

Mark Driscoll's Fall Serves as Warning to Megastar Pastors

Mars Hill announced last week that it would dissolve the multisite network of 13 churches across the Northwest that took root under pastor Mark Driscoll, who stepped down in October after supporters lost confidence in a high-wattage leadership style that was criticized as bullying, hyper-macho and intolerant.

For many megachurches, a pastor can become larger than the church itself—particularly for multisite churches where the pastor's sermon is the only thing binding disparate congregations connected by little more than a satellite feed. Before his resignation, the name "Mark Driscoll" was more widely known than "Mars Hill." The dueling brands sometimes clashed along the way; some say Driscoll once told staff "I am the brand."

Driscoll's edgy personality built up a congregation of an estimated 14,000 people at 15 locations across five states. Weekly attendance is now reportedly about 7,600. In August, the church saw a budget gap of nearly \$650,000 as expenses exceeded revenues.

According to Mars Hill leaders, by the start of 2015 locations within the Mars Hill network will either become independent, self-governing churches, merge with another church or disband completely.

Mars Hill's existing church properties will either be sold or the loans on the individual properties will be assumed by the newly independent churches. Central staff in Seattle will be laid off as the formal Mars Hill organization dissolves.

Megachurches across the country have faced similar dips in attendance once their popular pastor left, a problem that can plague any church but one that can be exacerbated in a megabrand context. If the CEO of McDonald's left, for instance, the company would face fewer questions about its survival than *The Colbert Report* will when its star leaves.

"It's not uncommon for CEOs to say the first agenda item is to talk about 'What happens when I'm not here anymore?'" said William Vanderbloemen, coauthor of the recent book *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. "The key is to have an emergency succession plan."

After former megachurch pastor Rob Bell's controversial book *Love Wins* raised debates over whether hell exists, his Grand Rapids, Michigan-based church experienced a loss. Current pastor Kent Dobson said the church lost about 1,000 people during the controversy and now has about 3,000 attendees.

Every megachurch pastor wrestles with challenges of brand and leadership, said Mark DeMoss, who handled some public relations for Mars Hill before Driscoll resigned.

"If the pastor is the best communicator and preacher and pastor in that local context, I think you can make a good case for that's who ought to be up there," he said. "The dangers are sometimes in succession."

Not all churches with large followings experience a loss in attendance after a pastor's departure. After Joel Osteen's father died unexpectedly from a heart attack in 1999, his Lakewood Church in Houston surged from 5,000 to more than 50,000 today.

Attendance at Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, was about 4,000 when he died. Under his son, Jonathan Falwell, the church now boasts about 10,000 attendees.

Similarly, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, founded by the Rev. D. James Kennedy, an icon of the religious right, had an average attendance of about 1,000 (and a broadcast reach of about 3 million) when he died in 2007. After facing turmoil during the transition, under Tullian Tchividjian, Billy Graham's grandson who is a popular pastor in his own right, the church's membership is around 2,400.

Driscoll's fall from grace came after a combination of growing scrutiny of church finances, plagiarism allegations concerning his books and comments he made under an online pseudonym. Much of the criticism came from bloggers and on social media from people who did not even attend the church.

Could Driscoll make a comeback at another church or ministry? For an evangelical movement that values forgiveness, redemption and second chances, anything is possible.

For one, Driscoll's resignation did not reach the scandalous level of Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart in the 1980s. Bakker was accused of fraud related to time shares, while Swaggart was accused of adultery. Both men remain active in the ministry but aren't seen much beyond late-night cable TV.

Other high-profile pastors have stepped down and attempted to come back with varied success.

After allegations of gay sex and drug use were made by a male escort, Ted Haggard stepped down from his Colorado Springs church (and as head of the National Association of Evangelicals) but has since started another church.

In 2011, Sovereign Grace Ministries founder C.J. Mahaney took a leave of absence from his church-planting network amid charges of "various expressions of pride, unentreatability, deceit, sinful judgment and hypocrisy." Mahaney was reinstated after a year, and he is now pastoring a local church in Louisville, Kentucky.

In 2010, John Piper took an eight-month leave from Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, explaining that his soul, marriage, family and ministry pattern needed “a reality check from the Holy Spirit.” He returned for a few years before retiring.

Some evangelicals see high numbers as a measure of success for a minister—something that could be hard for Driscoll to reproduce in a second act.

“If (Driscoll) can continue to draw people in and have a successful ministry, then his authority—even if it has been questioned—will still rest on what he’s producing,” said Scott Thumma, a megachurch expert at Hartford Seminary.

Some critique evangelicalism as a tradition that encourages a drive for more and more numbers, regardless of the costs. Wendy Alsup, who attended Mars Hill from 2002 to 2008, said she sees a growing movement of evangelicals asking whether bigger actually is better.

“There’s a big reaction among some to identify with something that has longevity,” Alsup said. “They’re rejecting fast growth and going back to the slow, methodical structure.”