance, recognizing the talent and vision of the star's persona, which simultaneously motivates strategic intermediaries to intensify, package, and promulgate the charismatic perception. In TMH context, Bruxy Cavey leads a megachurch of thousands because he offers people a vision, propagated by media-savvy technicians who organize venues for his message, amplifying his voice and image as it resonates in the cultural moment with an audience who feels inspired and empowered by his message and mission in their everyday lives.

3.1 Socio-Cultural Setting: The Stigmatization of (Evangelical) Religion in Canada

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical scheme was structured with three "regions" or settings/stages with respect to the performance: the front stage, backstage, and "outside," which includes places where audience and actors meet that is neither front stage nor backstage. My dramatic web, however, insists on the importance of a broader context to the performance, the socio-cultural setting of the performance, or cultural scene, which sets the stage for the meaning of the performance and influences shifts in its structure and content (Zilber et al. 2008). Jeffrey Alexander argues that effective cultural action fuses all the aspects of a performance together—actors, scene, audience, and background culture—but when the background culture does not support the local performance, a "defusion" occurs that weakens the performance (Alexander 2004, 2006; Cordero 2008:532; Wilford 2012). The goal then is to "re-fuse" local performances to larger cultural meanings in order to give them the character of authenticity.

I will suggest that this fracture in the performance connects with what Weber said about the conditions for charismatic authority. Weber explained that charisma is strongest in the context of social crises—"times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress" (Weber 1968:18). When social tensions rise and people feel anxious or uncertain, they look for someone who can empower them with a vision of a hopeful future. The charismatic leader becomes the hero with extraordinary gifts who compels people to follow and obey as part of a journey towards a new social order.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Willner (1984) qualifies the crisis criteria for charismatic authority, saying it may be constructed by the leader as much as it can be evident in sociological or political upheaval. Conger (1989), speaking from within management studies, suggests an opportunity could be just as efficacious for charisma as a crisis. For Ingram (2013) a crisis is

For attendees in the urban centres of southern Ontario, one significant part of the cultural context includes the fragmentation of postsuburban life—the mobility, the disconnection from the land and extended family, and the cosmic sense of “homelessness” (Berger 1974; Taylor 2007; Wilford 2010). I will describe this lifestyle in more detail later in the chapter. Here I focus more specifically on the demographic that attends TMH—conservative Christians—and I contend that Cavey supplies his attendees in Ontario with an identity that assuages their stigmatization in broader Canadian culture. His appearance, teaching, and praxis offer a more desirable religious identity in a context where evangelicalism meets with indifference, ignorance and, at times disdain. His ability to address this tension strengthens the charismatic bond he has with his followers. Conversely, without this context, Cavey’s appearance, his frequent references to popular culture, and his entire “irreligious” message would have significantly less charismatic appeal.

Erving Goffman defined stigmatization as a social identity that includes a perceived undesirable attribute, a shortcoming or failing that taints them, discounts them, and discredits them if discovered (1969:3). This “spoiled identity” causes constant tension for those in stigmatized environments as they have to manage information about themselves or be exposed. To establish that Canadian culture could be perceived as such a stigmatizing environment for religious institutions and evangelicals in particular, I will briefly lay out some historical shifts and cultural commentaries that suggest evangelical marginalization and disparagement.

On the broadest historical landscape, Charles Taylor (2007) has said Canadians are part of a larger shift into a “secular age”—meaning not only differentiation of religious authority from many social institutions or a general decline in belief but also the problematizing of belief itself. That is to say, the conditions of the age are such that belief not only becomes difficult, but disbelief for many becomes the default option (2007:14). Taylor writes as an academic in Quebec, and this social location conditions his conclusion that belief has become problematic; but it is an assessment applicable to the world of the white, educated professionals who form the core of TMH in Ontario. It is the same constituency of Peter Emberley’s 350 interviewees in his qualitative study of Canadian spirituality who, Emberley contends, are jaded by the church’s legacy with regards to women, gays and lesbians, and children under its care, and are left with “a staggering erosion of confidence in institutionalized religion” (Emberley 2002:12).

vital, and includes a breakdown of tradition, conditions of uncertainty, and a threatening “other.” Tucker (1968) insists that the leader’s promise of deliverance in the face of distress “may be the quality that most of all underlies their charisma and explains the extreme devotion and loyalty that they inspire in their followers.” Dryer (1987) comes closest to what I interpret to be the case at TMH: its not that the whole culture need be in crisis but “specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture”—specific ideological configurations irritating specific audiences, especially those who experience role/identity conflict and pressure. A celebrity or star can embody or “be” some social tension of the day.

Surveys of religious belief and church attendance confirm the trend. Reginald Bibby, after years of documenting the “fragmenting gods” (1987), and increasingly “unknown gods” of Canadians (1993), suggested a “renaissance” in the making (2004); but he withdrew that thesis in a later publication in favour of postulating increased polarization in Canada instead (2011:837).⁸¹ One indicator of this polarization would be the recent popularity of the “new atheist” bestsellers in Canada (Dawkins 2008; Hitchens 2009), who have not been shy in their declaration of faith as delusional and poisonous to “everything.” The trend includes the younger generation as well: while 12 percent of teens in 1984 described themselves as “religious nones,” in 2008 the number jumped to 32 percent (Bibby 2009:32). A more recent paper published by McMaster Divinity School professors summarizes it this way: “the prospects for Christianity in Canada, and more broadly in the West, are bleak” (Studebaker and Beach 2012).

In terms of evangelicals in Canada specifically, the last hundred years have radically shifted their status on the national landscape. Mark Noll (2006) notes a “great reversal” in North American religious history: while Canada in the 18th century displayed a “more radical, more anarchistic, and more populist” evangelicalism than the United States (Rawlyk 1996:11; see also Gauvreau 1991), it now lags behind its southern neighbour with regards to the percentage of church attendance and general Christian cultural influence. Similarly, over the last century, Canadian evangelicals in particular have lost a large degree of the confidence and appeal experienced by their religious cousins in the United States. For one thing, the majority religion has been Roman Catholicism in Canada, and that counter-balances any Protestant or evangelical hegemony. Additionally, since the sixties and the subsequent shift to an officially multicultural country the Christian religion as a whole has suffered a loss of “power, popularity, and prestige” (Bruce 2002) that effectively moves the nation into a post-Christian era (Miedema 2005).⁸² The Quiet Revolution in Quebec, which emptied the cathedral pews and effectively secularized government, media, and public education in the sixties, found a milder and more gradual compliment in English-speaking Canadian institutions. While the residue of Christian privilege can be found in some national institutional symbols, a process of de-Christianization in Canadian institutions continues to disentangle Christian tradition from public institutions (Bramadat and Seljak 2008:13). In a comparative study of U.S. and Canadian congregations, Lydia Bean concludes Canadian evangelicals are embattled like their U.S. evangelical

⁸¹ Putnam and Campbell (2010) document a similar polarization in the U.S.A. Bishop (2009) calls it “the big sort” that clusters like-minded people into particular U.S. regions.

⁸² Two symbolic indicators of the weight of Christianity in recent Canadian history: Gary Miedema describes how until the early sixties the CBC morning news (Toronto) included a ten-minute devotion led by a Christian clergyman and how Dutch atheist immigrants were deported back to the Netherlands in 1964 because, as the judge said, “The things we believe in this country stand for Christianity” (2005:16).

neighbours (see Smith 1998), but “embattled as a *religious minority*, in tension with Canadian society as a whole” (Bean 2014:110, emphasis in original). Reimer and Wilkinson (2015:37) elaborate on various tensions evangelicals cope with in everyday life, and they compare evangelical congregations with both a linguistic minority (citing theologian Jonathan Wilson 2007) and a cognitive minority (Berger 1970)—both of which suggest the need to continually maintain boundaries and socialize members regarding insider rules and values.

To be clear, this does not mean I hold to the full-scale “secularization theory” (Bruce 2002). My sympathies lie more with Casanova (1994), who sees a process of differentiation operating at the national level—not assuming that religiosity itself is waning across the modern world. My point more narrowly contends that the Christian faith has lost its previous institutional privilege in Canada—especially in politics, media, and the academy. A telling indicator of this shift is journalist Marci MacDonald’s book *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada* (2010), which was widely received through the Canadian media circuit, capitalizes on fears that right-wing American “dominionism” poses an imminent threat to Canadian democracy through Canadian evangelical political mobilization.⁸³

American televangelist scandals and the political maneuverings of the Religious Right influence the perceptions of evangelicals in Canada (Thiessen 2015:99, 139). General public perceptions of “fundamentalists” (the same term often used to refer to Muslim extremists) can extend to evangelicals. One poll reports that Canadians are slightly more likely to vote for a Muslim Prime Minister than an evangelical one (Todd 2008b). Canadian evangelical religious studies professor John Stackhouse says evangelicals are viewed as “fast-talking, money-hustling television preachers. Pushy, simplistic proselytizers. Dogmatic, narrow-minded know-it-alls. Straight-laced, thin-lipped kill-joys.” That is not the worst of it, either; evangelicals are perceived as “right-wing, and... American” (Stackhouse 2005).⁸⁴ Evangelical convictions regarding public issues such as abortion and homosexuality foster a “chilly climate” for them (Stackhouse 2011), as demonstrated by recent legal action against Trinity Western University (Rhodes 2015).

Canadian evangelicals and their congregations remain vital institutions—more so than mainline equivalents (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015). Modest estimates put evangelicals at a stable 8 percent of the Canadian population (Bibby 2006) but if one includes Catholics and mainline

⁸³ Wilkinson and Reimer’s (2015) study of evangelical congregations shows that political mobilization is a low priority for them. McKeen (2015) offers an in-depth critique of MacDonald’s book through an investigation of the Christian Heritage Party, who refuse to compromise their principles for political gain.

⁸⁴ A survey done by the Barna Group declared that Christianity in the U.S.A. suffers a similar “image problem.” Christians are perceived by Buster and Mosaic generations (those born after 1979) as hypocritical, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental (Kinnaman and Lyons 2007). Emerging Church participants respond with “an anxiety to avoid the stigma associated with conservative Christians” (Marti and Ganiel 2014:59).

Protestants with evangelical attitudes in the statistics, the number rises to 16 percent (Rawlyk 1996:224) and more generously by another poll up to 19 percent of the population—almost one in five Canadians (Todd 2005).⁸⁵ Moreover, some scholars voice concern about the vestiges of Christian privilege in public institutions, which they labour to expunge (Beaman 2003; Beyer 2013).

Despite such lingering advantage, Canadian evangelicals generally know they are not a celebrated presence in the Canadian media (Haskell 2009) or internationally (Marshall et al. 2008; Olasky and Smith 2013). An indication of this posture towards evangelicals on the political level includes the failure of the Christian Heritage Party since its founding in 1987 to gain significant public recognition and support, let alone a single seat in the Canadian Parliament (McKeen 2015). Telling as well was the ridicule and political failure of Stockwell Day as an “out of the closet” evangelical when he was elected leader of the Canadian Alliance Party in 2000. Public commentators heavily criticized his beliefs concerning gay marriage and mocked his young earth creationism; within a year he was ousted as leader of the party (Haskell 2009:28).

North American evangelicals remain intensely scrutinized in the secular academy as well. Bramadat (2000) and Zawadzki (2008) both studied evangelical student groups on public university campuses in Ontario. Bramadat noted both “bridge” and “fortress” strategies employed by the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship group at McMaster University. While their faith led them to make bridges to those outside their group, the secular context of the university left them feeling besieged. Zawadzki noticed more of the latter in her study and characterized evangelical student experience as “strain” and stigmatization, using the conceptual framework of Agnew (1992) and Goffman (1963) respectively. Zawadzki says student lifestyle issues pertaining to alcohol consumption and sexual activity are part of the experience of strain, but the academic bias against conservative Christians is more foundational to their university experience.⁸⁶ Anthropologist Susan Harding writes of the “otherness” put on fundamentalists (a term often conflated with evangelicals in popular media), whom some academics parody, characterizing them as “aberrant, usually backwards, hoodwinked versions of modern subjects” (1991:373; see also Ault 2004; Lee and Sinitiere 2009:6; Fletcher 2013). Paul Bramadat concurs in his ethnography of Canadian evangelical students, adding that one might alternately view evangelicals as “religious and cultural innovators”—as *bricoleurs* who are working in the midst of dynamic tension with the dominant secular milieu to forge, piecemeal, something new

⁸⁵ In a different article from the one listed above, Todd puts the number at 8-10 percent of Canadians (2011). Bibby tallies evangelicals by denominational identification and labels them as “conservative Christians” (1987, 2004).

⁸⁶ Zawadzki says hostility to Christianity in particular on campus causes students to hide their faith: “Censoring themselves in front of recent acquaintances is a way to ensure that their Christianity does not become entangled in the popular stereotypes” (2008:73).

(2000:147). Such tinkering is not unique to evangelicals, but that is precisely the point; they are as much modern subjects as many other religious groups.

Evangelicals can overstate their feelings of being discredited; Canadian Muslims, atheists and religious nones can feel stigmatized as well (Thiessen 2015:97). Religion writer for the *Vancouver Sun*, Douglas Todd has said, “there is even some truth to it, in terms of Evangelicals being somewhat stigmatized. But sometimes I think it's overdone” (Todd 2008a); in fact, he has elsewhere called it a “persecution complex” (Todd 2011). Having a long-standing Prime Minister associated with evangelicalism could be viewed as one symbolic challenge to an argument for their marginalization; but similar to Zawadzki’s Christian student subjects at a public university, Stephen Harper knows very well to keep his faith private, even if evangelism forms the heart of his tradition (Todd 2008b). In sum, evangelical stigmatization carries some ambiguity; it is not as severe as evangelicals perceive it to be, but perception directs the negotiation of their identity and the impression management displayed in their public communications. In fact, this “crisis” of evangelical identity is, in part at least, a social construction that evangelicals co-produce and which pastors such as Cavey highlight in their vision for revolutionary change (Ellingson 2007).

Bibby (2011:118) summarizes the Canadian scene in words that act as an appropriate preface to Bruxy Cavey’s message and mission: “While religion has been scorned and stigmatized and rejected by many, spirituality has known something of celebrity status.” Canadian ambivalence towards religion, and evangelicalism in particular, provides the cultural context for Cavey’s “irreligious” vision.⁸⁷ Goffman (1963) maintained that the experience of stigmatization draws the stigmatized into small solidarity groups, which often designate someone who is a little more vocal, a little better known, or a little more connected to become the group representative. Such a professional spokesperson will advocate for the group among outsiders by trying, among other things, to soften the social labeling, and model for the group how to “pass” for a normal person (1963:24, 134). He or she provides them with a “code”—instructions on how to manage tensions and impressions when among others (1963:109-111). This representative leader for some Ontario Christians is Bruxy Cavey, who is well-aware that outsiders easily associate conservative churches with stereotypes of angry, judgmental, politically ambitious, right-wing fundamentalist Christians. In order to cultivate legitimacy in the cultural context of the Greater Toronto Area, his religious performance needs to manage the stigma not only of being religious in Canada, but specifically of being a conservative evangelical Christian group centred around a charismatic leader.

⁸⁷ This is not to say that this cultural context has created Cavey and his vision, but his religious innovation is not independent of that context. In Weberian terms, this strategic counter-performance has an “elective affinity” with social structures (Berger 1963:950).

Do Meeting House attendees feel this stigmatization? Ambiguity about one's identity has been considered a significant source of stress that is conducive to charismaticization (Ingram 2013:50-62). My interviewees consistently avoided not only the identity of "evangelical" but also "Christian" and most certainly "religious." One young female attendee said she used to call herself an evangelical but then the term "apparently got a bad connotation" so she's warming to the label "Christ follower." Another young couple suggested the term "Jesus follower" fit them best. A young male Home Church leader skirted the question of labels altogether; he said whenever he is asked about his faith, he asks the inquirer how they understand Jesus and then he would describe himself in relation to their answer.

When asked if they were "religious," an older couple responded saying they were instead "full of Grace." They explained they had lived in the U.S. for while and they had since distanced themselves from their evangelical Republican associations. "We're more interested in politicians and governments that take care of the poor," they explained. "Christ talked far more about the poor than he did about abortions... and I'm upset with evangelical Christians because they of all people should know better that Christ wants us to take care of the poor."

One final intimation of some shame associated with a conservative Christian identity came from a young real estate agent. She explained to me why it was such a relief to walk into a movie theatre Sunday morning rather than a church building where people would be speaking "Christianese." "It kinda keeps you normal if there is a kid sweeping up popcorn beside you," she said. "You aren't going to say weird stuff you don't even know the meaning of." Her husband then spoke of the trappings of "the Christian subculture, especially in the States," and how it distracts them from more important things. The casual attitude fostered by TMH, the young woman repeated, "keeps you normal."

Cavey does not name this crisis directly as I have stated it here. Cavey takes a broader and more theological approach that resonates with this social context but allows attendees to project their own experiences onto his definition of the situation. The crisis Cavey proclaims is that of "religion"—the taming of the scandalous message of Jesus into a conservative system, a "treadmill of legislated performances powered by guilt and fear" (2007:13). Cavey defines religion as "any reliance on systems or institutions, rules or rituals as our conduit to God" and he attaches it to legalism, judgmentalism, and violence, contrasting it with the celebration, love, and generosity of Jesus (2007:37). Religion is always baggage for Cavey, and their home web page has often introduced TMH with the opening line: "Are you burnt out on religion?" Religion is construed as a burden, tiresome or odd, and the church itself is complicit in losing the core message of joy and love in Jesus.

The vagueness of this specter of religion is significant for its widespread appeal, as it could apply to many different groups. Cavey does not name some sociologically definable “other”—like some charismatic leaders in radical Islamicist groups do (Ingram 2013). Rather, he keeps the enemy broad and amorphous, like some conservative women’s groups have done with the concept of “feminism” (L. Smith 2014). Yet his theological critiques are most consistently directed at American right-wing evangelicalism, a group with a clear stereotyped identity and a sufficiently broad influence to be connected with aspects of the religious career of most conservative Christians—whether through their own church or their experience with parachurch organizations. In sum, when Cavey speaks of the nefarious influence of legalistic, angry religion, he is signaling a crisis that conservative Christians recognize personally or from mass media. The promise to “wreck religion” (as one teaching series was titled in 2013) asserts charismatic authority against traditional authority, and the hippie-like “subversive spirituality of Jesus” (the subtitle of his 2007 book) provides the remedy to the crisis of “religion.” This vision acts as a balm for the identity crisis of conservative Christians in Ontario.

3.2 The Creator and Star: Bruxy Cavey’s Mythological Rise, Fall and Redemption

Having set the cultural scene, the script writer, director, and lead performer now enters—Bruxy Cavey. Before he has even uttered a word, his hippie style reveals his mission, and the stage—a dark movie theatre or warehouse converted into a theatre—suggests his middle-class de-churched audience. He is known as a leader in Canadian evangelical subculture, but his long hair, earrings, thumb rings, T-shirt and jeans associate him with the counter-culture rather than the clean-cut suit and tie stereotype of evangelical preachers. Cavey has fashioned himself as an icon, model, and visionary for a “church for people not into church” and more specifically I claim, as an evangelical for those not into evangelicalism. He models a way to be normal.

I will not, however, directly connect Cavey to the cultural setting at this point; in this section I give background to his role as creator of the drama and lay the foundation for his charismatic performance. Cavey is a charismatic leader in the Weberian sense—core members recognize him to have extraordinary abilities, and they feel obligated to follow his challenge against the rules and rituals of institutional religion. They would also insist in line with St. Paul that Cavey’s teaching abilities, are not just exemplary—they are a divine gift intended for service in the church community. Finally, a dimension of Cavey’s charismatic authority overlaps with his role as an evangelical celebrity: he is a person who is also a media commodity, and he is packaged and broadcast transnationally and has “intimate strangers” who are his fans (Schickel 2000). These three layers of charismatic presence reinforce each other as long as people continue to be devoted to Cavey.

Charismatic authority is a performance, and drama is driven by story. Because the stage or the screen mediates most people's first encounter with Cavey, it is vital that celebrity studies sheds light on Cavey's charisma. Neal Gabler (2009) has argued that national celebrities, as shallow and salacious as some of their lives may be, provide narratives that bring meaning to life, distract people from their difficulties, and unite a politically and socially fragmented nation. While Gabler's contention that celebrity is the "great new art form" claims more than necessary for his thesis, the more modest assertion that celebrity functions as the social glue that crosses all lines of stratification, worldview and geography—giving diverse citizen groups something in common to talk about—holds more promise. The hook ups and break-ups, the scandals and suicides, the fame, frauds and fortune provide stories people voyeuristically enjoy, vicariously live out, or disdain with self-righteous zeal. "Celebrities don't have narratives," he maintains, "celebrity is narrative... The size of the celebrity is in direct proportion to the novelty and excitement of the narrative" (2009:30). Fiction has always laboured to give the impression of credibility to be "believable." Celebrity does not require such work; celebrities have the immediacy of real life action in which something is always at stake, and fans are often left waiting for the next installment of the celebrity saga. "That is how celebrity works—as a kind of endless daisy chain that amuses us, unifies us, and even occasionally educates us" (Gabler 2009).

Gabler argues that celebrity has become "cultural kudzu" and the best of celebrity stories provide us with life lessons, capture the cultural moment, give us a glimpse of transcendence or inspire us. Cavey is a far cry from the inanities of Paris Hilton; but even as a subcultural celebrity (Ferris 2010) who is reticent to talk too much about himself, Cavey is carried along by media events that highlight his latest teaching or commentary, and he is subject to the dynamics of the stagecraft that accompanies the production of a transnationally broadcast performance. Less salacious and nobler celebrities such as Cavey can have their marketers focus the main story on their message, talent, example and success. Celebrity can elevate others in its best moments—as Mother Teresa, Barack Obama, or Bono are examples of more socially responsible celebrities who challenge the derogatory meanings of "celebrity" with their social activism and heroism.⁸⁸

In what follows I will recount a few of the stories about Bruxy Cavey as they come from a variety of sources: from Cavey in his teachings, in interviews with me, and from attendees who share

⁸⁸ Jeffrey Alexander chronicles how the 2008 U.S. election campaign was determined by a symbolic struggle over which presidential candidate would retain the image of "hero." Republicans narrated John McCain as a national war hero while airing an ad that characterized Obama as a pampered, superficial "celebrity." "It is poetics not economic power," says Alexander, "that makes [the ad's] performative success great" (2010a:415). The ad did do symbolic damage to Obama, but Obama and his advisors corrected his presentation style in time to re-take the image of cultural hero and win the election.

the stories and become carriers of the charismatic narrative. While there are many stories to choose from, I have documented the ones that approximate the cultural mythology of celebrity: discovery and rise, tragic fall, comeback and redemption (Goodman 2010; see also Alexander 2010b; Carroll 2010). The mystique of this narrative structure intensifies charisma as it spreads through the ranks of followers. This section also serves as an introduction to the life of Cavey and demonstrates his grooming as a performer and his ironic perspective on his own life.

A. Discovery and Rise

Cavey's birth story is certainly worthy of a prophet. It begins with his brother Stephen, a sibling he never met. Stephen was six years old and playing outside one day when his mother Lois noticed a small lump under his arm. Investigation proved that he had cancer spreading through his growing body. He underwent numerous cancer tests and treatments for the next six years until he finally and tragically died at age twelve. "Half his life he battled cancer," reflects Cavey when telling the story to his Sunday audience.

Fred and Lois Cavey were finished having children—they had their last daughter in 1956 and it was now 1963. They were in their 40s by then with three daughters. One day after Stephen's heartbreaking death, Cavey describes how his family met around the kitchen table—to vote about having another baby in the family. They all voted yes except his sister Cathy, who "wanted to stay the youngest in the family." "I've never forgiven her," jokes Cavey. She would be overruled, and as Cavey himself puts it, "Baby Bruxy won the vote." Within the next year, Timothy Bruce ("Bruxy") was born to the family in the city of Montreal, 1965.

"I wouldn't be alive today if someone didn't die," asserts Cavey in a teaching given at a Christian leadership conference in Columbus, Ohio, 2013. "I am living my life for two boys. I was [my mother's] miracle child." He will from time to time refer to the fact that so many people in his family have had cancer—including his siblings, parents, and other relatives—he is nervously poised to receive the same diagnosis someday. "We've had the conversation with our daughters" he explained to attendees in a 2010 teaching on suffering, emphasizing how the threat of pain and death is a constant companion in life.

Such a dramatic story adds to the special status of Cavey as the charismatic community leader. He is charmed with a remarkable birth story, one bathed in the terminology of sacrifice and substitution and thus precariousness surrounds his continued existence. These stories function to reinforce his charismatic status, even if he appears to be casually sharing a poignant personal illustration.

Cavey grew up showered with attention from his three older sisters, though Cavey will often add with his characteristic self-deprecating humour, “getting hand-me-downs was a drag.” Cavey soon moved with the family to Scarborough, where he would attend the People’s Church Christian Academy—the school associated with the large and prominent People’s Church. The church has a long history in Toronto, stretching back to its founder, the charismatic Oswald J. Smith in 1928 and continuing successfully under his son, Paul B. Smith, and now under the popular preacher Charles Price (Stackhouse 1993). On Sundays, the Caveys attended Agincourt Pentecostal Church, another growing megachurch a few kilometres from People’s Church.⁸⁹

Cavey thrived at church and school. He won numerous speaking contests at school, switched to a public high school and started a Christian student club, became a leader in his youth group, and participated in street evangelism in Toronto. His street evangelism including preaching, but more often than not it included some performance art, such as a skit or break-dancing. The role of emcee was embraced by Cavey, and he would introduce their performances, but not without some trepidation. “I remember the moment before I would grab the attention of the crowds,” he said in one interview. “I thought: ‘Right now I’m just one of the crowd, but in a second I’ll be disturbing the scene with talk about Jesus.’ It was weird.”

Agincourt Pentecostal was not unlike many Pentecostal churches in the eighties—a place where prophetic talk was common, warnings of the end times punctuated evangelistic messages, and speaking in tongues was integral to Sunday worship. When I asked Cavey whether he had personally experienced any miraculous encounters—such as healings, visions, or speaking in tongues, he said no. In fact, he explained how many in his church tried to facilitate a second baptism in the Holy Spirit for him without success. One well-meaning lady prayed intensely over him, switching from tongues to pleading for his reception of the gift and back again to tongues, and then finally directly urging him to just speak in tongues. He told her he knew quite well how to mimic the sounds he heard in church but a real filling of the Spirit should be more than mimicking. So he gave in to her request, repeating sounds he had heard before and the lady became ecstatic and called a small crowd over, and they all rejoiced that Bruxy had received the second baptism. Cavey himself was unconvinced and went to the youth pastor for some advice. The youth pastor was not sure what to say, and Cavey was left skeptical about the whole experience.

This was a significant moment in Cavey’s life—the beginnings of his deconversion (Harrold 2006; Bielo 2009). While conversion experiences, especially dramatic ones, have been known to

⁸⁹ People’s Church has 3000 attendees and Agincourt Pentecostal has 2370 attendees according to Warren Bird’s Leadership Network database of large churches in Canada, shared with me in April 2015.

reinforce charismatic authority (Storr 1996; Hong 2000), deconversion can function similarly for a sympathetic audience. Without a definable second baptism in his biography, Cavey was lacking an experience central to the Pentecostal understanding of the Christian life. He thus understood himself to be disqualified from leadership in the Pentecostal denomination. He was determined to make his life about telling others about Jesus, but he was resigned that it would not be while in the position of preacher. Some pressed him to consider it in spite of his lacking tongues, but to Cavey this would be making a lie the foundation of his ordination.

Cavey went on from high school to York University, obtaining a B.A. in psychology. He avoided student life at York, the large concrete commuter campus hardly an invitation to community and faith. After that he completed a Masters in Theological Studies at Ontario Theological Seminary (now Tyndale Seminary), but he by-passed the Masters of Divinity degree, which is the expected degree for future preachers, as he had no ambition for the pastoral role. He also wanted to evade taking Greek, which was not required for the MTS as it was for the M.Div. He reports an intense love affair with Calvinism at this time, as he admired the professors' introduction to the teachings of the Reformation and Calvin's own "beautiful theological system" (as he calls it).

He continued to participate in different forms of Christian ministry, working part-time as a leader with "4 CRYING OUT LOUD!"—a performance art troupe that specialized in drama, dance, and mime. He also was the lead singer, song writer, and eventually bass player for a band that also took on the same name. "I don't know much about music," he confessed, "but I would hum out the various parts I saw for the various instruments, and we would go from there. The others were real musicians."

Cavey did some promotion work for World Vision at this time, helping schools and groups organize a 30-hour famine, a fundraiser for World Vision's international work in poverty relief. He became known through evangelical networks in Ontario, and church and para-church invited him to speak at various venues. He spoke at Heritage Fellowship Baptist Church in Ancaster one day in 1991, and some elders afterwards approached him, saying they been looking for new preacher for a few years and they would like to interview him. There were about 100-150 people attending there at the time, and they had just survived the scandal of a pastor who left his wife for another woman, so they were recovering and looking for a new leader.

In my interview with Cavey, he once again emphasized how his trajectory was set away from the career of pastor, suggesting both divine intervention and his own delight at the irony of his life's vocation. This is a story that some of the longstanding Meeting Housers know well. So in conversation with the elders of this church Cavey explained this was not his goal, and how he didn't own a suit and had never taken a single course in homiletics.

“Well,” they persisted, “buying a suit is not a difficult thing.”

“Furthermore,” one elder pressed home to him, “we will only hire you on the condition you promise to never take a course in homiletics.”

“OK,” replied Cavey. “But I’m too young” (he was 26 at the time).

“You’re wise beyond your years,” replied an elder.

Cavey was reluctant, but he remained open to the possibility because his integrity was not at stake as it would be if it were a Pentecostal church. Speaking in tongues was not expected in Baptist theology. His conscience was free to accept. Cavey took the job in 1991 with a one-year probationary period, and the church immediately started growing. News of the intelligent and humorous hippie preacher in Ancaster soon spread around the region through word of mouth, and within a few years, attendance rose from over one hundred to one thousand, and the church shifted Sunday services over to the 970-seat auditorium at Redeemer University College a kilometre down the road. Cavey was a Canadian evangelical celebrity on the rise.

B. Tragic Fall

The mystique offered in the romance of rising fame is intensified with a fall from grace. Goodman (2010) says celebrities may succumb to the illusion of invincibility, impervious to the precariousness of their status; stars must fall, he adds, and “supernova means explosion.”

It was late 1995, as Cavey tells it, and his burgeoning Sunday congregation was full of excitement and promise. Behind the scenes, however, he suffered marital breakdown. His wife Sharon had been unfaithful; the first time, her affair was handled internally with elders and both reparative and preventative measures put in place. Nevertheless, a second affair followed, and on this occasion she insisted she wanted out of the marriage. The church leadership offered a full-year paid sabbatical for Cavey, during which he might heal and re-calibrate his ministry. He was devastated and felt he could no longer remain as pastor at the Baptist church—nor any church, for that matter. The divorce went against his own biblical ethics, and he felt disgraced and so left the ministry altogether in early 1996. He was unemployed, unmarried, and anticipating work in some other profession.

Within a few short weeks of his exit, Sunday attendance numbers were back down to their pre-Cavey levels, and the congregation returned to its original church building down the road. Many followers were disillusioned, so suddenly bereft of their charismatic leader and the excitement that surrounded his burgeoning congregation. I sent emails to Heritage Baptist Church in 2014, hoping to hear the story from an insider at the time of Cavey’s resignation. I did talk with one elder who verified

the gist of Cavey's story, described the pain that still surrounded the event, and recommended I not contact other witnesses of that part of their history. He said the memories still caused hurt.

This disruption in Cavey's ministry forms an important part of the congregational lore at TMH. Although personal testimonies—especially narratives of pain or struggle—are endemic to evangelical faith (Meigs 1995; Harding 2001; Hindmarsh 2005), Cavey rarely speaks of his divorce. If Cavey does mention his divorce publicly, it is with few details, lurid or otherwise, and he talks quite matter-of-factly about it as part of some larger theological point he wants to make. I attended a Home Church where the majority of attendees were divorced and had come as refugees from the church in which their divorce took place. My inquiries confirmed they were fully aware of Cavey's marital history. Additionally, there are a few select teaching documents on specific theological issues available on their main website, namely gay marriage, dancing, biblical interpretation, and divorce. In this short on-line document Cavey names his own divorced status, but tells only the story of his theological shift to accept divorce as a Christian option, not the circumstances of his divorce. The fact that this information is available on the website—and is so readily available as part of the gossip in the church—makes it a vital moment in the biography of the church's main figure.

C. Recovery and Redemption

Cavey's fortunes soon changed after he left Heritage Baptist Church. He was approached in spring 1996 by the regional bishop of the Brethren in Christ denomination (BIC) and asked if he would consider a pastoral position at a decade-old church plant in Oakville. From the way Cavey tells it, when the hiring committee interviewed him for the job they offered him the position of senior pastor. He knew enough about his organizational skills and interests to request that he be hired only for teaching and that another leader be hired to cover the administrative tasks of running a church. The board resisted, and declared that Cavey should take all the roles that church leadership requires. The conversation went back and forth until Cavey finally relented.

Cavey then explains what happened next with a mischievous grin: his first goal in the role of senior pastor was to find another person to take up the role of senior pastor so he could focus on the teaching. This begins his return to local celebrity status, and attendance at the church plant quickly began a steep incline. Within years, building renovations and multiple moves were necessary to accommodate the burgeoning crowds. In the early 2000s, satellite sites began to be added in various cities across southern Ontario and in 2007 the large warehouse on Bristol Circle was purchased and converted into a theatre-like auditorium with 1,200 seats. His book *The End of Religion* was published by Navigator Press in 2007 as well, and the book hit the Amazon bestseller list in Canada soon after.

These days were busy, full of change, growth, excitement, and promise—a wild roller coaster ride that parallels the experience of other young megachurches (Kuykendall 2011).

Cavey's redemption not only reflects in the numerical success of his new church, but also in his personal life, which is often public news for congregation members. The story of his second engagement has become part of the in-house lore of the church, and since it was captured on video camera, it was screened at the 25th anniversary of TMH in 2011. The story itself is unusual, as Nina, now his wife, proposed to him during the Sunday morning service in the regular question and answer session after Cavey's teaching (called "Q. and Eh?"). The reversal of traditional gender roles in this plucky proposal reinforces the growing lore around Cavey's character as a self-confessed "beta male." People find the whole proposal story unique and winsome, and it simultaneously buttresses his egalitarian teachings on gender roles.

Cavey consistently characterizes himself as uncomfortable in the limelight. I asked him what fuels his ambition for ministry and he immediately said, "Boy, it really sounds cliché, but its Jesus and the gospel... it would have to be some kind of cosmic pay-off to get me to do that each week." When I probed further, asking what got him out of bed on Sunday morning, he said, "Yeah, if I don't show up, that's not nice. That would just be a mean thing to do... People are counting on me to communicate clearly... if I don't show up, I'm failing my teammates." This reveals someone with deep religious convictions, and someone with strong allegiances to his followers. But it also suggests the psyche of a performer—someone who does not want to disappoint his audience. Cavey has lived much of his life on the stage, and performing has become a way of life.

I have argued for four variables as being necessary for charismatic leadership, but the central and most visible element is the charismatic leader. Cavey's appearance, teaching, and background story add significantly to his charismatic performance, forming its foundation, its mythology, and its appeal. Cavey's dramatic birth story, his deconversion from Pentecostalism, and his soaring success on the religiously skeptical Canadian landscape form the fabric of his popular appeal. Growing up in the shadows of two megachurches positions him as a second-generation megachurch leader (Hey 2013:275), and his numerous experiences in performance have prepared him well for the role. An in-depth analysis of his psychology, arising from his birth situation, birth order, and divorce are beyond the scope of this project, although similarities can be found with famous preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and Henry Ward Beecher, who also grew up with an audience of older women and basked in the attention (Applegate 2007; Marsden 2008). Cavey's sense of loss after leaving his Pentecostal roots seems negligible; in interviews with him, I sensed his divorce harboured a deeper wound, as he said shuttling his children back and forth with their birth mother each weekend was a constant reminder of his fallibility. He was suggesting this humbling experience kept his celebrity in check.

Nevertheless, his biography extends beyond his own subjective rendering of it, and it follows the three-fold typology common to celebrity—discovery and rise, tragic fall and recovery and redemption.

3.3 Stagecraft: Creating, Shaping, and Disseminating Charisma

While many see charismatic authority as arising from a triangle of leader, followers, and a specific cultural context, my approach argues that the leader is not the sole creator of the charismatic relationship. I emphasize the important role of electronic media and its operators, a move which directly connects charismatic authority with notions of celebrity (Boorstin 1961; Quebedeaux 1982; Schultze 1991; Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005; Bartholomew 2006; Rojek 2001; Rojek 2011; Ruddock 2013). It is through media that charismatic authority is generated, packaged and disseminated, and not just as a neutral tool of distribution but as a medium that shapes the image of the charismatic leader. It places leaders outside of their local milieus and into the context of a wider marketplace, alongside other celebrities with differing shades of notoriety and infamy. Once commodified and distributed, the images and stories become part of a public electronic canon from which attendees and seekers can choose what they want to engage. In an age of interactive media, it also allows people to be co-producers, creating and posting videos of Cavey that extoll him, or less frequently criticize him, satirize him and potentially undermine his charismatic authority⁹⁰ (Campbell 2010; Campbell and Teusner 2011; Bekkering 2015).

Celebrity pastors rely on media as much as other celebrities do. In this section I introduce some of the significant media components of TMH: the communications department, Cavey's bestselling book, the "electronic oral tradition" of podcasts and videos, as well as mass media and social media platforms. This functions to demonstrate just how diversified one megachurch's media presence can be while also showing the growing transnational influence of Bruxy Cavey and the subsequent need for scholarly analysis of his congregation and leadership. Cavey is certainly one of the most prominent religious voices in Canada today.

Many Meeting Housers do not realize that behind the celebrity image of Cavey lies a group of hard working staff promoters—the intermediaries of his renown. In the world of theatre such creative labour is called *stagecraft*—the backstage technical work that includes everything from stage

⁹⁰ Cavey has not had to bear much critique in electronic media. One blog made oblique references to The Meeting House, criticizing the "pixilated pastor" (www.saptapper.com) and an Ontario Harvest Bible Chapel web page temporarily carried a video of Cavey's views on gay marriage, using it to critique the perceived liberal attitude of Cavey. But he garners little animosity.

scenery, sound and lighting to costumes, make-up, and props. Stage managers and designers use their professional skills to enhance the audience's experience of the performance on stage. In terms of TMH, up to seven staff people form the marketing and communications department with the mandate of promoting the identity and programs of TMH and Cavey as its icon and key spokesperson, including a website coordinator, video production manager, a video story-teller, a graphics designer, a social media coordinator, a marketing manager, and an administrator. Their creativity, technical decisions, script-writing choices and attitude, including their sense of humour, significantly shape the Cavey persona that most Meeting House attendees recognize. While Cavey used to have much more input into the marketing of the church, his preferences and personality still give shape to the language and tone of their media work. They shape his image, select the key moments of sermons for highlights, and at times write blogs using his name and selected transcriptions of his teaching. This clearly demonstrates that charisma—in the form of celebrity—is as much socially constructed by a team of people as it is some innate personality trait. Although some scholars criticize such creative work as crass manipulation or even conspiratorial obfuscation (Boorstin 1961; Bensman and Givant 1975), impression management happens on every level of human encounter, including face-to-face (Goffman 1959), and the media that magnify and deceive may also diminish and expose (Bekkering 2015).

Media are as old as human civilization. One of the traditionally seminal ways in which Christian leaders have developed renown is through the writing of gospels, letters, and more recently, books. Bestselling books are seminal in the formation of Protestant celebrities, as they develop a “para-church Christian identity” through the networks of Christian bookstores, magazines, and newspapers that supersedes denominational boundaries into transnational arenas (Bartholomew 2006). “Print and Christian celebrity have gone together since the very beginning of the medium” as books disseminate not only ideas, but names of their authors as well (Bartholomew 2006:11). Megachurch pastors, because their congregations number in the thousands, have a better chance than most having their book achieve the status of bestseller and boosting their sales to levels that get recognition and then feedback again on further sales (Walker 2015). Books, websites, television shows, and podcasts effectively become an informal tradition or “secondary scripture” for megachurch attendees, as they routinize the charisma of the leader through diverse media and as intermediaries, such as site pastors and small group leaders further promote their use and interpretation.

Cavey is a case in point, as his Canadian (Amazon) bestseller *The End of Religion: The Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (2007) has now been published in Urdu and has begun distribution in India. It was number five on a list of non-fiction bestsellers in Canada, coincidentally just behind

Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Rhonda Byrne’s books—all authors whom he has directly engaged as topics in teaching series in July 2007 (entitled “The God Debate” and “The Secret Revealed”). Cavey was the #1 bestselling non-fiction Canadian author on the Amazon bestseller list that year.⁹¹

Cavey has been featured in Canadian evangelical media such as *Christian Week* and *Faith Today*, as well as on Crossroads Television, an Ontario Christian broadcasting network. His book launched him beyond the boundaries of his church and Canadian evangelical networks, as I noticed a Jesuit priest in Guelph, Ontario reading Cavey’s book, and numerous book reviews on-line from around North America. All the major newspapers from *The Vancouver Sun* to *The Ottawa Citizen* in Canada have run a story or two on Cavey and his church, and even *The Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Australia) ran an editorial featuring an extended discussion of his book. Such exposure does not merely expand Cavey’s renown; it shapes his persona as an evangelical celebrity and, by his appearance and book title, as a theological rogue.

Electronic media enable these global flows of information and connection, and TMH is wired for transnational connection. Beyond their website and podcasts, Cavey has appeared on television, mostly on programs coming out of the Crossroads Television System (CTS), headquartered in Burlington, Ontario. Shows such as *Listenuptv* and *Context* with Lorna Dueck, *100 Huntley Street*, *Real Life*, as well as other media such as GraceTV and Peaceworkstv have featured segments with Cavey. He also is one of the theological figures interviewed in the New Directions DVD *Bridging the Gap: Conversations on Engaging Our Gay Neighbours* (2009) and similarly in Canadian journalist John Campea’s DVD on pacifism and Christianity entitled *Prince of Peace—God of War* (2007). Cavey has flown across Canada on a number tours; for example, one tour was with a band, geared evangelistically to a general audience, and another tour in 2014 was with World Vision and their national “church ambassador” Don Moore. He has also spoken at numerous conferences and universities across the continent, giving general talks on Christian apologetics or promoting the “irreligious” theme of his church and bestselling book.

Social media further expand the possibilities of exposure, visibility, and the shaping of his persona. Hellmueller and Aeschbacher (2010) give special attention to social media, describing it as an openly accessible forum in which celebrities themselves can contribute to the production of their image. The recently developed Meeting House app was downloaded by 11,000 people, and the website had over a million page views (by May 2014). Cavey regularly contributes to his Twitter (7880 followers) and Facebook (4,591 likes) accounts, and he previously had a Myspace page (2015

⁹¹ Cavey has another book set to come out later this year (2016).

totals). He attempts to answer genuine questions from inquirers and even dropped a tweet once that said, “Hanging out on Queen St downtown Toronto. Any Meeting Housers in the area wanna grab a drink & a chat? Text or call me” (July 21, 2013). In the face of critiques that he is a distant and inaccessible pastor, Cavey claims to be at least electronically accessible.

Videos of his teaching are weekly uploaded on YouTube and iTunes. Since 2007, his iTunes podcasts are consistently in the top ten (spoken word) Religion and Spirituality podcasts every year in Canada and often are the number one Canadian voice. In November 2013, he was the top Canadian religious podcast after CBC Tapestry, and sixth overall after Joel Osteen, Oprah, Mark Driscoll and an Alcoholic Anonymous podcast. On June 17th, 2014, the iTunes store reported the week’s Meeting House podcast to be ranked 7th in Religion and Spirituality, and of the Canadian podcasts, only third after CBC Tapestry and Ravi Zacharias. Staff reported to me that there are 400,000 downloads of audio and video clips per year from various sources, including iTunes, YouTube, and their website.

A staff member maintains www.bruxy.com, a site “for all things Bruxy”; this includes short blogs, excerpts extracted from sermons or highlight clips from sermons themselves. Of singular importance is the main website, www.meetinghouse.com, a powerful and comprehensive electronic medium run by Radiant (“a creative agency that produces world-class design, communications strategies and technology platforms”). This site functions as a hub for all aspects of The Meeting House, including a “teaching archive” that provides downloads for Cavey’s teachings dating back almost fifteen years. It comes with a versatile search engine that will scan all archived teachings by key word, Scripture text, teaching title, or teacher. In effect, this on-line material has become an *electronic oral tradition* that functions like a catechism or congregational Midrash—it offers reference material for followers to draw from so they can learn the official position of the church on a diverse array of topics. Often in his teachings or in answering questions from the audience, Cavey will recommend past teaching series. This not only is a convenient way to answer difficult questions, but it simultaneously extends Cavey’s charismatic authority through electronic means and disseminates it as far as internet access is available. Cavey does not need to be physically present at all sites or all Home Churches as his virtual presence is available at the click of a mouse.

Significantly, this secondary scripture for the church is not written, but oral. I interviewed many Meeting Housers who owned Cavey’s book but either had not read it or had read only portions of it. Cavey’s charismatic authority is mediated and thus shaped by orality and image rather than printed text. Moore (1995) contends that oral culture, unlike print, “is bound up with fun.” He quotes Walter Ong (1967:30, 128): “verbalized learning takes place quite normally in an atmosphere of celebration and play.” The medium is the message and the “massage,” and oral communication carries

the impression of energy and immediacy, not the depth and distance of print (McLuhan 1964; McLuhan and Fiore 1968).

The line between production and consumption of celebrity blurs with social media, as audiences themselves participate in the production and promotion of celebrity content (Hellmueller and Aeschbacher 2010).⁹² There are other Meeting House websites maintained by the various regional site pastors, including the local site Facebook pages and site pastor blogs. There are numerous attendee blogs that make reference to Cavey, and Facebook pages that draw attention to The Meeting House and “like” it. Leaders are regularly asking attendees to post ads for events or help a playful Meeting House video “go viral” through attendees’ social media. Yet so far no upload on YouTube has really been a big hit (only a few have crested 10,000 hits as of November 2015).⁹³

Home Churches are the weekly small group gatherings that TMH describes as the centre of their church. They, too, function as media of Cavey’s charismatic authority as they focus each week on discussion questions relating to Cavey’s teaching. The number of total Home Church groups varies, growing to upwards of 184 in 2014. There are also small “distance groups” that gather around Cavey’s podcasts surfacing in various cities across Canada that are not affiliated with a regional site, including Dawson Creek (British Columbia), Calgary (Alberta), Saskatoon (Saskatchewan), Quebec City (Quebec), Bell Island (Newfoundland) and ironically for a pacifist church, the Canadian Forces Base in Petawawa, Ontario. Further afield, a Facebook page offers contacts for groups meeting in American locations such as Orange County, Indianapolis, and Nashville, as well as countries such as Belize, Dominican Republic, Qatar, Rwanda, South Africa, Sweden, Qatar, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Australia and a number of other international locations. While many of these people are Canadian ex-patriots who attended The Meeting House and are now working internationally, they gather around themselves friends and coworkers to form local small groups that study Cavey’s teachings. In September of 2011, Tim Day announced while teaching that they have home groups

⁹² Press agents, marketers, and paparazzi gather stories of celebrities, then distribute them through a variety of modern media. An audience further spreads their fame through word of mouth and by posting and sending them through their personal electronic networks—a form of modern gossip (Hellmueller and Aeschbacher 2010). People consume celebrity gossip in order to connect with something beyond themselves, as resources for casual conversation, or even to learn such things as how to dress. It is significant to note that people are not just consumers of celebrity. By telling the stories of their celebrity—especially today through the use of social media—they are contributing producers of celebrity. Neologisms such as “citizen paparazzi” and “stalkerazzi” point towards the productive potential of anyone with a cell phone (Burns 2009:13). One study shows that fans who post webpages about their favorite celebrity not only gather information on celebrities, but they interpret the texts in new ways and provide forums for discussion of celebrity lives (Soukup 2006:332). Celebrity gossip is comparable to the inestimable value of word of mouth marketing; it increases exposure and solidifies visibility.

⁹³ In February 2016, Cavey’s five-minute video “Anabaptist Response to Attacks in Paris and Beirut” has almost 20,000 hits on YouTube. Ironic that a direct address to political issues gives the avowed apolitical Cavey his largest audience.

meeting around their teachings in 15 countries and podcasters from at least 24 different countries. These global flows increase as TMH matures.

Extensive mass media exposure adds celebrityhood to charismatic authority. Some audiences worry about Cavey's celebrity status and occasionally ask him how he manages the fame. Cavey quickly reminds people that all pastors are in positions where people may bestow on them unhealthy expectations. Although megachurch pastors are viewed as uniquely powerful, investing messianic hopes in a pastor can happen with any size church. Still, Cavey did concede in interview that being on a screen in a movie theatre does bestow an extra aura on one's person and that his position is thus more likely to be projected with unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, any abuse of his position would have consequences on a grander scale. Scandalous events always receive the widest exposure, and thus a study that looks beyond moments of disgrace is of increased importance.

3.4 Audience: The Productive Buzz About Charismatic Leadership

So far, I have described the cultural scene and introduced the creators of the charismatic performance (both Cavey and media agents) that shape the crisscrossing storylines in TMH's dramatic web. Every performance, however, requires a third element: an audience. Sociologically, the problem with the concept of audience is that it can be too quickly imagined as passive receivers of a centrally produced drama, and this is only partially true at TMH. Some people come as genuine spectators, curious about the Cavey phenomenon, or seek anonymity for a season as they heal from some hurt or sort out some personal issue. But belonging at TMH is rarely a matter of ascribed identity since so few followers have BIC background; belonging must be achieved and such achievement best comes through participation.

The culture of TMH therefore is better compared to experimental theatre than to a movie theatre. Experimental theatre intends to include audience participation—in Bertolt Brecht's language, to take down the invisible "fourth wall" between performers and audience (McTeague 1994; Thomson and Sacks 2007:56). In some ways, audience members can be directly involved in the Sunday performance, as when Cavey interviews Meeting Housers, fields questions, or asks for volunteers to come on stage and help illustrate a point through an improvised drama. Attendees are active participants in another way as well; almost all attendees who join were not members of TMH's denomination, Brethren in Christ. They have deliberately chosen to come to TMH because they embrace it as a resource for their own spiritual journey. They are mobile believers, *bricoleurs* (Roof 2001), cobblers (James 2006), tinkerers (Wuthnow 2007), or syncretists (Harrison 2014), picking and choosing from Cavey's teachings, and when they no longer feel nourished by Cavey, they move on

to other spiritual resources and personal projects. Attendees can be intensely loyal, but they can also be fickle. This reflects what Marti and Ganiel (2014) have said about the emerging church movement more generally—they function as “pluralist congregations” that “permit, and even foster, direct interaction between people with religiously contradictory perspectives and value systems” (2014:34).

The Meeting House can be best imagined not as a static group of people, but as a subway train, with many different cars in which people get on and off at different stops. Not only is it made of 14 different sites, but people stay for varied amounts of times and often have cross-cutting commitments beyond their relations with the people in TMH. Internally conducted surveys twice a year (2012-2014) show approximately 70 percent of attendees have joined within the last five years, including about one third who have joined within the last year. Of those who attend, only 40 percent attend every Sunday gathering—radically different statistics from other BIC churches in Canada, where 85 percent attend every week, plus another 10 percent who attend more than once a week (Burwell 2006).⁹⁴

The general demographic and socio-cultural context of the central MH sites reveals a population of well-educated mainline affiliates and religious nones drawing on income from a cognitive-cultural economy and living middle class and upper-middle class lives.⁹⁵ These are not necessarily reflective of all who attend TMH, but it does reflect their target audience. Oakville and Mississauga citizens are mobile, connected to a global economy and surrounded by a major multicultural urban centre. The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is the home to many of Canada’s influential entrepreneurs, especially in the “cognitive-culture economy” (Davis and Mills 2014), which includes a high concentration of “cultural creatives” (Leslie, Hunt, and Brail 2014; Florida 2014). I found the writing on “Bobos” (Bohemian Bourgeois) and “crunchy conservatives” bore some resemblance to the people I observed and met during my fieldwork (Brooks 2000; Brooks 2004; Dreher 2006), although the descriptions would need to be slightly adjusted for a Canadian cultural context.

⁹⁴ The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reports similar statistics for megachurches in North America: over two-thirds (68 percent) of those attending a megachurch any given week have been there five years or less compared to 40 percent in churches of all sizes. Twelve percent claimed the megachurch as “home” but said they also attended other churches as well (Thumma and Bird 2009), a practice Wuthnow (2010:124) has called “congregational bigamy.” There is a greater fluidity, turnover and instability to the population of a megachurch compared with smaller churches. Megachurches take advantage of this congregational diversity. Rick Warren at Saddleback Church, for example, recognizes five concentric circles form their constituency: community, crowd, congregation, committed and finally the core. He has a scheme that promises to take attendees “around the bases” from membership to maturity, ministry, and then home plate: missions (Sargeant 2000:113).

⁹⁵ This assessment is based on information from Statistics Canada and other sources. The details have been documented in Appendix C.

This description mirrors what Thumma and Bird (2014) have said about the global megachurch being a product of large, dense urban populations and their aspirations for upward mobility. Rather than being particularly innovative institutions, they are extensions of fragmented postsuburban structures (Wilford 2012) and, more critically, detention basins for “displaced folk” in a time of significant social change (VanGronigen 2013). Von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012) have called these mobile people both seekers and religious refugees, but they can also be described as free riders, free agents, and *bricoleurs* who use religious institutions as a resource for their own spiritual collage.

Going through my interview data, besides those with little faith background, followers could be separated into two large categories: the refugees and those who empathize with the refugees. The first group consisted of those burnt out on church—either they were tired of the culture of legalism, authoritarianism, or sectarianism (interviewees mentioned rules about drinking, dancing, Sunday dress, gay marriage or women in leadership that exasperated them), or they had specific experiences such as divorce which distanced them from their original congregation. One young couple was recovering from a congregational conflict, describing themselves as “victims of spiritual abuse that were lied to... We thought we might never step in a church again... we needed time to heal.” The complimentary group of followers consists of individuals who did not have this negative experience but seemed to understand it vicariously. One Home Church leader explained the “irreligious” themes of TMH this way: “I can think of a lot of people who had some sort of baggage, or issue, when they were in their sort of young adult phase, that they totally turned away from the church and then ended coming back. And TMH might have been the first church they came back to.”

TMH in-house surveys from 2011-2014 show between 5.2 and 14 percent of those who attend The Meeting House have little or no previous Christian identity. If the statistics are broken down to individual sites, it appears Brampton, Burlington, Kitchener have mostly transfers from other churches, while Ottawa and the two Toronto sites drive the unchurched statistics up overall. Oakville seems to be about average. Brethren in Christ denominational statistics from 2008 for TMH record 41 conversions and 93 baptisms, while in 2010 they report 32 and 105, and in 2011, 49 and 135 respectively. These numbers are quite small if 5,000 people weekly attend and approximately 8,000 would call it their church home; less than one percent of attendees are converts each year. While the number of converts ought to accumulate in the over 27-year history of the church, the high turnover rates prevent it. The conversion rates especially appear small if one compares with another megachurch, such as Steve Furtick’s Elevation church in Atlanta, which boasted over 3500 baptisms in 2012. Elevation, however, has been under severe scrutiny for emotionally manipulating people towards baptism and manufacturing a “Disneyfied” assembly line-style baptism ceremony that includes hundreds of baptisms at a time (Watson 2014). At TMH, they happen with three to six people

at a time and often in small ceremonies outside the Sunday service time. In sum, although a small but significant percentage of attendees may self-identify as coming from a non-religious background, and many have experienced a form of conversion or deconversion, most of the people who attend TMH come with some church experience. Generally, such experience rests in their recent past, but a few attendees come from nominal Christian backgrounds.

Bramadat (2000:26) has written that one of the vulnerabilities of ethnography is the complex webs of different biographies that form the fabric of one's case study become flattened by analysis—a necessary distillation that distinguishes patterns and generally makes idiosyncratic data more manageable. In effect, much of the thickness and richness of my 83 interviewees and 8000 Meeting House attendees may be obscured in broad sociological reflection. Bramadat ameliorates the problem by offering a whole chapter with four detailed subject profiles from his study group. I offer similar profiles in Appendix D, but in this section I instead reveal the different attachments attendees have to Cavey's charismatic authority. It simultaneously shows how an audience—by sharing opinions about their charismatic leader—can become co-producers of his charisma.

Some scholars refer to “celebrity gossip” as one key means of producing celebrity (Gamson 1994; Turner 2004; Van Krieken 2012). I have chosen to use the term “buzz” instead to avoid the pejorative connotations of “gossip” and emphasize the excitement generated around Cavey's personality and character. Buzz denotes not only enthusiastic chatter considered to be a form of marketing (Hughes 2008) but also, more colloquially, the mild flush of pleasure from alcohol or drug use, which has been used as an analogy for the emotional energy released in the crowds of a megachurch (Wellman 2012). These mobile stories of Cavey's identity perform numerous functions: they give pleasure, provoke curiosity, arouse admiration and envy, inspire emulation, and develop a faux sense of intimacy with Cavey. As has been said of other celebrities, these emotions can be “coloured by a subconscious feeling of wistful regret” in the fan—regret that they, too, may have become famous if they had been dealt a slightly different hand of cards (Friedman 1990:115). The emotions stirred up by these stories intensify the charismatic bond.

The buzz I disclose about Cavey investigates not so much full narrative plots as little stories told about Cavey's persona—not only stories told by Cavey but stories shared by attendees to each other and to me as interviewer. They are more the “bits and pieces” (Boje 2001:18, 137) of a larger narrative about Cavey's extraordinary gifts and character, which form a significant storyline in the dramatic web of Cavey's charisma. Most of the quotes below were selected from a host of similar opinions in my interview transcriptions, which I have grouped into buzz about his teaching, his lifestyle and his appearance.

The singularly most common answer attendees give for joining The Meeting House is the appeal of Cavey's teaching. In this sense, celebrity charisma need not be separated from talent and accomplishment, even if in our current context of reality TV and Paris Hilton one can achieve celebrity status without any admirable talent (Gabler 2001; Hellmueller and Aeschbacher 2010). Talent may not be necessary for celebrity status, but the perception of such can ensure consistent, enduring publicity. Talent functions as one way of establishing a foundational narrative that can entertain or enlighten fans.

Attendees remark with enthusiasm about Cavey's ability to stimulate theological reflection, make difficult concepts clear without being dogmatic, engage controversial topics with graciousness, provoke extended spiritual conversations with their families Sunday afternoon, and always "focus everything back on Jesus." Interviewees characterized the Sunday teachings as 45-minute university lectures, with lecture outlines handed out at the door, live Q. and A. afterwards (called Q. and Eh?) and guided tutorials to review the material during the week (Home Church). "It was like a continuation of the university experience," said one lapsed Catholic who married into The Meeting House community. "Similar style."

As lectures, however, they are anything but pedantic or boring for the audience. Attendees extol Cavey's delightful speaking talents, describing in rapturous terms how time stands still when he teaches. "Forty-five minutes had gone by," said one attendee, "and I was disappointed it was over. My friend beside me, who was my guest and a skeptic, audibly yelled, 'Don't stop! Keep preaching!'" Others have testified that every time they hear him speak they go home talking about the teaching all the way home in the car. "We never used to talk about sermons," explained one young adult spouse to me. "He just gets you thinking."

One young married teacher maintained, "He always did his research. Some of these pastors give you a sermon and they don't really back up why they say something. Don't just take it as you see it [says Cavey]. Go research it. Go look."

One university professor in history remarked with appreciation: "Bruxy knows what he is doing. He is obviously extremely well-educated, well-versed when he talks about the historical context of events that are described in the Bible; he's done his homework." A philosophy PhD student said, "They take the Scriptures seriously and recognize the care we have to take in interpreting it, and mistakes have been made and we're not going to get it right. There is a respect for the intelligence of the congregation... and we are free to disagree with one another."

A banking executive talked about catching a few sermons from Cavey while he and his wife were members of another congregation: "We were being fed by Bruxy, right? We both sort of felt alive again, and like we were growing, and we were being challenged." And so they switched loyalties

to The Meeting House. “He’s uniquely gifted by God to speak to this generation... I would have no problem listening to his sermon for the second time, I do even for the third, fourth, and fifth time. You always get something out of it.” He then added: “When he went on Sabbatical for a number of months, we just stopped going [to TMH]. You can tell the difference in attendance when Bruxy isn’t speaking.”

Another young couple said something similar during a Home Church gathering I attended: “We groan whenever we hear the speaker isn’t Bruxy.” There were nods of general agreement. Even the frequent guest pastor from a megachurch in Minneapolis, Gregory Boyd, falls short of Cavey. “He yells too much, repeats himself, and is not as funny as Bruxy,” they concluded.

Other attendees admire Cavey as much for his modest lifestyle as his impressive teaching skills. Here the presumed shallow entertainment of celebrity merges with a moral discourse (Gabler 2001; Inglis 2010) that suggests more the revolutionary mission of Weber’s charismatic hero. Celebrity narrative and charismatic authority blend to become a model of and for behaviour, and the drama’s script provides plotlines for fans to follow and improvise in their own lives.

“Why do I come? It’s less dogmatic, they teach different points of view, and there is an emphasis on community,” reported one young adult attendee I casually engaged after a morning service. “And Bruxy lives what he preaches. I know because I’ve had lunch with him.”

Attendees testified about Cavey’s singular focus on Jesus, his modest lifestyle, his humble spirit and how he “walks the talk.” A few I met were aware Cavey asked for a salary cut; many knew that he drives a Honda Civic and scaled down on his house. One older engineer who volunteers as a Home Church leader explained: “It used to be called ‘The Cavey Castle,’ but now it’s the ‘Cavey Cottage’: he made the change when he wanted to simplify his life.”

Attendees admire Cavey’s open door policy at his house, and how the Caveys welcome anyone who stops by. Cavey makes it clear that guests may be given special attention the first time they visit, but soon after that they are considered part of the family and expected to blend in with family activities and chores. During the five-part teaching series entitled “Modern Family” Cavey interviewed numerous attendees who have been part of the Cavey household in some way—either as regular dinner guests, as frequent visitors (one called Cavey her substitute father after her biological father died) or as people seeking temporary accommodations in a time of personal crisis. Cavey intended the showcasing of his household as a model for attendees of the kind of generous hospitality expected of those who follow Jesus through The Meeting House. It also very clearly included some attendees in the production side of Meeting House culture.

Some attendees are quick to point out that Cavey stresses practical application of his messages, as each teaching outline has a “To Take Out” section at the end, where Cavey suggests

“homework.” A school portable mover I chatted with after a service said he’s been following Cavey for over a decade while attending another church because of Cavey’s “ability to teach about how to live and not just how to think.” The questions at the very end of the teaching outline are reserved for Home Church and consistently stress practical ways of living out the message of the week, an emphasis which in part comes from Anabaptist tradition and Cavey’s deep immersion in the writings of Dallas Willard (Black 2013).

Cavey’s appearance, however, is the first aspect of his performance that attendees encounter, and it meets with a mixed reception. Lofton says of Oprah: “The show is her show, this show is her biography, and her biography is largely her body on display. No aspect of Winfrey’s particularity receives more press, or more of her own self-appraisal, than her body” (2011:100). In a similar way, Cavey’s body is the central icon of his church and the symbol of his vision for the Christian life. Cavey’s body is not a therapeutic example of how the self can improve and become whole; it signals his vulnerable humanity as well as the non-conformity and foolishness of his “irreligious” gospel.

His casual dress and hippie appearance signal an ethic of resistance to convention and religious formalism.⁹⁶ Cavey indicates from his dress that he is not abiding by the cultural mores around male beauty. His clothes are often ragged, and his jeans faded, and he wears either sandals or even flip-flops. He never wears a suit or dress pants; this is a church for people not into conventional, reverent, formal church culture. The deconstructive primitivist vision looms large: the gospel is Jesus’ mission to “shut down religion”—religion understood as rigid conformity to rules and rituals, and more theologically, as a way to earn favour with God.

Cavey’s appearance is certainly striking as a clergy uniform. He has recently shaved off his moustache and lengthened his beard, in order to mimic the old photos of Anabaptist elders. But he retains his giant watch, pinky rings and earrings, as well as his long hair. The colourfulness of the terms I heard used to characterize him is revealing: long-haired schmuck, thug, Joe Schmo, bearded hippie, clown, downright ugly, slob, obese. One person said she mistook him for the cleaning staff when she first came and another said when they saw him in the lobby they thought he was a homeless person. These stories enhance the perception of his radical character.

⁹⁶ Cavey consistently maintains that the goal of The Meeting House is to remove any cultural barriers so people can freely encounter Jesus within its walls. Yet his appearance, while turning stereotypes of clergy on their head, has little contemporary connection and sometimes repulses people. The long-haired hippie look has more connection with the sixties and seventies than current fashions. At best he has “The Dude” look (played by Jeff Bridges) in the now classic *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The closest comparison in evangelical circles would be the late Larry Norman (1947-2008), often called the “grandfather of Christian rock and roll.” A more contemporary likeness would be with a younger colleague, the Christian writer and activist Shane Claiborne (b. 1975), with whom Cavey shares not only long hair and scraggly clothes, but also an Anabaptist theological tradition. Regardless, Cavey’s appearance is certainly distinctive and constitutive of his charisma, tapping into stereotypes of the Jesus People in the sixties and seventies and into deeper archetypes of the eccentric prophet (Shires 2007).

A story I have heard from multiple sources involves a grandmother who is brought to The Meeting House to hear Cavey speak. Disgusted by his appearance, she asks to be brought home. Her son convinces her to stay, close her eyes and listen. Sure enough, after a few minutes of Cavey's speaking, she is won over, and afterwards she concludes with enthusiasm, "He's a great teacher!"

Drawing attention to his body is not always cute or instructive, however. I attended a pastors' conference in March 2012 that featured Cavey and Senior Pastor Tim Day as the plenary speakers. In the morning session, while Day was teaching, Cavey walked in a little late, looking tired, with bags under his eyes. He sat down to wait his turn in the front row, and while a belt held up his jeans, his intergluteal cleft was clearly showing through the gap in the folding chair. I could see it from half way to the back of the room of some 200 pastors, but the gentleman who sat behind Cavey was shocked. He told me after: "Every time he leaned over to get up to speak, I could see his crack. I have never seen a keynote speaker's butt before... it was like some plumber... it really threw me off."

Although Cavey's appearance acts as the icon of the church, his hippie/hipster look is not imitated by anyone but a few site pastors in the church. Members do not imitate Cavey's appearance, even if they vicariously experience some counter-cultural rebellion through identification with him. The vast majority of attendees at The Meeting House may dress from casual to trendy, but almost none of the males groom for the long-haired hippie look. Gabler (2001:14) maintains vicarious living through celebrity is endemic to celebrityhood, and thus attendees need not change their appearance to feel an association with a Christian counter-culture.

Some people simply do not like Cavey's appearance, and that critical stance is further indication that megachurch attendees are not just a passive or submissive audience. I saw this in numerous ways, as in Home Church discussions where many disagreed openly with Cavey's pacifist views, his emphasis on suffering as normative to the Christian life, or his stance on singlehood as the Christian default status rather than marriage. Despite Cavey's teaching that Christians should not be involved in politics, I met a number who were card-carrying members of the Conservative Party of Canada and were deeply involved in the current election campaigns. I noted the pastor doing baptisms (and the Meeting House *Manifesto*) both state that baptism is "an expression of [believers'] decision to follow Christ," but those being baptized interpreted their (re)baptism instead as a rite of passage towards leadership in the church or as a public expression of renewed faith. As a final example, TMH teaches that marriage is not an option for a gay Christian, but in 2014 an "unofficial" Home Church in Toronto was comprised of partnered gays and lesbians. I have since heard of a number of "unofficial" Home Churches that meet together and follow the teachings but do not comply with the liability requirements for Home Church as stated by TMH leadership and thus are not formally recognized, even if they are often informally acknowledged by a site pastor.

As Goffman reports in *Asylums* (1961), there is an “underlife” to large institutions—activities that may not be sanctioned by the institution’s officials (Ingram 1982, 1986). For example, the ordinary member of a large institution can “work the system” in a number of ways to his or her own advantage. I remember how at the large “all sites” gathering for the 25th anniversary of TMH at the PowerAde Centre in Brampton, clowns made up part of the festivities. As one clown was tying up a balloon for a child, the clown gave the parents her business card, saying, “I do birthday parties for children—check out my website.” I saw other instances where people were taking advantage of the large potential consumer market at TMH, and one interviewee even commented on the practice. She had not attended TMH long, but she said she heard some talk that “it was a good church to make business contacts.” She was a public school teacher, so networking opportunities did not attract her; but it was one of her lasting impressions of the church.

In sum, megachurch attendees are not a monolithic group of submissive fans or passive consumers—they are patrons who take in the parts of the performance that suits their predilections and become supporting actors and producers of the performance, insofar as they participate and extend conversations about it with others, inside and outside of TMH. The Meeting House leadership recognize this variety of commitment and even welcome some of the theological diversity. Cavey, for example, brought a long-time Meeting Houser up for an interview on stage because he was an Ontario Provincial Police officer—in order to demonstrate how people need not agree in order to be siblings in the officially pacifist Meeting House family.⁹⁷ Yet, as we shall see in the next chapter, leadership are less tolerant of diversity in terms of participation in the congregation, and they are always encouraging people to move deeper into the culture of the church—or else find another church to attend.

Vignette: Festive Flare

I will end this chapter by describing an in-house video that brings the three elements of the charismatic diamond together. As a line spun within the dramatic web of TMH, it demonstrates a common theme: Cavey’s ironic posture towards his own charisma. This performance shows Cavey’s celebrity status and hints at the reflexive approach many middle-class Canadians have towards charismatic leadership. As mentioned above, the achievement of celebrity status requires visibility through electronic media. For numerous years, The Meeting House staff released a short, humorous video in

⁹⁷ For Cavey, even working in private security is a direct challenge to his pacifist convictions, as it includes the option of using coercive or violent means to protect people and property.

December to wish their congregation a Merry Christmas. Judging by YouTube hits, one of the more popular ones is a skit entitled “The Meeting House Christmas Festive Flare Competition.”

The storyline begins with the announcement of a MH staff competition to see who can decorate his or her office space with the most spectacular Christmas décor. A small crowd of festively dressed staff follows the camera through the Oakville headquarters, revealing increasingly creative and elaborate Christmas office decorations as they proceed down a main hallway. Finally, the growing crowd approaches Cavey’s office.

Cavey, wearing his customary jeans and terra cotta hoodie with a green “Jesus Plus Nothing” T-shirt barely visible beneath, is just exiting his office, shutting the door, with his usual mug of coffee in hand. The crowd clamours to see his decorated office.

“Whoa. No, no, it’s nothing,” he modestly protests. “You guys are amazing. This little thing? It’s really nothing.”

“Do it! Do it!” the crowd chants.

Finally, he relents. “Alright, OK, I don’t know if you’re going to like it. C’mon take a peek.”

As he opens his office door, the camera shifts to the faces of the office staff as they gaze into his open office. Their mouths agape and their eyes wide, multiple coloured lights stream across their bodies, and the sound of fireworks exploding combines with the eruption of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus.” They squeal and cheer with delight, then clap enthusiastically as dry ice swirls around them. The viewer can only guess what spectacle the staff are witnessing.

In the final shot Cavey closes his door and says, “Ah! Now that’s how you do ‘Festive Flare.’”

That Cavey’s creative charm should outshine all other staff and his office explode with angelic choruses and fireworks offers a metaphor for his place in the matrix of The Meeting House. Yet the slapstick is intentionally laced with irreverence and irony—to critique the idea that Cavey is supernaturally gifted. Attendees testify in interviews that Cavey is just an ordinary human being, and Cavey himself dresses in an ordinary way, referring to himself as merely “the paid teaching staff” or “Uncle Brux”; and while the messianic symbols are spoofs, they simultaneously reinforce Cavey’s central charismatic role in the culture of the church. This blurred boundary between the ordinary and extraordinary has been a key ingredient in celebrity; celebrities are familiar enough to be identified with but admirable enough to be adored (Gabler 2009; Furedi 2010). In effect, the video ironically offers a charismatic hero for those not into charismatic heroes.

This chapter introduced each of the the three elements of the charismatic diamond that shape the dramatic web of TMH. The religiously ambivalent socio-cultural context sets the stage for the entrance of a charismatic hero such as Cavey. His irreligious performance, shaped and carried by intermediaries and a diversity of media, resonates with an audience of conservative Christians unsure

of their social status as believers in Canada, including some of whom have been wounded by church legalism or conflict. They recognize in Cavey some attractive vision that moves their life beyond the layers of religious rituals and rules and draws it closer to the source, a relationship with Jesus.

With these theatrical components established, I will shift the focus to the performance itself through the next three chapters. In the fourth chapter, I examine the Sunday services and Cavey's "irreligious" charismatic performance, which I describe as a satirical approach to religion. If the Sunday performance reveals a negative identity, the narrative vision for Home Churches, which are deemed to be the heart of their church, provides the positive charismatic alternative, and I cover this performance as narrated by Cavey and performed in Home Churches in chapter 5. Their goal of forming tight-knit communities of mutual self-disclosure and neighbourly service suggest a romantic vision lies beneath the satirical front stage of the church. Finally, chapter 6 addresses the question of what happens when the charismatic performance encounters dramaturgical trouble, especially if its star player leaves or dies. This is a common question for communities that appear dependent on one charismatic figure; but if, in fact, there are four elements in confluence that generate charisma, charisma may be simultaneously more precarious and more enduring than many assume.

Chapter 4

Sunday Satire as Strategic Religiosity: Performing Evangelicalism for Those Not Into Evangelicalism

“Irony has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behaviour that avoids all appearance of naïveté—of naïve devotion, belief, or hope. He subtly protests the inadequacy of the things he says, the gestures he makes, the acts he performs. By the inflection of his voice, the expression of his face, and the motion of his body, he signals that he is aware of all the ways he may be thought silly or jejune, and that he might even think so himself.”

-- Jedidiah Purdy (1999:xi)

“Religion is horse-hooy when compared to knowing Jesus. It’s not about the system or symbology that God invented: once you turn to the system as a source of salvation, you’ve missed the point.”

- Bruxy Cavey teaching on Philippians 3:8, June 2007

The last chapter introduced the three elements of the charismatic diamond—the cultural setting, the creators, and the receivers—of the drama of “a church for people not into church.” What that chapter analytically separates, this chapter dramatically integrates. This chapter offers a window into the public performance of TMH: its Sunday services as centrally constructed and distributed at the Oakville Production Site through the leadership and teaching of Pastor Bruxy Cavey. This performance is the first that most people encounter when investigating TMH—it is the public face of the church and the part most centred on the personality and appeal of Bruxy Cavey. Although these Sunday services change with different teaching series and have a multiplicity of dimensions worth examination, I argue that the general tone and content of these productions consist of a deconstruction of religion, and of right-wing evangelicalism in particular. This critique of religion and evangelicalism can be characterized as a satirical performance, which brings the four elements of the charismatic diamond together; it resonates with the cultural context of growing religious skepticism in Canada and Canadian evangelicals’ own self-critique; Cavey, through Goffmanesque role distance, plays with his pastoral authority, satirizing his role as the representative of a stigmatized group; his communications department shapes, packages and distributes his image and story through live performance, videocast, podcast, blog, social media and written word; and his conservative Christian

audience, at first unsettled by this performance (what I will suggest resembles Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect), in due course becomes energized by it, entering into the fabric of its dramatic web. In effect, Cavey first offers his audience a negative identity through the Sunday service, promising them what they will not be if they commit to participation in TMH. This is a precursor to a positive identity, that of being an irreligious revolutionary connected with an Anabaptist denomination—the subject of chapter 5.

This performance gets to the heart of what charisma accomplishes sociologically—it involves followers recognizing their leader has an intense “connection with (including possession by or embedment of) some *very central* feature of man's existence and the cosmos in which he lives” (Shils 1965:201). In his satirizing of institutional religion, Cavey names a problem that resonates with conservative Christians in Ontario—that religion is a barrier between the individual and his or her intimate connection with God. Cavey naming the problem is not enough, however, for the sealing of a charismatic bond; he has to provide a credible solution, and for many, this is found in “doing life together” in their Home Church communities such that they find an unimpeded relationship with Jesus Christ.

The opening act of this drama requires an intentional negotiation of the stigmatized identity of an evangelical church—what Goffman (1959) called “impression management” and what I would call more broadly identity management. Goffman explained that impression management involves both verbal and non-verbal gestures intended to over-communicate messages that buttress their preferred self-image while under-communicating any signals that may undermine that image. These messages function to define the situation and shape the behaviour of other people. Although Goffman's focus was the structures of the “interaction order” that exists between people in face-to-face encounters or in teams within a micro-setting, his conceptual framework can also apply at the level of institutions and even the macro-level of society (Hughes 2000). I would add that the goal is not just to manage impressions, but to negotiate one's own subjective and social identity.⁹⁸ Identity management is a broader concept that includes impression management.

The identity management done at TMH, I argue, although an attempt to mitigate the perception of Cavey's central celebrity role, simultaneously intensifies the emotional bond attendees have with him. The previous chapter revealed how Cavey's “extraordinary” character was recognized by attendees through stories by Cavey, stories of Cavey's life and buzz about Cavey's persona, which extended his charismatic authority through the distributed structures of the megachurch. This chapter demonstrates how Cavey's charismatic authority intensifies through a variety of dramatic scenes that

⁹⁸ This kind of identity labour is also discussed with respect to a Canadian Christian political party in McKeen (2015).

unsettle his audience. In one sense, this appears to undermine the dramatic web; but for the audience members who continue to attend, the over-all effect, in fact, strengthens an emotional connection with Cavey and thus reinforces the strands of the web. I will elaborate on various pieces of religious production at TMH, while drawing on my interviews to provide clues of how such performances are received by attendees.

TMH is a highly reflexive religious project. Reflexive performances are typical of what has been called the Emerging Church Movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014). Emerging churches deliberately rather than customarily construct their faith—a form of what Marti and Ganiel have called a “strategic religiosity” (2014:60). This means they approach their religious identity as a project of seeking out certain legitimized forms of religiosity while shunning undesirable—and I would add stigmatized—forms of religious identity. This means critiquing right-wing megachurch practises and embracing more individualized and pluralistic subcultures. Such deconversion strategies orient by what they are against or what they wish to leave behind—an “escape from standardized agency” socialized in their evangelical past (Marti and Ganiel 2014:76). I put strategic religiosity into dramaturgical terms, suggesting TMH cultivates a “*satirical* strategic religious counter-performance”—an intentional production directed against their own broader religious identity in the big tent of evangelicalism.

By characterizing much of this primary performance as satire, I am arguing the dramatic life of TMH embraces irony, parody, and even transgression to paradoxically expose and denounce the folly of institutions—and specifically religious institutions. Satire is prophetic criticism made funny (Jemielly 2006:21) or “the art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation” (Abrams and Harpham 2008:320). Such ironic critique is common to emerging churches, who seek a “third way” beyond liberal and conservative categories (McKnight 2008; Bielo 2009). The first words on TMH website are “Everything we read about Jesus in the Bible paints a clear picture of a revolutionary and radical who intended on turning our ways of thinking upside down and inside out. He wasn’t interested in creating a new religious system of dos and do nots, wrongs and rights, rites and rules. Rather, he had a completely irreligious agenda.” As Cavey puts the incongruity more succinctly: “We are in the ministry of busting up stereotypes, breaking up the line of expectation.”

In this chapter, I investigate a number of instances in which such strategic, satirical counter-performances demonstrate their management of evangelical stigma, what Goffman (1963) called a “spoiled identity.” First I explain the nature of emergent church reflexivity. Then I examine TMH satire as evident in on-line videos, Sunday services, and in Cavey’s theological polemics. These performances essentially signal a *negative identity*: TMH is not a cult of personality, it is not a

sentimental culture, it does not promote a prosperity gospel, and it is not an angry, judgmental place. The word “NOT” is key to their brand slogan and overall rhetoric; its usage has been postulated as a common practice of charismatic leaders (House, Spangler, and Woycke 1991; Fiol, Harris, and House 1999). TMH conveys the over-all paradoxical impression, I argue, that they are an “evangelical church for people *not* into evangelicalism” and a “megachurch for people *not* into megachurches.”⁹⁹ This prepares the way for offering a new, positive identity.

Much of what I examine in this chapter could have been investigated under the primary rubric of brand management and brand differentiation rather than identity management. Although such a frame places TMH into larger discussions of consumer religion, it also limits the analysis to the rational choices and calculus that characteristically motivate such economic activity and tends to configure religion as a mirror of economic life. By using theatrical terms, I can still discuss branding practices (as every theatre needs marketing) while including broader notions of religious meaning, motivation, and identity constructed through performance. So I draw insight in this chapter from theatre studies, performance theory and emerging church research to offer a more inclusive cultural analysis of TMH. People join TMH not merely because of clever marketing design as much as because they have been drawn into a religious drama that gives their life meaning, excitement, hope and joy.

4.1 Reflexivity, Role Distance, and the Alienation Effect

Before investigating Cavey’s reflexivity in his pastoral role, I will examine the significance of reflexivity for modern religiosity and its emergence in “role distance” and the “alienation effect” in an audience. The Emergent Church Movement displays a radical reflectivity towards its belief and practice, what has been called “a religious orientation built on a continual practice of deconstruction” (Marti and Ganiel 2014:25). Marti and Ganiel see the Emerging Church Movement as an institutionalizing structure constantly deconstructed and reframed by “religious institutional entrepreneurs” who paradoxically seek to resist the institutionalization of their movement (see also Packard 2012). To deconstruct means to irritate and problematize conventional practices and paradigms by drawing attention to their contingent, if not arbitrary status. Put differently, Emerging Church leaders’ posture towards ministry can be characterized as “the intentional provocation of reflexivity” (Marti and Ganiel 2014:81).

⁹⁹ Marti and Ganiel quote one emerging church member who said their church offers “Christianity for people who don’t like Christianity” (2014:76). Emerging church participants are notoriously ambivalent about their Christian faith.

Giddens (1991) sees reflexivity as endemic to late modernity and its disembedding character. Margaret Archer (2009) agrees that globalization facilitates the dynamics of reflexivity which creates “more ‘problematic situations’ confronting more people everywhere and fewer and fewer suitable, habitual responses.” Reflexivity she defines as more than reflection on an object—its distinguishing feature is “the self-referential characteristic of ‘bending-back’ some thought upon the self, such that it takes the form of *subject-object-subject*.” It involves an internal conversation, an inner drama or “musement” that can lead to some creative or novel course of action. Scholars who champion reflexivity write in tension with those who see only *habitus* at work (Pierre Bourdieu) and rational choice scholars who limit subjectivity to instrumental rationality. The reflexive agent is active, evaluating, and emotionally involved in a dynamic interplay with surrounding and partly internalized structures (Archer 2009:2,7,12).

This reflexivity has an equivalent in performance studies. Goffman’s notion of “role distance” offers one enduring example, defined as “actions which effectively convey some disdainful detachment of the performer from a role he is performing” (Goffman 1961:110). Goffman presents the example of a five-year-old child on the merry-go-round, who, unlike the younger children around him, takes an irreverent stance on the wooden horse, demonstrating to all that he is not caught up in the activity; this posture forms a psychosocial “wedge between the individual and his role, between doing and being” (1961:107-108). Role distance makes an appearance in the surgeon who sings off-colour tunes during the operation and the waitress who speaks of her music career—any instance where people suggest to their audience “I am not only what I appear to be” (Cohen 2004:117).

Although the discussion of acting roles turns attention towards the actor on stage, I want to include analysis of the audience’s response to this reflexivity, specifically a theatrical term called “the alienation effect.”¹⁰⁰ The notion of the “alienation effect” is attributed to playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who developed the concept from Chinese theatre, defining it as “playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play” (Brecht 1964:91; Furman 1988; Brooker 1994; Biehl-Missal 2010). The original German word—*Verfremdungseffekt*—has been variously translated as “alienation effect,” “de-familiarization effect,” or “distancing effect” or “estrangement effect” (Sargisson 2007). While the goal of conventional theatre performances was to draw the audience into a suspension of disbelief, such that they would

¹⁰⁰ I originally stumbled on this term in a creative but grammatically appalling electronic book on the charisma of Barack Obama (Bac 2013). Bac suggests Obama uses a form of alienation effect when he transitions from his visionary performance of the American Dream (made real in his own life) to attend to the mundane political issues of the day. She concludes that this strategy only partially worked for Obama; rather than mobilizing people for political action, the alienated audience often still retained strong emotional connections to the aspiring president’s charisma.

be “caught up” in the play (Stromberg 2009), Brecht’s goal was to disrupt the performance and prevent any such escape into illusion. He wanted to historicize the performance on stage, alert the audience to the political urgencies of the day and, as such, empower people to critical thought and political action (Brecht 1964:96; Sargisson 2007; Bissonette 2010). The goal is “stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them” (Thomson and Sacks 2007:191).

By turning the familiar and ordinary into the strange and unexpected, the audience becomes alienated from the character portrayed. The actor takes on a “double role”—as the character and themselves-as-actor at the same time, with both roles being accessible to the audience (Brecht 1964:143, 194). Brecht gives one everyday life example of the child whose mother has re-married, revealing the mother in a second role of another man’s wife. The taken-for-granted expectation is disappointed and made odd. Significantly, for my analysis of charisma, Brecht admitted the alienation effect did not motivate as much political action as he hoped; the audience still continued to emotionally attach and personally identify with the actor and the actor’s role (Gassner 1966; McTeague 1994).

Always reflexive about its beliefs and practices, a post-evangelical dramaturgy strives for a performance that generates an alienation effect. The practices I examine here are not the equivalent of back stage sightings that reveal the hypocrisy of the leader (Joosse 2012), nor the legendary scandalous antics of American televangelists (Buddenbaum 2013). They are, however, the opposite of charismatic performances intended to suspend disbelief and cultivate naïve faith (Luhmann 2012). The events and rituals described here are intended to unsettle, but they unsettle in order to disabuse the audience of participation in a conventional evangelical performance, not with the intention of completely estranging their followers. They cultivate just enough alienation to disturb the evangelical visitor by establishing distance from right-wing evangelical stereotypes and thus reinvigorating the charismatic authority of Cavey.

How does a satirical counter-performance reinforce the charismatic bond? If it does not prompt attendees to leave, the disruption of the evangelical performance suggests something new and revolutionary that resonates with the already disaffected attendees and validates their disillusionment with religious institutions. Cavey narrates a crisis in Christian religion and offers a way out that engenders a sense of self-efficacy in participants’ lives (Madsen and Snow 1991). He effectively promises people they can be saved from the cultish, violence-endorsing, angry, legalistic, judgmental liabilities of right-wing evangelicalism and re-invent themselves in his gentle pacifist, irreligious image—echoing themes of irenic Canadian evangelicalism (Reimer 2003) in nostalgic hippie attire. He calls them not to a conversion as much as a deconversion (Harrold 2006; Bielo 2011), in the name

of Jesus, who came to “shut down religion.”

In the terminology of Goffman (1961), like other emerging churches, this aspect of TMH reflects the “underlife” of institutional evangelicalism today (Marti and Ganiel 2014:27). Attendees do not escape institutional life, but they form their identity over against evangelical beliefs and practices because “selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull” of socialization (1961:320). Persons are “stance-taking entities,” says Goffman, who take up positions somewhere between identification with and opposition to institutions—a form of the reflexivity described by Archer (2009) above. In this case, people identify with Cavey, develop bonds of affection and loyalty to him while distancing themselves from wider evangelical culture.

4.2 Performing a Post-Evangelical Identity: Self-Satire and Zombie Fandom

TMH strategizes to make everything they do in public impress those who are religious nones while simultaneously attracting those who have had negative experiences with church.¹⁰¹ Robert Schuller had a similar vision to “impress the unchurched” (Penner 1992:124,152,154) and Rick Warren echoed Schuller, declaring from the early days of his megachurch, “We are not trying to impress other Christians or our denomination, but the unchurched people in the Saddleback Valley who couldn’t care less about most things related to the Lord. We want to get their attention long enough to share the Good News with them” (Sheler 2009:106). The TMH, like the two megachurches above, began by surveying the neighbourhood and asking people what they liked and did not like in a church. Identity management proceeds from assessments of one’s audience. Since, however, we know the audience is comprised mostly of de-churched or over-churched people, these declarations of their intended niche also function to legitimize their desire for unconventional rhetoric and practice.

TMH strives to be “a church for people not into church.” That means, as their website in 2015 explains, “we are trying to make space for those who’ve been turned off by traditional expressions of religion and Christianity. We are hoping that people might see this whole Jesus and God thing in a new light.” The first image any seekers or transfers from other congregations will have of TMH comes from their communications material, and I now examine two strategies in their church marketing.

A. Self-Satire in Church Communications

¹⁰¹ I established the typical Meeting Houser profile in chapter 2, which was similar to the emerging church demographic of “exiles, refugees, and outcasts of established churches” (Jamieson 2006:69).

One deliberate way to manage the optics of leadership roles and allay fears of a personality cult involves the use of satirical humour.¹⁰² When the congregation's size started increasing by the hundreds per month, there was a consciousness of Cavey's celebrity status and various in-house videos were produced, making sport of Cavey in some way. Cavey encourages such playfulness around his pivotal role, as I elaborate below.

Irony, in the form of self-deprecation, characterizes "emerging evangelicals" who critique the conservative side of their evangelical community and themselves (Bielo 2011:65). This reveals their discomfort with some aspects of their own religiosity and they shape their Christian identity to publicly demonstrate that struggle. Because of this intense self-consciousness, identity management becomes a very deliberate part of their religious performance.

In particular, a number of in-house "commercials" produced by TMH communications staff and volunteers suggest a strategy of self-satire.¹⁰³ A two-minute video created by their communications staff in 2007 entitled "What's the Worst that Could Happen? Power Trip Pastor?" was still on TMH YouTube channel in 2015. It features a couple in TMH parking lot on a cold fall day, the woman with a scarf and the man with a toque. "Oh, I feel so nervous about this," says the woman.

"What is there to be nervous about?" asks the man.

"Well, what if the pastor is on one of those power trips? You know, I heard about this church one time where once you were part of it, you just couldn't leave."

The man assures her: "I'm sure the pastor is a regular down to earth guy." But his companion is not convinced: "How do you know it isn't some sort of cult or something?"

The man then puts his arm around her and leads her towards TMH: "Honey, come on. What is the worst that can happen?"

They enter the new building in Oakville. Electronic dance music is playing. They work their way through the crowd to find their seats. The lights go down and it's quiet. Suddenly trumpets blare,

¹⁰² Sensationalized "cult" followings playing in the mass media at the time of Cavey's release from ministry (1995) and growing celebrity status at TMH (1996) include the Solar Temple's mass murders and suicides (1994), Aum Shinrikyo and their attacks on the Tokyo subway (1995) and the mass suicides of Heaven's Gate (1997). The televangelist scandals preceded these events, with Swaggart (1988, 1991) and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker (1988).

¹⁰³ This video was part of a series of four in-house commercials, all of which play on stereotypes of evangelical churches. Beyond these, two other videos are worth noting. A very short animation created in 2002 takes sound clips from a real media interview with Cavey and dubs them over a cartoon caricature of him. The Cavey figure explains to a female interviewer that people must "jump through hoops" in order to please him. The audio clip was no doubt taken from a random sermon of Cavey's. Another piece features a cut and spliced interview of Cavey from a Christian TV show called *Chuck and Jenni* from the early 2000s. In this edited video Cavey keeps repeating, no matter what the question from the host, "I'm at the top of the pyramid of power and you better do what I say" and "Please don't question us... we don't want to connect with anyone." I found these spoofs on their website—the latter still on-line until 2013. They were also shown during the 25th anniversary celebration ceremonies in 2011.

and the lights flash back on, and a bare-chested man jumps down on stage shouting in some strange language. In a mock primitive island festival, bongo drums begin to beat, torches alight, birds squawk in the background, and the audience jumps up, screaming and waving their arms. The camera pans across more bare-chested men with paint marks on their faces.¹⁰⁴

Then suddenly the crowd hushes again as Bruxy Cavey appears on stage in a bright golden robe arrayed with multiple giant necklaces. Incense burns around him. He suddenly opens his arms up wide and shouts: “My people! Can you dig it?”

The crowd screams, wildly jumping up and down.

Cavey continues, “People! Meeting House! Erupt in praise to me!”

Surrounded by a frenzy of excitement, the camera shows the couple looking at each other, worried. Then the words appear across the screen, ending the video: “What’s the WORST that could happen?”

I had a conversation with one of their communications staff, and I asked why such videos were featured on a public site meant to promote their teaching pastor (Youtube.com and Bruxy.com). He explained the community’s concern about public perception:

So it's kind of like, okay, the anti-cult leader. Right? To put people at ease, we're not some kind of cult. So, by making fun of it, you know, some people may not get it, but I don't care [chuckle]. But it's fun because, you know, we want to be the anti-cult, the anti-authoritarian, the anti, you know, screaming pastor. In this sense I'm kind of making fun of that as well. Right? The yelling, aggressive, screaming pastor who's a control freak. Where we want to be the antithesis of that. Right? And I think Bruxy is. Like, he is. He's a gentle—if anybody knows him, he's the total opposite. He's gentle, doesn't get mad, you know, totally like that. Not a control freak. Not an authoritarian. He doesn't even run this place. Right? It's other people that do it. He's studying.

In other words, this video appears to be self-aggrandizing, but the humour—for anyone who knows The Meeting House and Cavey—develops from the juxtaposition of Cavey with a primitive cult leader. Communications staff intend the satire to function prophetically—to ridicule their celebrity pastor and indirectly communicate his harmlessness. Staff seek to assuage the fears that The Meeting House is merely a personality cult while at the same time signalling that this church is different from fundamentalist churches; it values an irreverent, campy style and comic relief. In a double irony, it can simultaneously function to reinforce his celebrity status, as only a confidently humble leader with some growing notoriety would both need and allow such self-satire.

Meeting Housers I interviewed generally love these in-house commercials, revelling in the humour and expressing pride about the production quality and the acting talents of their fellow church

¹⁰⁴ There are some culturally insensitive cliché’s that mark this video. As one reader commented: “Its uncomfortably white.”

members. An awareness of the potential idolatry and corruption of their celebrity leader will surface, but they view such as a matter of managing outsider perceptions rather than a significant danger to Cavey or the congregation.

B. Zombie Fandom

Senior Pastor Tim Day explained to me in one interview: “We have special value as the leadership here for trying to be a place where the reverse of what you think will happen, happens.” Former staff have told me that this was much more the *modus operandi* during the years of rapid growth in the early 2000s, but once in a while Cavey still gives his audience a jolt.

One service before Christmas in 2012, Cavey is teaching about the importance of family time and the distraction of electronic devices. He says for the month of December his family has agreed to put their devices in a basket by the door and commit to playing board games together. Cavey, who often highlights his love for his Blackberry, makes the remark: “[This idea] is practically Amish, and it’s practically going to kill me. I hate board games. No laser beams, car chases or explosions.”

He then draws the audience’s attention to a small table beside him, with a blanket draped over a mysterious object. He tells his viewers, “My [teenage] daughter Chelsea isn’t here today, so I’m going to show you what she’s getting for Christmas.” He then pulls the blanket off the table and reveals *The Walking Dead* board game.

“Gotta start in familiar territory,” he quips. Cavey’s zombie fanaticism is one of the first things people are told about him. In introductions on interviews or at conference presentations, in short bios on-line, he is named as the Teaching Pastor at TMH and a fan of zombie films (his favorite film being *Dawn of the Dead*, 1978). Cavey’s old Myspace site has photos he took of his daughters at a Toronto zombie walk in 2006 (“A nice way to spend a relaxing Sunday afternoon,” he posts).¹⁰⁵ He revels in these moments of role distance, in which he alienates sections of his audience. Zombie references during his teachings may soften the juxtaposition since they occur in a movie theatre, but he does not explain to his audience why, as a pastor (and more ironically, an ardent pacifist pastor¹⁰⁶), he so flagrantly promotes his fondness for horror films. This is a significant part of his persona, a key piece in his strategic evangelical counter-performance.

¹⁰⁵ Cavey’s sermon titles, while focusing on Christians being “dead” to sin, will play off zombie films: “Night of the Living Dead” (2000), “Return of the Living Dead” (2003), “The Living Dead” (2005).

¹⁰⁶ The obvious contradiction does not seem to faze Cavey. A friend of Cavey who said Cavey enjoys the *Saw*, *Halloween*, *Exorcist* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* films described his shock when Cavey first mentioned zombies publicly. “I turned to my wife and said, ‘Did he just say what I thought he said?’” He added that one older woman left the service when Cavey played an (evangelically-speaking) risqué clip from *Lord of the Rings* during his teaching time.

One qualitative study of four American churches that regularly use film clips concludes that only conventional Hollywood genres are used in churches, with the exception of two genres: documentaries and horror films (Moore 2013). While plenty has been written on zombies as symbols of social anxiety, rampant consumerism, and repressed thoughts of death (Giroux 2011; McNally 2012; Paffenroth and Morehead 2012; Cowan 2008; Platts 2013), Cavey offers little cultural analysis to ease the cognitive dissonance, except the occasional one-liner, such as this 2011 tweet about his purchase of the new season of *The Walking Dead*: “As a Christ-follower I feel the burden 2 support any show about death & resurrection.” In September 2012, he used a clip from *Shaun of the Dead* and made passing reference to a scene in *The Walking Dead* to illustrate “zombie faith”—faith without following Jesus, going through the religious motions but being dead inside. Such use of zombie films stops short of cultural criticism; zombies are merely analogies for nominal Christians.¹⁰⁷ Unlike evangelicals’ historical ambivalence with film and their moralistic critiques, Cavey embraces all its genres, including the most sensationally violent. In traditional evangelical fashion, however, his use of media during a Sunday service remains mostly instrumental—as a means to connect with the unchurched (Moore 2013; Christians 2013) and, as I argue here, to distinguish TMH from other evangelical churches. “When we’re starting to make religious conservatives uneasy,” said Cavey in a 2015 interview, “we’re probably starting to live like Jesus.”

A stark contrast exists between *The Walking Dead* and taken-for-granted evangelical mores around movies and violence.¹⁰⁸ “The emotionality at the core of modern evangelicalism,” writes Todd Brenneman, “is a specific type of emotionality, one best labeled sentimentalism.” He defines sentimentality as “tender feelings” expressed in nostalgia for the nuclear family¹⁰⁹ and a romanticized

¹⁰⁷ When I pressed Cavey on the blood and gore issue in one of our interviews, he said some people may have sensitivities to it, but for him “fantasy is fantasy” and he compartmentalizes it in his head. He grew up playing with his camera and experimenting with special effects, such as making someone’s head appear to blow up on film. He finds it simply entertaining. The reality of violence, however, deeply upsets Cavey; he recalled seeing the clip of JFK being shot, and while there was no gore, his “stomach was in knots.” “The Bible contains violence, too,” he added on a less subjective note. Significant for this chapter’s focus, concerning the teaching series on pacifism and its violent film clips, Cavey remarked: “Sometimes we aim to be disturbing.”

¹⁰⁸ Compare this with the American evangelical organization Focus on the Family’s review of the show, which quotes film reviewer Jeff Otto: “This may well be the bloodiest show ever seen on television.” While the review admits there is some depth to the show with regards to family, friendship and faith, it concludes by warning: “This is munching-on-entrails, stab-that-shambler-in-the-eye-socket violence. And it’s turned into something of an illustration of just what you can and can’t do on cable these days” (Asay and Whitmore 2014). The profanity used in each episode is listed, with the key consonants and the proper number of dashes inserted for each term.

¹⁰⁹ Cavey did a teaching series entitled “Modern Family” that used numerous clips from the situational comedy show of the same name. While the show celebrates the de-centering of the nuclear family, Cavey used it to emphasize a theology that emphasizes the church as a family-like community, one in which “we turn our chairs toward one another and do life together.” “Focus on the Family” at TMH means a focus first of all on their own congregation and especially Home Church. This emphasis on “church family” is not an uncommon practise in evangelical culture (Ault 2004).

understanding of divine love for individuals, who are often conceptualized in infantilized terms (Brenneman 2014:4). Evangelicals typically prefer stories that are clean, wholesome, and have happy endings. “Christian readers are too easily satisfied with sentimental tales that don’t descend into the valley of the shadow of death,” says one evangelical professor, alluding to Psalm 23. “Our own literature often lacks the bite and angst our worldview ought to embrace” (Harris 2015).

In this light, Cavey’s celebration of zombie films will jolt most visitors, especially when couched in the context of a sermon on “family time.” Still, many attendees I interviewed were entertained or inspired by Cavey’s love for the horror genre. “Like Bruxy, I have the whole set of *Walking Dead* comic book volumes,” said one attendee, gesturing at his bookshelf. Another attendee more ambivalently concluded, “It’s just one of his idiosyncrasies.” Regardless, whether viewed as inspiring, endearing, or shocking, Cavey’s zombie fandom cultivates emotional ties between himself and attendees and signals an effort to distance the church from right-wing evangelical mores.

4.3 Sunday Service Satire as Identity Management: Purge Sunday

While Cavey describes their Sunday services as a “dietary supplement” to local Home Church gatherings, my observation is that Sunday actually functions as the centerpiece of TMH staff and volunteer activity. The majority of resources and personnel work are dedicated to making these professional and entertaining events for the thousands who attend or watch from remote locations. Identity management receives the most deliberate attention in this venue, and I will provide a brief description of its structure.

The physical setting itself pre-determines the definition of the situation. No spires or cathedral domes loom before pilgrims, greeting them with bells calling them to prayer. No catechetical iconography fills the front façade of the church; no columns, mosaics, or statues of biblical figures intended to “evoke a profound sense of goodness, beauty, and truth” (Rose 2009:44).¹¹⁰ The main Meeting House site looks like a warehouse on the outside and a movie theatre on the inside. All other sites, with one exception that meets in a school, are located at movie theatres within malls and plazas, surrounded by franchises such as Starbucks and East Side Mario’s. The giant “Empire” theatre logo stares down on visitors as they pass the oversized outdoor movie posters promising romance, adventure, titillation and escape. Twitchell comments: “Yes, the megachurch is the religious version

¹¹⁰ The literature on megachurch sacred space and architecture includes some articles (Rybczynski 2005; Hoover 2005; Kilde 2006; Williams, 2007; Nelson 2007; Clarke 2009; Robles-Anderson 2012), one significant book (Loveland and Wheeler 2003) with some other books touching on the subject (Kilde 2005; Thumma and Travis 2007; Hoffman 2010) and a few dissertations pursuing it as a central area of research (McKenzie 2007; Jones 2011; Petrov 2011).

of the gated community. And yes, it is religious Disneyland, but it is also the ineluctable result of combining powerful narrative with human yearning and plenty of free parking” (2004:280).

In Goffman’s (1959) language, the scene and its props “give off” impressions to visitors. The texts and language used are performances more directly “given” to visitors. Signage with consistent branding fonts and colours marks the setting and offers directions to visitors. Whether one attends the main site or distance sites, there are always volunteers and a welcome table ready to greet people. Generally, volunteers wait to be approached, as they have been trained to give visitors the degree of anonymity they choose for themselves.

Volunteers have strict instructions on the language they use in conversation with attendees. I was given a copy of a training sheet used with volunteers in 2013. Under the church logo at the top, the title “Communication 101” prefaced this paragraph:

We want our communication to help people take their next step toward Christ and toward being a part of our community. We want to keep everything our audience sees, listens to, or touches simple and that every aspect of their engagement with The Meeting House clear and meaningful.

This was followed by the sub-title: “VERBIAGE—What’s Hot... What’s Not” and the following two columns, giving instructions on the language volunteers are to use when on duty.

Clearly, by the very language they are instructed to use, TMH volunteers are giving and giving off impressions that promote their desired image of a “church for people not into church.”

These language rules, just as the scene and other props, are not unlike many other seeker-friendly churches. However, they demonstrate some role distance from traditional ways of doing church, and they may cause an alienation effect in some attendees who expect language and practices that are more traditional. Leadership were fond of telling me the story of some young men who came to TMH for a Sunday morning, all

HOT:	NOT:
Teaching	Preaching
Teachings	Sermons
Music	Worship
Program	Bulletin
Theatre	Sanctuary
Kidmax	Children’s/Kid’s program
The UNDERGROUND	Youth/teens program
Home Church	Small groups
Team	Committee
Invite	Recruit
Opportunity	Need
Experience	Service
Core Community	Membership
Compassion	Missions/outreach
Community	Congregation
Reflection and Teaching Theatre	Overflow Theatre or Theatre B
Oakville Production Site (or “The Office”)	Oakville

dressed in their Sunday finest, only to feel utterly conspicuous among the casually-dressed Meeting House crowd. All props, volunteers, and even the habitual attendees milling about on Sunday morning function as supporting actors in the post-evangelical dramaturgy whose star is yet to perform.

Attendees make their way through the dim theatre light and past the cash registers and popcorn machines, drop off their children for kidmax, grab a coffee or tea on offer for a voluntary donation, and then move through the gallery of Hollywood celebrities, superheroes and monsters. The service in the dark theatre begins with singing led by a small band at the front, typically consisting of a guitar, keyboard, bass, drums and a vocalist or two. The music essentially serves as a warm-up band for the main event of Cavey's teaching. People continue to enter the theatre during the music; a number come after the band has completed its twelve-minute set and the site pastor has begun with the six minutes of weekly announcements and prayer. An offering is taken as in-house MH commercials project onto the large screen, and people put their coffees into the cup holders and rock back on their plush seats.

The video portion of the service always ends with the professionally-produced teaching series introduction. It includes dramatic imagery, arresting music, and quotes that pertain to the day's teaching. Some visitors may even find the titles of the teaching series rather scandalous, such as "Big Buts of the Bible," "ISIS, Islam, and Jesus," "Inglorious Pastors," or "Don't Drink the Kool-Aid." Titles often play off popular culture themes: "Grace Anatomy," "Earn, Save, Give," and "License to Sin." Cavey regularly includes a video clip from some aspect of popular culture—not as an opportunity for nurturing media literacy, but to develop a theme, segue to his teaching, or just create an entertainment break. Cavey's approach is more like a television host than a preacher; his tone is casual, he sips his coffee, and smiles at the cameras as he guides the audience through the teaching notes they received at the entrance.

Purge Sunday

Megachurches are defined by their large size and often characterized by an ideology of expansion. Rick Warren scouted out famous megachurches and then set himself the goal of building a church of twenty thousand members. His training in McGavran's Institute of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary gave him the rationale to pursue quantitative growth as a sign of faithfulness to God and taught him the strategy to accomplish it: targeting the felt needs of middle-class "Saddleback Sam" and "Saddleback Samantha." When a group of his early converts expressed a preference for a smaller community church, Warren simply told them, "Well, then, goodbye" (Sheler 2009:136).

Various scholars have generalized this kind of entrepreneurial vision. MacNair argues that megachurch leaders are determined their church will “grow fast and furiously” and they “jettison unnecessary theological, ecclesiastical and liturgical baggage” in pursuit of this primary goal to the point where their organization can no longer be identified as a Christian church (2009:46, 224). Maddox (2012) defines megachurches—especially those with prosperity theology leanings—as “growth churches” and even “capitalism’s cathedrals” because of their “overriding commitment to growth” and their “gospel of growth.” “Growth is elevated to the highest organizational and religious value,” argues Ellingson (2007:184) in his critique of megachurch networks; megachurch expansion for Ellingson includes the “colonization” of other churches and their traditions through the distribution of megachurch growth strategies and resources.

I want to investigate in this section a Meeting House ritual internally referred to (with ironic tones) as “Purge Sunday.” This occasional Sunday ritual, a sort of “anxious bench” counter-performance or reverse altar call, demonstrates clearly the ambivalence of the church towards consumer culture and megachurch growth pressures while at the same time reinforcing aspects of it. It is a signal to their audience that communicates their distance from high-pressure evangelical churches and cults as well as from the stereotype of megachurches as greedy for members.¹¹¹ This particular ritual celebrates one of the paradoxical dimensions of their identity—that they are “a megachurch for people not into megachurches.”

On Purge Sunday, which typically happens unannounced in September, and more frequently of late in January, Cavey issues a challenge to his audience just before his teaching time. In September 2008, he said:

If you feel this church is not where you can serve your best, we’ll help you find another place. We’re not a cult. If it’s not a good fit—if you need something more liturgical, expressive, conservative, emotional, charismatic, etc., you may move onwards. If you left TMH and got more passionately involved in another church, that would be a success story for the broader kingdom of Christ. That’s better than a limbo half-commitment here.

Then Cavey turns to a slide that has appeared on the screen, and says, “We have a riotous diversity of people here”:

1. New visitors
2. Spiritual seekers.
3. Supporters of Seekers
4. Healing from Trauma (temporary season of healing)
5. A Christ-follower enthusiastically engaged in our mission.

¹¹¹ NBC, for example, has been critical of megachurch pastor Steve Furtick’s ceremonies where he purportedly manufactures baptisms by the thousands for his Elevation Church in Atlanta (Watson 2014). They are also critical of another matter of scale: his \$1.7 million, 16,000 sq. ft. mansion. By contrast, the various baptism events I witnessed at TMH usually included three to five baptisms, with short testimonies.

6. A Christian who has come from another church and really likes TMH but doesn't completely consider it your church 'home' and is taking a long time to belong because of some lingering issues or simply because you have slowly become comfortable hiding in the shadows.

This is an important moment. Cavey knows that not all free-riders are opportunists or free-loaders. Some are genuinely in process towards a commitment, and the cost of accommodating them is worth the investment if they are indeed potential recruits. But the “bad” free-riders he wants to sift out. In September 2007 he addressed them directly:

There are some who just kinda come who are like barnacles on a boat... And every so often you have to scrape the boat. You're just slowing us down. We do believe we have a mission and a calling and we want you to participate. If you are #6 we want to lift you up into category #5. If not, we just need to scrape the boat and say you best not come back next week. There are great churches we want to commend to you. Our site pastors will be happy to help you.

He apologizes to visitors, saying this doesn't happen every week. He then adds: “Someone came up to me after the last service [this morning] and said they were a barnacle and they need to make a commitment. We chatted a bit and then I said well, goodbye.”

This purging ritual deserves further discussion. Goffman (1963) explains that stigmatized groups will mobilize around a savvy representative who can teach them some “code” that instructs them on how to manage tensions and pass for a normal person. Cavey often gives his attendees instructions on how to share their faith with others—sometimes even dedicating a whole series on the topic.¹¹² Purge Sunday suggests another “code” instruction moment at TMH—where Cavey explains expectations for membership and distinguishes TMH from consumer religion, possessive cults, and “sheep stealers” (churches that draw transfer growth from other congregations). I will briefly discuss the ritual in light of what Goffman says about use of narratives, the role of humor in impression management, and identity ambivalence among the stigmatized.

First of all, Goffman discusses the function of publications and public presentations in formulating the ideology of the group through narrative—including both success stories and atrocity tales (1963:25). Cavey's Purge Sunday has become a more broadly discussed identifier of this church. The ritual was briefly featured in an article in the evangelical magazine *Leadership Journal* that critiqued passive “Magic Kingdom” amusement culture in the North American church (Stearns 2012); it also was the focus of an article in the Canadian news magazine *Christian Week* in which Cavey describes the ritual as a way to tell those who won't “get in” to church volunteering to “get

¹¹² For example, “Say What? Getting, Living and Giving the Good News” covered eight Sundays in June/July 2010.

out” of the church (Paddey 2005).¹¹³ The *Leadership Journal* article quotes Cavey as saying that ten to fifteen percent of the church leave after Purge Sunday, only to have the loss regained over the months that follow. The percentage seems remarkably steep to me; yet it certainly adds to the performance of “radical church.” The article functions to help manage the church’s identity by contrasting the Purge Sunday ritual over against the icon of consumer culture, Disneyland and analogous megachurches.

Similarly, when Cavey has spoken at Christian conferences across the continent, he has translated this event to other audiences under the title of “How to Attract Seekers, not Shoppers.” He explains that at TMH, Purge Sunday is “not some cheap manipulative trick” but the goal is to confront “Christian tourists”—often those from other churches who came to TMH after their own morning service was over—with their hypocrisy (that is, their play-acting Christian identity) and through pastoral relationships in the local settings, help these people move one step further in faith. He will tell a story, for example, of someone who left after a Purge Sunday and returned to thank Cavey ten years later for his timely rebuke. The choice-making ritual takes on a mythological power as it is publicized and discussed across the continent and becomes sacralized in its mimicry of an altar call, except the rhetorical emphasis rests on leaving, not coming forward. The underlying purpose, however, is to draw people deeper into their church participation.

A second focus of Goffman is how humour and jokes are used to manage the tension that arises between a stigmatized person and a normal person in everyday encounters (1963:108, 116-120, 133-7). More broadly, Durkheim (1995:384) and more recently Bellah (2011) have elaborated on the recreational or playful nature of ritual and religion. Schechner declared quite directly that performance is “ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play” (2013:89; see also Schechner 1993:24-44). Cavey, as the spokesperson for his church, uses humour to address the assumed consumer behavior of his audience and demonstrate his own distance from such cultural norms.

The complementarity of ritual and play appears obvious in this “purging” performance by the humour Cavey brings to it and by the amusement of many of his followers. On Purge Sunday, 2008, he adds a string of cultural clichés:

Maybe we need to go through a bit of a break up. I’d love to do it with a candle over dinner but why don’t we just do it right here. Could be better fits for you out there. Maybe it’s not you, it’s me. Its not your fault. You’re not meeting your full potential and maybe I’m holding you back. There are better people out there for you. I just want to release you. I’ll pay for your first year subscription to eHarmony... We can still be friends...

¹¹³ Other places the ritual has been discussed include blogs at unseminary.com (Nov 7, 2013), fulfilledprophesy.com (July 10, 2005), churchmarketingsucks.com (April 14, 2005) and transformingsermons.blogspot.ca (March 18, 2005). All enthusiastically approve of the practice.

This performance of dating break-up clichés provokes congregational laughter. The particular Purge Sundays I relate here were generally more elaborate than other Purge Sundays, with the 2007 performance becoming affectionately known to insiders as “Barnacle Sunday.” The majority of responses I received from attendees when I asked about this ritual were variations of enthusiastic mirth mixed with pride and a simultaneous acknowledgement of the practical necessity of purging spectators (eg. “Brilliant!” “Shocking!” “I love it! Every church should have one!”) One female interviewee was spurred on by a Purge Sunday to start volunteering the following week, and she eventually became a Meeting House staff member. The ritual disturbed her to action, a positive example of the alienation effect.

With such humour, Cavey not only signals TMH’s self-identity in contradistinction to a spectator sport, but at the same time conveys the risqué and playful character of the congregation—characteristics that contrast with the stereotype of the eager and serious proselytizing televangelist. Rick Warren, for example, performs a similar ritual to Purge Sunday in his megachurch; but this one has no comic element. Warren says:

Let me just be honest with you as somebody who loves you. If you passively just want to sit around in the next ten years and waste your life on things that won’t last, you probably want to find another church because you’re not going to really feel comfortable here. Because if you’re in this church, I’m coming after you to be mobilized (Kwon 2010).

Warren’s approach is both more sentimental and more threatening, and lacks the playfulness that Cavey brings to it. Cavey, moreso than Warren, wants to distance himself from the hard-sell evangelical subculture.

A third concern in Goffman to which I want to draw attention is the deep ambivalence that the stigmatized feel towards their fellow-stigmatized, as they are both attracted and repelled by this group that they cannot fully embrace nor let go (1963:106-107). Cavey aims to eliminate ambivalence in attendees on Purge Sunday, but he unintentionally simultaneously creates it. This is to say, impressions can be managed but not comprehensively controlled. At TMH, people share an experience of Cavey and their disdain for conventional evangelical religion; but they have little else that binds them to each other in terms of ethnicity, traditional affiliations, or even geographic location. TMH thrives on a negative identity, which fosters ambivalence from the start. Besides, as Cavey emphasizes, there are so many other options from which to choose for church.

The ambivalence that surfaced in one particular attendee interview was not ambivalence for the evangelical identity that Cavey seeks to distance himself from but ambivalence for Cavey’s purposes in the Purge ritual, based in a deep conscientiousness the interviewee had about his own spiritual performance. An older man involved in various aspects of Christian ministry, he explained

to me: “What happened, was after I hit about the third Purge Sunday, you know what? I find that too hard. I don't want to get Purged again.” He felt guilty about not coming every Sunday to the movie theatre, and although he was a regular at the Home Church, he felt he was charged with hypocrisy for only going occasionally on Sundays. “Okay,” he says, “I'm going to go when I'm one hundred percent committed to it.” He is disgusted by the image of being vomited out, and chafes against the assumption that the level of his participation in Meeting House activities is the measure of his Christian discipleship. “I don't want to commit to an institution and all it does; I want to commit to people.” As he spoke to me his body nervously shifted as he wrestled with the experience. The alienation effect was operating; two years later I found out he had left TMH for a more local church plant.

The Purge Sunday ritual suggests some performative contradictions. Intended to be a display that purges the church of consumeristic members, it relies on a market logic—that people should choose the church that attracts them most. Similarly, a ritual that Cavey uses to demarcate TMH from high-pressure evangelistic megachurches in the equivalent of a reverse altar call simultaneously demands one hundred percent commitment from attendees. In a case study of Hillsong Church in Australia, Wade (2010) draws on revised understanding of Goffman's (1961) concept of the “total institution” as well as Lewis Coser's (1974) investigation of “greedy institutions.” Unlike the coercive and draconian asylum that Goffman studied, the new kind of total institution Wade suggests is voluntary and seeks not to obliterate the self as much as promise self-actualization through complete commitment. Thus, the megachurch can be a “greedy institution” that seeks “exclusive and undivided loyalty... their demands on the person are omnivorous” (Coser 1974:4).

Although TMH deliberately limits its main programs to Sunday services, Home Church and more intimate “Huddles,” there are numerous activities attached to each venue that can potentially consume large portions of an individual's and family's week. That TMH doesn't have AA and divorce recovery groups, a recreation centre and hair styling salon does not necessarily mean it demands less of an individual's commitment. Regardless, many other congregations and religious groups make time-intensive demands on their members. TMH is not unique in its demands.

The difference with TMH is their constant drive to be distinguished from other churches. Cavey marks his emerging church-type congregation out from the stereotype of megachurches greedy for growth, and distinguishes his church as one for the committed rather than spiritual consumers. While the ritual does indicate the character of “a megachurch for those not into megachurches” it does also reinforce what it rejects. Ironically, Cavey calls members to deeper commitment while acknowledging the priority of their preferences and their freedom to choose. He assumes the ecclesiastical mobility of the individuals in his audience—that information on what churches might

be a “better fit” is readily available, and that attendees would be in a position to switch, apart from the feelings of their friends, spouse, and children.

In sum, if an open range of choices defines consumerism, megachurches are well-suited to providing numerous options to their pool of free-riders. This, however, does not mean that commitment is weak or that megachurches are somehow secularized. Consumerism has affected every religious community to some degree, but megachurches can capitalize on the consumer’s desire for options and sacralize that cultural impulse as a path to authenticity. In the long-term, it may draw deeper commitments from its core community than other religious institutions because its participants feel their commitments were freely and personally tested and chosen. In effect, it nurtures a consumer-oriented church for people not into consumerism.¹¹⁴

Going Off-Script: *Q. and Eh?*

Most of Cavey’s Sunday teachings end with a “Q. and Eh?” session that allows time for one to three questions—from the live audience by a roving microphone or through text-messaged questions that appear on the stage screens. Cavey often mentions this part of his teaching as a way to turn monologue into dialogue and demonstrate to his audience that he wants to make his church a safe place to ask questions. This practice, he makes clear, distinguishes TMH from other churches, where “the paid professional holy man” holds a monopoly on the public discourse and appears threatened by an audience that talks back. “That’s a bad first date,” he adds. “We are not just going to shout at you. We want to engage you in a conversational way.”

Cavey admits that although intended to demonstrate a “relational” and “dialogical” culture, the value is mostly symbolic when there are thousands of people and only a few questions. Yet he argues:

We are trying to create a questioning culture, a culture that values the question, and that also makes a statement to the non-believer who comes, that this is not propaganda, we are not trying to arm-twist you or kind of mentally seduce you into believing something or brainwash you. That random X-factor of the question almost has symbolic value, saying, ‘Yes, someone could ask something hostile or distracting, but we want to be open to the question and demonstrate that in our Sunday service.’¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ James Davison Hunter states that a consumer logic characterizes the trendy anti-institutional, “new ‘revolutionary’ expression of Christianity” that caters to specific demographic groups. “In the end, church is one more consumer choice for Christian believers; not much different in character from any other consumer choice” and reinforces modern individualism and consumerism rather than the structures that would resist them (2010:283). Hunter’s macro-view, however, neglects the ethnographic view, which can demonstrate how choice can allow people a chance to test options and then make a personal commitment that is more than mere preference (Neitz 1987; see also Smith 1998 and Taylor 2007).

¹¹⁵ Interview with James Prette and James DeGreef on Dieyo Godpod 119, September 30, 2014.

If the question relates to a previous teaching series, Cavey refers them to TMH electronic oral tradition or “teaching archives” on-line. Yet, he maintains that even a response such as, “That’s a great question, I have no idea, thank you for raising that,” models humility and sends a message to Meeting Housers that no one needs to have all the answers. Nevertheless, this rarely happens as Cavey is quick on his feet and impresses many attendees with his facility in answering questions. That these moments are clearly “off-script” gives them an authenticity that attendees value.

One example is from winter 2012 in a series entitled “My Invisible Friend: Embracing the Absurdity of a Relationship with Jesus”—five weeks of teachings on how to connect with a God one cannot see. On the third Sunday, Cavey spoke about how the Bible is not really “the Word of God” as evangelicals suppose, because the Word of God is not a book but God’s message to us, most vividly communicated in a person, Jesus Christ.

There was time for two questions after the forty-five-minute teaching, and the second one was not unusual: it asked for some detail about Cavey’s life. “What is your personal journey?” was the text-message, referring to Cavey’s own terminology for God’s communication. Cavey responded without pausing:

Yes. I grew up with the “word of God” language and now I think of [the Bible] more as special, holy, inspired. We need to step out of our evangelical linguistic culture. If I have relationship with someone I’ll bring this issue up, but I’m not going to argue about words in a casual conversation. You can read scripture and miss the word of God.

Cavey paused for a dramatic moment, and then added: “Now if I don’t know them well, I’ll shout it at them and then run away because that’s what Christians do.” The congregation erupts with a laugh of recognition, knowing he is satirizing aggressive, impersonal evangelistic techniques. Cavey then ends his teaching with a prayer, sometimes asking the audience to read a prayer on the screen with him.

Sunday morning services are deliberately planned—from the building environment to dress and language to the standard farewell of “Have a great week!” so that visitors are impressed with how enjoyable, informal, and non-threatening a church experience can be—in essence, how different it can be from parochial, formal, and high-pressure evangelical culture. They want to make the threshold as low as possible and keep anonymity easily attainable in their structure while having Purge Sundays and other invitations to encourage people to deeper commitment.

4.4 Identity Management in Teaching Content: Against Prosperity and Anger

Almost everything taught at TMH aims to distinguish the church from conventional evangelicalism. This does not mean their teachings are substantially different from core evangelical hallmarks

(Bebbington 1989) as much as it means that they give the impression that they are different by singling out various mores and practices associated with evangelicalism. For example, Cavey does not hold to biblical inerrancy (Feb 14, 2010) but neither does the National Association of Evangelicals (Olson 2011). When it comes to teaching about gay marriage, Cavey declares TMH offers a “third way.” This means, he explains, that they accept and love all people regardless of sexual orientation or sexual practice at TMH, unlike other conservative churches. But unlike more liberal churches, they do not agree that gay marriage is a viable option for a Christian and do not offer leadership positions to gay persons in partnerships.

This sort of positioning characterizes most of their teaching. The teachings that focus on Anabaptist history, doctrine, or distinctives such as simplicity and pacifism similarly separate TMH from generic evangelicalism, although as established in Appendix D, Anabaptism and the BIC in particular ambivalently identify as evangelicals. Regardless, here I want to focus on two teachings that are consistently highlighted by Cavey, and while they carry some aspect of Anabaptism they are more directly polemical with evangelical and megachurch culture.

A. An Anti-Prosperity Gospel

Coming into the mall or auditorium Sunday morning, a visitor can be excused for thinking that a feel-good message of God’s love and material blessing awaits at TMH. Anyone familiar with the TV shows of televangelists such as Joel Osteen or T. D. Jakes may expect similar prosperity theology to be the standard fare at a megachurch such as TMH.¹¹⁶ As established in the first chapter, globally speaking, most megachurches lean in varying degrees towards a health and wealth message. Brian Houston, the celebrity pastor at Hillsong megachurch in Australia, unabashedly sells a spirituality of upward mobility, exemplified in his book *You Need More Money* (1999). Wade (2010:20) summarizes the book and the church, saying “Hillsong’s consumer ethic is therefore not just a rationalization for wealth, but indeed a call to aspire to greater wealth and consumption.”

Cavey’s theology is characterized more by austerity than prosperity. He persistently critiques the synthetic, insulated, and comfortable life of most Canadians. He knows his audience, as most are middle to upper-class, and Oakville’s site—by far the largest and central site—sits in one of Canada’s wealthiest exurbs. With constant themes of self-sacrifice and a tempered Anabaptist asceticism, teaching series carry titles such as “Cruciformity,” “Can’t Buy Me Love,” and “Get Over Yourself:

¹¹⁶ The Christian mass media is saturated with prosperity theologians. Lee (2005:103) writes, “Today it would be very difficult to find an African-American church with members unaffected by prosperity teaching.” Joel Osteen would represent one TV prosperity influence that crosses most racial barriers (Lee and Sinitiere 2009).

Rebelling Against Our Culture of Narcissism.” A June 2007 teaching series entitled “The Secret Revealed,” directly critiques positive thinking in general and Rhonda Byrne’s book/film *The Secret* (2006) and its purported “law of attraction” in particular. Its magical-formula worldview is “completely incompatible” with the relational worldview of Jesus, argues Cavey, even if it mimics some “Christian” practices.¹¹⁷ Its prosperity teaching, says Cavey, echoes what he heard in his Pentecostal church growing up and from televangelists; if you give, God will give back more, because “You can’t out-give God.” This is a lie about what Jesus really taught, says Cavey, for Jesus declared wealth puts people at a spiritual disadvantage. Christians should never value money and possessions enough to seek them.¹¹⁸ True treasure is God’s kingdom community, where rich and poor hang out “soul to soul, naked and unashamed, just relating.”

In 2000, during the time when attendance numbers were rising weekly, Cavey offered his audience another humorous moment. He made a comment during the question and answer session about “those who are in Christian ministry just so they can make money.” He added dryly, “that’s why I’m here.” The audience laughs and he continued, standing in front of them in his jeans and T-shirt, “Please support my expensive taste in clothing.”

Cavey seeks to unsettle privilege; he will contrast the North American cushioned life with the persecution of Anabaptist communities throughout history—their simple living, and their martyrdom; he will address terminal illness such as cancer, describing how it has afflicted his family of origin and signals the fragility and precariousness of human life; or he will remark on horrific news such as the Newtown school shootings in December 2012 and declare such violence the common fare for many people worldwide from which North Americans have been sheltered. He suggests his audience lives in a “fantasy land where we think that we can buffer ourselves against it. So we react in the West as if it is the oddest thing. We are out of tune with suffering” (Feb. 16, 2013). Cavey will then mention that 30,000 children die everyday from malnutrition, but such news does not grab the attention of North Americans such as smaller, more local tragedies carried by the mass media. When suffering does come close, he says, we cry, “Why me?”

Cavey insists that the true altar call for disciples of Christ invites people to come and suffer—

¹¹⁷ On the fourth Sunday of the series Cavey directly compares the advice given in *The Secret* to randomly open its pages for immediate guidance with the evangelical practice of opening the Bible at random to receive guidance from God. “It’s just silly,” he concludes. “Immaturity and self-centredness.”

¹¹⁸ As mentioned in chapter 3, Cavey is admired for his modest lifestyle. Although he has also confessed to a season of financial mismanagement earlier in life, he does fit the Weberian charismatic leader who “shuns the possession of money” and “all rational economic conduct” (Weber 1968:21). The luxurious lifestyle of other megachurch leaders (Nigerian pastor David Oyedopo is reported to be worth \$150 million according to *The Economist*, July 2012:48) may be compared alongside Weber’s charismatic “pirate genius” and his gold, as well as the glamour of celebrity (Rojek 2001:73-75).

more precisely, to follow Jesus and go where love takes you, which will be towards those who suffer. “Suffering is the great worldview switcher,” he says; it brings non-Christians to seek Jesus and it turns Christians away from Jesus. For Cavey, our expectations drive our reactions, and he insists the Bible promises suffering, not protection from it. “This is Jesus’ pitch, his invitation to be spiritual,” says Cavey in a 2010 teaching entitled “The Spirituality of Suffering.” “You’re going to suffer; it’s going to suck. Follow me... This is not the Jesus of prosperity gospel, but the Jesus of Scripture.”¹¹⁹

Unlike prosperity theology, the theology of downward mobility has less popular appeal, and for Meeting Housers in the upper echelons of professional work, it is more difficult to put into practice—as evidenced in the opening scene at the beginning of this thesis. Most attendees I interviewed could speak of modest changes they have made to simplify their life, and some deliberately live below their means in order to give more generously to the church and other causes. My focus here, though, is the contrast between scene and script; attending a celebrated, growing church with a celebrity pastor and hearing a call to sacrifice without the accompanying promise of mirrored personal success can be jarring. The counter-performance alienates and can appear like a sudden change of script. It is a successful church for people not into success.

“I love being in the ministry of busting up people’s expectations,” said Bruxy in a 2015 interview at Unseminary.com. “It keeps them kind of unsettled, ‘What is going on here?’ I think it then prepares us to say, ‘Let’s take a fresh look at Jesus together.’”

B. Anger is Not a Fruit of the Spirit

One of Cavey’s signature teachings, which he wrote in his book (2007:65) and often uses when on tour and in interviews, critiques the religious affections of evangelicals. Often he begins this talk with the subject of religion, which he defines in pejorative terms as something people typically use to defend themselves or offend others. At the heart of this teaching is a parody of evangelical preachers, who he claims end their words with an extra syllable. He mimics the tone: “The wrath-uh of God-uh is coming upon you in the name of Je-*sus*.”

He then tells the story of how when listening to a radio preacher one day in the car, his wife Nina suddenly asks why he listens to angry Christians. Cavey utters surprise and plays up his incomprehension at her remark. He then relates how his wife, who was not socialized in a Christian

¹¹⁹ Cavey preaches against easy miracles, insisting people take responsibility for their difficult circumstances: “You are God’s Plan A.” “Sometimes we say, [in preacher’s voice] ‘God is still in the miracle-working business!’ as if that were his full-time job. But its not. He is not in the miracle-working business; he is in the relationship-building business, the partnership business” (Feb 14, 2010).

family, explained to him: “If this preacher was talking that way about any other topic, you would think him dysfunctional, and in need of therapy.” Cavey then imitates the preacher’s voice again, but attaches the voice to mattress sales, a university math lecture, and then a lover’s talk, the latter of which he says should most resemble Christian speech. The incongruity between the tone and content humorously displays the assumed dysfunctional behaviour and distinguishes Cavey from those other evangelicals while training his followers in the code, so that they, too, may pass as Goffman’s “normals.”

This is how it dawned on him, testifies Cavey; evangelicals were angry people. Evangelicals will rationalize such anger as holiness or passion, Cavey goes on to explain, but that holiness functions as a euphemism for a judgmental spirit, and judgment properly belongs only to God. Anger is one of the seven deadly sins and is frequently mentioned in the lists of vices in the Bible, argues Cavey—not in the list of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In a 2015 on-line interview, Cavey explains that “absent from the list [of spiritual virtues] at any time is anger, or even just those generic terms of, ‘I’m passionate, I’m excited, I’m on point, I’m on fire,’ which we sometimes use as euphemisms for ‘I’m a bully.’”

Cavey models gentleness, humour, and a conversational style in his teaching, what some journalists have described as a combination of lecture, stand-up comedy, and talk-show host (St. Philip 2006). The casual and jocular tone, especially during controversial teachings or on-stage interviews with contentious others such as a Muslim guest can cause indignation in some of his audience. Cavey explains in the same interview above: “For religious people who have lived within a tradition of anger equals holiness equals truth, it throws them off, but they need to be thrown off.” Through emotional labour, Cavey creates role distance from the “passionate” evangelical preacher and generates an alienation effect in sections of his audience.

Sometimes Cavey connects this teaching with Anabaptist pacifism, charging that non-Anabaptist Christians have killed in the name of holiness and righteous anger. At a Xenos conference talk he gave in the U.S. in 2013, he offers a sweeping historical judgment; the mainstream Christian authorities only stopped killing when the Enlightenment came and robbed the church of its power to kill. That is to say, the Church never repented of its violent ways on its own but only by the force of secularization, which disestablished its cultural dominance. Today, religious people, Cavey adds, “can only murder people with attitudes and judgments.”

This teaching often includes commentary on the “wrath” of God. Only God can be wrathful, says Cavey, because he is the ultimate judge. His wrath is always under the direction of his love, as

love is fundamental to God's essence, while wrath is accidental.¹²⁰ Jesus, who turned over tables and brought out a whip in the temple one day, was expressing his judgment against the "den of robbers" who occupied its court. Jesus did not recruit his disciples to such action, emphasizes Cavey. Christians need to distinguish when to imitate Jesus and when to stand back and worship. Such disapproving emotion is properly exclusive to the divine, and Cavey insists Christians should "have a reputation on the street for being gentle, graceful, merciful and very embracing."

At one point in the 2015 interview Cavey concludes: "I think that's one of the key lessons that we as Evangelical Christians in the West need to unlearn, is that anger is not the emotion that will help us display our holiness."¹²¹ Such declarations put Cavey outside the evangelical mainstream. For example, one prominent evangelical professor of human emotions has recently written in a small anthology of essays on anger that "anger expresses a sense of justice and a sense of being in the presence of responsible agents. A person who cannot get angry is seriously defective" (Roberts 2014).

Cavey's contentious claim here, like most of the criticisms of evangelicalism directly or indirectly assumed in this chapter, beg some critical comment. It is ironic that English literature scholar Ian Gordon (2002) describes satire as the "fusion of laughter and contempt" as satire's chief weapons of ridicule, parody and mockery use laughter for aggressive purposes, "vexing the reader's complacency and provoking his or her anger." That Cavey connects his theology of anger with his Anabaptist pacifism draws out a similar irony; James Davidson Hunter detects a passive-aggressive streak in the neo-Anabaptist camp, contending their criticism of state, market and mainstream church create a public tone that is "overwhelmingly a message of anger, disparagement, and negation. Christianity in America, as it is believed and lived by most believers, is just not Christian enough" (Hunter 2010:165). "Theirs is a world-hating theology," argues Hunter, which affirms neither social world nor creation but only the pacifist church and its God (2010:174). Some Nietzschean "ressentiment"—a psychology of entitlement endemic to politics at large today¹²²—also creeps into the Anabaptist narrative, as they recite the history of injuries against Anabaptists and intimate their position on the "right side of history" (2010:175). Ironically, proponents use the language of politics (and for Cavey, this includes terms such as "revolution" and "subversion") to frame a selectively

¹²⁰ Cavey steers away from God's wrath as the cause of Jesus' crucifixion. He avoids substitutionary atonement theory and places Jesus death firmly on the violence of the crowds (see April 8, 2012 teaching entitled "Why Did Jesus Die?").

¹²¹ He refers to evangelicals here in the first person plural; normally he is quick to distinguish himself from them (Stiller 2007). When speaking in an evangelical forum, however, he takes on a wider Christian identity than when on his own church stage. "Post-evangelicalism" suggests an internal debate, not an identity entirely discreet from evangelicalism.

¹²² Hunter translates this as resentment, but with a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage and revenge motivating any political action that arises from it. It is most visible among those who perceive themselves as weak or aggrieved (2010:107).

sectarian identity (Ellingson 2010) forged primarily against the state while making instrumental use of markets and electronic technologies.

Hunter overstates his case here, and some have called his characterization of the neo-Anabaptist approach unfair and uncharitable (Thiessen 2011). The irony, however subtle, remains; Cavey's demeanour is consistently gentle, casual and jocular, and his satirical tone is more the witty Horatian than the serious Juvenal (Abrams and Harpham 2008); but he is also contentious and passionate, vigilant of theological boundaries, as he was in his series on pacifism, the series against Calvinism, and in his series exploring other denominations (April 2010). Coincidentally, this discussion can turn attention back to the beginning of this chapter and Brecht's alienation effect. Brecht argued that the aim of the alienation effect was to nurture a critical attitude that evoked "justified anger" in the audience that "cannot be passionate enough" (McTeague 1994:26). If Cavey instils a critical stance towards religion (and evangelicalism in particular), he may not avoid arousing negative emotions in his already disaffected crowd.

Yet Cavey models his teaching well in terms of his approach and tone; he is consistently gentle, civil, and witty, even when being critical. His shunning of anger, if unintentionally ironic, proved to be of therapeutic value for some of the Meeting Housers I met in Home Churches. I was in one prayer group during a Home Church meeting that had recurring discussions and prayers about anger management—one father was concerned about his daughter's temper, and another father was struggling persistently with his uncontrollable rage. Not everyone at TMH may theologially agree with Cavey on the ethics of the emotion, but therapeutically speaking, controlling anger seemed an unquestioned good.

In sum, Cavey's teaching on anger highlights his polemical relationship with evangelicalism as well as the foundationally paradoxical nature of TMH, a religion for people not into religion, a megachurch for people not into megachurches, a satirical performance for those not into anger. I point out these performative paradoxes not to suggest their community has failed as a religious experiment but to emphasize that its charisma rests in these playful and provocative tensions that amuse, unsettle, and intensify loyalty and affection for Cavey.

I have suggested that a dramatic web enchants Cavey's charismatic authority, and in this chapter I demonstrated ways in which TMH deliberately appears to undermine such person-centred authority, especially for people identifying with Cavey as an evangelical celebrity pastor. TMH is intensely aware of the stigmatized identity of religion in Canada, and of evangelicalism especially, and awareness of this context directs their post-evangelical dramaturgy, characterized by strategic, satirical counter-performances. Such counter-performances however, suggest a reflexivity towards religiosity that has its own charms, as by managing audience impressions they can simultaneously

reinforce Cavey's authority by giving it more authentic form and thus more legitimacy. By creating role distance from the evangelical celebrity pastor—and clearly articulating that role distance—an alienation effect occurs with the audience that binds them more closely to Cavey, if it does not turn them away.

I have now covered the deconstructive performance that forms the unsettling and provocative opening act of Bruxy Cavey's dramatic web. This satire is not fully satisfying on its own, however—it names the problem that begs for a solution. Beneath much satire lies an ideal, a romantic notion of social life that informs the satirical critique, and at TMH this romance comes in the script that is given for their Home Church life—what is said to be the true centre of the church. The combination of satirical critique and utopian alternative complete the charismatic connection offered by Cavey to his followers. This taps into deeper mythologies of North American history and the early Christian church, and this gives Cavey's charisma enough novelty to be attractive but enough familiarity to be credible.

Chapter 5

Home Church Romance as Dramatic Script

“I get the benefit from [Cavey] doing all the work [chuckle]. And yet, in order for me to take it from head knowledge to heart and action, that's where I come home, I do my study, I go to Home Church and we talk about it. And that has been one of the most helpful areas of being able to grow. Because I can see how I'd be talking about an issue that I'm struggling with, in terms of, for example, a co-worker, at work, just came on board and she's a nasty, nasty person. I'm just astounded that anybody could be so mean. So, this is where the rubber hits the road. We're learning to love our enemies; we're learning...”

- middle-aged female, hospital clerk, co-leader of Home Church

Cavey's signature teaching declares the gospel is that Jesus came to “shut down religion.” The welcome page of their website explains:

We believe that in order to truly see Jesus, grasp his message, and follow him, we need to reject the lens given to us by religion, even the Christian religion, and become a community who opens our Bibles regularly with fresh eyes and re-live the accounts of those who first followed Jesus.

If the face of the church is a rejection of *religion*, the heart of the church is *relationship*—with Jesus and with others, an evangelical cliché given a more communitarian dimension:

Our real focus (our hidden agenda) is on what we call Home Church. These are small groups that meet in individual homes each week to talk, become friends and to reach out to their local communities. This is the core of who we are because we feel that only when people connect relationally with people, discuss ideas, serve together, and learn to get along, that they truly function spiritually as God intended. We feel that if there is any one thing a person should focus on, it's this—even at the expense of our Sunday morning services.

The previous chapter focused on Cavey's satirical critique of religion, and evangelicalism in particular, as communicated from the stage Sunday mornings. While satire may descend into disengaged cynicism, it can also harbour a deeper romantic vision (Guhin 2013). This chapter shifts from the Sunday show towards the small group drama that takes place during the week, what I am characterizing as the revolutionary romance narrative—with its nostalgic promise of adventure, fighting against monsters, and finding love (Frye 1957). I first examine Cavey's articulation of this script in two forms—as a revolutionary community and then as a restorationist program, and then I investigate how this script is performed in the Home Churches I visited. Much rests on the lived

religion of Home Churches, as according to Cavey, *they are the church*. Sunday mornings are just a teaching program—their public preaching point.

As in the previous chapter, the analytical separation of the four points of the charismatic diamond in chapter 3 are now integrated into an investigation of the dramatic web of the church. Cavey offers a message and mission that is shaped and distributed onto people's screens across Ontario—at home and in rented movie theatres. This message of relationship rather than institutional religion resonates with social and cultural conditions that have nurtured scepticism towards institutions and fragmented human communities, leaving people longing for more meaningful relationships, what Giddens (1991) has called “pure relationships.” Attendees recognize Cavey's talent and vision and live out his script for them while sharing it with others through word of mouth and social media. The charismatic diamond makes explicit what is implicit in my unfolding of TMH's dramatic web, just as analyzing the setting, star, stagecraft and spectators of a performance does not illustrate the play.

5.1 Stories, Organizations, and Overcoming the Monster

Before exploring Cavey's script and its performance in the Home Churches, I want to give a brief survey of the importance of story and its connection to organization and drama, and explain what I mean by revolutionary romance.

Human beings are story-telling animals,” declared Clark Wade Roof in his Presidential address to the Religious Research Association in 1992. “Who we are and what we become are tied up with stories” (Roof 1993:298). Roof claims a narrative approach to the study of religion has equal value to positivist scientific methods and different advantages. Noticing the power of stories highlights culture, he explains, as people use stories to enter “symbolic made-up worlds of meaning,” which Clifford Geertz (1973) called “webs of significance.” Plot brings disparate moments of action together, suggesting an order, meaning, and purpose, but also mystery, nuance, and the comfortable cohabitation of contradictions. Roof describes individual biographies that demonstrate the paradox of caring individualists and untraditional conservatives. Especially in the West, where people's lives have been disembedded from tradition, their stories have become piece-meal, temporary, therapeutic, and characterized by disorientation.

This emphasis on stories suggests a wider “narrative turn”¹²³ in scholarship, and not only in the humanities but the social sciences and other sciences as well (Fulford 1999; Phelan 2008; Spector-Mersel 2010; Rymes 2010). Coincidentally, as performance theorists turn to narrative, narrative research has experienced “the performative turn” (Peterson and Langellier 2006; Puroila 2013). That is to say, those championing narrative have come to realize the connection between story and action—the context and embodiment of story in human drama. The interdisciplinary nexus of performance and narrative has become quite wide and convoluted, as the meaning of narrative and performance are often quite varied and technical (Madison and Hamera 2006; Fenske 2007; Rosile et al. 2013; Dreyer 2014). For my purposes, the central ideas of this discussion are the crucial link between story, community, and action.

Stories have a life of their own, but it is not the story that carries social power. Anthropologist Raphael Falco, who defines myth as a narrative that gives shared meaning to a group, emphasizes that “only the shared experience of a myth system gives it meaning” (2010:2). For Falco, stories and charismatic leadership are interdependent, and act as a revolutionary force that overthrows people’s everyday routine. This destabilizing dynamic draws a group of people into a shared experience of charismatically sustained discourse (2010:3).

Stories and storytelling have been recognized to play a significant role in organizational management (Clark 1975; Gabriel 2000; Boje 2001), social movements (Davis 2012; Polletta 2009; Meyer 2009; Johnston 2009; Reed 2014) and congregational studies (Ammerman 1998, 2013). By storytelling, leaders conjure up a world in which followers can think, imagine, and feel in a new way, and thus be drawn into protest, mobilized for action or enticed deeper into community participation. Stories help form the self-conception of a group along lines that formal logic cannot imitate. Narratives are more fluid, more open to interpretation, and allow people to “imaginatively organize their agency” and develop a vision for an alternative social order (Reed 2014). Carrying moral interpretations of life and culture and ideas for action, storytelling gives people a sense of power and possibility. Stories arouse emotions of hope and fear, admiration and envy, curiosity and excitement that solidify a charismatic bond with their source.

Stories are the structure of drama; dramas are story in action. I will demonstrate that story, like a script, is what drives drama, and what primarily forms the dramatic web of TMH with its

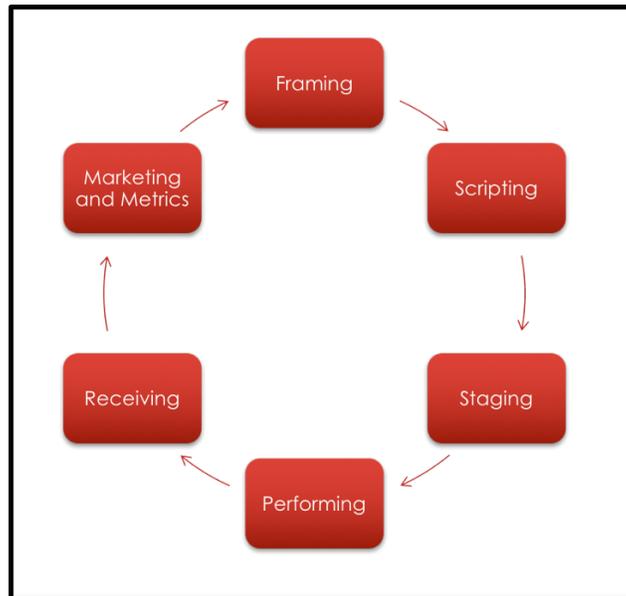
¹²³ This phrase describes a cross-disciplinary dissatisfaction with positivistic science that turns to highlight the significance of story in human life and society. Some sociologists are part of this shift, drawing attention to how people order their world via story (R. J. Berger and Quinney 2005; Ammerman 2013). Subdisciplines of sociology have experienced a similar turn, such as social movement studies (Polletta 2009; Meyer 2009; Davis 2012), celebrity studies (Gabler 2001, 2009; Goodman 2010), and sociology of religion, specifically in such areas as conversion, healing, and congregational identity (Ammerman 2013).

charismatic character embodied in Cavey. Management scholars Gardner and Avolio (1998) developed a dramaturgy for the charismatic relationship in which the leaders as actors, through various identification strategies, construct a charismatic image with the aid of their followers or audience. Impression management of their idealized image can be categorized into four phases of the lead actor's behaviour: framing, scripting, staging and performing. The audience members, far from passive in the process, align themselves with the performance as they gradually identify with the leader as role model, see their valued goals pursued, and feel an increase in their own self-esteem, self-efficacy, and positive affect for the leader.

Sharma and Grant (2011) adjust Gardner and Avolio's model, arguing that impression management is intrinsically a narrative and story-telling process, that Goffman's performing regions (front stage and backstage) require more emphasis, and the term "environment" is more appropriately understood as a "scene." I want to highlight here the conceptual priority they give to narrative and story-telling, and how the framing, scripting, staging, and performing all happen underneath that new rubric. While the model fails to recognize that a specific cultural context constitutes and conditions the performance, it shows the vital relationship between charisma, story, and organizations. In their elaboration of three seminal public performances by Steve Jobs, they show how narration and storytelling, with careful stage management, allows Jobs "to define himself and his world for his followers" through a grand narrative that "is itself an absorbing, perhaps heroic story of learning, growth and redemption" (2011:20).

In Figure 5.1 I conceptualize this dramaturgical process as a "spin cycle." The performance team at the core of an organization like TMH offers a stable set of meanings and practises which create and disseminate charismatic authority primarily by spinning a narrative—a narrative that guides action in the form of a dramatic web. The stories, language, symbols and practises of this web are framed, scripted, staged, and performed, but they are necessarily received by followers, interpreted by them in various ways and acted out to varying degrees. By taking on the language, rehearsing the inner folklore, and by participating in Sunday and Home Church events, attendees appropriate and routinize charismatic authority—what Barker (1993) describes as the "charismatizing" experience of participating in the group and Schrauwers (2002) calls developing a "vocabulary of motives" that derive from the vision of the charismatic leader. Aspects of the drama are then marketed by the leadership team and by followers themselves through word of mouth and social media. Finally, staff measure the quality and quantity of their reception among followers and the public, which in turn guides a re-framing of the narrative and its images, language, and associated practises.

Figure 5.1 Spin Cycle of the Dramatic Web



If management scholars see narrative as a key component of business organizations for its power to make meaning, encourage devotion and define new worlds for people, how much more should researchers of new religious movements and religious institutions value the same investigative program. This certainly applies to evangelicals, for whom the Bible is an anthology of stories, the central character Jesus is himself a storyteller, and for whom personal testimonies are a primary ritual in their religious performance (Harding 2001; Hindmarsh 2005). I would venture that story-telling is especially important for religious actors in a megachurch without a taken-for-granted denominational history, for storytelling of the megachurch becomes a primary way to create solidarity between people from vastly disparate backgrounds and potentially draw them into a new tradition. It is the story that captures the imagination and drives the drama—the drama on stage performed by the charismatic leader but also improvised in the daily lives of followers.

Sharma and Grant maintain that the narrative and storytelling generally develop along three lines: self, vision, and organizational. I have already described the stories of Cavey’s self—in terms of his biography and the buzz around his teaching and character. In this chapter, I examine the organizational vision of TMH—what I characterize as a revolutionary romance.

Christopher Booker (2004) suggested that stories can be generally grouped into seven basic plots. As established in chapter 1, the majority of megachurches worldwide fall into some version of a “prosperity gospel” subculture, often as part of the neo-Pentecostal or charismatic network (Lee 2005; Maddox 2012, 2013; Bowler 2013). The narrative plot championed in these churches comes closest to Booker’s second plot description, entitled “rags-to-riches,” exemplified in T. D. Jakes

biography and in his message to his followers (Lee 2005). This plot follows a similar trajectory to the American Dream and other globalization narratives in which the main character “who has seemed to the world quite commonplace is dramatically shown to have been hiding the potential for a second, much more exceptional self within” (Booker 2004:52). In theological terms, health and wealth are rewards for faith in God.

TMH, however, eschews the prosperity gospel church, and in their vision narrative the forces that threaten are grander and more terrifying than the personal struggles in a rags-to-riches plot (Booker 2004:244). The first of Booker’s plots, entitled “overcoming the monster,” fits best with the driving narrative of TMH where “the existence of some superhuman embodiment of evil power” threatens a community and must be fought to the death by the hero (2004:23). The monster, which can also be a force or machine in some other renditions of this archetypal romantic narrative, takes the shape of institutional religion in The Meeting House narrative. It is ironic that religion would be what threatens a church, but it is not surprising, given the perennial struggle that evangelicalism has had with formal religion (Hatch 1991). Cavey’s version of this plot is best compared to its revolutionary renditions, in which radical social transformation ushers in communitarian ideals (Booker 2004:578).

In sum, scholars increasingly recognize the significance of stories in human society. These stories are less often the grand overarching metanarratives of the previous modern era and are not always logically consistent with linear plot lines. They are narratives that give meaning, order and mystery to people’s lives, and in the context of organizations, these narratives are not merely texts but embodied local performances. These communal narratives can create, carry and expand charismatic authority, overturn conventional patterns of life, and draw people into social movements geared to religious and personal transformation.

5.2 The Revolutionary Community Narrative

Cavey tells a story that resonates in a climate of institutional and specifically religious skepticism and offers a way to be evangelical without the perceived stigma of conservative institutional religion. Cavey’s book and the church slogan, “the church for people not into church,” epitomize the idealized vision of the church and its themes of radicalism and rebellion. Cavey has on occasion condensed the vision narrative into three words: “relationship, not religion.” When one combines such an approach

with his pacifist position, denominational connections, and civil approach to ecumenical encounter, Cavey has created a Christian community well-tailored to Canadian sensibilities.¹²⁴

In what follows, I present two storylines in this dramatic web, and I organize, arrange and interpret them by drawing from different moments in the life of this congregation, including from their electronic oral tradition. Most teachings will include some reference to one of these two storylines, which I portray as “the revolutionary community” and “the restorationist design” narratives. Both plot a struggle to overcome the monster of established institutions—and especially religion—and carve space for revolutionary, restored community of what Giddens (1991) calls “pure relationships.”

The first core narrative performance includes Cavey’s hippie costume, including the long hair, T-shirt and jeans, and has been articulated most coherently in two related teaching series entitled “The Way: Teachings from the Original Hippie from Nazareth” (April 2004, October 2009) and echoes the rhetoric of the hippies and the Jesus People Movement with Sunday teaching titles such as “Make Love, Not War” and “Give Peace a Chance” (employing the image of multi-coloured flowers).

In this series Cavey starts by saying he wants to give the audience a sense for the context of the sixties. He explains:

It was a crazy time, far out time. Tremendous upheaval. Old institutions were being questioned, and radical ideas were being investigated. The nation was at war and divided over whether to fight, but this radical subversive group said maybe freedom and peace are not just goals to be pursued but a way to live. They refused to see war as the answer and instead headed in the other direction, fostering intentional communities of peace, love and togetherness. They rebelled against the war and lots of things acceptable in society like capitalist ideals, rejecting materialism that ensnared so many in it, and with radical simplicity and sharing everything, living communally and saying what is mine is yours; and so they were a counter-cultural movement not only as far as war and peace issues were concerned but also as far as economics and material possessions were concerned, but going so far as to go against the flow by going against some of society’s most cherished institutions, like religion itself.

They were very spiritual people and spiritually questing in a variety of ways, creating all kinds of issues but they shunned organized religion basically with the idea that it had had its day and quite frankly it had failed. It was the great failed experiment of humanity, religion was, and instead they pursued spirituality and faith. They said we are moving on from a time of law to a time of love because all you need is love and love is all you need.

¹²⁴ John Ralston Saul (2008) offers one articulation of this character of Canadian culture, positing its origins in aboriginal civilization, especially a “Metis mindset” that embraces difference and social complexity. The official multicultural policy of Canadian society since 1971 has cultivated values of tolerance, diversity, and accommodation. Cavey’s antipathy for loud right-wing evangelicals and even his recent distancing from his controversial colleague Greg Boyd (a megachurch pastor in Minneapolis with similar Anabaptist leanings) suggest a less polemicized religious vision consonant with Canadian evangelicalism (Reimer 2003).

After some more detail Cavey pulls the rhetorical twist: “Everything I’ve just said is about the 60s. Not the 1960s.” He then explains that 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the first century, the original sixties, his movement, The Way, was calling for love and peace formed in radical community.

Glimpses of a dramatic web become more evident now. Cavey puts layers of stories together, creating a web of overlapping storylines, including the early church, the 1960s, the spiritual but not religious subculture, and as this sermon ends, he plays a clip from *The Matrix: Revolutions* where the female rebel character Niobe declares regarding the hero Neo, “I believe in him.” Pop culture and a re-mixed tradition reinforce each other to emphasize the all-encompassing imperative of overcoming the monster.

Cavey consistently associates his vision narrative with the rhetoric and symbolism of radicalism and revolution. A teaching series entitled “*Revolution*” (a word within which they highlight the backwards-spelled word “love”) uses a parody logo of the Che Guevara silhouette with a crown of thorns on his head. The pacifist Cavey delights in the irony of using a symbol of revolutionary violence to promote his rendering of the peace-pursuing community of Jesus. Such iconography also deliberately appeals to the “rebel consumers” who associate Guevara’s image with “a challenge to authority in any guise, a ‘cry for freedom’ that no longer has any specific meaning in it” (Caistor 2010:xi, 134).

The Jesus figure at the centre of Cavey’s grand narrative is not the meek and mild pastel-coloured portrait of Sunday school; nor is it the muscular evangelical Jesus of the early 20th century (Putney 2003; Kee 2006); neither is Cavey’s Jesus primarily the king who sits on the throne as the ruler of all creation in conservative theology (N. T. Wright 2012; Keller 2013). First and foremost, Cavey’s Jesus is the prophetic Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, who stands up to teach the crowds a counter-cultural ethic; this Jesus challenges the status quo of violence with a promise of peace, and eschews riches to comfort the poor, and follows a path to suffering rather than personal security. In middle-class urban Toronto culture, Cavey’s faux Guevara/Jesus may carry the intensity and urgency of socialist revolution, but it does so apart from the context of murderous political struggle, apart from the radical sacrifices that such revolutions demand, and apart from the social transformation of the political economy. Comparatively speaking, Cavey’s “revolution” entails convictions that often remain open-ended, nurtures relations that are respectful and tolerant of others, and as a conservative Anabaptist, negates the possibility of political protest or involvement of any kind. In effect, such “revolutionary” language does not refer to overcoming the current political-economic system to reconstruct a new society but rather to develop a parallel society to the current configuration, centrally based in church community and its intermittent forays into broader society through “compassion”

activities. A Jesus who avoids violence, riches, and institutions remains modestly at the margins, in the tradition of “separation” from the world which has been characteristic of the social ethic of the Radical Reformation. Cavey’s use of the word “revolution,” similar to his use of the word “religion,” is idiosyncratic and requires the context of his larger oral and theological tradition to be properly understood.

Cavey’s social ethics share with liberation theology a concern for praxis—an emphasis on what participants can do to make a difference in their everyday lives rather than simply interpreting texts. This focus on discipleship is also characteristic of his theological tradition. All his teachings end with practical suggestions for action that most busy professionals could incorporate into their lives. “Compassion” initiatives stretch beyond the private sphere through collective action in concert with other Christian mission agencies: TMH concentrates attention and millions of dollars in finances toward the poor, especially those communities affected by AIDS in southern Africa (through the global BIC, World Vision, and Mennonite Central Committee networks). To be clear, Cavey does not hold to the preferential option for the poor, nor does he seek any structural change in the political economy in Canada or beyond. His notion of the “kingdom of God” is much narrower and much more spiritualistic than the liberation theologians (Gutierrez 1988)—or many emergent church pastors, for that matter (Bielo 2011).

The revolution Cavey describes champions authentic relationship, community, living simply and generously, and while that may involve scaling down one’s purchases and assets it has little to do with structurally transforming society as a whole or pursuing the common good. The Meeting House’s entire “Transform” mission—their five-year plan for ministry begun in 2012—has no strategy for change in the culture or political-economy of Toronto. In traditional Anabaptist fashion, they interpret Jesus’ words “My kingdom is not of this world,” to be rationale for political quietism.¹²⁵ Cavey provides well-circumscribed boundaries for the “revolution”; in one 2008 “Drive Home” podcast on gender differences, Cavey explains that “the gospel is not a social reform movement but a “heart reform” movement, not transforming society and institutional structures such as patriarchy and slavery but about the transforming freedom from slavery to our sin, selfishness, attitudes.” Cavey does not deny the significance of some social reform movements, but the gospel for him is something spiritual and of transcendent importance. It is ultimately a revolution of the heart; or to borrow the

¹²⁵ In a 2012 teaching on same sex marriage given at Woodland Hills megachurch in St. Paul, Minnesota, Cavey explains that the state, as a secular kingdom, will do what it thinks prudent. But Christians, as “visitors or tourists” in this land, are called to a different standard. He sees his church as accidentally located within a nation, dedicated to evangelism and acts of service but not investing energies in organizing rallies, policy change or political leadership. This is not the traditional evangelicalism of prohibition, but it is typical of Canadian evangelical congregations today (Reimer and Wilkinson 2015).

title from a book from one of Cavey's favourite thinkers, a "revolution of character" (Willard and Simpson 2005).

5.3 Restorationist Narrative

This leads directly into the second core storyline, which, contrary to American trends towards non-denominationalism, follows the megachurch's denominational identity—Brethren in Christ (BIC), discussed in more detail in Appendix E.

One of their 2010 promotional lines summarizes this storyline: "The Meeting House is a church trying to push back through 2000 years of religious tradition to learn from the Biblical Jesus." Arguing historically that the 16th century Protestant Reformers were not radical enough in their reforms, Anabaptists like Cavey claim the core of faith rests in discipleship with Jesus and that the first century church is the prototype of Jesus' original vision: meeting in people's houses, active in evangelism, and at odds with its surrounding culture. The turning point in the plot—the central conflict or complicating action of this story—is the "fall" of the Christian church in the fourth century, when the Christian movement calcified into an established institution linked with the state. Jesus' message became obscured in rules, rites and religion and the violence of Christendom—the storyline's monster—violence on occasion meted out against the Anabaptists in the 16th century and beyond.¹²⁶ In sum, teaching pacifism, simplicity, and revolutionary community, TMH promotes itself as "urban-dwelling Amish" or "Mennonites with electric guitars."

Anabaptism, the lesser-known underdog of Protestantism, offers resonance with current counter-cultural trends among the middle class that romanticize the local, authentic, green, and organic.¹²⁷ The Anabaptists were persecuted by the Christian establishment in centuries past, became known in Canadian literature for their controversial pacifist position in war-time through Rudy Wiebe in his 1962 book *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (Wiebe 2001). More recently they became the object of nostalgia, as one memoir recounts an almost fanatic pilgrimage to the culture of quilts (Bender 1991), another attests to the happiness that lies off the grid (Brende 2009) and more significantly, Harrison Ford brought their plain-dressed but charming lifestyle to the big movie screen (*Witness* 1985). Of late, Anabaptist life has been popularized not only through tourist attractions such as St. Jacob's Market, just north of TMH's Waterloo site, but also through such authors as American Beverly Lewis

¹²⁶ Cavey has a chapter in his first book (2007) entitled "Chamber of Horrors" in which he gives an inventory of the great evils of the church, including the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch hunts, and constant infighting. He concludes the chapter by saying the reason conservative Christians refrain from killing today is they lack the political power to do so. By identifying with the Anabaptists, Cavey dissociates from this history.

¹²⁷ For a discussion of the tension between the evangelical and Anabaptist identities of TMH, see Appendix E.

and her two-dozen bestselling Amish romance novels. One of her books, *The Shunning* (2008), has been made into a film of the same name (by Hallmark 2011), and it complements other recent Amish films (*The Devil's Playground* 2002; *Amish Grace* 2010) and the more popular TV shows such as *Amish in the City* (Stick Figure Productions, 2004), *Amish Mafia* (Discovery Channel 2012) and *Breaking Amish* (TLC 2012) with its promised sequel *Return to Amish*. While I did not notice any direct references to such popular culture in TMH, their Anabaptist heritage resonates with these popular culture productions. There are no Calvinist equivalents in popular culture.

Regardless, the Amish are not the full embodiment of Anabaptism. Anabaptists are also known for addressing global issues of poverty, hunger, and sustainability, notably through the advocacy of BIC-affiliated writers Shane Claiborne (2006) and Ron Sider (Swartz 2014), the latter of whom penned the controversial bestseller *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1978). Anabaptists are also known through the developmental work of the Mennonite Central Committee, and its ethics are popularly expressed in *The More With Less Cookbook* by Doris Janzen Longacre (1976) and its various sequels. In sum, while Anabaptism remains on the sidelines of establishment Protestantism, it has elements with “allure” that “enchant” and challenge mainstream culture (Kraybill 2003; Weaver-Zercher 2013).

The Anabaptist character of TMH stimulates the restorationist or primitivist impulses that reverberate through TMH. This is a notoriously controversial concept, and Anabaptist theologians prefer to dance with it at arms length (Yoder 1995; Schlabach 1995). It can be defined as “attempts to cut back through the corruption built up over centuries in order to recover the pristine purity of Christian faith and practice on the model of the church’s early period” (Noll 1988). One significant part of this primitivist impulse is a sense of the “fall of the church” and an understanding that church tradition, rather than an authority from which to glean, becomes a barrier to radical discipleship. One clear indication at The Meeting House was their seven Sunday “Inglorious Pastors” series which emphasized a “fall of the church” under Constantine and began with this promotional statement: “The Meeting House is a church trying to push back through 2000 years of religious tradition to learn from the Biblical Jesus.” In effect, history and its evolving church institutions contaminate the original charismatic body and so TMH’s teaching often leans back towards the first century, seeking more organic community relationships.

For Cavey, his restorationist impulse is most prominently ecclesiastical: de-coupling the church and state establishment initiated by Constantine and returning to New Testament networks of house churches that intentionally build community, or as they say at The Meeting House, “do life together.” Yet similar to many evangelical churches and revivalist movements, this restorationist impulse also seeks to push through the perceived cold formalism of mainline churches and foster a

more casual, energetic atmosphere (Hatch 1989). Church rituals, routines, roles, especially when rhetorically coupled with legalism, hypocrisy, and judgmentalism are spun in a negative, pejorative frame and that mirrors many evangelical writings today (Arterburn and Felton 2000; Boyd 2004; Bell 2006; James 2007; Kimball 2007; Schmelzer 2008; Bickel and Jantz 2008; Driscoll 2009; Farley 2011). In effect, Cavey's "irreligious" ethos can be linked both to his new Anabaptist lineage as well as his biographically more long-standing evangelical faith.

The Meeting House leaders describe themselves not as a megachurch but as "a network of about 200 house churches." Their logo encapsulates this contrarian narrative; TMH in blue letters, except the two "e" letters in the word "meeting" are facing each other, in this manner: "eə"—because "real church happens when we turn our chairs and face one another." Cavey elaborates on the cliché, saying that Sunday morning features their *teaching program* or "public preaching point," intended to meet with cultural norms for gathering spaces but is not the church. Church is Home Church.

At this point, I want to emphasize the similarity of Cavey's narrative with Giddens' notion of "the pure relationship," which he defines as "one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver. In the context of the pure relationship, trust can be mobilized only by a process of *mutual disclosure*" (1991:6). Modern people gravitate to relationships without ascriptive ties, pursuing them for their own sake, and they endure as long as their satisfaction lasts (Giddens 1992:58). While Giddens refers primarily to sexual relationships and their "purification" through the compartmentalization of sexuality from reproduction, the concept can translate to a megachurch small group, purified from the dynamics of ethnicity, family, nation, tradition, and shared memory—(recall that 99 per cent of attendees at TMH are not BIC). They are voluntary relations, entered into for their own sake and for self-development, democratically structured, reliable "until further notice." Both contemporary sexual relationships and megachurch attendee interactions are modern relations that rely less on history or nature for their bond, and rest more on precarious and fluid social agreements. They are risky, always in danger of dissolution or codependence. In Giddens' sociological understanding, these relations must be constantly re-solidified and re-negotiated in a disembedded, "runaway world" of globalizing forces which sweep away traditional markers by enhancing risk and relying on experts and abstract systems. Without inheriting pre-existent patterns for life, individuals must continually choose in matters of lifestyle and identity in a perpetually reflexive way.

Cavey's organizational vision narrative echoes with some of Giddens' social analysis. In a question and answer session one Sunday night in the summer of 2014, in what Cavey called a "Theology After-Party" for those interested in further discussion on the morning's teaching, Cavey

compares Home Church with professional counseling, suggesting that the relationships forged in Home Church may obviate the need for professional therapeutic help:

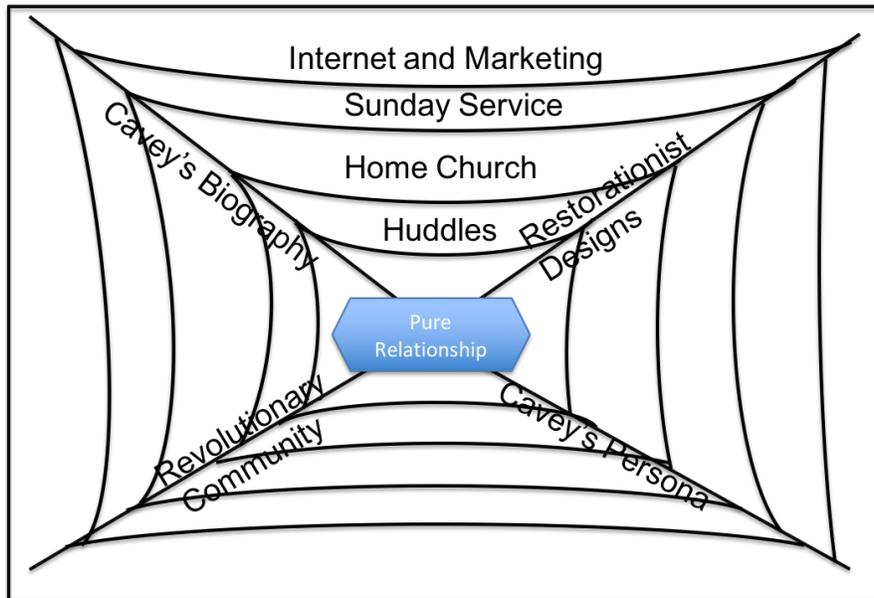
What we do in the West is take one element that should be part of our personal lives in the church and professionalize it, because it makes us comfortable. We love professional versions of professional things. So as friends, we should be a lot more open about how our lives are doing, how our marriages are doing, how our relationships with our kids are doing, what it's like being single, what my personal struggles are. We should be much more open about our personal emotional life. We should probably have those people we are much more open with and regularly meeting with for on-going mentorship and wisdom—we tend to be more private, those things get bottled up, we say “I need to get a therapist”—that's the secular version. Now I pay a person money, so they can look into my life and I can and catch up on this whole process of intimacy and give me wisdom.

Cavey does recognize a place for professional intervention, but he suggests more regular self-disclosure (the word “open” appears three times in three sentences) in our everyday relations could replace therapeutic help. He goes on to explain the value of The Meeting House's smaller and more intense configuration, called Huddles, where two to four people “are going to be more intentional, more intimate” than they would be with “the average brother or sister” in Home Church and “confess their sins to each other,” “lay bare their lives before one another and work through things together.” Cavey expects accountability in terms of their faith journey, as participants whose lives may be “off in left field” in some unhealthy way would be effectively requesting an intervention. He takes on the voice of his ideal Huddle member: “Oh, please, make it your business; my life *is* your business, actually, and *your* life is *my* business.”

Cavey explains that Sunday services, Home Church and Huddles form three concentric circles that encompass TMH, the Huddles forming the inner-most ring of the church's social structure. These concentric rings I compare with the concentric threads on a spider's web, with the radiating lines as the narratives that hold the diverse social circles together. The centre of the web is not Cavey or Jesus, but the utopian goal of “pure relationship”—where all storylines converge, and where the radical community demonstrates it has overcome the monster (see Figure 5.1). Mobile urbanites are caught up in this dramatic web, a symbolic “web of significance” (Geertz 1973) that brings meaning, purpose, excitement and a strategic religiosity to their disembedded lives.

Meeting House elders take this idealistic vision to heart, and it raises some issues. Cavey and Day irregularly offer special podcasts called “The Meeting House Roundtable” that are specifically addressed to the approximately 200 elders of the church who lead the Home Churches. Here they offer some leadership training and answer questions that have been emailed to them by elders. In one particular Roundtable from the summer of 2014 the question was raised: sometimes people share something with their Huddle and they end up feeling judged by others and their identity becomes marred in the group. Are these groups safe and confidential?

Figure 5.2 The Meeting House’s Dramatic Web



Day replies first, warning people that they should hold back at first in the group and test the waters to be sure they are safe. People come from vastly different faith traditions, and cultural expectations for group discussions can vary. Elders should remind people all conversation is confidential and the focus is support, not preaching at people. Cavey then elaborates:

We just remind ourselves about what we believe to be true but need to have overtly stated: ‘Guys, this is confidential here.’ Preventative [medicine]. And then if there is a breach of trust by gossiping, then we address it. Just say: ‘It’s good for us to persevere here and not fear this happening even if it has happened in the past.’ We can’t let that be used against us somehow to buffer us from intimate, honest, genuine Biblical community.

We need it. We are designed to grow in that soil. For that kind of connection. Within which, a lot can go wrong, a lot of misunderstanding can take place. But those are the problems that we choose to spend our lives addressing and sorting through, we don’t solve those problems by not choosing to be involved at that level of Biblical fellowship.

They end this portion of the podcast by saying that such honest conversations come with some risk and vulnerability but that “there is a huge amount of empowerment to overcome the stuff you struggle with.” Cavey then provides his own experience in Home Church as a model for the elders, and he assures all listeners that Huddles will become the highlight of their experience together in Home Churches.

At times, Cavey calls this intimate cloister friendship; other times he calls it discipleship or mentorship. However, the most common metaphor he uses for his megachurch community is

“family.” But these relations are often not as proximate or sustained over time as family; they are transitory, and often as long as personal satisfaction and work schedules last. The Huddle epitomizes more typically a therapeutic community not unlike other religious small groups (Wuthnow 2001) in which people seek voluntary, provisional, fluid connections based in intimate self-disclosure of their personal struggles. In a sense, these Huddles are “purer” than Giddens’ pure relationships, for Giddens has been criticized for ignoring the power differentials inherent in opposite sex relations (Hay et al. 1997). Home Church prayer times and Huddles, by contrast, are almost always gender segregated. While there remains some homogeneity in faith that binds people together, the diversity of past religious affiliations present in one group can be vast, ranging from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal. The charisma of Cavey and these narrative performances hold the group together in their quest to overcome the monster—their negative assumptions or experiences of institutional religion.

These narratives are not only foundational to TMH discourse; they are to be performed as part of their post-evangelical dramaturgy. I participated in five Home Churches and attended each for eleven weeks. While I did participate in one intense Huddle group, there was too much turn-over, transition, and interrupted meeting routines for stable long-term relationships to form for the vast majority of attendees. People switch groups, groups split, and they usually break for the summer season. The core vision narrative, however, with its promise of pure relationship over against the legalistic, self-justifying and historically violent institutional church, charismatically functions to engender increased self-efficacy (Madsen and Snow 1991) for deconverted evangelical attendees. The narrative functions to cultivate a charismatic bond with the long-haired, fast-talking and jocular Cavey, all bathed in the irony of being “a megachurch for people not into megachurch.”

Cavey describes these intimate relationships in Biblical terms with Anabaptist interpretations, but they resonate with the modern, mobile, white middle-class urban dweller because they are not *too radically* Anabaptist. Anabaptists have traditionally emphasized communal living and decision-making, but this was a more comprehensive community project, including living in proximity to each other and enforcing ecclesial discipline. Most significantly, the “mutual interactivity among diverse participants” in Anabaptist understanding is “most evident in economic sharing” which included the sharing of material possessions, something “regarded favourably by the lower classes” and authentically expressed in Hutterite communes (Finger 2004:242, 254).

Readily available cultural narratives about religion demonstrate an affinity with Cavey’s organizational vision narrative. This intimate understanding of “church” suggests a de-politicized organization removed from the tarnished legacy of Christendom and its establishment powers. Instead, it offers a privatized and individualized form of religion that puts the choices, struggles and needs of the attendee at the centre. While there still is a strong communal discourse and practise that

surrounds the Home Church, it appears in the form of “cooperative egoism” which “involves the management and assertion of one’s individuated self” while simultaneously pursuing empathy and connection with others (Marti and Ganiels 2014:166).

Additionally, an evangelical mythology and the broader Christian narrative of the biography of Jesus Christ most fundamentally enchant the performance (Falco 2010:27). Cavey would have much more work to do in order to connect with his dechurched and overchurched audience if he could not immediately make the connection with strangers already socialized to varying degrees within the drama of Jesus Christ and such staples as the Bible, Sunday worship, prayer, and forgiveness. This forms the subcultural base from which Cavey builds, and his organizational vision narrative rests upon it, as he gives it his own interpretive spin within a wider dramatic web, and the “irreligious” quality of the story comes across as fresh and innovative to his followers.

Like most narratives, this narrative is by no means uncontested (Phelan 2008). Culturally available alternatives that promote more traditional church practises or more individualistic consumeristic themes surround Meeting House participants not only in their everyday urban lifestyle, but TMH itself plays with consumer themes and even deliberately puts itself in the context of the movie theatre and mall. There are ironic associations on many different levels of this church. These ironies will keep a certain kind of more serious or literalistic personality type away from TMH, while others will feel inherently drawn to the pastiche of paradoxical messages that TMH engenders by its pop culture marketing, theatre and mall locations, and idealized vision of pure relationship.

5.4 Home Church Performance: The Romance and the Ambivalence

In this section I report on my observations while attending five Home Churches for eleven weeks each. I elaborate on three levels of engagement with the dramatic web, what I am calling on-script performances, off-script performances, and “failed script” narratives.¹²⁸ The first on-script performance I relate took place in a Home Church connected to the Oakville site led by an overseer and her spouse; it was attended by some MH staff and others who were quite committed to the Sunday services and regular Home Church participation. It demonstrates the permission that Home Churches have in structuring their meetings and their freedom to practice a “sacrament” that is normally the privilege of clergy in mainline churches.

¹²⁸ The language of “script” relates to the dramaturgical metaphor and is used by social scientists such as Davidman and Greil (2007), who describe religious defectors as “characters in search of a new script.” See also Harding (2001).

We were huddling together in the living room discussing Bruxy Cavey's latest teaching on prayer. It was a Wednesday evening, March 13, 2012, and there were fifteen people present, white professionals of both genders mostly in their thirties. One of the leaders announced we would have "communion" together and invited everyone to go in the kitchen, help themselves to a wine or juice, and enjoy it with some pita bread and snacks. They added that no one had to do it if they did not feel comfortable with the ritual. Those from traditional Christian backgrounds would have noticed there was no Scripture reading, no prayer, and no theological introduction to the ritual. They said this was more a "celebratory" style of communion. Less formal. Less religious.

I poured myself a glass of wine and one of the leaders said "Cheers" to me, then "To Jesus," and many of participants clinked glasses. There were also home baked cookies there, so I took one along with some pita bread.

I asked if they always did communion like this. One leader replied they have done it many times before in Home Church, but usually they read some of the intent of the ceremony beforehand. "Things are always different around here," she said.

I was at another Home Church in a different town that had a whole meal together, marked by the celebration of communion before the meal with bread and wine. As Cavey contends, Home Church is not an optional program in their church, such as a small group Bible study, but the heart of their ecclesiology. This scene testifies to the possibilities for forming local communities of diverse Meeting Housers, as most members came from different ecclesiastical and geographical backgrounds, although all members were white, white-collar workers in their thirties.

The focus of a typical evening was usually Cavey's teaching from the previous Sunday, and we usually reviewed questions that Cavey had prepared for Home Churches—some of which were on the Sunday bulletin, and some of which were only given to the Home Church leaders by email from Cavey. After an hour or so discussion, we divided into gendered groups and spent time sharing and praying about our personal joys and struggles. The group of men I was with usually consisted of about four or five young men, and our times together resembled Cavey's description of what a Huddle should be.

Here men shared about their disagreements with their wives, their struggles with supervisors at work, and their problems with time or anger management. The level of disclosure was quite intense for a group of males, and I found it both embracing and uncomfortable. Some newcomers never came back, as the group developed a depth of intimacy that made it awkward to join in without being determined to do so over the long-term. Nevertheless, I considered the group to be genuinely motivated to live out Cavey's vision for focusing on building intimate relationships through their weekly gatherings in people's homes.

There are special gatherings of the Home Churches that break from the discussion of Cavey's sermon and focus on a different agenda. I attended progressive dinners, helped out at the local Salvation Army food bank, played football and soccer with the young men, and went bowling. One particular night in January 2011 was a "games night" for a Home Church connected to the Kitchener site. Modest amounts of beer and wine flowed along with cheese, crackers, chocolates, chips and dip. We were at the Home Church leaders' house with about ten people, mostly all under age 35, playing the Mattel® party game Apples to Apples. Everyone begins with seven cards, each with a descriptive noun or activity on it. The "judge" flips over a random adjective card, and each player has to put down their noun card that they believe best corresponds to that adjective. The judge then determines the noun card that best fits their adjective card, and the person who originally presented that card wins the round and becomes the next judge.

Joanne, a biology major who now works for the Ontario Conservation Authority, was the judge and turned over the adjective card "selfish." With ten nouns to choose from, she gradually eliminated all of them but two: "George W. Bush" and "Saddam Hussein." She hesitated a moment and then made her decision: "selfish" was best paired with George Bush, the 43rd President of the United States.

Here again, the scene follows Cavey's script quite closely. Attendees are spending their leisure time "doing life together" and enjoying food and drink. Even the way people play the game mirrors Cavey's convictions, in this case the shunning of right-wing evangelical politicians and showing some degree of leniency towards enemies, although in an inconsequential way. These moments of Home Church life, where people share sacraments without clergy and where a game night flows naturally alongside Cavey's own politics, demonstrate that the dramatic web of TMH is more than a shared narrative; it is a shared dramatization, a story in action. These Home Church leaders have been cultivated by Cavey's teaching for over a decade, and they are firmly caught in the dramatic web.

Other experiences I had in the Home Churches revealed attendees less caught up in the dramatic web, and the beliefs and practices seemed "off-script" from Cavey's vision. These examples are not necessarily "off-script" because they demonstrate participants' disagreement with Cavey's theology. This is something Cavey recognizes and even invites, acknowledging that there is high turnover in his church and people come from a wide diversity of ecclesial and non-ecclesial backgrounds. As long as disagreement is done in a healthy way—not by harsh arguments or silent resistance—Cavey calls this part of being a "modern (church) family." The off-script aspect is revealed as Home Churches ignore the directions and questions given by Cavey for the Home Church and embrace more conventional evangelical or charismatic practices and mores.

A third Home Church I observed was also linked to the Kitchener site and one particular evening they were serving “Scripture Tea”—with tags containing Bible verses. It was April 2011 and we were discussing the questions given about Cavey’s teaching from his “Licence to Sin: When Christians Push the Boundaries of God’s Grace” series on the first half of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. The group was a mix of university students and older couples, and no one was enamoured with Cavey’s interpretation of Paul’s command to “remain as you are” (7:20). Cavey said that “staying single is best” for a young Christian, and should be the default status for believers rather than marriage.

“My single life was miserable,” said an accountant who married later in life.

“Ever since I’ve been married I’ve been sleeping much better,” added his wife. “My pets used to sleep in my bed.”

The conversation then left the direction given in the questions and people began to discuss faith and divorce, and how to help those struggling in their marriage to keep their vows. Then the question was asked how Home Church could help couples, and some tips were shared. Someone mentioned that Home Church can be a great place to meet a future spouse. We then circulated a card printed by DaySpring Christian card company (a subsidiary of Hallmark). A couple was struggling with cancer and a death in the family, and this was intended to encourage them.

A comparable “off-script” scene took place at another Home Church I attended in Guelph. We were gathered together in the living room discussing Cavey’s latest Sunday message on “the spirituality of suffering.” It was a Monday evening, December 6th, 2010, and there were fifteen people present, white professionals of both genders mostly in their thirties.

Rodney, in particular, was not following Cavey’s line of argument—that Christians who follow a cruciform Christ will find themselves close to those who suffer and inevitably bear some of that suffering.

“I just don’t get it,” said Rodney, referring to Cavey’s example of the Meeting House couple who gave up their middle-class life in Ontario to serve in Haiti for the indefinite future. “I’m not going to give up everything and go to Haiti,” he insisted.

Members of the group helpfully offered less extreme examples, such as befriending a neighbour who might be going through a difficult time by having them over for dinner. Rodney seemed open to that.

“Like not buying sweatshop clothes, or drinking fair-trade coffee,” he added. “That makes more sense.”

People were eager to distinguish Cavey’s message from some form of masochism. “Think of those televangelist preachers who teach the prosperity gospel,” said someone. “Bruxy is resisting that.

The point is don't insulate yourself from the suffering of the world by pursuing a protected comfort and then get surprised by hurt. Share in the sufferings of others." Cavey's radical message becomes effectively filtered and re-shaped in Home Church.

I visited a fifth Home Church (connected to the Waterloo site) in October 2011, during a teaching series by Cavey entitled "Chosen and Choosing: How God's Life Becomes Ours." This series was a direct polemic against the five points of Calvinism, and each Sunday Cavey critiqued the Calvinist position while extolling the Arminian alternative. The group consisted of mostly older people, the majority being over 55 years old.¹²⁹ They began with a review of the dinner they served for the homeless the previous week and made plans for next month's dinner. Then a short discussion of the Home Church's involvement in the TMH's annual "AIDS Care Kit" campaign followed. This was very much on-script.

One middle-aged woman was slated to lead the discussion of Cavey's teaching, and she had her outline for the evening printed out in front of her. It became immediately evident that all members of the group were ambivalent about this series. The woman appeared disinterested: "Makes me uneasy," said one. "This is the religion I wanted to get away from," muttered another. "It makes me agitated," admitted a fourth, while a fifth woman said, "I'm not following this at all." These women contributed little to the discussion that evening, staying mostly quiet and appearing bored.

Two men said they do not have any strong feelings on the Calvin/Arminius debate, although the evening demonstrated they do have opinions. A former pastor in the group said quite openly he's a Calvinist. A night-shift worker who was taking courses in Russian literature as a mature student said he used to be Arminian, but after studying the Bible with a learned mentor, he became ardently Calvinist.

"Bruxy is setting up more of a straw man here," he authoritatively argued. "Calvinists do believe in free will. Bruxy is simply misrepresenting the other side." He then launched into a summary of the difference between supra- and infra-lapsarianism (a debate about the logical order in which God makes his salvific decrees). The discussion leader for the evening and the Home Church leader both seemed uncertain how to proceed.

The leader then informed the group that I belong to a Calvinist church, and people asked me about my feelings on the series. I said that I would try not to be too defensive and keep an open mind, but I wished Cavey would give opportunity for a Calvinist theologian to respond in person. They nodded approvingly of the idea. I felt more conspicuous than usual that evening and tried to focus people's attention elsewhere.

¹²⁹ This Home Church narrative is a composite of three evenings I attended over three weeks on the same series.

One mother then exclaimed that she sends her daughter to a sister church of my home congregation because of its wonderful girl's program called "GEMS." She was one of a number of group members who had allegiances to other congregations from other denominations.

The Calvinist/Arminian debate then heated up in the group, as members argued whether Calvin denies the image of God in human beings and whether faith is a gift or a work. Suddenly, one of the men interrupted the discussion, breaking into spontaneous prayer and weeping for an acquaintance who had joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. His prayer transitioned into expressions of gratitude to God for his wife, who saved him from so much "crap." Group members whispered "Thank you Jesus" and "Yes, Jesus" and "Hallelujah!" A few other people prayed too, including someone who prayed for another family member who had left the church. Reflection on Cavey's teaching was left to the side as prayers drew the evening to a close.

Later that month, I attended the final Home Church gathering for this series, which Cavey designed as a wrap up for the last six Sunday teachings. This evening completely ignored the teaching and questions from Cavey. The leader read through the letter of 1 John instead, "as preparation for our next teaching series." The conversation bounced from Christmas preparations to false prophets, world religions, and demons. I noted three books mentioned that evening: Stephen King's *Under the Dome*, purported to be about a "horrible man" who thought he was called by God; David Augsberger's *Caring Enough to Confront: How to Understand and Express Your Deepest Feelings Toward Others* (2009), which allegedly shows that we should be like Jesus, "soft on people but hard on the issues"; and Todd Burpo's *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* (2010), which prompted stories from the group about people who had seen apparitions of dead relatives. Calvinism and Arminianism were never mentioned.

While the first two Home Church meetings I mentioned were operating closely to Cavey's general script of "doing life together" and reflect his own creative flair and politics, these latter three Home Churches were less caught up in their pastor's expectations for their group. These three groups were linked to regional sites—not the Oakville site—and thus there was some additional social distance from Cavey. They never see him teaching live, and he lives farther away from them. I noticed more regularly these groups were free to disagree with Cavey's teaching and to stray from the slated questions. Mainstream evangelical language, merchandise, and charismatic practices contributed to the subculture of the groups. While Cavey invites differences of opinion and welcomes dialogue in the Home Churches, these groups seemed less cohesive than the other two, lacking "Huddle" groups, and appeared further from the "pure relationships" that Cavey envisioned. This is not to say they are illegitimate or deviant—they could just as well be making progress towards socialization in the language and practices of Cavey's dramatic web. Time will tell.

The leader of one of the “off-script” Home Churches was also a worship leader at one of the regional sites. “They give us a list of 100 songs from which we can choose,” he told me. “But there are local favourites here, and I sometimes sneak in some of the more familiar Christian songs that people like around here.” At one point in 2014 the Oakville leadership tried to direct which four songs would be sung in all sites on a given Sunday. But a strong backlash from the regional sites reversed that initiative.

Some participants live closely by the script, others energetically engage it, and a significant number of people leave it altogether. In 2014, in-house surveys showed *one third of attendees at Sunday teachings had joined in the last year*. When the total number of attendees is relatively stable (since 2010), that means a significant number are exiting the back door as new potentials walk in the front door. Many may leave because of re-location to other cities, but many also leave because they have become dissatisfied, and they pull free of the dramatic web to find a new script by which to live.

I formally interviewed six ex-members of TMH and casually met many more. One young female teacher with a background in the Associated Gospel Church said she and her husband met while volunteering at TMH. They enjoyed Cavey’s teaching and the worship, but after a six-month stint overseas their feelings changed. When they returned to Ontario, she explained that TMH seemed “too big and too impersonal,” adding:

We just didn't feel that we fit there anymore. And it became, I didn't want my church experience to be coming in, listening to the sermon and music, and leaving, without ever talking to anyone besides who I'm sitting beside, my husband and my family. I think church needs to be more about community. And I think the MH tries to push for House Churches, and that sort of thing, but it's way too easy to come in, have your own little secluded church experience, and then leave. So we weren't getting that community aspect that we wanted.

At this point she admits she had a falling out with a friend who attended the same site, and it contributed to their decision to find a new congregation. She insists, however, that although TMH offers Home Church, the experience for most attendees—at least the 55 percent that attend only on Sundays—is a sense of disconnection with the organization.

A single young man working in the financial services industry was deeply involved in TMH for nine years, leading in Home Churches and leading the worship at various sites. He came from a strict Plymouth Brethren background, had experienced some church conflicts, and “a lot of guilt and legalism... ‘You will never be good enough’ [messages].” He became disillusioned with his faith.

When he left for university, he had some friends invite him to TMH, and the energy, the music, the spirit of freedom seduced him back to regular church attendance. “They are showing movie clips and this kind of thing... *The Matrix* was up [on the screen] all the time... it was cool and hip...

a new thing for me... and lots of provocative quotes!” He would note the books that Cavey quoted from and eagerly purchased and read them; it re-awakened his faith.

Over the years, however, he became disenchanted with the slick branding, the “hero worship” of Cavey, and the growing corporate structure of the church. He was caring pastorally for many different people in the church whom he felt were unattended by the leadership. “Institutionally, they weren’t set up to deal with the tough stuff where people were being hurt,” he explained, naming people who were going through divorce, church conflict, or burning out. Sadly, he reports, “There was no one to catch them.” He also may have been referring to himself here, as it was during this time he broke up an intense relationship with his girlfriend.

His exit from TMH came down to his need for ecclesial roots and a communal practise, which he could not find at TMH. “I want something with roots—a sense of history and tradition. And I actually want ritual, and I want religion... I want my imagination formed, and I want to mend some connection with the past.” He said he will “forever be grateful to Cavey and TMH,” but the church was a “gateway drug” for him, and now he was attending an Anglican Church and looking towards the Roman Catholic community. The dramatic web of Cavey’s irreligion no longer had any appeal to him. He did not perceive the BIC as sufficiently “rooted.”

I interviewed two married couples on separate occasions who both had evangelical backgrounds and who both exited TMH after painful life experiences. One woman struggled with depression, which led to marital trouble, and the other couple had their baby diagnosed as autistic. The first couple said turnover was too high in the church and in their Home Church, and “then when you need help there’s nothing there for you... They were more worried about getting the seekers in.” The second couple echoed the first couple’s complaint, saying they had been in three different Home Churches in three years, and when their crisis came they “didn’t get any phone calls or anything, or any offers of help... the accountability was lacking.” Both couples shifted to the more conservative neighbouring megachurch, Harvest Bible Chapel.

A final example tells a similar story, except this person was the chair of the Overseers (the board of trustees of the church). He was a leadership professor with mainline church experience and started attending TMH after seeing Cavey in the newspaper. He was enamoured by Cavey’s adaptive approach to leadership and became deeply involved during the years of tremendous growth in the early 2000s. He narrated to me his growing disillusionment with the church: “Everything became so focused on growth... people weren’t comfortable with the size, they weren’t comfortable with the showmanship, they weren’t comfortable with the professionalism of it.” He seemed to be describing his own critique here, but it was a sense of being abandoned that hurt him the most and caused his exit from TMH:

A whole series of things in my life just came off the rails. My wife of 23 years had an affair and left... My daughters were in university at the time... in the middle of that, my mother passed away... I left multiple [voice mail] messages, saying 'I need help.' I mean spiritual help. I needed relationship. I needed someone to walk with me. Never got a return phone call... Never got a message.

I was sick with cancer, too. And by then I had left TMH, I had had enough... and my daughters, for me the *coup de grace*, my daughters, seeing what was happening to us as a family, and seeing the lack of support from the church... said 'That's it. If that's what church is all about I don't want to be part of it...' They are still so bitter about that...

He admits it was a difficult time for many of the leaders, as Day was going through a tumultuous period of leadership and Cavey was distracted, writing his book. He has since met with Cavey and Day and come to an understanding. But this man attends a large, seeker-styled Plymouth Brethren church now.

Such intense grief is obviously not everyone's experience at TMH. A young couple in one of the Home Churches I attended gave birth to twins, and for weeks they were surrounded by their Home Church members who brought meals and helped care for both the parents and babies. This was a tighter group of young couples, and they shared many different aspects of their lives over a number of years as their families grew at a similar pace. But the story of people feeling pastorally neglected is not unusual, and the younger age of some Home Church leaders presents one possible reason why. Except for "roundtable" podcasts from Cavey and a few meetings a year, they are untrained and can be confronted with significant personal crises among their membership that they are ill-equipped to engage.

It is noteworthy that the reasons for exiting TMH are similar to the reasons I heard for first *joining* TMH. That is to say, times of crisis or transition preceded many attendees' entrance to TMH in their chronicles of their spiritual journey, and as described above, times of crisis or transition are also the catalysts for leaving TMH. This echoes the long-standing research into conversion by Lofland and Stark (1965), who concluded after studying a new religious movement that new converts, besides defining themselves as a seeker and developing more relational attachments with those in the new group than with people outside it, were significantly pre-conditioned for conversion by the experience of general tension or strain in their personal life (such as frustrated marital relations or unmet ambitions), and their transformation was triggered by a "turning point" in their life circumstance (such as illness, migration, loss of employment or graduation).

My research, however, more accurately describes a process of *deconversion* rather than conversion—or more accurately, the stimulus to switch to a new church. Nevertheless, the literature on deconversion focuses less on the triggers in one's life circumstance than the intellectual and emotional process of disillusionment leading to disaffiliation (Davidman and Greil 2007; Streib et al.

2009; Gooren 2010; Gooren 2011; B. Wright et al. 2011). An additional piece of the exit process for those who strongly identified with Cavey's charismatic leadership is their disaffection from him, the "severing of the socio-emotional bond" that charisma cultivates (Jacobs 1987).

Since emerging churches such as TMH are said to be places the deconverted move *towards* (Harrold 2006; Bielo 2011), it is noteworthy that *all* the ex-members I interviewed shifted to more conservative Christian congregations. This suggests either that the dramatic web at TMH was not compelling or convincing or they associated their personal crisis with Cavey's script and returned to a more familiar conventional conservative script. Wright et al. (2011) identify primarily "push" rather than a "pull" factors in deconversion from Christianity, and that may suggest the latter explanation for disaffiliation.

The charismatic authority of a megachurch leader can seem monolithically spellbinding as multitudes come to hear him speak every week. It is easy to overlook the diversity of commitment present in a faceless crowd. My observations from spending time among numerous Home Churches, which are purported to be the centre of TMH, is that there is a continuum of identification with Cavey's vision for "doing life together" in an irreligious way. The concepts of core and periphery may be helpful here, as there is a stable core of faithful, longstanding Meeting Housers who are caught up in Cavey's vision for intimate, local, cell group life. But around this core are people with varying degrees of attachment to Cavey and his vision, and they may be potential core members or temporary participants who are in transition to another Christian community. The megachurch, because of its size and fragmented, multiple venues, is conducive to exacerbating "the circulation of the saints" (Bibby 2003). People orbit the megachurch like objects around a planet—they either land on the surface and stay for a longer period or they get whipped around and out into space towards a different heavenly body. Once grounded on the planet, to leave again takes extra energy—often some mounting tension ignited by a significant trauma or turning point.

Cavey claims Home Church is the centre of his church and represents a local Christian community that "does life together." This is, in many ways, a fiction: by far the vast majority of resources, staff labour, and Cavey's own energy is poured into the Sunday morning event. Home Churches turn-over constantly, transition to new venues and leadership, and split to form new groups. People switch groups, attend sporadically, and most significantly, 55 percent of attendees on Sunday do not attend Home Church at all. Moreover, all the Home Churches I attended broke for the summer season.

My use of the word "fiction" is not a critique, however; I mean it as part of the dramatic web that Cavey spins for his followers, who are at varying stages of being caught up in the performance. The fiction is really an organizational vision that is not descriptive, but prescriptive, and functions to

nurture imagination for a new way of being “church.” Attendees who are captured by this fiction see it realized more concretely in their own lives, and Cavey’s promise of organic Christian community displacing rigid institutionalized rituals and structures increases in plausibility (Berger and Luckmann 1967). That TMH is an institution with its own structures and rituals does not completely escape the notice of Cavey and some attendees, and they live the incongruity, seeing the contradictions reconciled in the unity of their own biographical narrative.

This chapter has shown the romantic vision that lies beneath the satirical front of TMH. These highly mobile urbanites, situated in a cultural context where conservative religion has become a pariah, resonate with Cavey’s organizational vision narrative of a rebellious Jesus movement that overcomes tyrannical religious systems to move towards a utopian future characterized by therapeutic “pure relationships.” This draws crowds to Sunday services, congregates about half of them in Home Churches, and motivates a yet significantly smaller number of them to form exclusive Huddle groups of deeper intimacy. The alternative world constructed by Cavey’s narratives enables followers to think, imagine, and feel in a new way, and thus be drawn into a form of religious protest that is arranged into loose communities of mutual identification, and mobilized for occasional forays of compassionate action in their neighbourhoods.

In sum, these stories, with their accompanying symbols and practices, form a dramatic web characterized by an alternative social order which helps people to “imaginatively organize their agency” (Reed 2014) and nurture a sense of self-efficacy (Madsen and Snow 1991) in an otherwise “runaway world” (Giddens 2003). Attendees must simultaneously recognize the extraordinary character of Bruxy Cavey, for the stories alone are not sufficient; Cavey’s persona is necessarily a shared experience and co-production, even if interpreted in diverse ways by individual attendees. Yet the dramatic web must be enacted cooperatively; narrative in this case study is always understood as the script of a performance, not only a text.

This chapter has summarized the positive productive performance that animates TMH underneath the image of its negative identity as a “church for people not into church.” The two kinds of performance—deconstructive and constructive, satirical and romantic—at times complement each other and at times exist in tension with each other or even outright contradict each other. Cavey critiques religious institutions while cultivating his own religious organization—an inconsistency mitigated by his claim that the local cell groups are the heart of the church. This structured tension in part keeps the charismatic component of the church attractive and alive. Charismatic authority begins as a revolutionary force by disrupting routines and conventions; while new routines are established, there must be some regular destabilizing force to continually draw people to the charismatic source (Falco 2010:3). The routinizing and disrupting rhythm is necessary for the community to maintain

the sense of excitement that gave the community its original start and subsequent solidarity, and that solidarity keeps the charismatic bond strong within the dramatic web.

In the next chapter, I ask the most often repeated question at TMH and other megachurches across the continent: what happens when the leader leaves, resigns, is deposed or dies? In dramaturgical terms, how does the megachurch performance *end*—or how do leaders create a new chapter, a next act, or a sequel?

Chapter 6

Dramaturgical Trouble:

The Ambiguities of Charisma and the Contingencies of Succession

Bruxy Cavey: In the BIC every 14 years a pastor can get a full year off [as a sabbatical]. So see ya! I've been here 15, 16 years. It's not a crisis, it's a pre-emptive strike. I'm going to take 3 months off to do some reading, writing, with my family. I'll be in community.

Tim Day: What if things start tanking?

Cavey: Tanking?

Day: You'll come in and save it.

Cavey [nonplussed]: Yeah, I'll save it...

- on stage Sunday morning, May 6, 2012

“One of the guys in my particular HC, the topic came up ‘what if B gets hit by a bus’, right? And he said—and it's stuck with me for a long time—he said, ‘Well I'm here next Wednesday night. How about you?’ Right? So that's all he was saying. Yeah, Bruxy can die, but it hasn't nothing to do with me to a certain extent. This is my group. This is my Bible Study group. This is my HC. I'm coming here.”

- TMH Staff Member, interview, July 11, 2013

Cavey occasionally conveys to his followers the fleeting nature of their community. At the 25th anniversary of TMH in 2011, with thousands of people gathered together from all the regional sites of the church, he thanks God in his prayer for all the stories of changed, healed, restored lives. Then he adds:

If you use us for another 25 years that would be our privilege, to pass our torch to the next generation. But if you choose to close our doors next month—if that's your will, we thank you for how you've already used us. All of this has been pure privilege. We will turn our backs on our journey towards religion for we see you as everything to us...

Cavey realizes that to be consistent, he cannot merely preach against the abstraction of “religious rules, roles, and routines” if his own church is becoming a long-standing institution with its own rigid structures and inertia. He deliberately nurtures a sense of fragility and impermanence among his followers. If they wanted to be truly “irreligious” and anti-institutional, they might arbitrarily set a

closing date for their swelling organization.¹³⁰ In June 2007 he preached, “Part of the life of any structure, is being able to embrace their own demise: that is what it means to follow Jesus... One of the saddest things on the planet today are the time and energy that people invest in churches and denominations that have long outlived their usefulness... Shut it down.” However, there are no plans for such closure of TMH, suggesting the paradox of “routinization for people not into routinization.”

Cavey does not mention that the contingencies of his own career and life to a large degree create the sense of precariousness in such a large institution. When any organization—and especially a voluntary organization such as a church—owes its existence and growth largely to one personality, the inevitable question arises and becomes more pressing as the leader ages: what will happen if the leader leaves, retires, is deposed or suddenly dies? When power is concentrated narrowly in one charismatic authority, even if Cavey continues to freely delegate so much responsibility, the institutional structures rest on the precarious foundation of his continued extraordinary performances. The stakes are high; the livelihoods of dozens of staff and the spiritual care and community life of thousands of people are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of charismatic succession. Goffman uses the term “dramaturgical trouble” (1959:134) in passing to describe moments in the performance in which the performers cannot relax and where control of performance “regions” carries some uncertainties. In fact, Goffman examines performance disruptions and discrepancies at length for the tacit rules and roles they reveal. The dramaturgical trouble I explore in this chapter involves role distance taken to extremes (of leaving the pastor role or death) not discussed in chapter 4, and may produce an alienation effect much more profound than any instances mentioned hitherto.

This chapter aims to problematize the assumed comprehensive nature of charismatic authority by investigating two types of dramaturgical trouble. The first part of the chapter examines aspects of the performance that discredit the dominant impression they wish to make, including an examination of Cavey’s uncomfortable face-to-face encounters with attendees and his limited, if not awkward, involvement in the daily operations of his megachurch. To do this, I observe Cavey’s performance inconsistencies with respect to the celebrity pastor role, with significant reliance on the perceptions of his audience gathered from attendee interviews. My strategy in this section is to argue that TMH has been managing weaknesses in Cavey’s charismatic authority all along, and the inevitability of his leaving TMH is not as catastrophic a transition as some assume. The dramatic web is fragile because it hangs by a welter of tenuous threads; but because it hangs by a welter of such threads, it has some stability and a future.

¹³⁰ Josh Packard suggested this proposal for emerging churches in personal conversation with me in November 2013.

The second part of the chapter introduces the subject of the end of Cavey's performance at The Meeting House. While this dramaturgical crisis remains in the future, anxieties of its eventual reality reach back into the present. Therefore, I move beyond my own data to the broad range of anecdotes on megachurch pastoral succession and develop a typology of possibilities for the future of leadership at The Meeting House using some of Weber's descriptions of charismatic succession.

This is a timely discussion, for many of the megachurch founders from the 1970s and 1980s will be entering retirement age within this decade. Robert Schuller was one of the first to signal transition to new leadership, and if the bitter end of Schuller's Crystal Cathedral signals the paradigm for megachurch endings to the same degree it shaped the model for megachurch beginnings, many megachurches will be encountering disruptive and even disastrous transitions in the near future. However, while many took advice from Schuller on how to grow a church, many megachurch pastors and their boards may learn the negative lesson from his succession failure, that is, to plan carefully for their own leadership transition.

The charismatic diamond suggests charisma is a delicate phenomenon, arising from the confluence of four different factors. Charismatic authority can be destroyed or lost if one of the four elements becomes altered too suddenly or in the wrong direction. Billy Sunday lost the strength of his charismatic authority when the cultural context shifted but Sunday's message did not (Martin 2002). Robert Tilton's charisma was undermined when anti-fans used the democratic possibilities of new media to satirize his show and attack his credibility (Bekkering 2015). Mark Driscoll similarly bore the brunt of negative media scrutiny and resigned in ignominy (Vanderbloemen 2014; Hendersen and Murren 2015). Rob Bell stretched his evangelical image too far towards the left, and he lost much of his original constituency; with fewer followers, his charismatic authority waned (Wellman 2012). Followers form a deep emotional bond with their charismatic leaders; but when such leaders physically or psychologically abuse followers, reject their love, or spiritually betray them, the bond is threatened and can be severed (Jacobs 1987). The charismatic bond is not a taken-for-granted enduring phenomenon. In terms of the dramatic web of TMH, the nagging thought persists whether the romantic promise that supports the satirical show might not end in a tragic mess. Webs are sticky, and they can hold passing visitors for a time; but they are also delicate and subject to the vicissitudes of the weather.

6.1 Personality Cults and the Totalizing of Charismatic Authority

If religion, and evangelicalism in particular, are stigmatized in Canada as discussed in chapter 3, then religious "personality cults" are subject to even greater suspicion. The term "cult" already prejudices

the matter, but like the notion of “celebrity worship” (Laderman 2009), any situation where a single leader takes an idealized role that leaves their followers passive or dependent provokes severe criticism.¹³¹ While scholars use the term “cult of personality” to describe the manufactured media image of political leaders (Corsi 2008; Plamper 2012), it has also been popularly applied to religious leaders who are celebrities in their own communities and who are better known than those communities: new religious movement leaders such as Jimmy Jones or David Koresh and megachurch leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Rick Warren and Joel Osteen. The term has also been used to describe the enduring role of the charismatic African-American church pastor in the midst of their congregation (Royster 2013:17), leaders of some Buddhist groups in Canada, such as Daisaku Ikeda, the leader of Soka Gakkai International (Shiu 2010:93), as well as Fo Guang Shan’s leader, Master Hsing Yun (Verchery 2010:233). While the meaning of the term shifts within these different religious contexts, the public suspicion around a cult of personality carries social stigma that can propel impression management.

A number of participants and staff at TMH are aware of weaknesses in Cavey’s charisma and are attuned to the limits of his leadership abilities. Some lay leaders demonstrate a high degree of reflexivity and ambivalence about Cavey’s central role. Their concern is understandable, and emerging churches characteristically suspicious of celebrity pastors pursue egalitarian or “flat” leadership structures while ironically being dependent on charismatic leaders and invisible oligarchies (Jones 2011; Marti and Ganiel 2014:117). They are drawing on a growing popular disillusionment with charismatic leadership. For example, Jim Collins’ bestselling books on organizational management argue that if a company wants to survive longer than a few decades, it cannot rely on a charismatic leader. In fact, he says creating a cult of personality “is the last thing you should do” (Collins and Porras 2002:135). Charismatic leaders are a risk on various fronts; they can get obsessed with one idea and ignore the brutal facts (Collins 2001:70); employees may come to rely so much on the charisma, they lose their own sense of entrepreneurialism, and focus more on what the leader wants than what circumstances suggest (2001:72); and “larger-than-life heroes” can leave a management void that sets their successors up for failure (2001:26). While charismatic leaders may lead great companies that last, two traits are more important than any charisma, insists Collins: humility and resolve.¹³² In sum, charismatic leadership can be a liability, and leadership at TMH are

¹³¹ Schultze (2013) specifically distinguishes his use of the word personality cult from the popular notion of “a close-knit group that recruits unwitting members, employs mind control, and promotes false beliefs.” He gives the term his own particular sociological definition, as “a group of devoted followers of a particular person whom the group believes has a special relationship with God and is thereby worthy of following” (2013:145). He focuses on evangelists known primarily through radio, television and other media.

¹³² Collins’ notion of charisma seems limited to a trait theory, and many of his examples of charisma are negative, describing either self-aggrandizing or narcissistic behaviours. He is more positive when describing the antics of Sam

reflexive and savvy enough to know that not everything at The Meeting House depends on Cavey for its life, direction, and future.

Melton (1991) says that lingering prejudices of “cults” and their charismatic leaders lay behind the assumption that a succession process after the passing of a founder will inevitably involve serious disruption and even the dissolution of the new religious movement. Many new religious movements, he insists, are actually variations on the old religious traditions and have formed transnational networks led by a designated hierarchy within an international headquarters. The establishment of a bureaucratic structure ensures continuity: “once the founder articulates the group’s teachings and practices, they exist independently of him/her and can and do develop a life of their own” (1991:8).

Melton agrees that new religions come and go, but longevity has little to do with the founder’s passing. The more salient factors are public response to the founder’s ideas and the competence of followers in organizing the group after the founder’s retirement or death. Melton concludes quite simply:

What does happen when the founder dies? Generally, the same thing that happens in other types of organizations, that is, very simply, power passes to new leadership with more or less smoothness depending upon the extent and thoroughness of the preparation that has been made ahead of time (1991:8).

A founder’s passing may be sad, but it generally does not entail the subsequent death of the community. Power struggles may ensue, especially if intellectual property or other assets have not been properly designated. But new legal requirements of corporate structures have given more stability to new religious groups, says Melton, and there have been many “orderly transfers of power,” in recent history, including the succession of L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology), Victor Paul Wierwille (the Way), and Herbert W. Armstrong (Worldwide Church of God) (1991:10).

Although he does not name the process as the routinization of charisma, Melton offers a re-narration of a new religious movement’s development that echoes Weber. Contrary to the mythology and rhetoric of “totalizing” NRMs where the leader is in permanent, absolute control, Melton describes a shift from the centrifugal influence of charisma to the centripetal unfolding of bureaucratic structures. The first generation of followers are self-selected because they are drawn to the leader and his or her vision. As the community grows, it needs to experiment and adapt to new situations.

Walton, the charismatic founder of Wal-Mart, who he insists uses his personality to forward the company rather than the other way around. He quotes Walton, who remarked, “underneath that personality, I have always had the soul of an operator, somebody who wants to make things work well...” (Collins 2002:36). The “big hairy audacious goals” (BHAGS) of the company are really the driving mechanism of growth and success, which live on past the tenure of the CEO (Collins 2002:105). It is visionary companies that become great and last, not necessarily visionary leaders. I suggest a similar evaluation pertains to megachurches.

Followers give feedback to the leader and the leader trouble-shoots with respect to the teachings and follower's needs. Versatility decreases as the movement expands geographically, and branch campuses are set up with intermediaries to oversee community life. "The lines of authority and communication become more impersonal," says Melton, and administration passes to second and third echelon leadership (1991:11). If given enough time, the pattern of self-correcting and fine-tuning will continue through the death of the founder, and on to a second generation of followers. Trice and Beyer (1986) explain that with an administrative apparatus in place, oral and written traditions, rites and ceremonies to transfer charisma to others, and a successor committed to the founder's mission and continued identification with that mission, charisma can be effectively routinized. Historically speaking, the careers of megachurch pastors such as Aimee Semple McPherson, Daddy Grace, and Frank Norris mushroomed into new denominations rather than fizzled out, and other megachurch pastors such as William B. Riley, Dan Malone, Charles Spurgeon and Jerry Falwell began their own university to ensure a long and culturally expansive legacy. Charisma, as Weber said, becomes routinized by followers, and this ensures the continuity of the group beyond the life of the leader.

In what follows I will describe four aspects of Meeting House culture and its relationship with Cavey which condition his charismatic authority. The first examines the nature of his personality, the second his minor role in executive decisions, the third elaborates on his team approach to leadership, and the final section summarizes the reflexively constituted ambivalence of attendees towards Cavey's central role in the life and vision of the church. Cavey's charisma and executive powers are already qualified in many ways, and the routinization of his charisma has already begun.

6.2 The Ambiguities of Charisma: Cavey's Awkwardness and Follower Ambivalence

In this section, I want to demonstrate the limits of Cavey's charismatic bond and show some of the ambivalences of attendees towards his central role. In most conversations about Cavey, the sense of wonder at his talent and character is reticent of few superlatives. One former Overseer explained:

He has a tremendous sense of awareness, an openness, a vulnerability about his own foibles. And I think it comes from his theatre experience: he has this tremendous sense of the moment of the show... an amazing sense of the Spirit... he preaches the gospel fearlessly in a non-adversarial way... He's certainly one of the most compelling apologists and teachers of the gospel I think the world has ever seen.

He then told a story about Cavey's disarming performance while officiating at a wedding where much of the crowd, including the bride and groom, were hostile to any "God talk." "People who are not Christian come away from Bruxy going, 'Wow,'" he concluded. The Meeting House, he emphasized, "It's totally dependent on him."

Cavey's charisma, however, is not a universal phenomenon. To state the obvious, not everyone who encounters Cavey becomes enamored with him. The most virulent response I received was from a clergyman who said he had detailed knowledge about Cavey, and he became agitated when I mentioned my case study, exclaiming, "Cavey's a manipulator!" Because he refused to explain what he meant and walked away, I can only guess at his meaning and possible motives. The significant and simultaneously ironic reality remains that all charisma has its limits, and any accusations of brainwashing or even manipulation are rhetorical exaggerations that tap into the lingering mythology of "cults" (Melton 1991). Cavey may captivate some audiences, but his teaching, appearance, and personality certainly do not please everyone.

Additionally, while extolled as a charismatic speaker, Cavey lacks the spiritual *charismata* expected of Pentecostal leaders in his childhood tradition. Some megachurch pastors speak in tongues, initiate miraculous healings, and claim special revelation (Miller 1997; Hey 2013:97). As chronicled in chapter 3, Cavey repeatedly tried to receive the gift of tongues as a young leader in his Pentecostal church, but he never manifested any such supernatural experiences or gifts. This limitation is appropriate to a post-evangelical dramaturgy; while many Christians seeking the miraculous as evidence of divine presence will flock to such venues as Catch the Fire Toronto (formerly known as the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship), few skeptics would feel comfortable among a crowd being "slain in the spirit." Cavey offers a biography that knows the charismatic subculture well, and he distinguishes himself from it.

His awe-inspiring and renegade performance, however, lands in dramaturgical trouble when people encounter Cavey face-to-face. When Cavey is off-stage and off-camera, he often appears sharply out of character, and the experience can be jarring for attendees.¹³³ Cavey's presence in the halls of the Oakville site, for example, where he stands in-between Sunday performances to answer questions and get audience feedback on his teaching, demonstrates this disruption. If the auditorium stage is a Goffmanian performance "front region," Cavey's casual availability after the service is not precisely a back region or "outside" region, as he is still addressing his audience and not relaxing with colleagues or members of his "team." It's not quite a front region, as no exchanges in the hall are recorded and podcast for transnational consumption. In effect, it is a new pose, a second "out of character" performance habituated over time (Goffman 1959:134).

The hallway does give the appearance of a back region, however. Vulnerable to hundreds of potential questions, Cavey fosters the impression of accessibility and familiarity. He even invites

¹³³ Goffman states that "performers tend to give the impression, or tend not to contradict the impression, that the role they are playing at the time is their most important role and that the attributes claimed by or imputed to them are the most essential and characteristic attributes" (1959:136). Cavey disrupts that expectation.

Meeting Housers to his private residence and regularly hosts dance parties for those eager to connect with him in such a way. Yet he presents in a radically different character, not unlike Goffman's reference to Kenneth Burkes' musician, "who is assertive in his art and self-effacing in his personal relationships" (1959:136). Audience members become confused, even disillusioned (what I have called an alienation effect) as "what they had taken as the performer's essential self [now appears] not so essential" (1959:139).

In short, as Cavey transitions through the literal backstage and takes up his usual post standing by The Meeting House bookstore, he is no longer "on." Goffman uses the language of "regression" for back region behaviour, but Cavey does not show the casual familiarity of back region behaviour. Cavey simply turns his stage persona "off": gregarious, outgoing, and dynamic on stage, he is quiet, uncomfortable, and almost expressionless off-stage. While on one hand such radical contradictions may enlarge the enigmatic nature of Cavey's persona, on the other hand, accidental backstage interactions with charismatic leaders can be damaging to their charismatic authority when they reveal the leader's mundane existence (Joose 2012).

Meeting House attendees' personal encounters with their celebrated teacher are less than ecstatic experiences. "He's one of the most introverted people that I have ever met," said one older attendee. When in small gatherings with Meeting Housers, he is often distracted and "seems really small." His body language communicates "Don't bother me" or "Don't come near me please." "Awkward" and "shy" were among the most frequently used words to describe his social skills, but as one Cavey friend pointed out, he is not entirely shy. He will engage his conversation partners directly and deeply. "He's just introverted and would often rather go off in a corner and read a book."

One friend of Cavey told me the shy and awkward Cavey is the "real" Cavey and that his on-stage persona "is an act." Cavey and other Meeting House leaders have, in fact, offered this explanation on-stage and in "First Steps" orientation classes, warning attendees that they ought not to be offended if Cavey seems out of character when they meet him. "He is not being rude," they are told, "just reserved." This "plea of forgiveness" for out of character communication, says Goffman, strategically softens the disjuncture that audience members may feel (1959:169) and becomes an "inside secret" of the whole performance, unavailable to outsiders (1959:142), which now includes podcast viewers.

Another Home Church leader said something similar. "He somewhat psyches himself up for Sunday mornings, because that's not his typical way of doing things... He's a bit of an enigma... I find it intriguing that he could be one way in some circumstances... I feel like his real self is that introverted, quiet spirit that is really seeking after God, and who is passionate about what he does. So I really admire him." In other words, not only does he teach in an admirable fashion, but knowing

that public teaching is stressful for him adds to the mystery.

Rojek (2001:11) explains that celebrity status “always implies a split between a private self and a public self” and that the human actor “presents a ‘front’ or ‘face’ to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve.” In George Herbert Mead (1934) terminology, Rojek explains, the split between the I (the veridical self) and the Me (the self as seen by others) is basic to human life but exacerbated by the overwhelming power of the celebrity *Me*. Rojek suggests this tension may be disturbing if not pathological for the celebrity performer if the *Me* colonizes the *I*.¹³⁴

Another insight into the contradiction suggests that Cavey pre-empts the definition of the situation with the face he puts on. Said one attendee: “He doesn’t want to be your friend.” Typically, charismatic leaders “are known for their seeming sensitivity to the needs of others—they make a personal connection with those they meet, showing interest in their lives, no matter how brief the encounter may be” (Dawson 2011:116). Self-help manuals for developing charisma give advice that says something similar: charismatic individuals listen intently to others and make them feel comfortable and valuable (Alessandra 1998; Morgan 2009). A consistent report from Meeting House staff—including site pastors—was that Cavey did not recognize them at meetings, and even a day after interviewing them for a new position, could not remember their names. Cavey publically admits this; he makes jokes about missing appointments and not remembering people’s names or the events in their lives.

A former Overseer contrasted Cavey with another leader of a large local Christian institution who remembered “names, children’s names, and what you did last month” and with another business CEO he knew who made a point of coming to the employee lounge and chatting about hockey news. Cavey, he said, “doesn’t have the energy to invest in anything but teaching.” A former attendee who had spent considerable time as part of Cavey’s Home Church said he bumped into Cavey and his wife at a CD store and greeted him. “Cavey barely responded,” he said. “He looked at me, unrecognizing, as if he was a group home client being led around on a day out.”

I noticed some attendees develop a faux sense of intimacy with Cavey, who though a very familiar presence to the attendee, has no cognizance of their personal existence. As one attendee said, “I never know what to talk about with him. It’s kind of like this deity complex, right? I didn’t treat him like God, but it was weird. It was awkward.” Connections with Cavey remain a mediated, one-sided relationship, something critics variously describe as a pseudo-relation (Boorstin 1961), parasocial relationship (Rubin and McHugh 1987) or intimate stranger (Schickel 2000). It is the image

¹³⁴ Rojek makes reference to Cary Grant’s famous quip, “We all wish we were Cary Grant. Sometimes I wish I was Cary Grant.” Grant, who was originally Archie Leach, often struggled with the dichotomy between his persona and his veridical self (Rojek 2000:11, 178).

of Cavey and his vision that develop a sense of solidarity between attendees and offer them a “sacred matrix” in which to locate their busy “irreligious” lives (Shoemaker and Simpson 2014).

Another example of his introverted and detached nature when off-stage was when he was asked to take his father’s place as Santa for the Oakville Meeting House Christmas party. Cavey relented but not without reluctance. “I hated it,” he told me in one interview, laughing at himself. “I’m no Santa. I’m not a fan of kids. I love my own.” Those who have attended his parties, too, say that he is awkward, sometimes quiet, content to do his own thing in a corner, expecting people to mix, enjoy themselves, and when it’s time, leave his house.

Goffman describes the back region as a physical “buffer” from the deterministic demands of their front region performance (1959:114). People of higher social status, says Goffman, including “sacred” performers such as clergy (1959:133, 137), have a very small back region. Megachurch pastors, with their thousands of congregants and multiple thousands of viewers and outsiders, certainly have a limited back region in which to relax. I would suggest that Cavey has created a *psychological* buffer for himself by cultivating an additional persona that enables him to give the impression of accessibility while maintaining some level of guardedness. Compared to his animated teaching persona, he is very gentle yet stiff when addressing particular audience members from the stage, who can come with high expectations and at worst, with aggressive questions, the desire to stump him, embarrass him or even provoke him. His commitment to pacifism further requires consistency in these moments, and the formality with which he answers questions maintains the both the politeness and decorum necessary for front region behaviour (1959:108) while reserving energy for his next big performance. Cavey is certainly not the only charismatic leader to be introverted in intimate settings (Martin 2002:9; Goodbrand 2010:151; Wellman 2012:49).

This is not to say he does not break out of this docile character at times. He is not eager to please and can become impatient with impertinent questions. “He can’t stand people who challenge him just for the sake of challenging him and don’t care about the answers,” I was told by a Cavey friend. People who are looking for loopholes, who want to quibble about minutia or the proper definition of “religion” can raise his ire. Rarely does his impatience lead to a visible display of anger.¹³⁵

To summarize thus far, I am arguing that the charismatic authority of Cavey has its limits. I am not discussing the proverbial clay feet, Achilles Heel, or even the classical hubris that may

¹³⁵ His secretary told me she saw him angry only once, and it involved a dispute with his daughter. He apparently gets very quiet when he is annoyed. In my interviews with Cavey, he has always been civil, if not mildly friendly to me, and on one occasion where we met in a coffee shop, he greeted me with a hug. On another occasion at his home, he offered me a beer as we talked. But his demeanour was always fairly distant, and never familiar or jocular.

diminish a megachurch pastor's charisma but merely the non-totalizing character of such charisma, what Goffman called the discrediting of the fostered impression. If Cavey is dynamic and brilliantly charismatic on stage, he is flat, guarded, and meek in person. This challenges the lingering caricatures of personality cults and their totalitarian charismatic leaders, as my detailed empirical descriptions of one particular charismatic individual demonstrates the nuances and limits of charismatic power.

MH attendees are not only puzzled by Cavey's lack of charisma in person, however, they are ambivalent about his excess of charismatic authority within their church. Gamson (1994:146) constructs a typology of audiences from his empirical research, which has five categories that range from naïve believers in the deserving fame of a celebrity to those who see the manufacturing process of celebrityhood and then either strive to unmask the mechanics of desire or just enjoy the play of representations and gossip about them.

The Meeting Houser typically fits in Gamson's first category, what he calls the "traditional audience." They trust in their own ability to discern authenticity and see Cavey as a deserving celebrity. They identify with him, not fantasizing about him as Gamson says some traditional audiences might do, but rather seeing him as a model for their lives. Attendees typically do not see Cavey's celebrity status as a function of media processes but rather simply a result of his teaching skill and charisma. Attendees, however, always understand charisma as Cavey's unique possession, as a form of biblical *charism*, not as a Weberian charismatic bond.

A few interviewees expressed recognition that the "Bruxy" they knew was packaged, polished, and controlled by various intermediaries and that "Bruxy" was in fact an image, a persona that they interacted with through a screen or podcast from a distance. One site pastor, with the knowledge of his superiors, began a blog that critiqued "pixilated pastors" but did not mention TMH or his role within it (he resigned soon after). The average education of attendees is higher than the average in Canada, and many would when pressed acknowledge their mediated relationship with their pastor. Simply the fact that he is called "Bruxy" betrays an illusion of intimacy with him.

Attendees are wary of being part of a church too dependent on one personality. One university student thought having Sunday teachings lead by different teachers was a good idea. "There's a lot of people at The Meeting House that follow Bruxy and they don't follow Jesus," she laughed. When other teachers come, "there is either less people at church or there's people who are visibly like 'Oh, it's just [some other staff member]. Whatever.'"

A male nurse said that the uncomfortable thought crossed his mind that "this could be a church full of people just wanting to hear Bruxy speak," but he shrugged it off, suppressing the thought. I asked a middle-aged woman who only attends a Home Church (she gets the teachings on podcasts) if The Meeting House had any weaknesses. She explained:

Bruxy is the key. He explains big concepts by putting them in laymen terms and shows practical ways of living it out. I wouldn't be at The Meeting House if it weren't for him. I like to see and hear him. I do listen to the others, and I try to get something out of them, but Bruxy touches me most. 'When is he coming back to teach?' I always ask. The church in my eyes is Bruxy. I know that's not right but that's where my attachment is. If he would move on... well, I would still go but I wouldn't get as much out of it.

Attendees feel some ambivalence about the indispensable role of Cavey while at the same time coveting his consistent presence and teaching. He is the megachurch pastor for those not into megachurch pastors. It is a weak form of resistance to his celebrity status, but it demonstrates an awareness that is a few steps beyond denial and naïve celebrity worship.

Those who were deeply involved in a Home Church often insisted that their loyalties had switched to this local group. Said one church employee who had been converted to the Christian faith through TMH:

There's a lot more to us than just the Sunday morning teaching. It's significant for sure, but all those other things we've talked about that makes us unique, and our focus on our small groups, one of the guys in my particular Home Church, the topic came up "what if Bruxy gets hit by a bus", right? And he said—and it's stuck with me for a long time—he said, "Well I'm here next Wednesday night. How about you?" Right? So that's all he was saying. Yeah, Bruxy can die, but it hasn't nothing to do with me in a certain extent. This is my group. This is my Bible Study group. This is my Home Church. I'm coming here. Right? Are you coming, or are you stopping coming just because Bruxy died? Right? And I think that's a reality for a lot of people.

A few interviewees repeated impressive stories of committed people who come faithfully to Home Church but do not attend Sunday—as evidence that Home Church is the primary locus of their commitment, not Cavey. These circulating stories, in my estimation, allow attendees to believe Cavey's teaching and personality are incidental to the church, and that the pure relationships of Home Church will endure regardless of Cavey's presence. This ignores the actual fluidity of Home Churches and the fact that their weekly gatherings are structured around Cavey's Sunday teachings. The stories, however, soften the precariousness of their church situation and quell the anxiety that may surface when they think of Cavey's departure from their community.

6.3 Distributed Charisma: Team Performance

The emerging concept of institutional entrepreneur offers another frame in which to analyze Cavey—a leadership concept mostly confined to the sociology of institutions and management. Marti and Ganiel (2014) find the concept helpful in understanding the leaders of the Emerging Church Movement even though the literature on institutional entrepreneurs has yet to be systematically applied to religious settings. Marti himself has coined the term “entrepreneurial evangelicalism”

(2005:*xi*), which he describes as a religious orientation that “creatively and intentionally engages ‘culture’” (2005:*xii*).

The role of entrepreneurial wizard only loosely fits Cavey. He is the star of the show, but he does not run the show. He has an intuitive knack for connecting with the “spiritual but not religious” sentiment, and I am told he has provided some novel ideas in shaping the structure of The Meeting House, especially in terms of its marketing in the earlier days. Overseers have told me he is reserved at their board-level meetings and can look distracted or bored at times, even if when asked to speak he is perceived as prescient. He does not present as the passionate visionary driven to inspire and control his board, which is the impression given by Robert Schuller, Bill Hybels and Mark Driscoll. In fact, numerous leaders have told me that he was quite reluctant to set up closed circuit television in the school where they used to have their Sunday services and then unenthusiastic about expanding the church through projected teachings at multiple sites.

Furthermore, his disorganized behaviour is legendary; he has missed various appointments, including a church Christmas party. “He’s lost his wallet, like, four times,” mused a family friend. One newly hired site pastor told me that he met Cavey at the main site for an introductory interview. Cavey arrived late and asked: “What are we supposed to be doing here?” “You are supposed to interview me,” replied the young recruit. In some ways, Cavey resembles the absent-minded professor more than the driven megachurch entrepreneur-pastor.

This mild-mannered performance is consistently reported. “He’s no Alpha male,” said Cavey’s wife to me in passing during one of my interviews in their home. Cavey has spoken on occasion of TMH as a culture of beta males, and often calls himself a geek. He tells his followers, “My idea of a good time is a bigger book.” He lives far away from the main campus of the church, he has no permanent office he consistently uses within the main building,¹³⁶ and the majority of his time he spends preparing for his teaching moments and answering questions from those who pursue his attention—or on the road speaking at a variety of venues. In some ways, he fits the role of a guru or lama¹³⁷ more than a visionary megachurch pastor or MacNair’s (2009) all-powerful “regal pastor”; he lives on the mountain (actually, at the foot of Hamilton mountain in Dundas) and people must seek him out to have an audience. His primary mode of conversation with pastors, board, and attendees is passive; he patiently waits to be asked a question. In sum, like Korean megachurch pastor David Yonggi Cho (Hong 2000), Cavey appears disinterested in controlling mundane church operations; he

¹³⁶ W. A. Creswell, the megachurch pastor at First Baptist, Dallas, reportedly had four offices, all of which were luxuriously furnished (Gregory 1994).

¹³⁷ This is not uncommon with emerging church pastors. Marti and Ganiel write that “some leaders even exude a guru-like quality in attracting followers” (2014:118).

delegates to others quickly and thus frees himself for the tasks he enjoys. His charismatic authority is already routinized through tasks he has handed on to other Meeting House leaders.

This is important because people intuitively believe, and research suggests, that overdependence on a single charismatic leader presents numerous dangers (Hey 2013:192). While some attendees may be anxious knowing Cavey is not running the whole show, others will be nervous if they believe he is controlling all operational matters. Either way, dramaturgical trouble threatens.

Goffman (1959) usually conceptualized performances in terms of colleagues and teams, which he defined as “a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained” (1959:104). Although one team member may be the “star, lead, or centre,” power can be distributed differentially to directive, dramatic, and ceremonial roles, and all members depend on each other to maintain a common front. In fact, says Goffman, teams rather than individuals are the basic unit of performances (1959:85).

By both strategy and necessity TMH tries to undermine its celebrity fulcrum and mitigate the structural and psychological dangers of being completely dependent on one person by implementing a deliberate structure of team leadership. Thumma and Travis (2007:71) have said dual leader models or leadership teams are becoming an increasing trend in megachurch leadership because organizational management and teaching are “two distinct tasks seldom found in the same person, even among megachurch pastors” (2007:68).

The Meeting House is a case in point. From the day of his hiring, Cavey reports he began a process of building a leadership team, and specifically began looking for someone to fill the role of senior pastor so he could focus on his strength, teaching. “Team leadership is biblical,” he will say, and its primary virtue is “mutual submission.” “I am submitted to, and listening to, and learning from our other leaders,” he explained to me. Besides, he will add, “it makes me feel more secure... warm and fuzzy. I know my place.” A deliberate chain of feedback structures the relationship between site pastors and the executive leadership, which Cavey says conditions his choice of topics for Sunday teachings and the direction of church vision. “If I’m the primary communicator, I need to represent some of the spice that is out there in leadership. If they think something is important, then it is important. There is a lot of groupthink that might be behind some aspect of the sermon.” Every elder in the church (there are over 200) has his phone number and can text him at any time, although few take advantage of the opportunity. Realistically, though, the feedback mechanisms may be in place, but the elders are not always engaged and the decisions ultimately rest with the executive leadership.

The executive leadership team has consisted of three to six people over the years, and Tim Day was hired in 2001, eventually becoming senior pastor. He oversaw much of the day-to-day operations of the church, functioning like a chief operating officer. Born and bred Brethren in Christ,

he had worked at its denomination's summer camp, Camp Kaquah, for many summers. He has an M.Div. from Tyndale Theological Seminary and before coming to TMH worked as a congregational ministry pastor at Maranatha Christian Reformed Church in Bowmanville.

Drawing on Weber, Toth (1972) posits the notion of "double charisma," whereby a charismatic leader is often paired with a second leader who "borrows or shares" the charisma of the first in order to routinize it. While the original leader receives the "outer call" and appears "strange, fascinating, unusual, unearthly," the second leader consolidates the movement's vision and presents as "more conventional, mundane, practical." He offers a long list of historical examples including Jesus and Peter, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, Lenin and Stalin, Guevara and Castro, and Kennedy and Johnson. Although Toth's argument is brief, it echoes with what Weber suggested about the role of administrators with respect to the charisma of the monarch (1968:40) and bears some resemblance to the scene at TMH.

Similar to Cavey, Tim Day is physically short—even a little shorter than Cavey, something Cavey publicly enjoys. Unlike Cavey, he is clean-cut and physically fit, and dresses casually but neatly. His language is more conventionally evangelical, and his tweets tend to be more moralistic and therapeutic than Cavey's more playful and punchy quips. He is not a Goffmanian "side-kick," however, simply there to give the comfort of a teammate in the performance (1959:133, 189, 206). His organizational management skills receive praise from attendees, as does his pastoral demeanor. More than a few spoke of Day's calm presence and "Jesus eyes"; apparently Day has a compassionate way of listening that attendees and staff have affectionately described as the eyes of Jesus.

Many will swear by the vital role that Day played in The Meeting House, including the meaningful way he taught when Cavey is absent. Some argued that Tim Day was the "wizard behind the curtains" who held up the structures of the church, and the church was most dependent on his organizational acumen. "Tim is really the brains behind the operation," one site pastor told me. "He's the little man behind the curtain pulling the levers." Day has now released his own book, *Plot Twist: God Enters Stage Left* (2013), a self-published introduction to the biblical narrative he seeks to use in transnational missionary efforts.

My interview data, however, showed that no one joined The Meeting House to hear Tim Day, and if Day had left, he was replaceable as the senior pastor.¹³⁸ Day ensures the operation runs smoothly, but Cavey draws the crowds and gives them reason to stay. Other current executive leaders,

¹³⁸ In fact, as I edited this chapter in June, 2015, Tim Day has stepped aside as Senior Pastor of TMH. The announcement emphasizes that he is not leaving the MH but merely going to take up a different role (the details of which will be decided in due time). There have not been any significant shifts in attendance numbers accompanying this change.

such as Christa Hesselink and Sandra Nicholas, and former members of the executive leadership team (such as Joel Percy, Rich Birch, and Paul Morris) have worked hard to carry the charisma of Cavey and his vision to a wider group of people and this behind-the-scenes action gives both stability and growth to the whole operation.

One schoolteacher said, “I wouldn’t say Bruxy is the leader of The Meeting House, although he is the public face of The Meeting House.” This testifies to the general recognition that as much as the church is dependent on Cavey, Cavey is dependent on Day and his staff of 65 persons, and Cavey openly acknowledges this on a regular basis. He once introduced the chair of the overseers with the quip, “If The Meeting House had a pope, he would be it.” There have even been attempts towards hiring a second teaching pastor, but so far those efforts have come up short.

The insider discourse of “team ministry” deserves some qualification. Former megachurch pastor Meredith Wheeler (2008) studied the succession process of three megachurches for his Ph.D. dissertation. With regards to the claim of “team leadership” from all his case studies he maintained:

Although interviews in each of the three churches included explicit statements that the churches were not personality-centered nor built around a person, clearly in each church the senior pastoral role has enormous influence. The reported responses of various segments of the congregation and the launch of key initiatives following the transitions would indicate the influence of the role. Even in the case of [one of the megachurches] which claimed a more team orientation to the senior leadership, a point person—a directional leader of exceptional skill—was considered essential to the continued effectiveness of the church (2008:344).

The discourse of team leadership in megachurches can be more a symbol of what they value and wish to achieve rather than a structural reality.

Some staff members will bluntly acknowledge Cavey’s vital connection to the church’s success while others are noticeably shy about it. “The leadership are weaning people off Cavey over time,” they will say, and point out that Cavey is preaching fewer Sundays per year (which is not entirely accurate¹³⁹); that he left on a sabbatical over the summer of 2012 and attendance did not drastically plummet; that Tim Day and Christa Hesselink are capable teachers, and that there are plans for other teaching staff to come aboard. Yet the attempt to mitigate Cavey’s celebrity status can simultaneously exacerbate it, by drawing more attention to him through the effort to de-centre him. Furthermore, in my judgment, the contrast between his theological acumen, public speaking skills,

¹³⁹ Cavey downplays his role in TMH, modestly emphasizing his great team and pointing to the teaching ability of other Meeting House pastors. He has written that he only teaches for 60 percent of the Sunday services (Cavey and Carrington-Phillips 2012), which is true for 2011. My statistics for other years, derived from counting podcasts in the archives, shows he preached 75 percent in 2003-2007, 80 percent in 2008, 77 percent in 2010, 75 percent in 2012, 65 percent in 2013, and 83 percent in 2014. If one were to include the Drive Home and Roundtable podcasts, the percentages would rise, as he speaks on almost all of them, the latter podcasts generally including other speakers along with Cavey.

and on-stage persona with that of substitute teachers often functions to heighten his exceptional ability.

On the other hand, there is a danger of over-emphasizing the centrality of Cavey. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a lingering mythology about the death of the religious community inevitably following the death of its founder simply has no basis in the history of new religious movement (Melton 1991). Team ministry talk, and the implemented structures that reflect it, are the foundation of the expansion and routinization of charisma within the dynamics of the dramatic web.

In sum, this section has sought to demonstrate numerous ways in which Cavey's charismatic authority is disrupted and distributed. The looming prospect of his eventual retirement and death are thus not so much a novel and insurmountable catastrophe for TMH leadership to navigate as another challenge for them to address and engage as they seek to routinize the charisma of his presence, teaching, and vision. Not only is charismatic authority always dependent on follower recognition and cultural support, but it is never so overwhelming that it does not need the organization and planning of a committed staff and leadership team.

6.4 The End of the Show: A Dramaturgical Typology

When Cavey was set to go on sabbatical for three months in 2012, there was some concern expressed at the Annual General Meeting that spring. First of all, people wondered if attendance would plunge. "We'll be fine as long as everyone is on automatic withdrawal," quipped Day. There was also some concern as to whether Cavey could potentially be transitioning out. "I have pledged to retire at The Meeting House," said Cavey, adding with a joke, "That's in two years." They were all assured the best days are ahead, and everyone cheered.

Still, what will happen to TMH and its attendees if Bruxy Cavey suddenly leaves, dies or is deposed? Someday he will retire, and TMH will have to move forward without him or close its doors. I made the question of Cavey's passing a standard part of my interviews (and I didn't always need to ask the question—it was sometimes brought up by the interviewee). In many of my discussions and in the literature, the question takes the form of "What would happen if the leader was hit by a bus?" (Vanderbloemen and Bird 2014:33, 37, 132). Besides suggesting an unexpected death happening in the daily routine of pedestrian life, the scenario is a popular culture trope—a device used in TV and other media for killing off a character (sometimes referred to as the "Look Both Ways" trope¹⁴⁰). The

¹⁴⁰ <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LookBothWays>. Accessed on Feb. 20, 2015.

scene usually consists of two main characters having a conversation on the side of the road, and the camera centers on just one of them. A bus suddenly enters the frame of the picture from one side and sweeps the victim right off the screen. The scene deliberately provokes shock, a reaction appropriate to a church that will lose the one character so centrally important to its life and identity. The trope itself is also symbolically apt for a church thoroughly permeated with popular culture.

In order to engage in structured speculation on the future of TMH, I need to go beyond my case study material to the social/cultural context of megachurch leadership and the biographies of other celebrity pastors. Scholars have approached the diversity of succession anecdotes with different frameworks, but the literature specifically on megachurch pastor succession is scant. Meredith Wheeler's dissertation (2008) remains the most focused examination of the topic. William Vanderbloemen and Warren Bird (2014) wrote a book on pastoral succession for churches of all sizes that includes mostly anecdotes from megachurches and three appendixes at the back charting the current ages, succession ages, and number of successors in America's largest churches.

Numerous other books are available on pastoral succession intended as practical aids for smaller church pastors and boards (Umidi 2000; Russell and Bucher 2010; Weese and Crabtree 2012; L. B. Mead 2012; Mullins 2015). All agree that pastoral succession is one of the most important issues that leaders and congregational boards have to deal with. How different are megachurch leadership transitions from smaller church experiences of the same process? Smaller churches' pastors' careers can end in varying degrees of conflict, decline, and successful transition just as easily as megachurch pastors' careers. Most succession processes involve some disruption and organizational instability and are "messy, complex, and dynamic" (Wheeler 2008). The difference is megachurches have a much smaller pool of potential candidates and the transition process is handled by a much smaller representation of the community. Additionally, endings are played out on a larger stage, mediated by a variety of local and national communications networks. The consequences affect more people, and in the case of the internationally acclaimed Schullers and their Crystal Cathedral, it becomes a drama of international scale. Megachurch pastors are regional, if not national celebrities, and local pastors usually are not.

Wheeler (2008) describes in detail three megachurch successions as constructed through interviews with five leaders from each of three megachurches that recently experienced transitions. Coming from an organizational theory approach that relies heavily on management literature such as Grusky (1960), Wheeler equates the megachurch leadership role with that of a CEO and proceeds to chronicle the experiential reflections of leaders, offering a five-phase process of succession. His highly detailed research takes an instrumental approach focusing on the business of a successful transition for megachurches.

Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014) recommend pastors and boards look at some business literature that also deals with succession issues from a practical standpoint (Carey and Ogden 2000; Oswald, Heath, and Heath 2003; Cionca 2004; Wiersema et al. 2009; Rothwell 2010; Goldsmith 2013). This is the primary disciplinary source for Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014), who offer the best survey on megachurch succession yet to be published, although the authors widen their scope of advice and market the book to appeal to congregations of all sizes.

Their approach offers little theoretical analysis and focuses primarily on the pragmatic issues of pastoral succession as understood within a Christian theological framework. So they make references to Bible texts and stories to reinforce practical points about pastoral succession. They relate anecdotes of successful and failed transitions, covering different issues that may arise in the process of pastoral succession, such as: does the outgoing pastor need to leave town; how to avoid being a “sacrifice pastor” or “unintentional interim pastor”; what to do if the pastor needs to go but does not; and what it costs to finance a pastoral succession.

Besides the pragmatic focus, a weakness with much of the literature addressed to pastors and church boards is they treat pastoral succession like a bureaucratic problem of filling an organizational role—replacing one employee with another. This is true on one level; however, a number of issues distinguish megachurch leadership from leadership in smaller churches and from leadership in the corporate world.

First of all, many megachurches exist because of the ambition and personality of the pastor. The pastor is not only filling an organizational position but also an existential role in the lives of those who attend (Jacobs 1987). Attendees are self-selected and join primarily for the person of the pastor, not for the community, theology, or denomination. It is true that people’s loyalties expand to include the community over time, but the megachurch pastor often remains the sacred symbol of that community, especially if he or she is the founder of the church. Put differently, the leader is not just a functionary in an institutional position but the star of the show—an icon or celebrity (Weese and Crabtree 2004). Celebrities typically cannot be replaced like simple functionaries, for the celebrity is the role.

Secondly, unlike the CEO of a large business organization, labour contracts and the need for a livelihood do not bind the constituency to the organization of a church. Especially in a climate of consumer religion, church attendance, and the expected practice of financial giving are voluntary activities that can be abandoned with varying degrees of ease. Attendees, unlike employees, are increasingly mobile. Loyalties initially adhere to the leader rather than the congregation or denomination and often remain connected to the leader even if loyalties expand to their small group friends or the church itself. Like a fan community, unless the celebrity narrative is strong enough to

carry the fans into post-mortem solidarity, they will move on to find another object of affection—at times another celebrity pastor.

Celebrity studies thus offer little light on the subject of succession, except to say that celebrity is a mantle that cannot be easily passed onto another person. When a celebrity's narrative ends through vocational change, retirement, or death, there is rarely a direct successor. Fan clubs do not need to elect a new celebrity when their star dies. Even children of celebrities still need to create their own developing narrative to garner attention. Without some dramatic action, the media spotlight simply shifts to another celebrity story unless the dead celebrity culturally transforms into something similar to a saint (Riddell 2008; Hopper 2014).

The literature needs a framework in which to understand the end of a megachurch celebrity leader's performance—one that acknowledges the relevance of celebrity studies and organizational management literature but highlights the particularly religious nature of the setting and especially the importance of charisma. One strategic approach would be to develop a typology of megachurch pastoral succession.

Discussions of leadership successions are usually couched in organizational management terms and compared most often with CEO succession models. Jeffery Sonnenfeld (1991), addressing CEO retirement, uses the political analogies of monarchs, generals, ambassadors, and governors and their different structures of transition. Robert Strong (2013), who focuses solely on churches, divides pastoral successions into three types: by pastoral appointment, board decision, or search committee. Weese and Crabtree (2004) describe four cultures of church, which entail four transitional processes: small family culture centred on the pastor (mainline churches and community churches), icon culture in which the pastor is living logo of the church (large mainline and megachurches), archival cultures guided by tradition (Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches) and replication cultures focused on innovation and results (para-church organizations and some megachurches). Dave Travis maintains that successions follow church *leader* culture—whether the pastor is a key administrator, an executive leader, a chief of chiefs, or monarch. Each culture of leadership proscribes a different transition process, along lines of simple to complex programming and individually-based to group-based decision-making (Vanderbloemen and Bird 2014:73). Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014:59) describe two categories—expected and unexpected transitions, and the unexpected falls into three sub-categories: emergencies, disqualification (due to moral or theological scandal), or forced termination (due to internal conflict). In another publication, Bird (2014) suggests a different schema: the family plan, the denominational plan, the process-only plan (which relies heavily on a pre-written protocol) and an intentional overlap-plan between predecessor and successor.

These models of pastoral transition all have some value, but they operate within an organizational management frame. Additionally, none of the above schemas focuses primarily on megachurches, or highlight the fact that megachurch leadership transitions are primarily about the transmission of charismatic authority,¹⁴¹ and not just a pastoral leadership role. Put differently, the succession of a megachurch leader is more akin to charismatic succession than to corporate succession, as charisma is not a requirement (or in some expert opinions, not even a desirable trait) of a successful CEO (Collins 1991; Khurana 2002).

My method in the following section involved gathering the anecdotes of over 110 megachurch successions from Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014), from a few specific narratives of transition (Gregory 1994; Hunt 2010; Wellman 2012), and from news articles available on the internet covering megachurch pastor transitions. While I rely heavily on Vanderbloemen and Bird's text, I use their book as a source for data, as Vanderbloemen brings in anecdotes from his Search Group and Warren conducted 108 personal interviews on the subject of pastoral succession. Such data is a small sample of the over 1700 megachurches scattered across the United States, not including the growing list of previous megachurch pastors. I grouped them into three different categories based on the kind of succession process they underwent and compared the categories with what Weber said about charismatic succession. His six types of charismatic succession (a search guided by traditional criteria, direct revelation through oracles or other similar means, designation by original leader, designation by administrative staff, through heredity, or through ritual means such as anointing or coronation) have been woven into my first two major categories in order to tailor them for megachurch pastoral succession. The reader will note that these first two categories correspond with Weber's two other ideal types of authority: traditional and rational-legal types. Weber saw these two types of authority as an integral part of the routinization of charisma and my schema matches his thought.

I translated the Weberian descriptions into performance terms to continue the performance studies framework of this dissertation and to demonstrate that these successions are not only strategic management decisions but dramas on a grand stage that follow meaningful cultural patterns. For each of the categories I have tried to establish an estimate of its numerical significance, even though some of the categories may overlap. In other words, while the scenarios are a typology, I have tried to approximately weigh the prevalence of each.

¹⁴¹ Jacobsen and House (2001) postulate charismatic authority develops as a process, and they have created a six-phase scheme to describe it (Identification, Activity Arousal, Commitment, Disenchantment, Depersonalization, Alienation). This scheme, however, is a generic process for the development of charismatic authority and not a typology of charismatic leadership successions. Neither does it address the specifics of megachurch celebrity pastor successions.

Within these three scenarios are a diverse range of structures and processes, some involving denominational representatives and polity and others primarily determined by the personality and vision of the predecessor and/or the advice of a leadership consultant group. Some proceed with an “overlap” or “relay” succession, which gives time for the successor to learn from the predecessor while others have a time of transition or interim after the predecessor has left and before the successor arrives (which may include the presence of an interim pastor or a subordinate pastor acting as lead pastor for that time). I have reduced the diversity of all these differences to three scenarios or types, based primarily on the kind of performance being managed by the megachurch leadership.

A. The Drama of Dynasty: Hereditary Charisma

This type of succession combines charismatic authority with traditional authority to ensure the legitimacy of the successor. The passing of the leadership role to a family member remains one of the more common scenarios when it comes to megachurch succession in the United States. I found 24 instances in the anecdotes I collected in which the mantle of leadership was passed down to a son, son-in-law or, in rare cases, the megachurch pastor’s wife or daughter, and I would estimate this may represent anywhere from 15 to 40 percent of megachurch leadership transitions. This is supported by the fact that of the 16 largest churches in the U.S.A. in 1967 listed in Appendix 3 of Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014), I can determine that at least 5 had the lead pastor role passed on to a son or son-in-law.

Weber called this hereditary charisma his fifth type of charismatic succession and included the practice of primogeniture as an example (Weber 1968:56). The notion of primogeniture does not pertain directly to megachurches, but the succession of a celebrity pastor’s role may include vast holdings in church real estate, Christian schools and colleges, radio and TV broadcasting assets, and global missionary networks and infrastructure. Ownership transfers of such vast wealth require a high degree of trust that is often—but not always—kept within the bounded sets of families. At least two megachurch pastor’s families—Robert H. Schuller (Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, California) and Kate Smith (Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California) have sued their former church for the rights to intellectual property, which in the mass market of megachurch resources can add up to a substantial investment.

Bethany Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana serves as an example of a better-managed succession process. Begun in the living room of Roy and Ruth Stockstill in 1963, the group quickly grew. In 1983 Roy handed the lead role to his son, Larry, who had been working in West Africa as a missionary for two years after seminary. Larry expanded the church to a multi-site venue and

membership jumped from 2000 to over 5000. Then in 2011, Larry's son, Jonathan, who had led the worship ministry for fifteen years, was given the title of lead pastor as weekly attendance hovered at about 6000 (Hunter 2013; Vanderbloemen and Bird 2014:68).

Grandfather Roy still attends the church. Larry Stockstill now focuses his efforts on church planting overseas and attends no board meetings, although he preaches every two months. Jonathan's siblings—four brothers and a sister—have varying levels of leadership roles in the church, most significantly with his brother Jared managing the support staff and his other brother, James, heading the young adults group. Jonathan's wife, Angie, oversees the Bible College and Bethany school (pre-K through 12th grade).

When asked about the strong family connections in leadership, Jonathan maintains that “God works in families” and cites the divine promise to Abraham, the priesthood covenant with the sons of Aaron, and the Davidic line in the throne of Israel (Hunter 2013). Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014:149) highlight the pragmatic value of “family” members—what they more broadly refer to as internal candidates for leadership succession. Using biological analogies, they say that internal candidates know the DNA of the church, and their “transplanting” into the body of the congregation has “a much higher probability of being a good ‘tissue match’” (2014:149). So in some cases where there is no biological heredity, the *analogy* of family is invoked. J. Don George, the charismatic leader of Calvary Church, an Assemblies of God congregation in Irving, Texas, maintains that in 2011 God designated Ben Dailey to be his successor. George heard the divine call, “Make him a son” (Vanderbloemen and Bird 2014:133).

Although associations with family business and royal history maintain images of leadership continuity and divine appointment, as Weber noted, the pertinent reality is that *charismatic authority* passes from the first generation to the second generation. The new appointment can be accomplished by the designation of the charismatic leader, Weber's third type of charismatic succession, and/or with the blessing of a congregational board. All three of Wheeler's (2008:344) case studies of megachurch leadership succession revealed the predecessor as “the leader of the successor identification process,” although church boards were heavily involved (but no congregational vote). In this scenario of succession types, it is the *kinship* relation, however, that ensures the legitimate transfer of charismatic authority. Attendees understand the cultural meaning of family dynasties and the succession process carries the dramatic power of a royal succession.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Other prominent examples of dynasty include John to Joel Osteen (Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas), Jerry to Jonathan Falwell (Thomas Road Baptist, Lynchburg, Virginia), Jack Hyles to son-in-law Jack Schaap (First Church of Hammond, Illinois), Jack Hayford to son-in-law Scott Bauer (Church on the Way, Van Nuys, California), and Chuck Smith to his son-in-law Brian Brodersen (Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California). Additionally, much media

B. Professional Performance: Charismatic Succession Through Official Process

This type of leadership succession combines charismatic authority with rational-legal authority to ensure the legitimacy of the successor. Some megachurch pastors, and I suspect more in the next generation of megachurch pastors, are willing to release control of the process of succession and allow their board and/or a search committee oversee the entire open process. If charismatic authority is to be passed on in full strength, however, Weber insisted this cannot merely be a bureaucratic process of nominations and votes.

Weber described this kind of transfer of charisma in a number of ways. His first type described “the search” as a process by which the successor must match some qualities specifically declared by tradition (1968:55). Weber suggested the process by which a group of administrators seek to find a new Dalai Lama illustrated a “pure type” of this kind (which also mixes in some traditional authority). This type is not likely in a megachurch setting and I could find no examples of such. Weber offers another possibility in his fourth type: designation of a successor who comes from a charismatically qualified administrative staff, who must find the “right” person using the “right” methods or risk offending magical powers. He offers coronation as an example, but in religious institutions the election of a new pope illustrates the same process—whereby special ceremonies impressed with a dramatic sense of gravity mark the transition from one leader to the next.

From their professional experience, Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014) offer numerous examples of megachurch boards and search committees developing succession plans, and they include copious notes of sage advice on how best to navigate the search process. Wheeler (2008) names his own transition as a megachurch pastor and his role as co-founder of a leadership consultation group called The Center for Leadership Advancement. I am suggesting in this second category of succession that the transfer of charismatic authority takes on a more rationalized process and is performed in a way that emphasizes not the heredity of the successor but rather the professionalism of the process. Denominational officials, bishops and pastor search firms such as the Vanderbloemen Search Group and other private consultants provide advice in developing succession plans and direct megachurches through their search process. They are the new officials that guide congregations in finding the “right” person in the “right” way. I would estimate that this encompasses the largest percentage of succession events—perhaps from 40 to 60 percent of all megachurch leadership transitions. Of my data sample, about 35 anecdotes fit into this category, although the

attention has focused on the failed attempt at dynasty at Crystal Cathedral, California, from Robert H. Schuller to his son Robert A. Schuller in 2014.

diversity in structure of the transition process was quite extensive. In these narratives, the competence and procedural efficiency of the process legitimize the transfer of charismatic authority rather than the blood relations and pomp and circumstance of hereditary charisma.

For example, Bill Bohline started Hosanna! Lutheran Church in Lakeville, Minnesota in 1973, growing it from 65 members to 7000 members by 2014. Already before the year 2000 Hosanna began a practice of training and commissioning its own pastors rather than acquiring interns from its ELCA denomination (from which it became independent in 2009). Bohline says he deliberately nurtured a culture that was not dependent on his own personality and presence. In 2009, Bohline and his board read through Weese and Crabtree's book on pastoral succession and developed a five-year plan for leadership transition. Russell Crabtree, the president of Holy Cow! Consulting was brought in to help them develop the plan. As part of the plan, Bohline's executive pastor Ryan Alexander was mentored and prepared to succeed Bohline at the end of 2015 (Adams 2011; Sawyer 2014). In effect, the charismatic authority of Bohline will be transferred to Alexander on the basis of a highly publicized organizational process. Procedure and professionalism rather than heredity carries the charismatic mantle.

Weber describes some details of process while also emphasizing the importance of ritual and ceremony. In megachurches such formalities can be structured in many creative ways as part of a professional process. In Wheeler's (2008:341) description of the succession process in megachurches, he explains the exit of the leader as a moment of "symbolism such as the passing of the baton or the knighting of the new leader." Professionals also recognize the therapeutic and pedagogical value of ceremonies—as they help a congregation adjust to loss and change.

One example of such a ceremony took place at Oak Hills Church, in San Antonio, Texas. The celebrity author and pastor Max Lucado, voted "America's Best Preacher" by *Reader's Digest* in 2005, was experiencing heart trouble and needed to pull back from his executive leadership role and limit his preaching to half-time. One Sunday in 2007, Lucado came on stage beside his successor, 33-year-old Randy Frazee. Frazee stands six inches shorter than Lucado, and they tried to exchange shoes in front of the audience, without success. "If I come, Max is going to be Max," said Frazee, "and I'm going to be Randy." The congregation responded with a standing ovation (Long 2014; Vanderbloemen and Bird 2014:137). The ritual functioned not only to transfer charismatic authority but also to emotionally prepare the congregation for a change of style and content.

Although not emphasizing the professional quality of the drama, Weber's sixth type of succession, called "office charisma," demonstrates the enduring power of ritual performance for succession (1968:57). If the church community itself takes on mythical status in broader culture, the megachurch itself may share in the charisma of its founder. That is to say, the charismatic authority

transfers from the founder's personality to the leadership position in a prestigious church, whose building may take on the iconic character of a shrine. By various rituals, including anointing and laying on of hands, says Weber, the new bearer continues the charismatic authority. Some examples would be the leadership at Charles Spurgeon's church at the London Metropolitan Tabernacle or those who follow in the role of Aimee Semple McPherson at Angelus Temple in Los Angeles. The mythology of the sacred space can carry charismatic authority (Falco 2011). When there are no qualified blood relations ready to succeed a celebrity pastor, official processes, special rituals, and even the enduring legacy of the predecessor within a special building can facilitate the dramatic act of transition in a megachurch.

One more type of charismatic succession that does not fit neatly into any of the categories mentioned so far Weber described as "revelation"—where a new leader is designated by oracle, casting lots or other direct divine appointment (Weber 1968:55). This suggests not just ceremony but supernatural events. Such occurrences are rare in megachurch circles, although the language of divine appointment is frequently used to describe the succession process, whatever its form may take. The closest example I found of direct "revelation" would be the case of Clay Evans at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago. One day in 2000, after Evans had led the church for fifty years, a student from Moody Bible Institute named Charles Jenkins stopped by the church to drop off a proposal for a youth ministry program. He was spontaneously asked to present his proposal to a group of leaders at the church, and as the story was told later, the moment Jenkins stood up to speak, Evans perceived the Spirit of God whispering to him, "That's your successor." While Jenkins instituted some radical changes to the aging megachurch, the "mantle of credibility" had been bestowed on him by the charismatic authority of Evans and has blended into Jenkins' own authority in the church (Vanderbloemen and Bird 2014:92). Megachurch succession, because the stakes are so high, cannot simply be about filling the position of leader. It requires that charisma and its narratives be carried forward, through special ceremonies, to a new individual, who may "borrow" their charisma (Toth 1972).

C. The Drama of Scandal: Failed Charismatic Succession

According to Vanderbloemen and Bird, most churches and many megachurches do not plan for the succession of their current pastor. Many leadership transitions are disruptive and potentially destructive to the church. Some megachurch leaders, such as Frank Harrington (Peach Tree Presbyterian Church), who suddenly died of pneumonia in 2000, leave their church without a succession plan and risk a power struggle for leadership control and assets. Others, such as the

prominent case of Wallie Amos Criswell (First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas) call a successor (Joel Gregory), but once he comes on board the old pastor, his family, and even the board refuse to transfer authority to the new leader. In this instance, Gregory left in frustration after two years on staff and wrote a book about his frustrated experience (Gregory 1994). Leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz (1994) called such cases where a constituency refuses to accept the adaptive changes urged by a leader an “assassination.” Their ability to influence the organization has been nullified. This leads us into our last category of megachurch succession performances, those characterized by conflict and scandal.

Starks’ (2013) book on megachurch pastors and sexual misconduct creates the impression that sexual misconduct is a particularly significant issue for megachurch pastors. But he does not offer any evidence for his claims—for example, by comparing the amount of sexual misconduct discovered in the lives of megachurch pastors with smaller church pastors, CEOs of large corporations, politicians, military leaders, or those in show business. Starks cites mostly psychological literature, which either addresses all pastors generally or even wider populations. The myth of Elmer Gantry lingers, and mass media coverage of celebrity scandals—and the ensuing gossip—only feeds these misperceptions.

A brief comparison with corporate experience of disruptive leadership transition suggests churches—including megachurches—may fair considerably better. An oft-cited article published by the Center for Creative Leadership actually estimates between 38 and 50 percent of new CEOs fail within the first 18 months (Riddle 2009). Professor and leadership consultant Clutterbuck (2012:8) talks about a “crisis in succession planning” and cites the Human Capital Institute claim that 70 percent of new CEOs fail within two years. Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser (2011) summarize twelve studies of management failure from 1985-2005, which maintain failure rates of 30-67 percent, with an average of about 50 percent. Reasons for failure fell into categories of team mismanagement, lack of business acumen, poor working relationships, and inappropriate or immature behaviour.¹⁴³ “Based on the data,” they conclude, “two-thirds of existing managers are insufferable and at least half will eventually be fired” (2011:3). Aasland et al. (2010) estimate the prevalence of destructive leadership behaviour (which includes passive, disloyal and tyrannical behaviours) to range from 33 to 61 percent, as determined by surveys gleaned from 2539 employees.

Failure is difficult to give precise definitional boundaries, and what it exactly entails can be widely diverse. However, if we assume it results in termination, we can make a rough comparison.

¹⁴³ In another study, Hogan and Hogan (2001) surveyed over 10,000 working adults and developed 11 dimensions associated with management incompetence, summarized into three large factors: tendencies to blow up, show off, or conform when under pressure.

The FACT 2010 survey covers 12,000 religious groups of all sizes and traditions and reports that in the last five years of these groups' history, because of the leader's personal behavior, 7 percent of the groups surveyed had congregation members leave, 3 percent of them had members withhold donations, and 5 percent of them resulted in a leader or staff member leaving.¹⁴⁴ Other statistics show that 28 percent of current pastors in the United States have been fired or forced to resign at some point in their career, and 42 percent of these seriously considered leaving the ministry (Tanner et al. 2012).

There are currently no statistics available on the number of megachurches that experience scandals, a category that is admittedly difficult to operationalize for a survey. My correspondence with Scott Thumma, Warren Bird, and Dave Travis—all experts on megachurch research—shows them agreeing that under 5 percent of all current megachurch pastors will end their careers in some “significant conflict,” including financial, sexual, or criminal scandal. With 1700 megachurches across the United States, that means 90 megachurch pastors' conflicts will most likely be covered in the media as their tenure ends.

This suggests, first of all, that the vast majority of megachurch pastors do not end their career in scandal. Most of their succession narratives will follow the two scenarios listed above. Secondly, the vast discrepancy between perception and reality only goes to show the powerful and yet distorting character of the mass media because the most readily available cultural narrative of megachurch pastor careers remains the ignominious ending, reinforcing the Elmer Gantry stereotype cynicism. Granted, megachurch leaders deserve more scrutiny because they have more power, and more power generally entails greater ethical dilemmas affecting more people (Paschen and Dihmaier 2013:7).¹⁴⁵

I gathered 29 anecdotes of megachurch pastors who ended their megachurch careers in scandal, and all of these stories were easily accessible via the internet. This includes Ted Haggard (New Life Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado), who in 2007 resigned from his church after it was revealed he had sexual liaisons with a male prostitute and used crystal methamphetamine; Jack Schaap (First Church Hammond, Illinois), who left his megachurch in 2012 and now is serving a 12-year prison term for having sex with a minor; Isaac Hunter (Summit Church, Orlando, Florida) who committed suicide in 2013 when it was discovered he was having an affair with a member of his church staff; Mark Driscoll (Mars Hill, Seattle), who resigned from his leadership position under accusations of bullying, plagiarism and financial impropriety; and David Yonggi Cho (Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea—the world's largest megachurch), who in early 2015 was sentenced to

¹⁴⁴ <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2010>. These statistics were brought to my attention by Scott Thumma, Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Accessed March 15, 2015.

¹⁴⁵ Leadership failure in larger organizations is also costlier. Hogan, Hogan and Kaiser (2011) cite studies that estimate costs resulting from a derailed senior corporate executive will range from \$500,000 to \$2.7 million.

three years in prison for embezzling the equivalent of \$12 million from his church. Buddenbaum (2013) summarizes the history of evangelical scandals, arguing that while older scenarios involved evangelicals acting scandalously “in spite of their faith” (such as megachurch leaders Aimee Semple McPherson and J. Frank Norris) more recent examples generate scandals by evangelicals “acting because of their faith” (referring primarily to the political maneuverings of the Religious Right, such as Chief Justice Roy Moore and Republican Tom DeLay). She concludes, “the acts of a few have, in recent years, tarnished the image of the many” (Buddenbaum 2013:123).

Goodman (2010) reifies the celebrity scandal trope when he says, “The old law of tragedy says stars must fall. If the persona is the product, the person is the victim, swallowed up in the persona.” When it comes to celebrity megachurch pastors, at least, scandal is not inevitable. As Hey (2013) suggests, there are ways to structure support and accountability that help prevent abuse and scandal. He mentions such practices as establishing strong ties with other congregations, denominations, and government agencies, increasing lay empowerment, and pursuing a transformational leadership model (2013:215, 276).

Some megachurch pastors can continue after a scandal, as the financial scandals of Charles Blair in the 1970s (Calvary Temple, Denver, Colorado) were forgiven by many followers (Ingold 2009), and more surprisingly Bishop Eddie Long (New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia), who despite being divorced twice, charged with tax evasion and sexual misconduct with minors, remains the pastor of his megachurch, although with diminished attendance. An *Atlantic* journalist attended Long’s church after some of the scandal erupted and concluded from the boisterous support of the audience that “there would be no disillusionment, no void in the spirit as Long was guilt proof” (Coates 2010).¹⁴⁶ While a core of followers may never turn from their charismatic leader, the tarnish of scandal usually does some lasting damage. Vanderbloemen and Bird suggest the aphorism: “People will remember how you leave long after they forget what you did while you were there” (2014:141).

Scott Thumma (1996) offers a careful analysis of the scandals that plagued Earl Paulk Jr. at his Chapel Hill Harvester Church in Atlanta. He specifically emphasizes how Paulk’s charismatic presence and rhetoric could no longer carry charismatic authority, as the latter is determined by recognition from followers, who were largely beginning to leave his church after receiving scandalous news about their pastor. “I came because of one man,” said one staff member and singer in the worship

¹⁴⁶ Other historical examples would include the antics, divorces, and public mischief trials of Aimee Semple McPherson (Angelus Temple, Lost Angeles) (Sutton 2007) and the murder trial of J. Frank Norris (First Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas) (Stokes 2011). Both were acquitted or found not guilty, and the popularity of neither seemed diminished by their scandalous publicity; rather, in some ways the scandals magnified their notoriety and public influence.

band, “and now I’m leaving because of one man.” Thumma concludes: “Paulk’s charismatic vision could not have arisen without a supportive community; and neither could it be maintained in social isolation” (1996:454). If supporting actors and audience turn away, the dramatic web of charisma falls apart.

A variation on this third scenario would include megachurch pastors who leave the ministry by choice—not due to the pressure of moral, financial, or criminal wrongdoing. While their charismatic authority is not dissolved by scandal, it is dissipated by their exit from both their congregation and the Christian ministry. While this remains a rare occurrence, one example would be Allen Hunt (Mount Pigsah United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia), who left his megachurch of 8000 to focus on his radio show in 2007 and then converted to Catholicism in 2008 (Hunt 2010). Another example would be Rob Bell (Mars Hill, Grandville, Michigan), who left his church after some controversy surrounding his latest book (*Love Wins* 2012) to produce a TV show in Hollywood (which failed to materialize). In his biography of Rob Bell, James Wellman reports that some say Bell’s “charisma has passed” and his fifteen minutes of fame read at “14:45 and ticking” (2012:59,63). As we have established in earlier chapters, charisma develops from the nexus of a number of factors including audience recognition in the context of cultural crisis or uncertainty. Charismatic succession, like charisma itself, remains precarious, unpredictable, and potentially fleeting. Glassman (1975) examines briefly the notion of “de-charismatization”—when rationalistic and even cynical perspectives infect the enchantment that surrounds a particular leader, and the charismatic bond corrupts and fades. Charismatic authority comes with no guarantees.

The End of the Meeting House

When Cavey retires or dies, or is deposed, it is mostly likely that TMH will follow some form of the second scenario I have typologized—guided by professional consultants, as there does not seem to be an heir apparent in the Cavey family at this time. The overseers of TMH would take charge and begin a search process or potentially give a mandate to a search committee for the task with the aid of a management consultant group. TMH would inevitably suffer a loss of membership, but this need not be equated with the dissolution of the church or all its regional sites.

Close observers of megachurches seem to agree that there is no formula for megachurch pastor succession, but it can be a relatively smooth and healthy transition if planned carefully well ahead of time. Thumma and Travis say the key factor is “the former senior pastor’s willingness to give up power, status, and a prominent public role within the worship life of the church” (2007:75). Wheeler (2008) explains how a “relay succession” (called “intentional overlap” by Bird 2014) was

the plan with all three of his case studies of megachurch leadership transition and they provided important mentoring for a “home grown” successor and significant continuity and stability for the congregation. Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014) make numerous suggestions, including helping the former pastor find a new identity, giving the congregation time to grieve the loss of their beloved leader, cultivating internal candidates who have had some training elsewhere, and encouraging the new leader to honour the former pastor and his family.

Vanderbloemen and Bird (2014:36) offer Larry Osborne (North Coast Church, Vista, California) as their role model for successful succession planning. Osborne inherited a small church plant from a friend in 1980 and grew it to megachurch size, with 11,000 people in attendance at four different sites in 2013. Nurturing a culture of leadership development, Osborne set a standard for his subordinate leaders by creating a preaching team and an executive team of senior pastor peers. One particular teaching pastor, Chris Brown, is 17 years younger than Osborne and has been teaching as often as Osborne has. North Coast Church is the model church not because it has a succession plan on paper but because replication of leadership and its distributed character has been built into the culture of the church at every level, preparing it for almost any kind of leadership transition.

The anti-cult scares of the 1960s and 1970s linger in the media and transfer onto discussions of the charismatic leaders of megachurches in North America. I have demonstrated that rather than the myth of totalizing power over their followers, the charismatic leaders of megachurches suffer different kinds of dramaturgical trouble, and this stems from weaknesses in the charismatic leader, anxieties about the group’s over-dependence on a single leader, and from nervousness about approaching leadership succession. Yet the impending death of the prophet does not likely entail the disbanding of the group—for there are many likely scenarios that result in the continuation and eventual expansion of the church. As a case study, The Meeting House demonstrates that the routinization of charisma expands in parallel to charismatic authority—through teamwork and dedicated staff, and most likely will continue long after Bruxy Cavey has retired, died, or been removed from his position of leadership.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Implications and Limits of Research

“The careers of the most popular religious figures of the era probably are more revealing of the Protestantism of the era than are the histories of the major denominations... if you did not like one church, you could simply leave and go to the one down the street. Accordingly, the strongest religious loyalties of many people were to attractive preachers... [A] free enterprise system produced great stars who rose to the top in the competition for public acclaim. These traits and the messages of these religious stars are quite revealing, therefore, of popular Protestant opinion.”

-- George Marsden (1991:17)

Evangelical charismatic leaders have a dubious reputation—some of it well deserved, some of it bad press, and some of it due to the perpetuation of the Elmer Gantry stereotype in both popular and academic writing on the megachurch. Furthermore, the megachurch institution has been narrowly characterized as “the cruise ship” of congregational life (Jethani 2014), McDonaldized church (Drane 2009), “capitalism’s cathedral” (Maddox 2012) and “the 800-pound gorilla in the voting booth” (Einstein 2007). One of my goals was to problematize these caricatures by examining one charismatic evangelical leader within his megachurch community—to show the nuances of such a character but also to demonstrate how charisma is not simply a personality trait but the confluence of four factors—what I call the charismatic diamond. Building on the tradition of Max Weber, I argue that the impressive abilities of a charismatic leader require recognition from a group of followers in order to be actualized as a relational bond, and this bond is conditioned by both the socio-cultural context and the intermediaries who shape, package, and distribute a “dramatic web” of story, symbol, language, and practice.

In this light, megachurch leaders are not successful due to their savvy executive leadership skills and their calculated marketing genius as much as because of their imaginative break with a bureaucratized and tradition-bound church institution. Many megachurch studies focus on religious economy as the best explanation for megachurch success, but it is more broadly cultural explanations that offer a wider and deeper explanation. I am implying that megachurches are not just reflections of capitalist structures or the single-handed production of savvy entrepreneurs who exploit attendees or which attendees rationally choose for calculated reasons, but rather that a megachurch is a grand drama, a co-production of leaders, followers, and intermediaries that creates its own compelling

subculture. The charismatic authority of a leader generates the meaning, emotion, and vision that cultivates popular success, and it is the routinization of that charisma by followers and staff that reinforces its power, expands its reach, and ensures its longevity.

The charismatic message and mission, I maintain, as well as its routinization, is best investigated in Erving Goffman's dramaturgical terms—as a “dramatic web” that Cavey and his staff spin and in which followers find meaningful narratives, personal empowerment, and a spiritual home in a “homeless” modern world (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973). The structural elements of the web are the charismatic diamond, but the fabric of the web includes first of all narratives (by, of, and about Cavey), as well as symbols (such as Cavey's appearance, the Che Guevara Jesus silhouette and the “e9” logo), a specialized language (common phrases such as “doing life together” and the in-house chart of words that are “hot” and “not”), rituals (Purge Sunday) and practices (such as attending Home Church). I have shown how attendees are not all passive consumers of this drama, but suspend disbelief to varying degrees, selecting from the drama what suits them or nourishes them and leaving the rest. Some make the dramatic web at TMH their own, and they do so in their own way, taking from Cavey what meets their own needs and desires. Others are more like cobblers who tread lightly on the narrative threads of the church and use pieces of what is offered to string together a faith of their own (Beck 2010).

Besides my exploration of megachurch leader charisma through a four-fold dramaturgical lens, I maintain that this case study contributes to the wider literature in religious studies on a number of further levels: it offers research on a Canadian congregation to a literature with few such case studies; it uncovers qualitative detail of megachurch life that goes beyond the available statistics and commentaries; it investigates an Anabaptist megachurch that resists the culture of the majority of prosperity megachurches worldwide; and it gives an example of the modern trend towards a “strategic religiosity.” Furthermore, it exemplifies the Canadian evangelical tendency to distance itself from American evangelicalism and shows that church declension is not a uniform phenomenon in Canada.

From the start I was wary that the reader may erroneously assume I am suggesting megachurches are “just a show” and that their leaders' convictions are “just an act.” Goffman's writings have been accused of promoting a view of humans as cynical manipulators, and I argued along the lines of Manning (1992) and Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015) that this was not the case for Goffman, and neither is it the case at The Meeting House. I did not suggest the opposite—a naïve view that all religion at megachurches is sincere, unpretentious, and done in good faith, but tried to keep the scope of action open to the full range of human aspiration and failure; religion can be manipulative, but it can also cultivate the better parts of our humanity, and sometimes it can be quite ironic and playful. A performance, if nothing else, is a play.

Cowan (2008) has argued that against the fallacy that religion is “good, decent, and moral” in order to disabuse readers of the assumption that religion by nature occupies some ethical high ground. In light of Hitchens (2009) and other new atheists, it may be necessary to also posit a “bad, poisonous and violent” fallacy with regards to religion. After my fieldwork at TMH, however, I am struck by my own and other common assumptions about the “seriousness” of religion—what might be called the “serious, strict, and sacred” fallacy. While a popular academic theory states that some degree of strictness is necessary for churches to thrive and grow (Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Stark 2008), much research into megachurch echoes my own findings, suggesting that religion also thrives when it is celebratory, silly, romantic or satirical. This echoes older claims that explore a close connection between religion and play (Berger 1970, 1997; Durkheim 1995; Droogers 2011; Bellah 2011), claiming that religion, at heart, must refresh people for the ordinary work of their lives, and that within the origins of ritual is a form of play that suggests a signal of transcendence, echoes of voice, rumours of angels.

The playful paradox that runs straight through the middle of TMH gives the appearance of a casual hold on one’s identity: a church that’s not church, religion that is not religious. Cavey claims to stand outside the constraints and artifice of institutions—he is the characteristic cool “outsider” who satirizes and critiques with prophetic authenticity (Hale 2011). The irony of his ironic attitude, however, is that irony has become mainstream—the counter-culture is the dominant culture, and authenticity is a market commodity (Purdy 2000; Heath and Potter 2005; Gilmore 2007; Potter 2011). To build and preserve institutions within a long-term commitment to their sustainability—this would be a true challenge to mainstream consumer culture.¹⁴⁷

7.1 Church Growth and the Leaderless Emerging Church Ideal

Another matter I wish to address is the implications of this project for a wider public; it could be mistaken as a project in congregational growth research. I began this project with the intention of pursuing study of TMH because of its vitality and growth in a country where church attendance was waning. My purposes were not instrumental, insofar as I did not aspire to find the secret formula by which I might sell many books and begin a church consultant business. Neither was it my aim to show how superficial the megachurch can be and how the crowds are evidence of a cheap and manipulative scam to take advantage of people’s credulity. I wanted to see what the attraction was, and I found it

¹⁴⁷ Brian Carwana made this assessment clear during a small, academic gathering around Cavey at The Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. Cavey denied any attempt to be counter-cultural; he said he merely was trying to remove any barriers that may block people from meeting Jesus.

was Bruxy Cavey and a confluence of factors within which he creates a dramatic web—which in turn creates him.

This suggests what happens at TMH is not a formula for growth that can be replicated. I would further add that my understanding of growth and “success” in this thesis is generally reductionistically numerical, although success can also be postulated normatively in terms of healthy community practises, an individual’s spiritual development (Fowler 1995) or as a deeper faithfulness to one’s calling and tradition (Wolterstorff 1983; Mouw 1994).

Church growth literature covers a vast terrain and remains an active market for church leaders. I do not see much value in the sale of organizational growth techniques, especially when local demographics, leaders’ personalities, and good fortune with media networks are so much more salient when it comes to numerical success. Charismatic leaders themselves rest on uncertain popular success. I hope that my case study can be read as evidence for the precariousness of any congregational growth and suggest reliance on other factors than technique or personality.

Incidentally, Cavey has read a draft of this thesis. I was unable to get an audience with him to discuss it, but he did send me a short email saying that he appreciates my work while being “not familiar with the frameworks” that I have used. He adds that my observations “have been passed on to our overseers team for us to learn and grow from.” The email ends with a jocular remark: “And I for one will be paying closer attention to my tendency toward Plumber Butt” (a reference to a story I tell in chapter three). So I may have my own intentions for my dissertation, but it can be used by others for other purposes.

Some church growth literature now eschews the romance of a charismatic leader. “Missional Church” writing, stemming out of the work of Lesslie Newbigin (1936-1974) and launched by a collective reflection on his vision (Guder 1998; chronicled in Goheen 2010), first of all distinguishes itself from the church growth-focused megachurch models. It critiques the “CEO leader who takes charge, sets growth goals, and targets ‘turnaround congregations’... rooted in the North American myth of the heroic, charismatic personality” (Roxburgh et al. 2006:27). Instead, missional leadership cultivates an environment in which people can imagine and follow what they perceive God is already doing in their local community (Roxburgh et al. 2006:29; Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2010). Such leadership balances the theological and the methodological, orienting itself not at growth, strategy or charisma as much as the needs and opportunities for holistic ministry in the local neighbourhood. In sum, missional rhetoric shifts pastoral leadership from maintenance and management to risky local “missionary” work that fundamentally re-works the Western Christian congregational imagination (Roxburgh 2013).

The question remains whether charismatic leadership can be denied its place in the church. Emerging Church Movement discussions share this “missional” foundation for leadership but orient themselves to postmodern culture as much as local community, emphasizing a broader socially active “kingdom theology” rather than numerical church growth (Bielo 2011:138-156). They begin with an aversion not only to CEO models of leadership but modern hierarchy, control, and patriarchy in general (Morgenthaler 2007:175-186), symbolically taking collaborative Dorothy as an icon in opposition to the expert authority of the Wizard of Oz (McLaren and Campolo 2003:141-151). Pushing off from bad experiences with controlling charismatic leadership in their past and inspired by the 1960s counter-culture, these Generation X pastors experimented with democratic, collaborative, rotating and even leaderless forms of leadership that focus on a person’s particular passion, gifting, or the nature of a task rather than a specific person and position (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:191-215). The pastor pursues more of a facilitative role than a directive one, which may mirror the academic socialization that many emerging attendees have experienced, as they tend to have higher education levels than the average evangelical church (Marti and Ganiel 2014:23). Leaders are not some hired know-it-all, but a fellow traveler who arises from the group, and vulnerably shares their brokenness with others in compelling ways (Burke 2003:35-45). If Church Growth specialists value the decisive visionary leader, the Emerging Church communities groom leaders for humility, thoughtfulness, genuineness, and warmth (Marti and Ganiel 2014:118).

Still, many have learned that the leaderless ideal can cause frustration, and unspoken forms of leadership inevitably develop (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:198). Packard explains that while they have a democratic, egalitarian vision, Emerging Church pastors’ charismatic authority casts a “long shadow” on their congregations, and often in the push and pull of congregational life “power is still very much connected to status in the organization” (2012:117-118). Some leaders exude a “guru-like quality” that attracts the crowd in the first place, such that members declare they would be lost without their leader (Marti and Ganiel 2014:118-119). Some Emerging Church leaders, such as Peter Rollins, take on the role of intellectual celebrity, as he draws deeply on philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, and Slavoj Zizek (Marti and Ganiel:169). In other words, the anti-modern, often negative identity of the Emerging Church does not always provide clear alternatives to what it seeks to transcend. While energized by postmodern successors to modern staples, modern forms linger, especially when it comes to the central role of a charismatic leader, and thus Marti and Ganiel employ “institutional entrepreneurs” as a central concept for understanding not only emerging church leaders but larger patterns of religious change as well (2014:79). Institutional entrepreneurs catalyze institutional change through reflexive, creative discourse; that is, through story-telling, dialogue, and directed conversation that reframes notions of truth, faith, and God.

TMH exemplifies the creative tensions and contradictions of the emerging church leadership model. As I have explained, in person Cavey is gentle, soft-spoken, and self-effacing, and always gives credit to his staff for their role in making things happen. He describes the church as a decentralized, collaborative, team-centred organism built on dialogical structures and friendship. He is quick to point out that his role is teaching pastor and not the senior pastor, and he is truly generally absent from the daily operations of the church. Neither does he monopolize the choice of themes discussed in the Sunday services; the leadership team develops the teaching topics and series together, based on feedback from the sites. Finally, they delegate pastoral care to the regional sites, and specifically to the elders of the Home Churches.

Still, Cavey exudes a guru-like presence in a church that has been built around his teaching, his charisma, and his irreligious brand. Since Cavey absents himself from daily operations, a certain level of efficiency necessarily keeps the centralized-distributed organization in relative order—the marketing, the weekly services, the special events, overseas networks, finances, human resources, plant operations and large mission campaigns all require attentive management labour. They have a staff of about seventy people and over 332 elders engaging upwards of 10,000 people. Despite their avoidance of the term, they are a megachurch, and they continue to learn best practices from other megachurches. (Former) Senior Pastor Tim Day stands in the shadows of Cavey, studying the church growth consultant's books, ensuring the institutional capacity of the organization matches the current demand for Cavey's wares. Together, Cavey and Day bring the church growth and emergent church orientations together to create TMH hybrid. In retrospect, this is the legacy of evangelicalism, the combination of charismatic prophets and innovative entrepreneurs, celebrities and businessmen—in a phrase, the routinization of charisma.

C. G. Hart says evangelicalism can never become a tradition because celebrity cannot be handed down (2004:185); but he overlooks not only the inevitable attempt to routinize of charisma (and successes such as Aimee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Church), but that large personalities played vital roles in many religious traditions, including Calvinism, Lutheranism, Mormonism and Buddhism. American evangelicalism is not distinguished only by celebrity personalities, but as much by the particularly American quality of those personalities—championing revolution, innovation, expansion, and marketing. In Canada, this legacy is received in emerging church-like fashion as a tempered evangelical performance, due to a smaller religious marketplace and stronger ties to historical denominations.

7.2 Limits of Research

There are five basic limits to my research. Performance has its limits as a metaphor for understanding charisma, and Goffman recognized these limits for understanding interaction ritual. So he shifted his research to operate with other metaphors such as game, ritual, and frames (Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015). My argument in this dissertation has been that the economic metaphors of megachurches as McDonaldized institutions and their leaders as CEOs has already been significantly developed, and other frameworks, such as that of the theatre, shed new light on the subject. Seeing the megachurch and its leaders from different comparative angles—such as a social movement, a new religious movement, or civil society—would prove fruitful as well. One of the best ways to illuminate a subject is to examine it in light of something else.

Secondly, this project is a case study—a sample size of one—and generalizations from such data can only be made with caution. The notions of charismatic diamond and dramatic web can certainly be tested in other megachurch contexts—or any other institutional context. Additionally, my typology of megachurch succession in the previous chapter was intended to be generalizable.

I am able to disprove generalizations such as those that suggest all megachurches are grown on prosperity theology and challenge the Elmer Gantry stereotype with my counter-example of Cavey. Moreover, I have shown that TMH is a hybrid of seeker and emerging church traditions in an Anabaptist mould, and this makes it part of wider trends and networks that suggest it represents more than its own idiosyncratic character and may offer some wider comparisons.

Still, other studies of Canadian megachurches from different provinces and denominations (and non-denominational examples) would certainly add to a growing knowledge of the field, which still remains poorly explored. A comparative qualitative study such as that of Elisha (2011) would have offered some diversity in data and shown a wider scope of megachurch life. Still, a church of 8,000 people with 17 sites across southern Ontario could be likened to studying a small denomination as much as a congregation. The amounts of data available on the website alone—the “electronic oral tradition” of fifteen years of Cavey podcasts, for example—would be expansive and rich enough for its own investigation.

There are approximately 1700 megachurches in North America, and each has a leader that draws over 2000 people every Sunday. TMH is a seeker/emerging hybrid with Anabaptist roots, and those religious institutions and strategies shape the quality of the charisma that draws people to the church. Megachurches that come from a more Calvinist, Pentecostal, or mainstream evangelical tradition, for example, will develop a different charisma in their leader, as traditions shape charismatic performance. We have many biographies of megachurch leaders, but few that examine the leader in dialogue with the material on charisma, and such projects would certainly add to our understanding of this growing phenomenon.

A third limitation comes in the scope of my investigation within TMH. My research is only a snapshot of approximately 30 months in the church's life, and it's a snapshot from just one angle—my own. Additionally, my dissertation covers more the production side of the dramatic web than the reception side; the practises and meanings of the attendees get less attention than the star of the show, Bruxy Cavey. Other megachurch studies have covered the span of decades (Thumma 1996; Wellman 2012; Hey 2013), and this makes routinization of charisma and its evaluation easier to explore. One study of a megachurch commends a team approach, noting that more surface area can be covered in a shorter amount of time with multiple researchers, and differences in age, gender, and race of the researchers can develop different impressions of what is going on (Snow et al. 2010). I visited every regional site that was up and running during my data collection phase on a Sunday morning, but I was spreading myself thin over a wide area, and so concentrated my time in a few nearby sites. As I entered the writing phase, the number of sites continued to expand, staff turned over, and many aspects of the church changed, even if Cavey remained at the centre.

As a fourth limitation, I am leaving a number of loose ends. My plans of doing a survey of my own personal design did not materialize. I did not see the relation with charismatic authority displayed in the life of the church's children or teens, and neither did I investigate the church's "compassion" programs to any depth. Additionally, a qualitative study of a megachurch communications and marketing department would be a revealing investigation into the construction of a megachurch identity and the routinization of its leader's charisma. If such intermediaries are key to the production of megachurch culture and its leader's celebrity, a detailed analysis of their conversations, language, marketing strategies and "mistakes" would be valuable to our understanding of not only the routinization of charisma but also religious celebrity.

Significant pieces of my writing on TMH have not been included here. I presented papers on sacred space, popular culture, the spiritual but not religious trend, and aspects of the theology of The Meeting House, as well as lectured undergraduate classes on TMH as a new religious movement and an example of the culture of cool. Parts of these works made their way into the thesis, but they did not receive the full treatment that they could have.

Finally, my analysis omits an in-depth investigation of the power dynamics of TMH in the context of globalized capitalism. TMH is a white middle-class congregation situated mostly within the greater Toronto area and hidden structures of privilege certainly riddle the organization. Giddens (2009) criticizes Goffman for this general omission as well, admitting he does address the issue but never systematically. Differentials in power, insists Giddens, shape the interaction order in significant ways—how doctors talk to patients, how slave-owners treat their slaves. These encounters are structured by systems of power yet also reproduce them through ritualized action. Ever conscious of

the dialectic relation between structure and agency, Giddens see how social structures “help constitute, as well as being constituted by, the interaction” (2009:293).

Yet, as Giddens notes, Goffman was not oblivious to power. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman says dramaturgy is not the only perspective on institutional life—it may also be viewed technically, structurally, culturally, and politically. By politically, he means “the capacities of one individual to direct the activity of another” and this “intersects clearly” with a dramaturgical perspective (1959:241). Power, says Goffman, especially in its more naked coercive forms, is a means of communication, not merely a means of action.

This study of Bruxy Cavey focuses on his power, not narrowly focused on power as coercion but power as his charismatic authority—in Weberian terms, legitimate power given to him by those who have voluntarily chosen to follow him. Power is carried in the narratives, rituals, and symbols that mark the church—the threads of the dramatic web—and they not only constrain but also empower attendees by providing meaning, solidarity, and hope for them. Charismatic authority can increase the self-efficacy of followers in a time of social tension and eases the fragmentation of highly mobile postsuburban life (Madsen and Snow 1991; Wilford 2012). Within the constraints of the web and its institutional structures, attendees can select from Cavey what they want and leave the rest.

I could have looked more deeply into the power differentials between female and male leaders, or between leaders at the main site and those at the regional sites. This latter tension I mentioned briefly but would be worthy of deeper study. The role of the regional site pastors is structured more in managerial terms than those of a pastor, preacher, or visionary. Site pastors are given benchmarks in attendance and baptism to aspire towards, and they are accountable to the main site in Oakville, specifically the Site Leadership Pastor and ultimately the Senior Pastor. They coordinate people, instruct volunteers, and organize events as much as they pastor, and there is negligible room for localized creative expression. Leadership have responded to some complaints in this regard, and site pastors have recently been given permission to publicly address their communities (i.e. preach) one or two Sundays a year, instead of the usual practise of showing the DVD of Cavey’s latest teaching.

In terms of power as institutional structures and their constraints, in *Asylums* (1961) Goffman investigates this in a vivid way. The study does not investigate the long history of the institution such as that completed by Foucault (1973, 1977), but Foucault missed what Goffman presented so keenly: the agency of the individual even in the midst of overbearing institutional structures. Goffman’s patients are not docile bodies but are skilled in dodging the boundaries of the matrix that surrounds them—what Goffman called “secondary adjustments” found in the “underlife” of the institution.

Moreover, “working the system” is just one dynamic in the formation of the self, which is simultaneously formed and shaped by the structures it resists. Goffman explains:

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks (1961:320).

Goffman was an ethnographer, and he did not observe people crushed by the panopticon’s power—the all-seeing watchtower of the prison—as Foucault theorized.¹⁴⁸ My view of institutions and power allows for a wider range of configurations for power, including empowerment and legitimate power (Weber). Martin Jay comments on Foucault’s ambition to avoid the investigation of solutions and rather uncover the genealogy of problems, of *problematiques*. Foucault said, “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous,” and Jay argues that Foucault remained blind to the other micropractices of everyday life that subvert the panopticon’s power. Wherever Foucault fixed his gaze, adds Jay, all he could see were “scopic regimes” of “*malveillance*” (Jay 1993:415-416).

Maddox (2012, 2013) takes this more pessimistic view of megachurches, demonstrating how the Australian megachurches she examines perpetuate the structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Her fieldwork investigations are shallow, however, and the same applies to Wade (2010), who did not obtain research ethics clearance for participant observation of Hillsong Church. He elaborates on Hillsong as a “total institution” without investigating the large section in *Asylums* where Goffman elaborates on the underlife of the organization and the many ways inmates “work the system.” Hillsong Australia is quite different from TMH, being more conservative, more charismatic, and steeped in prosperity theology, and thus a discussion of power and structures requires a different framework than I used here. But I suspect a more thorough ethnography would uncover much more agency than is supposed by Maddox and Wade. Thumma and Bird (2014), for example, suggest megachurches across the globe foster the upward mobility of a burgeoning middle class. Where Goffman sees agency latent in the individual, Thumma and Bird see “mediating institutions” as potentially empowering (see also Berger and Neuhaus 1977; Marti 2008).

Some attendees are completely caught up in the dramatic web of the megachurch; but most of those I met are not. Almost all of them have switched churches to be at TMH, and if they deeply identify with the institution, it is by choice. Most are cobblers (James 2006) who use religious

¹⁴⁸ Foucault’s (1977) panopticon model of social institutions was a significant part of my master’s thesis (Schuurman 1995) on the power of video surveillance cameras in everyday life. My conclusion was they do not function as Foucault’s panopticon does; they are ignored, played with, and subverted as much as they manipulate and control human behaviour.

institutions as a resource for their own ends, and I have described attendees who attend only on Sunday or only Home Church, who perform “off-script” and “work the system” as they manage cross-cutting allegiances—sometimes to multiple church communities. Power is not evenly distributed through a megachurch by any means, but I have not observed or portrayed it here as a zero-sum game. It is important to note, furthermore, that by presenting people as passive or powerless, you can perpetuate their disempowerment. The power is in the energy generated by the dramatic web, not just within Cavey and his team.

Nevertheless, I have indicated throughout the dissertation that there are macro-structures of consumer culture that influence the life and identity of TMH, including transnational capitalist forces. This I have not denied, but I more carefully tried to situate TMH between these macro-structures and their own meso-level performative agency. The work of cultural studies, for example, in highlighting the agency of fans in popular culture should not totally eclipse the power of the culture industry (Sandvoss 2005). Put differently, the individual “tactics” of creative resistance do not completely subvert the broader “strategies” of macro-systems (de Certeau 1984; Miller 2005). My intent was to examine the meso-level of congregational life, including some micro-level social interaction, and not reduce either of them to the configurations of global capitalism while still acknowledging its conditioning influence.

7.3 The Future of The Meeting House

Success brings many challenges. Every church is dependent on its pastor, and both Cavey and Day are considered vital to the on-going vitality of the church. Cavey is the personality that swells the numbers, but Day keeps the large organizational pieces in manageable place. Still, the inevitable vicissitudes of pastoral succession loom before the governing board, and I have heard rumours that the conversation on sustainability has already been broached on a number of levels.

Additionally, attendee mobility remains high as many come and go without making deep investments in the fabric of the church while a smaller number give immensely of their time and energy to keep the quality of community high. I am told that in the last twenty years there are over 33,000 email addresses gathered on their email list. The core group of faithful followers and staff could potentially burn out, especially as change seems to be constant and at times very intense. Another issue is the whiteness of the church, even at regional sites located in deeply diverse ethnic communities such as Brampton and Toronto. The disjuncture between church and surrounding demographics has been a matter of discussion, but I know of no strategies to shift ethnic boundaries (Marti 2012, for example, explores churches that use ethnic minorities as worship leaders to leverage

for racial diversity in their congregation). Finally, some members are agitating for more specialized programming, and Young Adult Home Churches have begun to spring up, as well as a number of “unofficial” Home Churches, including one composed of gay persons not fully in agreement with TMH’s stance on gay marriage.

The site pastors were generally male, with a few exceptions. Christa Hesselink was site pastor at Brampton and Waterloo for a time and Thelma Eisen became site pastor at East Hamilton in 2012. Eisen came out as a lesbian in 2014 through a video broadcast during a summer teaching, declaring her long-time celibacy and the supportive embrace she felt by TMH. Leadership explained to me that TMH was open to hiring more female pastors, as Cavey champions the “egalitarian” gender ethic of the church; Tim Day, however, explained to me that qualified female candidates formed a small pool.

As with any church, there were staff tensions, personnel changes, and other growing pains. Joel Percy was on the executive team in the early 2000s and preached occasionally. He was well-liked by attendees but decided to move on to the private sector in early 2009, eventually getting involved in development work in East Africa. Rich Birch was a key player in the expansion of the multi-site structure and moved on to Liquid Church, a megachurch in New Jersey in 2008. Paul Morris was also a key personality on the executive team but stepped away in 2012 to re-evaluate his vocation. Matt Vincent, the lead pastor of the East Hamilton and then Oakville sites, left in 2014 after six years of service to become a church planter for the BIC in Oakville and simultaneously take leadership of all BIC church plants (called “The Network”). Ken Styles served ten years as West Hamilton site pastor before leaving for other work in 2014. Site lead pastors are sometimes shuffled around, depending on who is available when new sites are being launched, and a few left TMH after only a year or two in the position. Like many churches, staff turnover can be high, but this seems exacerbated when there are so many staff to find, train, and support.

Tim Day and Cavey called themselves the “mom and dad” of TMH family. Many insiders have sworn to the indispensability of Day, and he now carries much of the history of the institution. In June 2015, he shifted out of the Senior Pastor position, and his role is now uncertain. But TMH continues without much of a stumble. The organization has had its share of growing pains, but has yet to experience any significant conflict or scandal.

One caveat I would suggest is that Cavey’s propensity to be disconnected from the day-to-day operations of the organization could create a bifurcation at some point that may be hard to bridge; Johnson (1992:5) calls this the emergence of “two worlds”—one of the followers and one of the leader and his inner circle. Cavey needs to keep in lock-step with his executive team and curb his tendency to be a guru by the mountain only who speaks on Sundays, reads books, engages social media, and travels on speaking tours. Most importantly, if Cavey’s charismatic authority is to be

passed on beyond his own persona, he will need to strategize about internal leadership development. Cavey has a poor reputation in this regard, and if his legacy is to reach beyond his own celebrity, the active mentoring of a new generation of leaders would be an essential task.

The routinization of charisma requires a delicate balance. The vulnerability of a group to its leader's failure, departure or demise can create anxiety especially when followers recognize how correlated the leader's presence is to attendance, volunteerism and giving. On one hand, this precarious state can be energizing, keeping Cavey and his staff nimble and forward-looking, always trying to push themselves to perform well. On the other hand, when so much time, staffing, marketing and resources are dependant on one person, the urge to solidify the current corporate identity and centralize can become self-defeating. That is to say, the brand confines the creativity that gave it success because so much has been invested in it, any change seems like too large a risk. Hey (2013) calls this the balance between innovation and institutionalization the most significant challenge for the sustainability of megachurches. Cavey calls it the challenge of confining religion over against the promise of relationship. The Meeting House can become its own worst monster, and switching metaphors, Cavey himself can become confined to a web he himself has spun. Would he shut down TMH if it became too institutionalized? How would he measure that, and what process would guide such a decision? Institutions have an inertia that cannot be suddenly collapsed on a whim.

What does the future hold for TMH? The relationship between TMH and the BIC seems strong, as the BIC in Canada, now doubled in size with TMH and independent from its larger American sibling, has some initial momentum. There is a synergy between the two that is changing the BIC culture across Canada. The relationship between TMH and Eastlake Community Church continues to grow. New regional sites continue to be added every year. The overall attendance numbers have plateaued, with only slight increases as new regional sites are added. What organizational culture and enduring legacy of Christian identity will settle into this network of communities remains unclear, but it promises to be a distinctive contribution to religious life in southern Ontario.

Scholars such as Martin Marty have predicted for over two decades that megachurches, as a fad in evangelical congregational culture, would soon fade from the North American landscape (Marty 1995, 2010). This case study shows that the charismatic leadership of one megachurch in "secular" Canada has created a dramatic religious production that has captured the imagination of thousands of followers. This dramatic web may be as fragile as it is sticky, but there are many ways in which its vision and mission can be routinized by followers. In short, if megachurches are indeed a compelling drama co-produced by leader and follower that brings meaning, purpose, and "festive flare" to followers' lives in the midst of cultural tension, megachurches as religious organizations are

not just a passing fad or vulnerable personality cult, but a viable and likely enduring North American religious institution.

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Appendix A: Interview Subject Table

* the final column “compassion” indicates whether the person was involved in regular “compassion” (community service activities) associated with TMH.

#	vocation	Status	Joined	age	sex	ethnicity	education	religious affiliation	Site	Reason for coming	Attend	Baptized	Anabaptist?	com- passion
1	university professor	attendee	08/06/08	50	f	German	bachelors	Evangelical	West Hamilton	friends/family	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	no
2	TMH pastor	staff	09/01/01	41	m	German	masters	BIC	Oakville	Anabaptist roots	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
3	college staff worker	volunteer	06/08/05	32	m	Dutch	doctoral	CRC	West Hamilton	community	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	yes
4	site pastor	staff	09/05/06	49	m	other	bachelors	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	both	Yes, for sure	on occ.
5	TMH staff	staff	07/07/04	28	m	Dutch	college	CRC	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	Yes, for sure	yes
6	librarian	elder	08/10/05	38	m	Italian	masters	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
7	executive pastor	staff	09/09/04	36	m	Dutch	masters	CRC	Oakville	friends/family	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
8	TMH staff	staff	01/09/08	37	m	other	masters	Evangelical	Downtown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
9	site pastor	staff	09/06/10	32	f	British	masters	Evangelical	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	ambivalent	yes
10	parachurch worker	attendee	08/02/10	52	m	Italian	bachelors	Catholic	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	podcast only	as adult	no	no
11	retail sales	attendee	06/05/07	25	m	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Kingston	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as infant	no	no
12	church architect	attendee	09/05/06	66	m	German	bachelors	BIC	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
13	public school teacher	attendee	11/13/02	42	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as adult	ambivalent	no
14	musician	staff	09/03/07	32	m	other	bachelors	Evangelical	Uptown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
15	nurse	volunteer	09/04/06	30	m	German	bachelors	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	yes
16	public school teacher	volunteer	09/04/06	28	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	yes

#	vocation	Status	Joined	age	sex	ethnicity	education	religious affiliation	Site	Reason for coming	Attend	Baptized	Anabaptist?	com- passion
17	Real estate agent	volunteer	09/07/08	26	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	yes
18	factory worker	volunteer	09/03/07	26	m	British	high school	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	yes
19	ex-pastor/web technician	attendee	09/05/10	56	m	other	masters	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as adult	ambivalent	no
20	engineer/professor	visitor	07/03/11	36	m	Dutch	doctoral	CRC	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday irregular	as infant	no	no
21	TMH pastor	staff	09/07/86	60	m	British	high school	other	Oakville	community	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
22	student	attendee	09/03/95	20	m	other	bachelors	CRC	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	podcast only	as infant	Yes, for sure	no
23	self-employed	volunteer	06/11/08	48	m	British	masters	Evangelical	Parry Sound	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
24	TMH site pastor	staff	05/04/07	36	f	British	high school	Evangelical	Parry Sound	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	ambivalent	on occ.
25	veterinarian	attendee	06/09/09	25	f	British	masters	Mainline	Parry Sound	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as infant	ambivalent	on occ.
26	student	attendee	10/10/07	18	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	podcast only	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
27	student	attendee	02/10/92	20	m	German	bachelors	BIC	West Hamilton	friends/family	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
28	student	attendee	06/14/11	20	m	Dutch	bachelors	CRC	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday irregular	as infant	no	no
29	student	attendee	05/19/10	21	m	German	bachelors	Evangelical	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday irregular	as adult	ambivalent	no
30	PhD student	attendee	08/06/11	50	m	British	doctoral	Evangelical	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	HC	as adult	ambivalent	no
31	worship pastor consultant	former staff	07/09/08	55	m	German	masters	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
32	marketing consultant	attendee	10/09/07	55	f	German	masters	Anabaptist	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
33	hotel attendant	volunteer	10/09/08	45	m	Italian	high school	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	ambivalent	no
34	missionary	attendee	02/06/07	57	m	German	masters	Evangelical	Kitchener	community	HC	as infant	ambivalent	on occ.
35	dietitian	attendee	11/07/07	55	f	German	bachelors	Evangelical	Kitchener	community	HC	as infant	ambivalent	on occ.

#	vocation	Status	Joined	age	sex	ethnicity	education	religious affiliation	Site	Reason for coming	Attend	Baptized	Anabaptist?	com- passion
36	PhD student	attendee	06/11/08	35	m	German	doctoral	Anabaptist	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
37	interior design	attendee	07/15/08	34	f	German	bachelors	Anabaptist	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
38	teaching pastor	staff	07/09/97	46	m	British	masters	BIC	Oakville	community	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
39	pastor	visitor	09/28/13	70	m	Dutch	masters	CRC	West Hamilton	friends/family	podcast only	as infant	no	no
40	pastor	visitor	09/28/13	41	m	British	masters	Evangelical	West Hamilton	Bruxy's teaching	podcast only	as adult	no	no
41	unemployed	attendee	08/10/11	26	m	other	bachelors	Evangelical	Brampton	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	on occ.
42	teacher	volunteer	11/08/07	33	m	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
43	physiotherapist	attendee	02/13/08	32	f	Dutch	bachelors	CRC	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	ambivalent	on occ.
44	teacher	ex-member	01/09/07	40	f	British	doctoral	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	on occ.
45	auto sales	attendee	04/15/09	44	m	other	masters	Evangelical	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	podcast only	as adult	no	no
46	financial analyst	former staff	01/10/07	50	f	British	masters	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as adult	ambivalent	no
47	teacher	ex-member	04/10/03	36	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	on occ.
48	Computer technician	volunteer	04/17/03	40	m	other	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	no
49	television writer	ex-member	01/14/08	48	f	German	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as infant	no	no
50	security guard	ex-member	06/18/08	46	m	German	high school	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	on occ.
51	TMH site pastor	staff	05/10/11	33	m	British	masters	Evangelical	Waterloo	friends/family	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
52	website developer	staff	05/09/95	52	m	other	masters	Evangelical	Oakville	community	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
53	TMH site pastor	staff	05/12/08	38	m	British	masters	Evangelical	Ottawa	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	yes
54	homemaker	volunteer	07/11/06	50	f	Dutch	bachelors	CRC	Burlington	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as infant	ambivalent	on occ.

#	vocation	Status	Joined	age	sex	ethnicity	education	religious affiliation	Site	Reason for coming	Attend	Baptized	Anabaptist?	com- passion
55	civil servant	volunteer	06/02/09	34	m	British	masters	other	Ottawa	friends/family	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
56	financial services	ex-member	12/17/03	34	m	German	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
57	marketing consultant	overseer	09/12/00	38	m	British	masters	Mainline	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	Yes, for sure	on occ.
58	engineer	volunteer	08/09/00	38	m	British	masters	Evangelical	Oakville	friends/family	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
59	banker	overseer	12/05/01	65	m	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	no
60	homemaker	attende	05/21/02	63	f	Dutch	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	podcast only	as adult	no	no
61	student	volunteer	09/10/09	20	m	British	bachelors	Evangelical	West Hamilton	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
62	TMH youth pastor	staff	06/10/09	26	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	West Hamilton	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
63	Security guard	volunteer	09/10/08	34	m	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Uptown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
64	professor	ex-member	04/11/06	58	m	British	masters	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	no
65	Engineer	attende	07/14/10	49	m	British	doctoral	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC	as adult	ambivalent	on occ.
66	professor	attende	11/10/09	48	f	Dutch	doctoral	CRC	West Hamilton	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as infant	no	no
67	international trade sales	attende	07/19/07	48	f	British	college	Evangelical	Kitchener	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	no
68	local foods worker	attende	10/08/03	26	f	Italian	bachelors	Catholic	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC	neither	no	on occ.
69	TMH pastor	former staff	06/08/98	37	m	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	Yes, for sure	on occ.
70	Christian agency worker	staff	05/15/11	28	m	British	masters	Evangelical	Newmarket	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	no	on occ.
71	law clerk	attende	06/15/10	49	m	German	bachelors	Evangelical	Waterloo	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	no
72	Christian worker	volunteer	06/05/12	29	f	British	college	Evangelical	Downtown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	ambivalent	no
73	homemaker	attende	08/14/07	37	f	British	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as adult	ambivalent	no

#	vocation	Status	Joined	age	sex	ethnicity	education	religious affiliation	Site	Reason for coming	Attend	Baptized	Anabaptist?	com- passion
74	software sales	overseer	10/08/91	53	m	British	college	Mainline	West Hamilton	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	both	no	no
75	TMH pastor	staff	04/12/06	30	f	British	masters	Evangelical	Downtown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	yes
76	graduate student	attendee	05/14/08	24	f	other	masters	Evangelical	Downtown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	ambivalent	no
77	PhD in biology	elder	09/09/08	30	m	British	doctoral	Mainline	Downtown TO	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	both	Yes, for sure	no
78	BIC pastor	staff	05/06/97	50	m	German	doctoral	BIC	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	Yes, for sure	on occ.
79	security guard supervisor	attendee	09/10/02	56	m	other	bachelors	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	as adult	no	on occ.
80	real estate agent	volunteer	11/08/00	53	f	British	college	Evangelical	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	as adult	no	on occ.
81	engineer	attendee	05/14/03	56	m	British	bachelors	other	Oakville	Bruxy's teaching	Sunday regular	neither	no	on occ.
82	TMH site pastor	staff	24/09/200 0	54	m	British	doctoral	Mainline	West Hamilton	Bruxy's teaching	HC and Sunday	adult	Yes, for sure	yes

Appendix B: Formal Interview Questionnaire

These questions were used as a guide for my interviews. I followed the flow of conversation rather than keep strictly to this template. Questions for staff and leadership were particularized according to their position in the church.

Questions for Attendees/Core Members:

1. Describe your occupation and family situation.
2. How many years have you been attending TMH? Describe the extent of your participation (Sunday, Home Church).
3. Tell me about your spiritual journey.
4. What brought you to TMH?
5. Tell me about TMH. What is it about?
6. What does the Anabaptist identity of the church mean to you?
7. What is the style of this church? What does it feel like to be part of TMH? (Gauge if “Emergent” terms are meaningful)
8. What role would you say play/humour has in this church?
9. Describe how you’ve changed since joining TMH.
10. What was your favourite teaching series? Your least favourite?
11. Do you belong, download, participate in any other religious agencies?

Bruxy and Tim

12. Tell me about Bruxy. What’s his place in this church? Have you met him?
13. Have you read his book *The End of Religion*? What struck you as you read it?
14. What about Tim Day? What is your relationship, connection to him?
15. Have you done First Steps or Next Steps?

Site Experience

16. How does the movie theatre environment shape your Sunday experience?
17. How attached are you to others at the site?
18. Do you volunteer? Financially contribute? (Are you a “core member”?)
19. Do you volunteer for compassion projects?

Home Church Experience

20. Describe your Home Church experience for me.
21. Is this a new experience for you?
22. Who are your friends?

Concluding Questions

23. What challenges or opportunities lie ahead for TMH?
24. What if TMH were to fold next week (as Bruxy imagines): what would you do?
25. Is there anything else about TMH and your experience in it that we haven’t talked about?

Appendix C:

History of The Meeting House

The Meeting House did not actually begin as The Meeting House. In the 1980s, the Brethren In Christ had an unimpressive legacy when it came to urban church plants; most had failed. In 1985, Craig and Laura Sider moved into the west end Toronto suburb of Oakville with vision of creating “a church for people who had given up on church.” To begin a church plant, they went door to door in Oakville conducting a survey of the neighborhood, asking people what they needed most in their neighbourhood. They began with a small group of eight people in a Bible study and the group slowly grew, with some joining while still attending another congregation, waiting to see what would become of this new community.

Wendell Murray (pseudonym) worked in a window and door factory for 32 years and was one of the first Oakville doors that Laura Sider knocked upon in December 1985. The story is well-known and often told of how Murray’s immediate reply to Sider’s question about neighbourhood needs was less than ripe for church participation: “We need a beer store.”

Murray, however, became involved with the launch process of the church and became the first person to be baptized in the new church. He volunteered for many roles in the church, was then hired on staff part-time in the children’s ministry (1998) and is said to have since done “almost every role in TMH” including administrative coordinator, Site Leadership Associate Pastor, and now Data Manager. His journey around various positions resembles the lives of other staff who have been around for a long time; they inconsistently shift their role as the church grows. This rotation keeps people unsettled and constantly challenged while preventing the development of private positional fiefdoms.

In 2011, Murray and his wife were showcased on stage for about a minute at the “One Roof” 25th anniversary event as “the first convert” who was enfolded into the church by baptism. Glowing under the bright spotlights of the giant arena in front of thousands of church attendees, he was introduced as an icon of the church, symbolizing its evangelistic mission and its self-deprecating style; their church began with a desire for a beer store.

Like many North American megachurches, TMH moved through many different venues in the early years. After developing a core group and building some anticipation, the Siders launched “Upper Oaks Community Church” on Easter Sunday 1986 in Munn’s Public School, Oakville, with an oak tree as their logo. The “Upper Oaks” name was a combination of the geographical references points of Upper Middle Road and Oakville. “Community Church” was becoming a popular way for churches to identify themselves when not using the denomination in the title. They also opened an office space in

a plaza nearby. In the fall of 1988, they moved to General Wolfe High School down the street (now known as White Oaks North Campus) since Munn's school was starting renovations to accommodate the ever-growing north Oakville population. The BIC denominational identity was kept low key and, in 1990, a hundred attendees rallied around the slogan, "The church for people who have given up on church." Through worship services, baptisms, picnics, summer children's camps and backyard clubs, the small church plant began to grow.

In September 1994, a new high school opened in town—Iroquois Ridge High School—and services were moved to this larger facility with about 150 seats and a stage. Through prayer, the leadership perceived God was giving them a ten-year vision to attract 1000 people by the year 2000. Before that vision was fully pursued, the Siders moved south of the border, as Craig Sider accepted a position as Bishop with the Brethren in Christ in Pennsylvania. It was 1996, the tenth anniversary of the church, and the future of the church looked uncertain.¹⁴⁹

Timothy Bruce (Bruxy) Cavey was a young Pentecostal street evangelist from Agincourt, north Toronto, who became part of a drama troupe that ministered to youth groups, camps and churches across Ontario. He became the pastor of Heritage Fellowship Baptist Church in Ancaster, Ontario, but after five years of rapid growth his marriage ended and he resigned from his pastoral position to reconfigure his life and find a new line of work.

It was during these months outside of formal ministry that BIC Bishop Dale Shaw approached Cavey and asked if he would be interested in stepping in as the new pastor at Upper Oaks Community Church. It was only two months after Craig and Laura Sider had left when Cavey accepted the position. Cavey was not interested in the administrative responsibilities of the senior pastor position, but he reluctantly agreed, planning to build a leadership team that would cover those tasks in due time.

When Cavey left his former charge at Heritage Baptist Church in Ancaster, the church immediately shrank back to its former size, returning to its own small sanctuary down the road. The BIC church plant started by Sider in Oakville had been hovering below 200 after ten years. After Cavey arrived in 1997 attendance numbers initially dropped as some could not align themselves with Cavey's teaching or appearance. In 1998 numbers steadily began to increase, growing an average of 53 percent a year for the next five years.

The Growing Years

On Sundays the church was nervous with excitement and anticipation, and the atmosphere was campy as much as casual. Cavey was the main attraction. One long-time member said he was like a one-man

¹⁴⁹ Sider has since moved again. From 2004 to 2010, he completed a D.Min. in Executive Leadership at Denver Seminary and is now President of the New York City Leadership Center, whose mission is "to exponentially increase the leadership effectiveness of ministry and marketplace leaders."

band, with all the accessories, drawing crowds with teaching times up to an hour as well as skits, contemporary music, and clever marketing ideas. At the beginning of 1998, they began having two services on Sunday morning to accommodate the swelling crowds. Overflow seating became necessary and closed circuit television was set up in the cafeteria of the high school to accommodate the numbers. Eventually, there were more people in the cafeteria watching the service on a screen than witnessing it in the theatre live. Many of the new attendees were young adults, and Sunday services were lively, with worship bands playing many of the contemporary praise songs and a congregational troupe called “Beyond Belief” performing humorous skits.

The leadership began looking for land and a permanent place to call home, but they did not want to limit themselves to locations in north Oakville because of the church’s name. Finally, in 2000, after a long, democratic process, the name “The Meeting House” was chosen for its communitarian connotations and its historical link to the first church structures built by Anabaptists in America. The church slogan was altered to read “the church for people not into church,” and the logo morphed to a graphic suggesting a house with two people meeting within it.

The original vision of having 1000 members by the year 2000 was not fulfilled until the early weeks of February 2001. Shortly after reaching this new milestone, conversations began about how to accommodate this rapid growth. They recognized that many people were commuting from Hamilton and there was a groundswell of interest in setting up a satellite church in West Hamilton. TMH was one of the first churches in Canada to consider such a move, and progress was uneven at times. The organizers of this first regional site wanted to be on the same weekly schedule of teaching topics as the Oakville campus, so the early service at Oakville would be recorded and then the VHS would be swiftly sped down highway 403 to Hamilton. This proved to be rather unreliable at times, especially during winter snows and with unpredictable traffic on the provincial highway.

Tim Day, born and bred BIC, former intern with Craig Sider at TMH in 1989-1990, and now ordained pastor with an M.Div. from Tyndale Seminary, joined the staff team as Mission Pastor in July 2001. He later officially became Senior Pastor—to fulfill Cavey’s original dream of passing on operational duties to a co-leader. He had been working at Maranatha Christian Reformed Church in Belleville as an associate pastor and now came home to his own denominational family, although in a different configuration from the traditional BIC church.

Swelling crowds, expansion, and change happened rapidly over the next few years. One leader at the time said it was a roller coaster ride that went by as a blur. In December 2001, they took on a five-year lease at a former Cineplex Odeon Theatre on Speers Road, again in Oakville. Offices moved into the facility in April 2002 and after reconstruction was completed they held their first services in May—a Saturday evening and two Sunday morning services.

By February 2003, they had three Sunday morning services running. North or Uptown Toronto launched in fall 2003 (Yorkville Station on the subway line), Brampton launched in fall 2004 (just north

of Oakville) and a downtown Toronto site was launched a year later in fall 2005 for the younger professional demographic of the area. The diversity of locations separated Meeting Housers (as they soon called themselves) from each other and from the physical presence of their central personality, but a common board, budget, brand, structure, and weekly Sunday teaching united them.

The lease for the Speers Road theatre was scheduled to end in the year 2006, which made 2005 a big year for the constantly expanding church plant. After a successful building campaign led by an investment consultant and church attendee, TMH moved to its current Bristol Circle location—in the middle of an industrial park beside a busy commercial section of Dundas Street by the major highway #403 (still in Oakville). This large warehouse-like facility was used to make Ford minivan seats and was converted into a giant 1300-seat theatre, with numerous classrooms for kidmax (children’s ministry), an auditorium for the Underground (youth ministries) and office space for now dozens of staff members. One third of the building continued to be rented out to a warehousing company, but that ended in February 2013. At the same time, the church underwent an organizational re-visioning, adopting more savvy management structure with more significant divisions of labour among the leadership.

In 2005, Cavey wrote the first edition of *The End of Religion*, which was to become a “bestseller” in Canada in 2007. The “Tri-Cities” regional site (Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge) opened the following year (2006)—a part of Ontario some call “the Bible Belt” for its many churches drawn significantly from a dense German Lutheran and Anabaptist population. They now had five remote sites adding two more in October 2008—East Hamilton and Ottawa, the nation’s capital brimming with educated professionals and civil servants. In 2008, TMH went on satellite, broadcasting to the now seven sites across Ontario. The set up was convenient, as the new building was directly across from The Weather Network, where the technology was readily available. But after about a year of live satellite feed, the six-digit figure costs convinced leadership to revert to a week delay via a DVD couriered to regional sites. To this day, leaders insist that except on holiday weekends, the regional sites do not notice they are a week delayed, although they can no longer text questions to Cavey during a live event (for the regular Q. and Eh? time).

One significant issue was determining to what extent a site could depart from the standardized identity and program created and distributed by the Oakville Production Site, as it became officially named. The need to keep a strong centralized brand that was recognizable in every site was challenged by the desire of some sites to experiment with local culture, including choice of music in Sunday morning services. The domestic compassion initiatives had generally been unique to local needs and the Sunday message kept standardized, but into 2011 lead pastors at regional sites were given two designated Sundays per year to address their communities directly at the usually scheduled teaching time on screen. But the tension between a franchise model that released some creative license to the

regional sites and a corporate model that reinforced centralized programs was a frequent issue in my discussions with site pastors.

In July 2009, the first non-movie theatre site was launched—at a public school in Parry Sound. A group had split off from a Presbyterian church in town. After a brief period on their own as a community church, they asked to join TMH as a satellite congregation. This small town northern Ontario group differs in a number of ways from its more urban, professional siblings, and the difference in venue also engenders a different sort of Sunday morning culture. Meeting in an educational facility rather than a movie theatre creates a different mood, allows less anonymity, and gives more time for people to sing, pray, and linger afterwards.

Waterloo was launched in 2010 as a way to deal with the large size of the Kitchener (“Tri-Cities”) site and Burlington launched in 2011 to relieve some of the crowds in Oakville who lived in that area. Richmond Hill and Newmarket launched in March 2012, with Brantford following in the fall of 2013. Some potential sites, even with a committed core group, we rejected as regional sites if the numbers did not reach a critical mass—about 100 adults are needed to make a site viable in terms of volunteers and financial support. Regional site cultures noticeably vary; Tim Day said some sites involved the kind of professional crowd that asks lots of questions and has various opinions on how things are done. However, Brantford was the “tell us what to do and we’ll get ‘er done” kind of people. By this time there was a total of 13 remote sites. Sites in the works at this time included London, Owen Sound, Kingston, Downtown Hamilton and High Park in Toronto.

Present Day: Plateau

Staff are learning to adapt to a constantly changing organization, and the leadership have transitioned from a small organic community to a large system of interrelated remote communities. The number of staff in 2014 sat at approximately 65 people. In many ways the church is becoming more bureaucratized under the theme of “one church, many locations” although each site has a unique personality and Home Churches remain relatively free to improvise with regards to their activities. Still, concerns of legal liability have forced additional conformity requirements on Home Churches, too, especially with regards to the care of children during meeting times.

On a few rare occasions, the entire church population gathers in one place. June 2011 marked the 25th anniversary of the church plant, and they rented the PowerAde Centre in Brampton to host “One Roof”—an all-sites gathering that included a service of celebration, a tail-gate pot-luck in the parking lot, and a family-friendly dance party with “DJ Bruxy.” A similar extravaganza was hosted there in October 2012 to launch the next five-year mission plan called “Transform,” which included goals of growing in faith, opening more seats by opening more sites and renovating the remaining one third of

the Oakville warehouse, inviting 100,000 people to the church, and giving \$5 million to compassion agencies in Canada and Africa.

After sixteen years as the Teaching Pastor and central figure of TMH, Cavey got his first sabbatical in 2012: from June to October. This was to be an opportunity to write another book, but the death of Cavey's father interrupted his plans. Tim Day wrote and gave away thousands of copies of his own book through the church, *Plot Twist: God Enters Stage Left* (2013), published by TMH itself. He also had a sabbatical leave in summer 2014, after which he returned back to his position as Senior Pastor, only to step down from the position in the summer 2015. Tim was not replaced, but his roles were divided up between executive leaders.

The TMH story speaks of swift success in terms of numbers, innovative church practices, and significant charity work locally and overseas. In a relatively short time, it has become one of the largest Protestant churches in Canada and one of the largest Anabaptist congregations in the world. Cavey has vowed to stay at TMH until the day of his retirement, which frees up the church from worries of a sudden departure (aside from unexpected death) and allows it to make plans for the longer-term future.

Appendix D: Attendee Profiles

As a way of facilitating a deeper understanding of the receiver or audience element in the dramatic web, this appendix gives a brief but detailed window into the lives of five “Meeting Housers” and their respective Home Churches.

While no one person is truly “typical” or representative, I have chosen two couples and one adult as a window into the everyday lives of the people who attend TMH. The first couple represents people in their late thirties who are deeply involved in the life of the church, giving significant, sacrificial volunteer time to help make the Oakville community and their Home Church flourish and grow. The second couple (in their late twenties) strongly identifies with TMH, and travels a half-hour to attend a regional site, while being committed leaders in their local Home Church. Finally, the woman I have called “Diane” represents a demographic of middle-aged people who attend a regional site and Home Church, enjoying the conversations and fellowship without deep commitments of volunteer time. In sum, I am profiling three age groups and three levels of participation, leaving out examples of those with lesser commitments, who may only attend on Sundays or only attend Home Church. Typical to MH clientele, all are white, middle-class, and socialized in Christian households, and none have a past in the BIC or wider Anabaptist circles but have circulated through numerous other Christian traditions. All of them highlighted the role of Bruxy Cavey in their MH career.

Karen and Barry

Karen and Barry are a young, white, professional couple who hosted and led a Home Church from their large suburban home in Milton. Karen grew up in Calgary, faithfully attending a United Church with her family, and as a teen was asked to join the board of directors in the role of youth representative. The faith of her Mormon basketball teammates, however, seemed to her more intense and involved than her own faith experience, and when she encountered Campus Crusade’s Athletes in Action program she found a more attractive version of Christianity, which she says, “answered many of my questions.” When at university in Ontario, she became more deeply connected to the local chapter of Campus Crusade, which she describes as “hard core, evangelistically oriented” and instigated her “becoming-a-Christian moment.”

After university, she worked as a marketing executive in Toronto and began looking for a church to join. The early incarnation of The Meeting House under Cavey was recommended to her and she immediately became deeply involved, volunteering in multiple capacities and soon joining the

Overseers—the church’s board of elders. “I fell in love with Cavey’s teaching—he is definitely a gifted communicator,” she said, “but I also fell in love with the community. It was this sense of belonging.”

Karen helped organized the young adults group in Oakville, which was mushrooming in size at the time. Through this network she met Barry, who soon became her husband. He grew up with Plymouth Brethren parents in Ottawa who switched to the local Baptist church when he was young. They then became very involved in a Baptist church plant, and Barry made a “commitment to Christ” there at a young age. In high school he was involved with Interschool Christian Fellowship and at university in Ontario he was involved in Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. He visited a number of different church groups through his university years and, after landing an engineering job, he settled on a non-denominational church in downtown Toronto called Freedomize. At the invitation from a friend, he joined a MH Young Adult ski trip, where he met Karen and they began to date, eventually getting married. Barry was being burned out volunteering in so many ways at his own church, and he was immediately drawn to Cavey’s teaching, and so they made TMH their home. “His teaching was like a university lecture,” he said, “but with practical implications.”

When I asked if he ever met Cavey, he spoke shyly about the event, explaining that his respect for Cavey made it very awkward. “Well, its kind of like this deity complex, right? I didn't treat him like God, but it was weird. It was awkward. I didn't know what to talk about.”

They became part of the core group that started a regional site in uptown Toronto and became hosts and leaders for a Home Church. Barry was promoted to manager in an engineering consultant firm, and they both commute to the city from a large home in a new exurban subdivision. They now have two boys whom they raise with the help of a nanny and Barry’s widowed mother, who lives in their basement apartment. Barry’s mother, who has an M.Div. degree, also attends TMH and their Home Church, which was mostly white professionals similar to themselves in their late twenties and thirties, who had young children, too. The babies would be rocked to sleep upstairs with the nanny while the adults gathered for study and prayer below. Each year, there was high turnover in the group, but a core of them were developing deeper connections, at times seeing each other during the week for social events.

Henry and Monica

I met Henry and Monica in a Home Church associated with the Kitchener site, which met in a home in a new subdivision in Guelph. Monica grew up in a small town Ontario, attending a Reformed Church of America congregation; Henry had been raised Pentecostal in Clarkson (West Toronto), attending Baptist camps and Christian schools. These white, middle-class young adults met at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, where he was an English and sociology double major and she was in the kinesiology program. Redeemer has a contingent of students who walk from campus to the

Hamilton West Meeting House site each Sunday, which meets in a Silver City theatre just down the road. But Henry and Monica did not develop their relationship to TMH in that way.

“We just church hopped together,” they said. “There wasn’t a church in the area I wanted to commit to,” continued Monica, “and it was kinda fun exploring different churches. If there was one we liked, we would go there a little more often.”

They married soon after graduating, as Henry trained to become a teacher and Monica pursued a vocation in physiotherapy. Henry’s brother got deeply involved in TMH and urged them to visit and investigate. Henry, being a “preacher podcast junkie” listened to a year’s worth of Cavey’s teaching on-line and was immediately attracted to Cavey’s teaching style, especially his singular focus on the person of Jesus. He had heard Cavey at a Christian apologetics conference years earlier, and already liked Cavey’s way of simplifying the message to just following Jesus and working out your faith in practical ways.

Monica was drawn in by the opportunity of worshipping in a movie theatre, as well as Cavey’s engaging, humorous style:

He’s just a totally relaxed kind of free-spirited guy, with long hair, blue jeans and a T-shirt and his main mission is to get the church excited about Jesus. Growing up, we focused more on God than Jesus, and Bruxy fine-tunes my knowledge of Jesus. He can be really dramatic, and he’s a good actor. But in a good way. He illustrates his sermons really well through that.

Monica reflects on the performance aspect of Cavey’s teaching, noting his costume, but sees it all pointing to a central symbol—Jesus Christ.

They lived an hour from Oakville. At first, they drove all the way to Oakville on Sundays and when the Kitchener site opened up they started to attend there regularly, eventually getting involved in a Home Church, including becoming co-leaders. They did try to start a new Home Church in the small town they lived in, but it did not build enough momentum and faltered. So they joined another Home Church that was child-friendly, as they had two children by this time. The children would play with toys in the living room while their young parents discussed the week’s teaching from Cavey. They have been attending TMH for six years and have never personally met Cavey.

“He’s pretty shy and reserved,” said Monica.

“I’ve heard him described as socially awkward,” added Henry.

I met them two years after attending their Home Church, and they were still attending TMH. But they were concerned about what would happen to their participation as their children got older. The regional site was a half-hour drive and there were church youth groups closer by. Home Church in the evenings was becoming difficult for the growing children’s sleep schedule and there were many strict rules about childcare coming from Meeting House headquarters (for liability protection). They would sort it out in time, they said.

Diane

Diane was one of a number of middle-aged adults I met in three of the five Home Churches I attended (the other two had mostly young adults under age forty). Her Home Church was associated with the Waterloo site and met in a home near a large mall. Finding members who are older than Cavey is not rare, although unlike many mainline churches today, the farther one gets from age 55 the smaller the percentage of attendees becomes.

Diane is a busy law clerk, white, college educated, divorced, and 49 years old. She grew up with a Polish Lutheran father and an English Anglican mother. She has fond memories of growing up in an Anglican church, where she was an altar girl.

She worked in a Salvation Army office for a number of years, where she met some people whom she described as having a more legalistic mindset. She attended a Salvation Army church at the time, but eventually drifted over to a local non-denominational church. A friend there suggested she look into the new Meeting House regional site in Kitchener, and it resonated with her. While she disagrees with the pacifist position, she finds commonality with the irreligious identity of the church. She has been attending for three years, and her two young adult daughters attend with her on occasion.

She has deep respect for Cavey, explaining that he is not only a great speaker, but he “walks the talk.” Cavey offers religious credibility that she and her daughters appreciate. She explains:

If he was a clean cut guy with nice clothes it wouldn't have the same impact. He's got those rope bracelets and bead necklaces and he's overweight—just to look at him you're intrigued—and then he opens his mouth and he's really intelligent, well-read. If you met him on the street you'd mistake his identity, which is what he wants to do—get you to re-think your assumptions, your judgment on people. He turns things upside down, which is exactly what Christ wanted to do.

She wishes he would preach more often. Other speakers, she says, leave her restless for more of Cavey's teaching.

She shares with Cavey a special love for popular culture, especially zombie films. Like Cavey, Sunday night is reserved for watching the TV series *The Walking Dead*. She watched a special on the History Network that compared zombies to Jesus, and she suggested that Jesus was “the ultimate anti-Zombie.”

She had been attending for three years and was involved in a Home Church of mixed ages and stages. The Home Church meeting location had been re-arranged twice, disrupting the group and causing a split to accommodate different schedule needs.

Diane reminds me of the members in another Home Church I attended for two months. This group was almost all over fifty years old, and eighty percent of the group was divorced and either re-married or exploring new partnerships. Having left their previous churches, they were starting life over and found something comforting in the irreligious message and in a teaching pastor who was himself divorced.

The above profiles only hint at the diversity of characters who have intersected with the story of TMH. They are all drawn to Cavey in different ways and at varying distances. Some focus on his style, others on his intellect, and others his example. Yet they are all white, middle class evangelicals with no history in the BIC. Other characters I met in the Home Churches include a few students, two real estate salespersons, an interior designer, a body-builder, a born-and-bred BIC church member, an ordained Mennonite Brethren pastor who works for a parachurch agency, a public university professor who attends only for the sake of his children, a public university librarian, an engineer, an owner of a marketing company, an accountant, a veterinarian, a doctor, a retail store clerk, and an automobile factory worker. The five people described more fully above, however, give a window into the variety of participation levels at TMH and the many-layered religious identities that constitute its membership.

Appendix E: The Meeting House: Anabaptists or Evangelicals?

From the moment of my departmental thesis proposal there was some debate as to whether this was an Anabaptist church or, more significantly, a broadly evangelical one. I have deemed it to be a “post-evangelical” church, but I conceive of post-evangelicalism as a debate within evangelicalism—in other words, as a subcategory of evangelicalism. Yet TMH also firmly resides in an Anabaptist denomination—making up more than half of the denomination’s presence in Canada. I contend that while its Anabaptist identity gives it cultural legitimacy and a theological home, its pragmatic style and partnerships place it firmly as a node in the evangelical megachurch network.

Now before examining this relationship more deeply, it is significant that the BIC identifies itself with two other traditions—the Pietist and the Wesleyan. In my time with TMH, I heard reference to the “warm heart” of the first maybe once or twice in passing, and while Wesley was mentioned a few times, it was with regards to his ecclesiology, not the holiness theology that historically connects with the BIC. Anabaptism would be the tradition TMH identifies with most closely and consistently, and evangelicalism would be the tradition most evident in terms of its style and partnerships beyond the BIC. Neither Anabaptism nor evangelicalism are denominationally defined: they are broad movements, networks, and theological commitments that span across denominational lines.

In this section, I examine the evangelical style and character of TMH and how that evangelical identity rests uneasily with its Anabaptist heritage. These two aspects of its identity form the syncretistic heart of TMH, the evangelical side widening its market of potential followers and energizing it with an innovative evangelistic impulse while its Anabaptist side gives it a more established and distinctive history and theology that resonates with some counter-cultural trends. Theologically, insiders know the Anabaptist side critiques and contains the evangelical side, but practically, the generic evangelical side becomes the assumed identity of the church to outsiders. The alliance between the two identities covers a range of dynamics: synergistic, productive, ambivalent, uneasy, awkward, and even antagonistic at times. But the two sides need each other—especially in Canada—where polemics are less culturally acceptable and religious partnerships are more necessary to thrive amidst an increasingly secular cultural context.

In terms of identifying this congregation as evangelical, its general theology and its partnerships place it well within the evangelical network in Canada. Following Bebbington’s (1989) quadrilateral of historical evangelicalism, TMH displays a strong biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism, although these could be nuanced in many ways by Anabaptist commitments. More significantly, if evangelicalism is conceived as an impulse and network as much as religious belief and behaviour, TMH

finds affinity with central players in the evangelical world, as it partners with World Vision, gleans from Willow Creek Church resources, invites Tony Campolo and Philip Yancey as guest teachers, and hosts Teen Compass and Outreach Canada events (the latter being a church planting network that can trace its lineage back to Donald McGavran and Fuller Theological Seminary's church growth program). Additional examples of such evangelical affiliations include Cavey's position as faculty member at Toronto's Tyndale Seminary (a flagship evangelical seminary in central Canada), his occasional guest appearances on Crossroads Television (CTS), and his periodic featuring in *Faith Today*, the Canadian equivalent of the American *Christianity Today*. In this way, TMH is certainly perceived as evangelical by the media and those who first come to attend its services.

Theologically, they support a generally conservative agenda, teaching a historically real and metaphysically divine Christ, who died and rose physically from the dead, and a Holy Spirit mystically available today. They are pro-life, against gay marriage for Christians, and consider male/female marriage the pre-requisite for a sexually active life. They believe "God hates divorce and anyone who hungers for God will hate it, too" while still allowing for it, and in particular cases, condoning remarriage. "Compassion" features as the operative term for Christian benevolence and action, not "justice," "social justice" or "inclusivism" or "tolerance." TMH rhetoric broadly echoes with the language of "compassionate conservatism" (Wead 1980) embraced by President George W. Bush and U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron. While Cavey always nuances his teaching to distinguish TMH from the attitude and politics of right-wing American conservatives, his general position on social issues (including social action and sexual morality) aligns with a general *Christianity Today* position rather than *Christian Century*, or put in the language of the culture war, more orthodox than progressive positions (Hunter 1992). Yet Cavey protests that he carves a third way—with a liberal attitude of acceptance and a conservative Christology and social ethics.

Brethren in Christ

The history of the Brethren in Christ (BIC) denomination has relative importance to the focus of this project. As we have said, few attendees identify in a meaningful way with the wider body to which TMH belongs. Yet it remains the closest partnership the church has, as the Canadian BIC offices rent space inside The Meeting House headquarters, they share employees, and Cavey and Day consistently emphasize this denominational relationship in their teaching.

The history of the denomination mirrors, however, the tensions in identity that The Meeting House has with evangelicalism, and to the extent that the BIC and TMH are intertwined, this tension is reinforced. Both institutions are caught in the North American orbit of the larger, more amorphous evangelical network while resisting its influence and cultivating a distinctive and separate identity; yet

they do not want to alienate themselves from the movement or the broad market of people who would self-identify as evangelical and potentially shift allegiance to TMH or other BIC congregations.

The Brethren in Christ Church traces its history back to the Swiss Mennonite tradition and began as an off-shoot of the Mennonites in the North Eastern USA (Sider 1988, 1999; Bicksler 2002). Also known as the “River Brethren” or “Tunkers,” they began in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, sometime between 1775 and 1788. The official website of the denomination in Canada emphasizes the Anabaptist roots, while acknowledging the influence of Wesleyan revivals during the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century and the Pietistic movement carried by German Baptists.

While calling themselves “the Brethren”—an older English translation of a Greek term common in Paul’s epistles—they were labelled the “River Brethren” since they lived along the Susquehanna River. By 1788 a sub-group of this community, uncomfortable with the revolutionary spirit in the United States, immigrated to Canada and became known as the “Tunkers,” a reference to their practice of baptism (from the German word meaning “to dip”). Like most Anabaptists, separation from the world held special value, and this was marked in highly visible ways; they became recognized for their unadorned dress, their avoidance of politics and general disdain for card playing and other amusements.

After World War II, Mennonites in general, who for generations composed a relatively uniform and rural community, began to enter the city and embrace an increasingly modern lifestyle. Whereas in the 1940s 90 percent of Mennonites were farmers, by the late 1990s only 10 percent continued to farm, and over a quarter of all Mennonites were involved in professional work (a.k.a. “Muppies”) (Driedger 2000:31). The BIC generally follows a similar shift, and TMH marks its attempt, via church planting, to settle in the big city. One BIC leader told me that the ministry of Billy Graham was instrumental in inspiring the BIC to evangelize beyond their ethnic walls. Manzullo-Thomas (2013) says for the BIC in North America, the key moment of acculturation was the eighth annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Indianapolis in 1950. It was the first time BIC delegates had gone to an NAE meeting, and the reports of rapid growth and evangelistic success from other, larger denominations opened their imagination for similar possibilities in their small sect.

Currently, there are tensions in the BIC regarding its identity, and specifically, its relationship to wider North American culture and the evangelical influence that surrounds it. While it is common to name the BIC as influenced by three streams—Anabaptist, Wesleyan and Pietistic movements—it is acknowledged in some scholarly articles that evangelicalism has become a fourth contributing stream (Lebo 2001; Keefer 2005; Hughes 2013; Manzullo-Thomas 2013). Significantly, a BIC church member survey done in 2006 surprisingly shows that while 74 percent of BIC members identify as evangelical, and 47.5 percent identify as “spiritual,” only 38.9 percent identify as Anabaptist (Burwell 2006). BIC scholars such as Keefer, citing similar statistics, see the evangelical stream of influence merging with the BIC in a dangerously unconscious way, and because he perceives Calvinistic and charismatic

strands of evangelicalism in America to be incompatible with and a threat to the other streams of the BIC (namely with respect to soteriology and church/state relations), he calls for a “critical appraisal” of the evangelical influence, lest it “dominate” and “domesticate” the other streams (2005:44,54,58). Thus, while the Wesleyan and Pietist streams are listed and described on the Canadian and American BIC website, the evangelical stream is conspicuously absent.

The thinning of Anabaptist values and identity does not require evangelical influence, however, as years before the Indianapolis ’50 and the joining of the NAE some dissolution had already begun. Over half the men in the pacifist BIC, for example, served in the military during World War II (Burwell 2013). Nevertheless, these scholars are concerned that the BIC’s new enthusiasm for evangelistic outreach may homogenize their Anabaptist sub-culture with a generic evangelical Americanism. This is not unique to the BIC but motivates concern from all those concerned about preserving local cultures in the midst of growing globalization (Barber 1996).

The question remains to what extent The Meeting House reflects the theology and culture of the greater BIC and, more specifically, to what extent attendees perceive this heritage, pursue it, and incorporate it in their everyday life. There is no doubt that the pastors, and specifically Tim Day and Bruxy Cavey, actively make connections between the BIC and The Meeting House. To the press, they have described themselves as “Mennonites with electric guitars” or “Mennonites minus the horse and buggies.” The BIC connection is described on their website, discussed openly in their “First Steps” and “Next Steps” information classes, and made the subject of teaching series (eg. pacifism and Arminianism have been front and centre on two series, respectively). So, on the production side of the equation, the Anabaptist identity is certainly not hidden; it is, in fact, celebrated and even apologetically asserted.

On the reception side of this equation, however, there is a significant amount of ambivalence. Almost everyone who attends The Meeting House comes from a background other than BIC—about 98 percent of the attendees. The BIC only has some 3,000 attendees in Canada (besides those in The Meeting House) scattered mostly in Ontario (with three in Saskatchewan) totalling about 36 churches, with an average of about 82 members each (General Conference minutes 2012). For those who come from other Mennonite traditions to TMH (about 5 percent), the Anabaptist connection is recognized and generally embraced with appreciation. But for the vast majority who come from traditions outside the Anabaptist camp, judging by the casual and formal interviews I had with attendees, the Anabaptist accent at The Meeting House is acknowledged but not considered terribly vital to their own identification with the community. When asked if they would look for a BIC church if they moved to another city, most said no. Many see it as an ornamental addition to The Meeting House that they appreciate from a distance.

When I asked one member of the executive leadership team about this lack of identification with Anabaptism, she agreed that the BIC connection was “family business... and the allegiance [from

attendees] is just not there.” But she explained that most attendees still unconsciously carry some of the heritage with them: “the values of simplicity, the values of peace, the values of community that Jesus permeated—that, I think, is what deeply resonates with people. Which is all the right stuff to deeply resonate with.”

My interviews broadly confirm she makes a pertinent point. While very few of the people I interviewed identified with the BIC, and most would not self-describe as pacifist, they would mention that Cavey had provoked them to think more deliberately about their views on pacifism, as well as other BIC core values such as voluntarism, simplicity, community and generosity. For example, one middle-aged woman I interviewed had her children leaving the house for college, and they decided to downsize to a smaller house. She narrated this as an application of the simplicity teachings she and her husband had absorbed at TMH. But she did not self-identify as Anabaptist.

More significant than the BIC’s influence on TMH is TMH’s influence on the BIC. TMH has effectively doubled the size of the BIC in Canada and has given it an energy, visibility, and model that is incomparable with the denomination’s previous status on the Canadian religious landscape. Particularly noteworthy is that since Cavey has brought the crowds to TMH, the Canadian Conference has asserted independence from its American parent organization and become a fraternal institution in the global BIC, now called BIC Canada. Communications about this move emphasize Canada’s distinctive culture and the need for contextualization that was hampered when leadership was centralized south of the border. BIC Canada now has a separate website on-line and in early 2013 hired its first executive director named Rev. Doug Sider.

Not only have vast numbers of people joined the BIC through TMH, but also pastors and whole congregations have joined in the last ten years. Additionally, BIC Canada has since 2011 been re-configured into three distinct groups — not geographically centred as their regional conferences are, but organized by ministry focus: the Community churches (established BIC churches, numbering 33); the Network churches (church plants, about seven currently); and The Meeting House (with its 17 regional sites and plans to expand by two per year). Each group has its own national leader to coordinate its ministry and communicate its insights to the other groups. It is noteworthy that Cavey’s congregation marks a distinctive ecclesial culture that deserves its own unique place in the structures of the BIC. It does not fit the usual structure of a BIC church.

BIC Canada has also embraced a new theme: “We are a growing faith community following Jesus sharing his message and extending his peace around the world.” This new vision came in 2011 with five strategic initiatives:

1. We will get behind a new wave of young and emerging leaders to move us into the future.
2. We will renew, innovate and multiply expressions of church locally and across Canada.
3. We will foster a creative leadership culture that inspires faith-based risks.

4. We will cultivate mutual, compassionate relationships with those most in need locally and globally.
5. We will embrace the communication revolution using new ways to connect, communicate and relate.

None of these strategies carry a distinctly Anabaptist tone or character. The tone of the discussions and promotional videos suggests they are moving away from tradition and the past and into mission and the future. There is an apparent culture-clash between the old-style BIC church and this entrepreneurial, youth-centred, technologically-savvy faith venture, but I am told the shift in vision has been embraced by most church members. Darrell Winger, who has been the Canadian bishop, the Canadian national director, and a Meeting House executive pastor, says there was some envy and suspicion when The Meeting House first burst on the scene, but it has demonstrated to the born-and-bred BIC crowd the possibility of a successful, genuinely Anabaptist, Canadian mission. “The general tone is supportive,” he assured me, “and we are working together through our various perspectives to a general sense of united effort in changing for more effective ministry.”

TMH is an evangelical church for those not into evangelicalism; it is also an Anabaptist church for those who may not be into Anabaptism. It plays with these two subcultures and identities, fostering an ambivalent but productive dynamic. The evangelical impulse gives the church a strong evangelistic impulse and a motivation to risk, compromise, and innovate. The Anabaptist link gives it an additional distinctive flavour, a particular history and theological character. Cavey embodies this blend in his own biography, lending it credibility through his testimony and visibility through his iconoclastic image. He has become known across North America as a champion for contemporary Anabaptism, as he can describe it and advocate for it in an accessible language that evangelicals and unchurched people can understand. His hippie appearance gives him a cultural credibility that opens up conversations. As Cavey has said, “Plain is the new cool.”

Harvest Bible Chapel (HBC)

We have discussed many of the institutions closely affiliated with TMH, but the ecology of TMH requires some mention of its evangelical competition as well. Oakville Harvest Bible Chapel (OHBC), one of the closest megachurches to TMH, sprung up to megachurch status only a few steps behind TMH, and they have exchanged a number of members through the years. One member referred to OHBC as “the back door of TMH.” A member of the Harvest Bible Chapel association of churches that originated in the greater Chicago area under the leadership of James MacDonald in 1988, the OHBC is one of its growing number of Ontario church plants (with sister plants in London, Waterloo, Cambridge, Brantford, St. Catharines, Bracebridge, Barrie, Brampton, Etobicoke, Markham, and Whitby). Robbie Symons leads the OHBC, a Canadian who holds a B.A. from Wilfred Laurier and an M. Div. from

McMaster Divinity College. There are now over 70 HBC church plants in the U.S., 14 in Canada, 10 in Central America, 8 in Europe (the majority in Romania), 8 in Africa (mostly Liberia), and 13 in Asia (mostly Nepal).

The theology and tone of HBC contrasts sharply with TMH and carries a more strident and embattled American evangelical approach that has been called “neo-Reformed.” They promote themselves as “contemporary without compromise” and see their mission to “proclaim the authority of God’s Word without apology.” They do not allow women in positions of leadership, and offer more clearly delineated behaviour requirements. One daughter of a MH attendee chose HBC over TMH because she felt it was more conservative, offering her more clarity and certainty on particular issues. Another ex-MH couple told me they moved on to HBC because they felt TMH was geared towards evangelizing seekers and they wanted to move on to “deeper” Christian commitment and discipleship. They saw Cavey as compromised, having to cater to unchurched patrons, and watering down his message to suit perceived outsider needs and tastes.

While competition between the two megachurches could be expected to generate sibling rivalry, the leaders have worked to build amicable relations. They have met and talked together, and Robbie Symons was a guest speaker at TMH one summer Sunday morning in 2011. TMH wants to communicate that they are not threatened by the growing popularity of OHBC and would even bless people leaving their ranks for Symon’s group.

Competition shapes identity. James MacDonald is closely aligned with Mark Driscoll¹⁵⁰, the (former) controversial Calvinist pastor at Mars Hills in Seattle, who is the unspoken nemesis of Cavey and Day. Day has posted very few comments on websites, but at least two critical comments were located under YouTube videos of Driscoll. Similarly, Cavey has directly critiqued Driscoll in a few teachings, but he referred to him as a “well-known pastor” he “preferred not to name.” More significantly, a seven-part series on pacifism was introduced as a response to a very vocal Reformed network that Cavey said beckoned for an articulate Anabaptist alternative. Megachurches play out their ideological differences on a very large stage, and they sharpen and widen each other’s congregational and theological identities. Cavey considers himself a leader of the opposition to these powerful and often authoritarian evangelical Christian alternatives.

Transnational Partnerships and Networks

Ammerman (2005:18) has argued that congregations can be understood as much by their partnerships as by their theological statements. Similarly, Chapman elaborates on the importance of networks to the evangelical sub-culture, especially connections that are functional and associative rather than

¹⁵⁰ As of fall 2014, Driscoll resigned from his church due to a number of issues, many relating to his authoritarian personality. James MacDonald has received similar critique, but remains in his position.

theological and direct (Chapman 2004). We have discussed already connections with evangelical organizations and the partnerships with Anabaptist denominational structures and agencies. There are significant relationships, however, with other institutions outside of Canada.

Transnational markets, innovations in electronic media, and global flows of people, information, and religious symbols and institutions have facilitated the transnationally networked congregation. Coleman (2000) examines the global flows of a megachurch in Sweden, noting that its extended transnational connections “are not incidental to the ‘real’ activities of the group, but vital to its operations and self-image” (2000:113). In fact, labeling such a group as a “tribe” or “subculture” can obscure the group’s wider imagined social reality—its dialogue with and reaction to other groups and its attempt to engage and change the wider cultural arena (2000:114).

The Meeting House engages dialogue with other megachurches, as they share similar issues that come with size, multi-site venues, and electronic media. For many years in the early 2000s, there was constant interaction between The Meeting House and Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, as well as, to a lesser degree, other megachurches such as Mosaic in Los Angeles and Seacoast in Charleston. These connections were mostly pragmatic in nature, as TMH learned how to manage its rapidly growing congregation, develop its website, and find a workable structure for its expanding number of regional sites.

A closer, more fraternal relationship was forged over time with the controversial pastor Gregory Boyd and his Woodland Hills megachurch in St. Paul, Minnesota. This relationship was based on mutual admiration, common theological convictions such as irreligion, pacifism, and church/state separation and it involved sharing teachings and even proceeded to preliminary negotiations around official affiliation with each other. Boyd, a Yale alumni with a Ph.D. from Princeton and former Bethel University faculty member, started with forty members in 1992, grew the congregation to five thousand by 2004, but made the *New York Times* front page (Goodstein 2006) after he lost a thousand members for such things as refusing to support the Iraq war, denying the American flag a place in the sanctuary, rejecting the evangelical consensus that the United States is a “Christian nation” (Boyd 2007), and declaring pacifism to be the true Christian lifestyle. Boyd, like Cavey, is passionately “anti-religious,” having written best-sellers that argue for a revolutionary Christian pacifism in contradistinction to a judgmental, nationalistic, legalistic Christian “religion” (Boyd 2004, 2009). He is the president of Reknew.org, an on-line forum for “revolutionary” Christian forum to promulgate his iconoclastic teachings.

“I wouldn't know any more where my brain ends off and his picks up inside my head,” said Cavey to me in an interview. After N. T. Wright and Dallas Willard, Cavey ranks Boyd as the most significant theological influence in his thinking. Yet Cavey contrasts with Boyd on a number of fronts. Boyd is a full-fledged academic who came out of the Ivy League and a prolific author who dabbles in philosophy, historical Jesus scholarship, and hermeneutical theory. For example, in his controversial

book *God of the Possible* (Boyd 2000), he challenges traditional Christian notions of the foreknowledge of God, putting him in the marginalized camp of “open theists” in evangelical theological circles. Cavey is more an actor and preacher than a writer, and when he writes he gets significant editorial help from staff. When Boyd preaches, he speaks passionately, usually raising his voice even though he has a microphone. Cavey is generally relaxed in his preaching, which he prefers to call teaching, and is often humorous in tone. Boyd thrives as a contentious figure, raising the ire of many evangelicals and drawing the attention of local and national media. Cavey is more mild-mannered, less contentious, and awkward when not in scripted situations.

These differences may in part be why Cavey reported at a general membership meeting (2014) an even more collaborative and “theologically and structurally compatible relationship” has grown between TMH and Ryan Meeks’ Eastlake Community Church, just outside Seattle, Washington. Begun in 2005, this young adult-led church promotes itself as an ecumenical “church for the rest of us” that seeks to follow Jesus’ pacifist “counter-cultural Way.” “We’re all about Jesus and not about organized religion,” said Meeks to a local reporter (Corrigan 2010). Like TMH, its aggregate sites draw in thousands on a Sunday; unlike TMH, it has no “main site” and all its sites receive a pre-recorded message for the service.

In sum, megachurches may be denominationally affiliated, but they have so much in common with their evangelical megachurch peers, collegial relations have much to offer in terms of mutual collaboration; these megachurch fraternities allow them to share best practices, exchange guest speakers, and further construct an international audience and identity. Megachurches are competitors and partners in a transnational guild of corporate-sized congregations who function like pseudo-denominations in their own right, collaborating in a direct relationship with evangelical educational institutions and para-church organizations. TMH may be BIC in terms of its denominational affiliation, but its partnerships extend far beyond the denomination as it identifies with and is influenced by numerous American megachurches.