

6. The Global Appeal of Digital Pastors: A Comparative Case Study of Joseph Prince, and Brian and Bobbie Houston

Catherine Gomes and Jonathan Y. Tan

Abstract

Digital technology has facilitated new ways for pastors and the faithful to congregate. No longer are congregations limited to physical and temporal boundaries with sermons streamed live, or as podcasts for viewing anywhere and anytime. Moreover, the visibility of pastors in their churches giving charismatic sermons and surrounded by musical performers in front of huge and sometimes emotional crowds are slick theatrical productions that not only maintain spiritual manna for church members near and far, but also appealing to new converts. This chapter investigates the transnational and cross-cultural appeal of the prosperity gospel movement's Asia-Pacific stars – Brian and Bobbie Houston (Hillsong Church) and Joseph Prince (Joseph Prince Ministries, New Creation Church and Grace Ministries) on their culturally diverse and ethnically pluralistic global congregations.

Keywords: digital, online, megachurch, pastors

Introduction

In the past few years of incidentally observing the religious practices of our social media contacts, we were struck by the changing nature of rituals and behaviours by our Christian Facebook friends. While both of us were raised and schooled in Catholicism at a time when fellowship only took place when the faithful congregated in real time and in a specific physical space (i.e. face-to-face at an allotted time in a church), what we are seeing

now are different religious Christian practices which are not limited to temporal or spatial confines. Here we saw Facebook friends document their spiritual experience through posts and photographs which were alien to the experiences we had as practicing Catholics. What we witnessed was a new kind of Christian worship – as personified by the increasingly popular megachurches – where people could be part of a Christian community and receive weekly devotional messages by just tuning into live or downloaded broadcasts anywhere in the world, and at any time, so long as there was available and reliable WiFi. The digital revolution in other words, has not only disrupted Christian worship but has also created contemporary brands of Christianity which embraced digital technology to evangelise and shepherd large, growing and physically distant congregations.

In this chapter we explore the intersections of Christian outreach and the digital space by looking at Brian and Bobbie Houston of Hillsong Church and Joseph Prince of New Creation Church – the increasingly popular preachers of the prosperity gospel. Brian and Bobbie Houston and Joseph Prince make use of digital media technology – with a strong emphasis on the visual – to sell their messages of salvation through success and self-improvement that consciously cross ethnic and national lines. Through a visual digital display of church and personal wealth and glamour, the pop star preaching Houstons and Prince promote social-economic mobility as vital to Christian tenet. Hence in order to understand the pop star appeal of the Houstons and Prince, we employ digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2015), where we do content analyses of websites and social media platforms of Brian and Bobbie Houston, Joseph Prince and their respective churches Hillsong and New Creation. Digital ethnography as Pink et al. note (2015, p. 1) ‘outlines an approach to doing ethnography in a contemporary world [...] [and] [...] invites researchers to consider how we live and research in a digital, material and sensory environment’ because we do not live in ‘a static world or environment’. In addition, Pink and her colleagues go on further to explain that digital ethnography:

Explores the consequences of the presence of digital media in shaping the techniques and processes through which we practice ethnography, and accounts for how the digital, methodological, practical and theoretical dimensions of ethnographic research are increasingly intertwined (*ibid.*).

We use digital ethnography as a method because digital media is part of everyday life. Digital media has also become prevalent in the Christian churches, particularly those which we showcase in this chapter. While

websites are now a necessary way for organisations to communicate their business and purpose, social media is dominating the communication relationships between organisations and their publics. Hence to unpack the appeal of the Houstons and Prince, we need to understand the churches which they built.

The Changing Face of Christianity: Megachurches and their Megapastors

First emerging in the United States in the 1970s and experiencing tremendous growth from the 1980s onwards in North America and across the globe in Africa, Asia and Australia, the megachurch movement seeks to provide a one-stop venue where every need and desire of a person or family, from faith to community support, could be met. Within the contemporary North American socio-cultural context, the rise of megachurches parallels the rise of capitalism, the triumph of profit-making and massive economic growth during this period. This economic development emerged as a result of the social and economic policies of Ronald Reagan, which has resulted in the rise of mega shopping malls and massive superstores like Wal-Mart that seek to provide a one-stop destination for every desire and need. In this regard, megachurches represent the 'Walmartisation' of Christianity, i.e. building on the same goals of supersized growth to transform Christianity from traditional church structures and denominations to one-size-fits-all supersized behemoths of Christian communities where every need – spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical could be met and fulfilled (Thumma and Travis 2007).

Within the broader history of Christianity's evolution, megachurches represent an unprecedented transformation of Christianity. From traditional small-sized neighbourhood or local churches that belong to various denominations to one-size-fits-all supersized communities that are led by charismatic pastors who, by virtue of the emotional pull of their personal charisma and 'cool' factor, have been able to amass a large following of Christians who share their vision of church communities that seek to fulfil every facet of a believer's life. To attract and retain believers, worship services at megachurches emphasise the emotional aspects, i.e. high degrees of emotional energy and psychological high, which in turn reinforce feelings of belonging and commitment. Not surprisingly, megachurches' worship services are highly emotional and experienced events for their congregants, with their staged and choreographed performances by Oprah-like charismatic pastors with live praise bands, big screens, as well as special effects

lighting and sound inside vast cavernous spaces. These megachurch worship spaces serve not only to accommodate their huge congregations, but also to create the spectacular effect of vastness as part of their branding.

Post-World War II North America has seen the increasing fragmentation of traditional extended familial and familiar social structures of society as a result of the rapid growth of internal migration of Americans in search of job opportunities away from their families that is fuelled by the interstate highway system, affordable automobiles and cheap gas. In turn, the ubiquity of the automobile has led to the rise of sprawling suburbs and exurbs where many young nuclear families have settled. While traditional Catholic and mainline Protestant churches in urban city cores across the United States are struggling or closing, the proliferation of megachurches in suburbs and exurbs provide an alluring sense of community and an attractive framework of communal and spiritual support for both individuals and typical American nuclear families who are far away from their traditional extended familial networks.

Wuthnow (1976) and Ellingson (2007) note that traditional mainline churches often struggle to adapt and change to meet the massive population shifts away from urban centres to suburbs, and more recently, exurbs. By contrast, megachurches and their pastors view the massive population shift to the suburbs and exurbs, as well as their consumerist worldview as opportunities for expansion and growth. Berger suggests that the complexity, diversity and pluralism within contemporary society has encouraged the growth of religions that offer a sense of certainty, stability and existential hope (Berger 1998). This would describe the megachurch and the role it plays in shaping the identities of the young nuclear families who have flocked in droves to megachurches. Roof (1993) thinks that an increasingly secularised education system and increasing cultural and religious pluralism have opened the door for megachurches, which are adept at identifying, meeting and at times growing the spiritual needs, personal interests and cultural tastes of this younger demographic while their mainstream counterparts are unable to do so. Within the all-encompassing communal and spiritual framework that megachurches offer, these individuals or families could feel at home and experience a sense of belonging to large communities of like-minded fellow Christians that are able to provide for all their spiritual and physical needs and growth under one roof.

In North America, megachurches are often located in suburbs and exurbs because the availability of cheap real estate for extensive automobile parking, making them easily accessible to the young nuclear families in these suburbs and exurbs, who comprise their major demographic. Megachurches are also

attractive to young nuclear families because they not only offer energetic and upbeat Sunday worship services, but also ancillary services for all kinds of therapeutic needs, including support groups for all kinds of needs, childcare, educational classes for both spiritual and physical growth, and other community building exercises (Thumma and Travis 2007). Specifically, Thumma and Travis (*ibid.*) assert that megachurches are successful because they are able to meet the needs of their congregants, including professionalism, quality experiences and interactions, a sense of identity, contemporary and entertainment worship, choice and opportunities to participate in various communal activities to express their Christian commitment. It also helps that the young and charismatic pastors of these suburban and exurban megachurches are hip, contemporary and able to identify with the young nuclear families who flock to these megachurches, as the case studies of Hillsong and New Creation Church show. By contrast, the older leadership demographic of Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations have been slow to adapt and respond to the challenges and needs of these young nuclear families who now comprise the bulk of megachurch congregants in North America.

Not surprisingly, megachurches in North America are also characterised by their homogeneity in terms of social class, economic status and racial-ethnic identity, with white wealthy and middle-class Americans being overrepresented, and racial, social and economic minorities being underrepresented (Bird and Thumma 2011). Studies conducted in North America (Bird and Thumma 2011; Thumma and Travis 2007) indicate that one defining characteristic of megachurches in North America is the fact that the majority of megachurch membership are well educated and wealthy. Because the general megachurch membership is economically well off to begin with, megachurches have been able to leverage this aspect of their membership to raise large sums of money from their membership to finance their growth and further increase in size. In other words, megachurches represent the triumph of the American lifestyle of growth and success as a defining mark of successful churches. Megachurches that are able to provide for their members' lifestyles and needs experience continued growth, which in turn attracts more members who are desirous of such affirmation in their lives.

Megachurches and the Prosperity Gospel in Australia and Singapore: The Case of Hillsong and New Creation

Australia and Singapore are both countries with similar histories as settler societies. In many respects, the rise of megachurches like Hillsong and New

Creation, the largest megachurches in Australia and Singapore respectively, parallels the rise of megachurches in another settler region – North America. What sets megachurches like Hillsong and New Creation apart from their Catholic and mainline Protestant counterparts in Australia and Singapore is not merely huge numbers but also the megachurches' near complete reliance on capitalism's language of business growth and marketing strategies in its operational structure and day-to-day operations. This can be seen in the savvy use of social media outreach and other digital campaigns, all of which seek to generate further growth in a virtuous cycle of cumulative growth.

In addition, supersized growth as a key performance indicator of the megachurches' success is central to the identity construction of megachurches and the continuing validity of the theology of prosperity gospel that undergirds the worldview and ethos of these megachurches. The prosperity gospel that emerges from the strategic blending of the Christian gospel with capitalism and its business and marketplace-centric emphasis on material success is alluring to the growing middle class in Australia and Singapore. It should come as no surprise that young, upwardly mobile, affluent and aspirational Australians and Singaporeans are attracted to megachurches in droves. This is driven by Australian and Singaporean Christians seeking a self-centric Christianity that would empower their personal material and spiritual growth.

Thus, the Australian sociologist of religion, Marion Maddox (2012) speaks of megachurches as 'growth churches' with an intense focus on increasing their market presence and utilising the key performance indicator of material success as evidence of divine blessings of their growth strategy and spiritual development. Although Maddox (2012) is focusing on the growth of Hillsong here, her assessment generally holds true for the growth of megachurches in Singapore, as we shall see below. This in turn generates a self-perpetuating cycle of growth that depends on the ability of the megachurches' pastors to attract and retain an ever-increasing number of new members to maintain this cycle of growth and justify the validity of the megachurches' prosperity gospel for their members' own economic prosperity. However, this prosperity gospel is as far removed as one can get from the social gospel and liberation theologies of historic mainline Protestant and Catholic churches that focuses on addressing the ills of social injustice.

The rise of megachurches and its underlying evangelical Christian worldview in Singapore also mirror similar trends in North America and Australia. According to the Singaporean sociologist Terence Chong (2016), the emergence of megachurches in Singapore is tied to the rise of a specific socio-economic class: the 'English only' socio-economic class. He notes that Singaporean Christians in the 1980s were 'certainly the best educated, with

an overrepresentation of its number in upper secondary and tertiary education, and also the most economically well off, with overrepresentation in terms of the number living in 'bungalows, semi-detached and terrace houses' and 'private flats', and 'almost half of all Christians' said that 'they were "literate" in "English only"' (Chong 2016, p. 98). Unlike earlier generations of Singaporean Christians, many of whom hailed from the lower classes, many of these socially and economically upwardly mobile Singaporean Christians are converts to Evangelical Christianity, which took root and experienced tremendous growth in Singapore from the 1980s onwards (Goh 2010). In particular, Evangelical Christianity is attractive to a large number of Singaporeans because of its emphasis on black and white moral clarity that not only integrates well with the Singapore government's emphasis on morality, but also the traditional Confucian underpinnings of moral-ethical conduct and self-cultivation that continues to undergird the wider Singaporean society (Chong 2011).

Hence, the groundwork for the rise of megachurches in Singapore was laid by the socio-economic policies of the Singapore government in the 1980s that birthed and nurtured the middle class, the emphasis on meritocracy and self-improvement and the triumph of capitalism and the market forces. In many respects, megachurches in Singapore take their cues from their North American and Australian counterparts in terms of theological worldviews and emphasis on emotional and affective worship styles. This have given rise to the centrality of charismatic pastors, rock concert-style worship in massive auditoriums and an emphasis on popular culture, consumerist ethos, self-growth and business marketing that seeks unfettered growth to reinforce its image of success among Singapore megachurches like New Creation and City Harvest Church. Like their North American and Australian counterparts, Singaporean megachurches blend Evangelical and Pentecostal worldviews, emphasising absolutist moral clarity clad with biblical injunctions in a world filled with shades of grey, the primacy of ecstatic worship experiences and personal, material and spiritual growth. In doing so, they draw on contemporary digital marketing, branding and consumerist strategies to nurture their growth. Not surprisingly, the 'English only' middle class Singaporeans, with their familiarity with popular culture, rock concerts, shopping malls and social-economic mobility, are thoroughly at home in megachurches. This sense of familiarity has steered the growth of megachurches in Singapore, as Terence Chong (2016, p. 100) explains:

Quantifiable criteria such as numerical and financial growth were more likely to be taken by megachurch Christians as signs of divine blessing

and personal faithfulness. Echoing capitalist logic, the time, energy, and indeed finances that megachurch Christians invest in doing 'God's work' will be multiplied, in turn, as blessings. Reinforcing this is the myth of meritocracy, which justifies material blessings for hard work. In correlating the material with the spiritual, one is able to measure the immeasurable, perfect for younger professionals who desire a linear and progressional gauge of their journey with God. Finally, many of these young Singaporean Christians not only find a brand of spirituality and theology that is familiar to the ethos of post-industrial Singapore but also cultural empathy with those of similar backgrounds undergoing the same class transitions, suggesting that the Singapore megachurch shares 'elective affinity' with the aspirations of young, upwardly mobile Singaporeans.

Hillsong: Corporate Marketing and Communication Media and in the Digital Age

Hillsong Church is a megachurch touted by the media (McKinnon, 2016) as one of the fastest growing churches in the world, and one which has revolutionised religion in Australia. Hillsong Church, according to its website, is a contemporary Pentecostal church and member of the Australian Christian Churches (ACC) (Hillsong 2019a). The ACC which is made up of close to 1100 churches has more than 250,000 worshippers across Australia (*ibid.*). Founded by New Zealand-born Brian and Bobbie Houston in Sydney in 1983, Hillsong was originally called Hills Christian Life Centre but had a name change in 1999 (Hicks 2012).

From its humble beginnings worshiping in a school hall with 45 people, the church in Sydney today claims to have a weekly congregation of 30,000 – the largest religious congregation in Australia (Hillsong 2019b) who aspire to Hillsong's self-help vision (Hillsong 2019c):

To reach and influence the world by building a large Christ-centered, Bible-based church, changing mindsets and empowering people to lead and impact in every sphere of life.

This vision is constantly reiterated online, for instance in media bites gleaned from sermons. An example of this is a post on the Hillsong Facebook page. In a 30-second media bite published on 10 January 2018, Brian Houston (2018a) says:

We say living large [...] I want to start the year by inspiring you and challenging you to lift your thinking, to lift your spirit and to believe this year that you're going to live *large* [emphasis added].

The post received 11,000 views, 1100 reactions (likes, hearts and wows) and 179 shares. Undoubtedly, people – congregation, believers and possibly doubters and trolls – are engaging with Brian Houston through a simple, short yet visual capture of one of his weekly sermons.

Hillsong, however, is more than just a single church. Rather, it claims to be 'a contemporary Christian church, a global movement positioned at the intersection of Christianity and culture' (see Hillsong 2019d) whose 'services resemble popular television shows; its members are young, hip and upwardly mobile' (Maddox 2013, p. 109). According to its website, Hillsong's founder Brian Houston:

Has launched churches located in some of the world's most influential cities, three record labels, a film and television platform, multiple worldwide conferences and an international college. Each week, Hillsong's music is sung by an estimated 50 million people in 60 languages, and Houston's sermons are broadcast around the globe. In June 2016, Hillsong launched a global, 24-hour channel in partnership with Trinity Broadcasting Network, providing access to the worship and ministry to millions of viewers around the world. Through Hillsong's college, conferences, podcasts, broadcasting and publishing, Houston trains and equips tens of thousands of Christian leaders and encourages countless others in their daily faith.

Hillsong's flagship church may be in Sydney but it has franchises in every city in Australia as well as in several locations around the world: Bali, Buenos Aires, Copenhagen, France, Germany, Israel, Kiev, Los Angeles, Moscow, Netherlands, New York City, Norway, Phoenix, Portugal, San Francisco, Sao Paulo, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Moreover, the church claims to support a weekly online global audience of 112,000 worshipers worldwide (Hillsong 2019d). Additionally, the Church is an up and coming religious organisation among North American celebrities. While the Church of Scientology is synonymous with Tom Cruise and John Travolta and Kabbalah with Madonna, Ashton Kushner and Lindsay Lohan, Hillsong has become the spiritual outlet for Canadian singer and songwriter Justin Bieber. So profound is Hillsong's impact on Bieber that celebrity news outlets are reporting that 'Justin cancelled the tour because of "religious enlightenment", claiming he "rededicated his life to Christ" and

that Hillsong's New York pastor 'Carl Lentz is essentially a second father to the singer' with 'Justin's Instagram [...] actually flooded with photos of him and Carl' (Gray 2017). This report not only shows us that Hillsong has the celebrity endorsement of one of the biggest pop singers of his generation, but also as a brand that appears in mainstream pop culture news. Surely combined, this is the kind of coveted incidental advertising that serves its purpose as soft evangelicalism.

The Hillsong Church brand is personified by two interrelated elements: marketing and music. While the church has been marred by some serious scandals such as the abuse of young boys by Brian's father Fran and the obsession with money (Brian wrote a book called *You Need More Money* in 1999 linking wealth accumulation with Christian tradition), Hillsong continues to attract new members. Writing for Mumbrella,¹ an online publication dedicated to discussing 'everything under Australia's media and marketing umbrella', journalist Robin Hicks (2012) writes:

Hillsong is one of Australia's few global brands. It is one of the most powerful Australian youth brands. And it is the fastest growing church in a country where religion is in decline.

Hillsong's marketing genius is seen in its ability to harness digital technology in its outreach and messaging. In other words, it does not only depend on its high energy and youth-oriented weekend services which start from Fridays through to Sundays, but also on its ability to capture these services for distribution through images and video online. Hillsong's homepage (see Hillsong 2019e) and 'Music' webpage (see Hillsong 2019f) for instance are examples of Hillsong's version of youthful and hip Christianity whose popularity is visualised by packed services (see 2019e). By focusing on music (and the guitar as a prominent instrument), as demonstrated in the openly available images of their services online (see Hillsong 2019e; 2019f), Hillsong exudes a sense of contemporariness, accessibility, energy, religious progressiveness and youth which (young) people are able to identify with. Instead of having resemblance to a church worship, their services are akin to rock concerts. In doing so, Hillsong makes their brand of Christianity attractively relevant and modern, as emphasised in various pages on its website (see Hillsong 2019d; 2019e) – Hillsong's packed auditorium of worshippers.

Hillsong allows worshippers the avenue of worshipping through the media such as through its Hillsong Channel NOW which is also available through

1 see Mumbrella (2019)

the Hillsong App for a price, free online devotional reflections located on Brian Houston's website (2018b) and its trademark Team Box. The Hillsong Team Box (HillsongTeamBox 2019) 'is a special selection of resources for the whole family including inspiring music, devotionals, apparel, downloads, books, encouraging messages and more – delivered to your door each month!'. Hillsong markets Team Box as:

Our desire is to create a greater connection with people just like you who want to be a part of what God is doing around the world. We want to enrich your life with practical tools, powerful messages, fun apparel to wear and resources to share (HillsongTeamBox 2019).

However the key to Hillsong's marketing success – the energy and lifeblood of the church, so to speak – is its music. Hicks (2012) quoting Australian brand expert Richard Sauerman, for instance, explains:

Music is what helps make Hillsong relevant and accessible to young people [...] It is the main thing that lifts Hillsong above other older, dustier religions.

Hillsong services are theatrical productions which are heavily peppered with lively Christian pop music performances in between sermons and available through various offline (e.g. CDs and DVDs) and online (e.g. downloads and YouTube channel) outlets. Hillsong's brand of music is channelled through its main three musical groups: Hillsong Worship which has produced 24 albums containing more than 275 songs; Hillsong United led by Brian and Bobbie's son Joel is a United States-based band which was named the 2016 Top Christian Artist at the Billboard Music Awards; and Young and Free, Hillsong's youth ministry. Hillsong's existence, much less its success however, is the brainchild of its founders – Co-Senior Pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston.

Brian and Bobbie Houston: The Image of Perfection and Wealth

Brian and Bobbie Houston are undoubtedly the face, inspiration, motivation and engine behind the success of Hillsong. A rags to riches story, the Houstons built themselves a global Christian empire of worship based on a Charismatic cult of personality after moving to Australia from New Zealand in 1978. Brian was born in Auckland in 1954 to Salvation Army officers Frank

and Hazel, who joined and became pastors in an Assemblies of God church near Wellington (Bp-Relate 2016). Brian met his future wife Bobbie (born in 1957 also in Auckland) in New Zealand and married in 1977 (Bp-Relate 2016).

Moreover, Bobbie who is biracial – her mother of Scottish descent and her father Pacific Islander (Joy 2007) – champions diversity through her Colour Sisterhood Movement and Conferences. The webpages dedicated to the Colour Sisterhood and Colour Conferences often, if not always, emphasise national and ethnic diversity. Meanwhile, Bobbie's 'Colour' brand is their sisterhood outreach aimed at all women no matter their circumstance, ethnicity or nationality. The website explains that Colour Sisterhood is a movement which is:

A company of down to earth, everyday women who desire to make a difference and make the world a better place. It is a foundation seeking to place value upon humanity – a story of unity & alliance (Hillsong 2014).

The Colour Sisterhood Declaration states:

I Am Sisterhood is a declaration.
 A declaration that is bold and strong, quiet and confident.
 A declaration about value and identity, purpose and mission.
 It is a declaration intentional in reach and embrace.
 It transcends culture and creed, age and status, prejudice and preference
 [...] (*ibid.*)

The Website's page is filled with pictures of young ethnically diverse women (see Hillsong 2014).

Reminiscent of the United Colours of Benneton advertisements, such evangelical campaigns, like the earlier discussion on music, feature the Hillsong Church as attractive, youthful and contemporary. The Colour Sisterhood movement statement and declaration (including the visualisation of the sisterhood (see Hillsong 2015)) are not only incredibly inclusive in its promotion of female empowerment but seems refreshingly modern when compared to older Christian denominations such as Catholicism, which emphasises visible maleness through patriarchal domination and control. What further aids the attractiveness of Hillsong is its ability to feature a bevy of beautiful and young women in their 'I am sisterhood declaration' website banner (see Hillsong 2014) who seem to be from diverse ethnicities.

The image the Houstons give is one of perfection where they are a good-looking, hip (Brian rides a Harley Davidson) and healthy couple (Brian is

known to do push-ups in the middle of sermons) with a loving and supportive family made up of sons Joel and Ben, daughter Laura, their spouses and grandchildren. Brian and Bobbie document their happiness and popularity through the promotion of their version of a Jesus-centric lifestyle (e.g. helping the less fortunate such as through Hillsong's Greenlight initiative to help homeless people in London by helping them with medical care). By image, we do not mean figuratively but literally since Brian, Bobbie and the family they preside over have a strong (digital) media presence with their lives – at work and at play – documented. The Hillsong owned and sanctioned media (e.g. television station) as well as various online and social media platforms with open accounts such as Brian Houston's personal Instagram (see BrianHouston 2019) not only show Brian, Bobbie and their family at work (e.g. giving sermons) but also glimpses into their private family lives (e.g. intimate moments with family). Even Brian and Bobbie's primary school-going granddaughter has an open Instagram account.

However, the media have documented the lavish lifestyle which Brian and Bobbie live. In 2015, the media reported that in the previous year, Hillsong brought in \$80 million from its followers in Australia alone and over \$100 million internationally, tax-free (Snow 2015). Earlier in 2010, *The Daily Telegraph* (Shand 2010) provided a snapshot of Brian and Bobbie's lavish lifestyle:

Property deals that have earned Brian Houston and his wife Bobbie \$1.4 million. The Houstons are still tenants of waterfront properties at Bondi Beach and the Hawkesbury River that they sold to LMI [Leadership Ministries].

A \$1 million, fringe benefits tax-free expense account each year for five people, including the Houstons.

The use of vehicles worth more than \$120,000.

Fully funded overseas tours where Brian Houston can earn \$US20,000 a speech in 'love offerings' on the preaching circuit.

While such documenting of their wealth has led to the Houstons going public documenting and defending their finances (Hillsong 2010), the suspicion of benefitting from the tax-free income brought in by congregation has not affected the church in attracting new converts (see Hillsong 2010). In its 2016 Annual Report, Hillsong claimed that their '[w]eekly church attendance grew by 5% to 37,384 people' and their '[w]eekly attendance at our youth and children's programs grew to 7968 from 7439' (Hillsong 2019b).

While the Houston's Hillsong church attracts young and upwardly mobile worshippers (Maddox 2013, p. 109), their version of Christianity is still deeply conservative. In 2017 for instance, Brian Houston publicly urged his congregation to vote against the Australian same sex marriage postal plebiscite declaring: 'I believe God's word is clear that marriage is between a man and a woman' (Hillsong 2017). Likewise, despite Brian and Bobbie being co-Senior Pastors and the leaders of the Hillsong Church worldwide, the distribution of work and image which the Houstons give is highly gendered. For instance Brian is the principal face of Hillsong where sermons available for viewing that are made by him has a stronger online and social media presence than Bobbie. While both have their own Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages with hundreds of thousands of followers each, Brian has his own personal website (see Houston 2018b) which he uses to market his books and features devotional prayers while Bobbie's online website is an extension of the Hillsong webpage (see Hillsong 2019g). Additionally, the projects Bobbie leads are specifically girl and woman centric where she encourages and promotes stereotypes such as teaching girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen to look pretty in the Hillsong six week Shine course (Maddox 2013, p. 111). In a video podcast in 2017, Bobbie took on a more serious tone dedicating a prayer during that year's Colour Sisterhood Conference, a movement to promote 'womanhood' to 'barren women' (Hillsong Teaching 2019). This theme is incredibly unsettling because the idea behind it is that if a couple who desire for children but the woman (and note, not the man) is barren, praying for a child is the key anecdote to solving this medical issue. Bobbie issues weekly podcasts of her praying for barren women to be fulfilled with children. While Bobbie Houston's Colour Sisterhood statement and declaration, as discussed earlier, promote a surface-like female empowerment, a conference dedicated to barren women shifts the reproductive blame squarely on a woman's shoulders, thus ironically makes the female disempowered rather than empowered. A barren woman, in other words, is also not perfect because of her inability to reproduce. A barren woman, in other words, is unlike Bobbie Houston who herself has three grown-up children with Brian. The Colour Sisterhood in actuality promotes conventionally conservative rather than progressive ideas about women, much like the way New Creation Church's elevation of womanhood. Wendy, the wife of Joseph Prince who we will discuss shortly, is described on the Joseph Prince Ministries (2019a) website as:

A devoted wife to Pastor Prince and a loving mother to Jessica Shayna and Justin David, Wendy Prince epitomises the virtuous woman mentioned in

Proverbs 31. She is a constant source of love and support to Joseph, and has committed herself to bringing Jessica and Justin up in the ways of the Lord.

While Wendy Prince takes more of a supportive role in her husband's ministry unlike Bobbie Houston who as an arguably equal partnership in Hillsong, both women's worth (and in the case of Bobbie, an active campaign) is defined by their reproductive abilities and committed mothering capabilities.

Glamour, Fame and Wealth: *New Creation Church*

New Creation Church is a non-denominational church based in Singapore and a member of the National Council of Churches of Singapore. While it was formed by a small group of Singaporeans, which included Joseph Prince, Henry Yeo, David Yeow and Jack Ho, it is Prince who is almost exclusively associated with the church and associated with its rise. This is because New Creation Church's brand is exclusively tied with Prince himself. As the church's website proclaims:

A founding member of New Creation Church, Joseph initially served as an elder and associate pastor. However, his unanimous appointment as senior pastor in 1990 marked a turning point in the history of the church, which started experiencing phenomenal growth. Under Joseph's leadership, the church congregation has grown by more than a hundredfold – from about 150 to more than 31,000 attendees. He currently serves as the senior pastor of the church on a voluntary basis (New Creation Church 2019d).

While New Creation Church had humble beginnings with its original venue being a flat in a government subsidised Housing Development Board (HDB) apartment block, it now boasts a SGD\$500 million performing arts centre as its main venue. The Star Performing Arts Centre seats 5000 people and has an amphitheatre which accommodates an additional 300 worshippers. It was built and is managed by Rock Productions, the business arm of New Creation Church. The venue also incorporates a shopping mall called The Star Vista which is owned and managed by CapitaLand Mall Asia (Zaccheus 2016). The church is made up of members who have contributed to the financial strength of the organisation as this excerpt from a report in The Straits Times shows:

In a 2012 tax document obtained by The Sunday Times, the organisation said its daily broadcast could reach 680 million households globally. And

in that financial year alone, the organisation listed a revenue of US\$27.6 million, most of which came from ‘contributions and grants’. Of that amount, US\$21.2 million was spent on the broadcasts. [...] Still, the church has been a fund-raising powerhouse, collecting \$21 million in donations in a single day in 2010. This broke its own one-day records of \$19 million in 2009 and about \$18 million in 2008 (Feng 2014).

Loyal worshippers not only convene at the Star venue for Sunday services but also in other venues in different locations throughout Singapore where services are simultaneously broadcast. These include the Shine Auditorium, Marina Bay Sands Ballrooms, Cathay Cineplex Causeway Point, Shaw Theatres Seletar, Golden Village Grand (Great World City) and Golden Village Yishun. Shaw Theatres is a movie-theatre chain and Golden Village is a Cineplex chain in Singapore. While attendance for churchgoers to the Star venue is free entry, worshippers need to use an online booking form in order to reserve a seat for themselves. While services are in English, which are often conducted by Prince, one of the other pastors or by visiting pastors, the church conducts services in Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese at the Marina Bay Sands Ballrooms venue. The church also uses new media to reach out to its flock.

As reported by *The Straits Times*, the church reaches 680 million households worldwide through its daily broadcasts. These broadcasts take place on various cable television (e.g. Daystar Television Network and Christian Television Network), radio (e.g. KMOA 89.7 FM (American Samoa)) and online, for instance through the church’s various social media outlets such as YouTube² which has 13,793 subscribers, its Facebook page³ with 149,328 followers and its Twitter account with 17,700 followers.⁴ The church’s followers use the social media platforms to express their faith and loyalty to the church. For example, on its YouTube channel, comments to videos often look like the following from a worshipper:⁵

Thank you LORD JESUS for New Creation Church
So blessed with each wordings [...] oh how beautiful savior we have in
Jesus!

2 see New Creation Church (2019a)

3 see New Creation Church (2019b)

4 see New Creation Church (2019c)

5 This is a response to a YouTube video titled Jermaine Leong, New Creation Worship: Finished (see New Creation Church 2015)

I love New Creation Worship.
 They have such a true and sweet spirit.
 You can feel the anointing in their singing,
 all because of Jesus, we are thoroughly blessed! Hallelujah.
 I bless the glorious king who gave you this amazing song.
 Let there be abundance of his grace on your ministry
 and your service to the holy church of the world

New Creation Church's open official Facebook page (New Creation Church 2019b) is no different with commenters expressing their faith and positive impressions of the church. An example of such a post is one showing a response of a quote from the bible dated 31 March 2019 at 11 am: May He grant your heart's desires and make all your plans succeed (Psalm 20:4, NLT). The post received 1400 reactions ('likes' and 'loves'), 136 shares and 159 comments. The comments which are featured often express faith by praising the Holy Trinity (God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ) particularly with favours done towards them. The first post for instance praises God and Jesus while expressing generic thanks. The second post is more specific about what the commenter is thankful for: business class (airline) tickets.

While the church is becoming increasingly popular with its admittance now averaging a Sunday attendance of 33,000 worshippers (New Creation Church 2019d), it accords its success to its larger than life Senior Pastor Joseph Prince. Prince, as the church's website explains, is:

The author of best sellers with spiritually positivist self-help titles such as *The Power of Right Believing: 7 Keys to Freedom from Fear, Guilt, and Addiction* (2013), *Destined To Reign* (2007), and *Unmerited Favor: Your Supernatural Advantage for a Successful Life* (2011), Pastor Prince is also a highly sought-after conference speaker. He has impacted church leaders worldwide by preaching the unadulterated gospel of Jesus with boldness. He is known for teaching God's Word in a fresh, practical and revelatory way that always unveils Jesus. His humorous, dynamic and engaging style of preaching has also endeared him to a wide spectrum of viewers who tune in to his daily television programme. His broadcast currently reaches millions of homes across North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Israel on both secular and Christian networks (New Creation Church 2019d).

To understand the appeal of New Creation Church, we need to look at their larger than life Senior Pastor Joseph Prince, who is the face of the church.

The Glamourous Prince

Joseph Prince's success as a pastor is not only confined to New Creation Church. This success is despite him not having much or any formal training in theology. While his roots as a pastor may have started there, Prince has been consciously developing his brand for mass appeal. We see this in his reconstruction of his identity (e.g. through his name change), his dominance on digital media and his founding of another new church based on his brand of Christianity, which he brands 'the Grace Revolution' outside his base of Singapore. All the while, Prince uses visual cues that integrate wealth and glamour with his teachings of Christianity.

Prince was born Xenonamandar Jegahusiee Singh but later changed his name to the Anglicised Joseph Prince. While critics of Prince point out that the name change may have been because 'Joseph Prince' is easier to remember and more significantly it is reminiscent of Joseph, the Hebrew Prince of Egypt (e.g. Goddall 2013) in Genesis 42:6-8, Prince's neutralising of his name to erase his biracial heritage (Sikh father and ethnic Chinese mother) may have made him more palatable particularly to ethnic Chinese Singaporeans. Three quarters of Singapore's population is ethnic Chinese and proselytising would be more effective in terms of mass appeal. Increasing this appeal further is Prince's marriage to an ethnic Chinese Singaporean. Having an Anglicised name perhaps also allowed Prince to appeal to an international audience outside of Asia. He states on his website:

Joseph has also seen doors open supernaturally for his broadcast program, which currently reaches millions of homes across North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Israel on both secular and Christian networks (Joseph Prince Ministries 2019b).

A name change, however, is not the only way in which Prince appeals to his congregation. Recognising the power of digital media, Prince dominates cable television and the internet, where broadcast television is also finding a home. Currently, he is featured prominently on the New Creation Church official website and its social media platforms (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). Prince also has a personal website named Joseph Prince Ministries,⁶ a comprehensive collection of Prince's teachings which take the form of podcasts of his prayers and sermons. This website has an online store where the faithful can purchase his books and his DVDs, some of which have

6 see Joseph Prince Ministries (2019c)

fixed prices or prices based on the purchaser's preference. Prince also has a YouTube channel⁷ which has 262,430 subscribers, a public Facebook profile with 3,828,881 followers and a Twitter account with an estimated 389,000 followers. While Prince may have a large media profile, the image he conveys is always controlled, where he and his family always look slick and glamorous and what he says officially points to the intersectionality between wealth and religiosity. Doing so, Prince creates an unbreakable link between his brand of Christianity, which marries wealth and faith seamlessly together.

A Google Image search of Joseph Prince, for instance, reveals professionally taken images of him preaching or portraits in a studio. Always well-groomed, the portraits depict him as having a friendly demeanour while the action shots of him preaching present a commanding albeit friendly figure. The images of Prince in Google Images no doubt convey a financially successful man. This success is evident in media reports that he is one of the world's richest pastors (Singh 2014). While New Creation Church has stated that he had stopped drawing a salary from them since 2009 (Carmichael 2017; Singh 2014), his wealth could well easily be made from the selling of his merchandise (at least 20 books, including special editions and translations, as well as DVDs) and from speaking arrangements. His book, *The Power Of Right Believing, 100 Days of Right Believing*, for instance, was No. 2 on the New York Times bestseller list under the advice and 'how to' section (Feng 2014).

The image of wealth and success, however, is drawn from Prince's interpretation of Christian teachings, which he names 'The Grace Revolution'. On his website he explains that God spoke to him directly, while he was on a holiday in the Swiss Alps, and that his calling was to spread The Grace Revolution (Joseph Prince Ministries 2019b):

If you don't preach pure, unadulterated grace, people's lives will never be gloriously blessed and gloriously transformed. This one statement that God made to Joseph Prince in 1997 completely transformed the way Joseph preached and taught the gospel.

And thus began the Grace Revolution.

Joseph had been holidaying with his wife Wendy in the Swiss Alps and there, amid the majestic landscape, God told him that he had not been

7 see Joseph Prince Online (2019)

preaching grace, and gave him the mandate to preach grace – pure and unadulterated. This meant preaching about God's grace without attempting to balance, or mix, it with the law. Desiring to see his congregation liberated, empowered and blessed by the Lord, Joseph fully embraced the mandate from God and has not looked back since.

The passage above reveals two things: 1) that he is chosen by God to facilitate this 'divine' message of The Grace Revolution, and 2) that Prince is a wealthy and successful man as manifested by his choice of holiday locations. Prince claims that God spoke to him in 1997 when the Swiss Alps would have been – whether real or imagined – considered a luxury holiday by Singaporeans or anyone travelling internationally from outside Europe. God speaking to Prince in, as Prince himself states, a 'majestic landscape' gives the impression that God approves of this luxurious, if not opulent, lifestyle.

Prince's The Grace Revolution has resulted in the New Creation Church growing from 2000 members in 1997 to 31,000 at present, but has also increased his transnational mobility where he has preached his liturgy in Israel, Norway, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and in various part of Asia (Joseph Prince Ministries 2017). Moreover, he has found fame and wealth through the communication of The Grace Revolution (books, DVDs, television, radio and internet broadcasts, and speaking engagements), resulting in his social and religiosity cache increasing due to his association with fellow well-known pastor and televangelist Joel Osteen.

In 2014, Prince opened The Grace Revolution Church in Texas whose beliefs are identical to that of New Creation Church but who are not financially supported by the Singapore church. On their website, Grace Revolution Church (2019) proclaims proudly:

A Church you can call home. No matter where you are in life or what you've been through, you'll see your life transformed from the inside out when you encounter our beautiful Lord Jesus. Join us – we'd love to have you!

Although Grace Revolution Church has its own local church leadership team of United States-based pastors, the principal Sunday morning service at 10:30 features video-streaming of Prince's Sunday services at New Creation in Singapore. While there are no published numbers of the membership of Grace Revolution Church, it appears from their website and Facebook group that this emergent daughter congregation is doing well. This is not surprising as Prince chose to start a new congregation in Texas, which has among the highest concentrations of Christians generally, and Evangelical Christians

in particular. According to Pew Research Center (2019), 77% of adults in Texas claim to be Christian with Evangelical Christians (31%), Catholics (23%), Mainline Protestants (13%) and Historically Black Protestant (6%) making the bulk of the faithful.

Communicating the Message through the Visual

Communicating messages through elaborate theatrical productions has been the focus of culture theorists such as Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (trans. Cunningham 1972) whose work has been used to explain the way messages are conveyed to mass audiences. They warn that commercial productions are tools for indoctrination of the masses, the same can be said for in-house productions made for unstoppable and sometimes viral broadcasting online through social media.

Early audience theory, for instance, promoted a 'hypodermic' model which suggested that audiences were passive and influenced by the power of the message in texts (Morley 1980). Meanwhile others such as Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, Hazel Gaudet and Robert K. Merton (1944) argue that audiences were not influenced directly by the media. Rather, media messages were filtered through 'opinion leaders' before flowing to the 'less active sections of the population' (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944, p. 14).

In *Encoding, Decoding*, Hall (1973) for instance states that communication is a complex structure between broadcaster/producer, text and audience. He explains that there is a symbiotic communication flow between broadcasters and audiences where broadcasters encode their productions with messages within a framework of knowledge familiar to audiences (*ibid.*). Moreover, these messages are constructed within the cultural framework of the audiences. Audiences thus find enjoyment in these productions because they recognise the messages in them (Hall 1973). In the case of the Houstons and Prince, their messages of self-improvement to attain happiness and closeness to Christ through the attainment of wealth, glamour and good health is displayed through highly stylised and controlled visuals online, particularly on their church and individual websites and social media platforms. The messages of success of the self becomes universal in the sense that they cross ethnic, cultural and national lines. Additionally these messages are made even more potent and convincing since they are embodied by the very individuals who preach them. In her work on glamour in cinema, for instance, Gomes (2008) notes that the reason why audiences are enamoured with glamorous stars because they see themselves in them. In other words,

audiences identify with the rags to riches stories of the stars they adore because they see the wealth and glamour as attainable.

At the same time, digital media are made for the world of dazzling spectacle and special effects that megachurch pastors use to enchant and attract their followers as consumers of the prosperity gospel. Digital media is ultimately oriented toward consumption and instant gratification. It inspires, differentiates, captivates and enchants its consumers. Its principal appeal lies in its ability to make its consumers feel as if they are in charge, forgetting for a moment that digital media platforms are, in reality, strategic marketing to specific niche audiences like themselves. Moreover, digital media further facilitates the connection between spirituality on the one hand, with materialism and consumption on the other. In a real sense, congregational members often live vicariously through the glamorous lives of their digital pastors as digital stars, following their digital pastors' every move on various social media platforms and imitating their moves as a means of achieving their own material success. As a result, we see the prominent role that the digital platform plays in enabling these digital superstar pastors to influence and shape the identity constructions and spiritual formation of their followers. Hence, digital media becomes the theological medium that promotes a theology of personal fulfilment and success, synthesising faithfulness and mobility for the followers of these digital pastors, enabling them to integrate their faith, as shaped by their digital pastors' prosperity gospel with their own quest for material success and wealth consumption. For these megachurch members, the glitzy and glamorous material success of their digital superstar pastors as splashed across the various digital platforms becomes the self-fulfilling prophecy of their digital pastors' divinely sanctioned evidence of divine favour and spiritual development, which in turn becomes inspiration for them to aspire and imitate.

More significantly, digital pastors represent the commodification of Christianity, in which spirituality becomes commodified as 'Spirituality, Inc.' that can be marketed digitally and globally, as the New Creation and Hillsong examples discussed above illustrate. Our examples illustrate digital pastors as savvy, astute and dynamic marketers of the prosperity gospel in hyper consumerist societies, integrating materialism and spirituality. The success of their ability to convey the socio-economic power of the prosperity gospel to empower their followers that faith and obedience would lead to material blessings in the form of wealth and success makes it possible for their followers to justify ostentatious consumption and unfettered wealth acquisition without any ethical or moral compunctions arising from issues

of economic and wealth inequalities that traditional Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have sought to address through the social gospel or liberation theologies.

Conclusion

Megachurches like Hillsong in Australia and New Creation in Singapore represent a turn in Christianity away from a counter-cultural religious faith that challenges its members to live out the gospel ideals to care for the underprivileged towards a personalist and entrepreneurial religious faith, that seeks to fulfil their members' quest for socio-economic mobility, accumulation of wealth and attainment of upward social class. Indeed, the principal attraction of megachurches for the emerging middle class in Australia and Singapore lies in their appeal to the young and aspirational middle class Australians' and Singaporeans' sense of agency for the quest for upward mobility within a meritocratic and achievement-oriented culture promoted by entrepreneurial ethos and achievement-oriented worldview of global capitalism. At the same time, the prosperity gospel that drives Hillsong and New Creation and their theological and organisational innovations is rooted in the paradoxical secularisation of Christianity, marking the triumph of capitalism and market forces as shaping the future of Christianity and Christian churches. Indeed, capitalism's faith in the 'invisible' hand of market forces has reshaped the interpretation of the Christian Gospel and led to the promotion of a Christian faith that dwells on personal growth and empowerment rather than societal transformation.

This chapter's focus on Hillsong's and New Creation's strategic use of digital media by their digitally-savvy pastors reveal how digital media are blurring the lines between secular and sacred. Indeed, Hillsong and New Creation are poster children for how megachurches, unlike their Catholic and mainline Protestant counterparts, have been quick to harness the power of new digital media platforms as new means of reaching out to and connecting with members of their congregations. In one sense, digital pastors as digital stars are not much different from YouTube and Instagram superstars with their legions of followers who live their lives vicariously through these online superstars. This explains why Hillsong and New Creation congregants, unlike their traditional Catholic and mainline Protestant counterparts, are not critical of the ostentatious lifestyles of their ultra-wealthy digital pastors. Digital pastors, like other social media digital superstars, legitimise

the aspirational ethos of their followers and affirm their followers' desire to mimic their glitz, glamour and success, which in turn legitimise the prosperity gospel, recruiting more followers and bringing in more income to the megachurches. In turn, this also enables the megachurch members to affirm their own upwardly mobile aspirations to climb up the socio-economic ladder and announce their own material success to their families, friends, neighbours and co-workers.

The case studies of Hillsong and New Creation reveal the ease by which digital pastors make use of various digital platforms to accentuate their upbeat and inspirational message of the prosperity gospel. These pastors convey charisma and charming personalities that digital platforms emphasise and accentuate. Clearly, the digital pastors' appeal to the members of their flocks lie in their charismatic personas and ability to appeal to their members' sense of agency, and provide a sense of empowerment in an achievement oriented culture shaped by capitalism and consumerism. Moreover, digital pastors often blur the line between the secular and sacred, synthesising digital technology and evangelical theology, thereby accentuating the personalist and consumerist ethos of the prosperity gospel. The digital platforms often enable these digital pastors to portray a glitzy and glamorous lifestyle and exude success, wealth and prosperity that their flocks aspire to emulate and imitate in a mimetic fashion. Indeed, the success of digital pastors' often rests on their ability to inspire their respective flocks to personal agency, empowerment and achievement using their online narratives on various digital media platforms.

Hence, we end up with a paradoxical situation where, rather than the Gospel of Jesus Christ prophetically critiquing and challenging the socio-economic inequalities that are caused by capitalism and market forces, one finds that capitalism and market forces are shaping how the Gospel is understood and appropriated by the members of Hillsong and New Creation. It is a twist of irony that the Christian Gospel is not shaping how Hillsong and New Creation members respond to the contemporary Australian and Singaporean realities of increasing socio-economic inequalities. Rather, digital savvy pastors of Hillsong and New Creation have completely negated the prophetic critique of the Christian Gospel and continues to deliver the prosperity gospel. One thus finds themselves in a situation where the values and discourses of capitalism, instead, shape the way the Christian Gospel is interpreted, understood and lived out by the members of Hillsong and New Creation.

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About the Authors

Catherine Gomes is an Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Her work contributes to the understanding of the evolving migration, mobility and digital media nexus. She is a specialist on the Asia-Pacific with Australia and Singapore being significant fieldwork sites. She has authored and edited 7 books.

Jonathan Y. Tan is Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan Professor of Catholic Studies and affiliated faculty in the Chinese, Ethnic Studies, Asian Studies, and International Studies programmes at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, United States. His research and scholarship focus on Asian and Asian American Christianity, World Christianity, Migration Studies and Interreligious Studies.