

7 Significant Lessons Churches Can Learn From the Mars Hill/Mark Driscoll Implosion

According to some reports, the aftermath of the resignation of Pastor Mark Driscoll as the lead pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle has resulted in losing about half of their 14,000 attendees. This will not only result in closing church campuses and laying off much of the staff—but, (in the opinion of some) could also result in the church declaring bankruptcy (I pray and hope not!).

There are not only lessons we can all learn as individuals, but more importantly, churches should take heed to how a church can implode so easily based on the behavior of their key leader.

The following are seven lessons all churches can learn.

(Two of the following points are ideas I received from a conversation with a pastor friend of mine whom I will leave nameless)

1. Every lead pastor needs both internal and external accountability. It seems as though there was a lack of real accountability, both from the church board of elders and from the outside. This is the reason why Dr. Paul Tripp, one of the key outside accountability leaders for the church, resigned.

In my opinion, every lead pastor needs to be accountable internally to the board of elders for both the spiritual and financial issues of the church. Also, a lead pastor should always attempt to function with the consensus of both the elders and trustees, especially when it comes to major

financial decisions. Furthermore, every lead pastor needs at least one extra-local leader to be their overseer to hold them accountable for matters related to their personal life and family. It is very difficult, awkward and often not practical for in-house leaders to serve in that role in most cases. (It is hard for those a lead pastor has nurtured into eldership to be able to speak into the personal life of their overseer and shepherd. Thus, every shepherd needs an outside voice to be their shepherd.)

2. Church elders need an apostolic overseer to appeal to in case of an impasse.

Often, church elders have no one to look to when they reach an impasse with the lead pastor; this is often why they vote with their feet and resign and/or cause division and attempt to start another church. Every church eldership needs to have a person they can appeal to if the elders and lead pastor hit a major wall regarding the governance of the church or personal issues with said lead pastor. This is why I am a major proponent of having an “apostolic church” template in which every local church is overseen by a lead pastor who is also submitted to an apostolic leader or bishop who oversees other associated congregations. This is the New Testament pattern and is much better than leaving congregations and leaders all by themselves.

3. Satellite churches need their own pastor/preacher.

The satellite model structure usually simulcasts the lead pastor’s message to all the other campuses. Thus, while the church is expanding in numbers, it is not always developing leaders commensurate to their expansion. This is dissimilar to church planting in which every congregation has their own lead pastor, preacher and leadership team. Consequently, every campus is being built around the preaching, leadership and vision casting of one man who leaves them vulnerable to the

kind of implosion we have seen at Mars Hill.

4. The “one man brand” of the church leaves the church vulnerable.

Most of the time, their charismatic leader knows evangelical churches more than their congregation or vision. At Mars Hill, Mark Driscoll was their “brand.” Not only that, but evangelical churches too often perpetuate a personality cult in which folks say something like “I am going to Joe Mattera’s church” rather than “Resurrection Church.” You get the picture.

Many people can’t even remember the name of the church they visited—they just know the church by the name of the lead pastor! This is nothing new—it’s the same thing that Paul the apostle had to address with the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 3:4). Although this is common with evangelical churches, it doesn’t mean it is healthy, and something in our present global church culture has to change. One of the things we have done in our church for the past decade is to have a team of leaders who rotate and share the responsibility of delivering the Word on Sunday mornings so the people don’t just hear the Word from one person. Also, for the past few years we have gone from topical to exegetical teaching on Sundays so that the focus is on understanding the Scriptures rather than the skilled presentation of the lead pastor.

5. The essence of the church needs to be based upon the centrality of Christ.

Along the lines of point four, there needs to be a drastic shift away from a congregation that comes to be entertained by a great worship leader and/or preacher to a congregation that comes primarily to worship Jesus. Every church has to ingrain its vision, mission, preaching, ministry and worship around the centrality of Christ. This is one of the advantages some

of the historic mainline denominational churches have over the typical evangelical church.

In spite of the fact that Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and other denominational churches transfer their priest every few years to another parish, faithful people still attend their churches by the millions all over the world. Why? Because their congregations are committed to their parish and to their expression of the universal church more than they are to the charismatic leadership of their lead pastor. For example, in my area of NYC, a Roman Catholic might say "I am attending Saint Francis church in Brooklyn Heights; they rarely if ever say "I am attending Father Frank Mascara's church!"

One of the reasons why I instituted weekly communion years ago in our church was because I wanted the center of the service to be about the gospel—not about my preaching. When people judge a church merely by good sermons and/or a worship experience, they are acting carnal. Their focus should be on worshipping Jesus, ministering to the saints and being empowered for the work of the kingdom in the context of the corporate vision of their local congregation

6. Every lead pastor needs an equally competent understudy who can step in.

After Mark Driscoll resigned, there was no understudy with capacity to come in and preach (and lead?) equal to him. In my opinion, the greatest role of every lead pastor is to nurture leaders who can potentially step in to their role and do a better job than them!

7. The congregation has to be more committed to their corporate vision than to the lead pastor and/or to their social networks.

Most people attend a church because a friend attends and/or because they like the lead pastor. We have to structure our

churches so that we develop a discipleship culture in which believers are assimilated to serve their church and community. Folks have to discover their individual gifts and have their purpose ignited with a passion inspired by a compelling corporate vision to transform their city that transcends their social networking needs.

In closing, those of us in the evangelical church will miss an opportunity for growth unless we admit that much of the leadership and character issues that led to Pastor Mark Driscoll's resignation are common issues with a large percentage of lead pastors globally. Also, many of the flaws in the structure of Mars Hill Church are also fatal flaws in a large percentage of all evangelical churches worldwide. We should allow the Lord to redeem the experience of Mars Hill as a teaching moment for us all.

May the Lord minister grace, mercy and restoration to pastor Mark Driscoll, and may the Mars Hill congregation not only survive, but also thrive in the years ahead for the glory of God.

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