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# Evangelizing Neoliberalism through Megachurches in Latin America and the United States

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Thesis for the Master of Arts in the Study of the Americas

Submitted by W. O. Collazo

**Evangelizing Neoliberalism through Megachurches in Latin America and  
the United States**

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William O. Collazo, May, 2018



## **The Cold War Foundations of the Modern Megachurch in the Americas: Between Pentecostalism and Neoliberalism**

The subject of this thesis is North American neoliberalism's relationship with Latin American Pentecostalism. Beginning in the Cold War era, during the heyday of Area Studies, scholars attempted to classify the growth of Pentecostalism in general, and to examine its association with the poor in particular. It was during this era that much of the developing scholarship on the rapid growth of Pentecostalism among the poor looked toward Latin America for ready test subjects and case studies. The Pentecostal movement has been a global phenomenon since the early decades of the twentieth century, but the emergence and proliferation of megachurches and Pentecostalism's significant, often political, influence on Christianity is more recent, dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> This context was overlooked by much of the initial scholarship on Pentecostalism. It overlooked the emergence of United States-exported neoliberalism, and how it has interacted with Pentecostal beliefs and their megachurches in a wide variety of ways. As a result of this, scholarship failed to detect how megachurches used Pentecostalism's influence with the poor to stand aside as a brutal dictatorship sought to remake society into a haven for neoliberalism.

One of the most salient features of contemporary Pentecostalism is the phenomenon of the megachurch. Today, the megachurch is Pentecostalism's most influential institution, yet the rise of the megachurch is all too often viewed as an incidental byproduct of Pentecostalism's growth. I contend that the paradigm shift of neoliberalism, which is one of the most "global transformations" of our age, has been left out of much of the analysis of megachurches.<sup>2</sup> The emergence and proliferation of the modern megachurch has only recently been recognized as a global phenomenon deserving of study in its own right.<sup>3</sup> But this scholarship is too often rooted<sup>3</sup> within sociological frameworks that predate the rise of neoliberalism. In other words, the works that were written in the age of Area Studies could not

but fail to explore how and why neoliberal ideology has influenced the development of Pentecostal doctrine and practice, especially as they have taken shape within the structures and practices of the megachurch.

To rectify this omission in the scholarly literature, the first section of this thesis will revisit the time when Latin American Pentecostalism first came into contact with US-exported neoliberalism. This thesis will argue that these two transformational, ideological movements have developed into a mutually beneficial relationship with each other. Specifically, it was a relationship that was not brokered by the poor, but by a segment of Pentecostalism that should be identified as the affluent. As the neoliberal “shock therapy” of dictatorship and repression was being applied, often towards the poorest segments of Latin American society, the Pentecostal Latin America middle-class recognized an opportunity to advance its own, class-based economic and political agenda.<sup>4</sup> Their agenda was based upon neoliberal ideas and was incorporated into the organizational structure of worldwide Pentecostal movement's most economically and politically influential institution, the megachurch. Like the rise of a politicized Evangelicalism in the US, more generally the Latin American-style megachurch has become synonymous with conservative, if not to say right-wing, politics and social practices.

Latin American Pentecostal megachurches share much in common with the rise of the religious right in the United States. Therefore, after reexamining Chile as the point of first contact between neoliberalism and Pentecostalism, this thesis will move north, first to the American colony of Puerto Rico, then to the United States. Because of its small size, Puerto Rico provides a manageable and unique case study for examining the relationship between American-exported neoliberalism and indigenous Latin American Pentecostalism. Puerto Rico demonstrates how a “neoliberal market-based populist culture” came to be fomented by Pentecostal megachurches.<sup>5</sup> In this section the focus will be on how populism and megachurch politics came to be staunch supporters of neoliberal policies. I argue



that an alliance developed between megachurches and neoliberal politicians, with religious values serving as the basis for “the restoration of class power,” brought megachurch pastors and middle-class Pentecostals into the ranks of the wealthy and the politically influential on the island of Puerto Rico.<sup>6</sup>

In an effort to outline the path of exported American neoliberalism back to its point of origin, the final section of the thesis analyzes the evolution of the United States megachurch, within the context of growing immigration from Latin America to North America. There are many different types of megachurches, and many myths that obscure their importance within contemporary religious and social life alike, but the importance of the US megachurch are nevertheless, often measured through its wealth, its political influence, and its overall potential for mobilizing the poor.<sup>7</sup> As the archetype by which all others are measured, the US megachurch has solidified and institutionalized the religious link with neoliberalism that has transformed the manner in which religion motivates and directs worshipers today. Neoliberal values dominate the organizational structure of the US megachurch, and through this domination they have infiltrated much of Evangelicalism as a whole. The political beliefs and goals of Christian voters have, through the megachurch, merged with neoliberalism, and thus neoliberalism has become evangelized. What has emerged from this is a new political alignment of Pentecostalism's poor in support of a political and economic agenda that benefits the more affluent than it does the poor.

I hope to shed light on some of the myths surrounding the organizational development of megachurches. I do this by showing how neoliberalism has interacted with Pentecostalism, first in Latin America, and, later on, in the United States itself. This thesis suggests that neoliberalism served as a catalyst for change in the evolution of Pentecostalism's organizational structure, and quite possibly its doctrine as well. In accordance with such doctrinal change, there has been a proliferation of wealthy and politically influential Pentecostal megachurches. Neoliberalism has benefited from these developments; it has gained an ally that can evangelize on its behalf - especially among the poor, those

who would seem least likely to support neoliberal economic policies - and thus co-opt segments of society who otherwise might object to its implementation by economic, social, and/or political elites. Pentecostalism has also benefited from its association with neoliberalism. It has emerged an even greater theological and political force in the US and it is challenging centuries of Catholic hegemony in Latin America. Much of this is the result of the proliferation of Pentecostalism's most potent institution – the megachurch. But to appreciate this fact we must look at developments both within the United States and across Latin America and reveal the concordant rise of two paradigm shifting movements that have redefined democracy throughout the Americas and beyond.

Class considerations were not only present during the formation of megachurches, they were, I argue, an integral, driving force of megachurch proliferation. As a result, the relationship between neoliberalism and Pentecostalism has helped to legitimize dictatorships, as well as many other forms of repression which neoliberalism has prescribed, primarily against the poor. In Latin America, the poor have been both the objects and subjects of neoliberalism and Pentecostalism. Since 1973, neoliberalism has maintained a close relationship with Latin American Pentecostalism. Thus Latin America can be listed as one of the “epicenters” that had the most influence upon the evolution of both movements.<sup>8</sup> The 1973 coup in Chile, which toppled the elected government of Salvador Allende and replaced it with the military regime of General Augusto Pinochet, is in fact the exact point of first contact between two of the most powerful movements to wash over Latin America – the global spread of neoliberalism and Pentecostalism

Yet, as much as it has been a mutually beneficial relationship, it has also been a paradoxical one. It is only recently that new scholarly perspectives are finally beginning to emerge. However, none have yet to view the dichotomous nature of Pentecostalism's rise within the affluent and the poor. Nor has there been any works that address Pentecostalism's apparent political indifference as it relates to the

politics of the middle-class, who it should be said have rarely, if ever, been labeled as politically indifferent.

### **The Skewed Early Literature of Pentecostalism in Latin America**

The two most influential works that came to define Latin American Pentecostalism were written before the rise of neoliberalism. For this reason alone, if not for others, these works must be reevaluated, especially with regard to the phenomenon of the megachurch. The works of Emilio Willems, in 1967, and Christian Lalive d'Epinau, in 1969, were the most oft-cited works on Pentecostalism for decades.<sup>9</sup> Willems' work titled *Followers of the New Faith*, traced Pentecostalism's development throughout the industrializing Chilean provinces of Santiago, Valparaiso and Concepcion which “accounted for almost half of the country's Protestants.”<sup>10</sup> Willems viewed Pentecostalism as an imported religion and, as such, the manifestation of American Protestant values that had been implanted in Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the most insightful of Willems' findings was that in Chile there seemed “to be a relationship between the concentration of Protestants and industrialization.”<sup>12</sup>

This analysis overlaps with d'Epinau's work titled *Haven of the Masses*, which traced Pentecostalism's presence in the urbanization of the poor in Chile's capital of Santiago.<sup>13</sup> Although d'Epinau also expresses the opinion that Pentecostalism was imported from the US, he asserted that Chilean Pentecostalism had thrived despite being cut off, without “professional pastors, with no external financial help” from foreign missionary society.<sup>14</sup> A major facet of d'Epinau's work was his argument that “only the analysis of external factors makes it possible to understand the attraction which the internal characteristics of Pentecostalism exercises over the common people.”<sup>15</sup> From this starting point d'Epinau worked to bring into focus the conditions of urbanization, and how they had affected the growth of the Pentecostal movement in Chile. Incorporating a “more subtle” understanding of Max and

Weber about Protestantism relationship with capitalism, d'Epinay's work questioned whether Latin American Pentecostalism provided “social mobility,” by preaching the worth of “work, production and enterprise.”<sup>16</sup> d'Epinay found that Pentecostalism “regulates strictly the life of its initiates” which constitutes a “social ethic” in its own right that helps to fosters actual social change.<sup>17</sup>

Willems' and d'Epinay's works provide insight into Pentecostalism in Latin America at the time. The fact that these were the first major explorations of the subject of Pentecostalism, meant that, by default, they become the basis of all other subsequent work on the subject. Their works had firmly identified Latin American Pentecostalism within the realm of the poor masses. With sociological data the subject of Pentecostalism was pushed away from theology into secular studies precisely when US intellectuals began carving the world into political and sociological districts, thanks to the rise of Area Studies. This opened the door for many scholars to apply the latest theories about the poor in Latin America - in addition to established Marxist notions - to the appearance of a movement that seemed to emerge from the masses. The shadow of the Cold War loomed over this scholarship, capturing it within the binary of capitalism versus socialism. Too often, it was Latin America's poor who suffered the very real effects of US policies that were influenced, and misinformed, by such scholarship.

Viewed from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the scholarship produced during the Cold War era, including that of Willems and d'Epinay, has proven to be, as theologian William K. Kay puts it, “old scholarship, based upon the old paradigms and often insufficient field work and informed by outdated Marxist exploratory theories, [that] has continued to be recycled as a way of castigating Pentecostals by association”<sup>18</sup> Much of Kay's argument is directed towards reductionist theories that sought to utilize notions of anomie or class consciousness, among others, to explain why the majority of Pentecostals originate from the poorer segments of society. Attempts to find demonstrable instances of class identity within Pentecostalism's growth by utilizing secular theoretical models stemming from a

Cold War binary was, in the opinion of Kay and other theologians, “nothing more than an attempt to repudiate the legitimacy of Pentecostalism as a religion - an emerging faith on a continent that had for five hundred years been under Catholic hegemony.”<sup>19</sup> Theologian Calvin L. Smith has commented that under such circumstances, “It is therefore not surprising that the growth of Latin American Pentecostalism, together with its social and political effects, should have a major impact upon the academy.” For many theologians it was clear that academic interest in Pentecostalism was intense, but it was marred by an equally intense, secular-leaning prejudice towards its subject.

The works that followed Willems and d'Epinay, although mired in Area Studies-derived prejudices, do have some merit. They attempted to use the prevailing theories about poverty to further an understanding of the Pentecostal movement. The 1970 paper titled, “Attitudes Towards Joining Authoritarian Organizations and Sectarian Churches,” by sociologists John Photiadis and William Schweiker, focused exclusively on a comparative evaluation of authoritarian organizations and churches so as to explain why some would choose one or the other. Their work is a good example of so-called Rational Choice Theory. But Rational Choice Theory does not bother to examine or take into account pre-existing social conditions; nor does it examine the history of minority peoples within dominant social conditions. As a result, Photiadis and Schweiker's work does not account for how the choices themselves both reflect and contribute to the very forces that were causing rapid change in the first place.

Similarly, in an attempt to account for what drives people to seek social stability within churches, sociologist Cornelia Butler Flora, in a 1973 paper titled, “Social Dislocation and Pentecostalism: A Multivariate Analysis,” attempted to identify a working understanding that might link economic dislocation to what theologian Calvin L. Smith later identified as an era of explosive growth for Pentecostal churches.<sup>22</sup> One of the effects of Flora's work has been to support the widespread belief

that the average adherent of Pentecostalism generally belongs to the lower socio-economic strata of a population. But this promoted the assumption that people of the same class share more than just the same social realities; it assumes that people of the same class will likely also share the same social values and spiritual tendencies.

Flora's work sounded reasonable enough at the time, but four years after it first appeared, Harry G. Lefever, another sociologist, offered a different account in his paper, "The Religion of the Poor: Escape or Creative Force?,"<sup>23</sup> Lefever offered "an alternative explanation of low-income religious behavior other than as a compensation for the conditions of lower-class life or as an escape from those conditions."<sup>24</sup> Lefever's work focused on "identity formation" and the development of "cultural values."<sup>25</sup> He suggested that these were better points of departure for understanding what he also called "the religion of the poor."<sup>26</sup> Lefever sought to incorporate the deeper social, as well as, spiritual values which Pentecostalism had been very successful in conferring to its members. As a Weberian, and thus similarly to d'Epinay, Lefever sought to move away from Karl Marx, who "had very little to say about the protest function of religion."<sup>27</sup> Lefever tried to show how social dislocation could create its own form of identity and values, which is then expressed within a religious context. Lefever alluded to classical Marxist notions to illustrate how common value systems are created, but he then applied Weberian insights to show how religion works as a form of social protest. Placing religion as the foci for both identity and protest, Lefever attempted to connect Pentecostalism's growth among the poor to its role in providing a sense of social purpose.

In Latin America, during an era in which identities were formed under the pressures of competing hegemonic ideologies, Lefever's argument was well received, if only because it, too, tacitly accepted the frozen binary of Cold War ideologies. Even Catholicism, which for five hundred years enjoyed almost total theological dominance in Latin America, had to reevaluate its own theology within

the vise grip of capitalism and communism. But things were about to change. Even though Lefever had incorporated social values as a major component for understanding the protest function of religion, he could not envision that the binary, within which these values had been shaped, would itself undergo a radical transformation. By 1991, the ideological binary that had defined life in Latin America would disappear virtually overnight, to be replaced by a new binary: the Global North vs. the Global South.

Yet, Lefever's Weberian analysis was challenged by scholars even before the fall of the Berlin wall. This began by looking more closely into Pentecostalism's actual theology. John Wilson and Harvey K. Clow, in a 1981 paper titled, "Themes of Power and Control in a Pentecostal Assembly," argued that "conventional theories of Pentecostalism, which stress its compensatory functions, have little to say about its most distinctive feature – Spirit possession."<sup>28</sup> With this Wilson and Clow moved the debate from Max and Weber to Emile Durkheim. In doing so, they stumbled upon a rationale for why members often remained in a church: "Pentecostals endorse the meritocratic view of American society, but they do not see themselves as fully sharing in this system."<sup>29</sup> This statement reads like a ringing endorsement of the larger retreat from social disorder and disenfranchisement; it also expresses the church member's hopes of developing better identities or values, which might help them to adapt to dis-empowering conditions. Wilson and Clow concluded that, for Pentecostals, "the ideal is not attainable," which in effect defines Pentecostalism as a religion that preaches attitudes and strategies of survival for the poor, rather than any kind of social advancement in this world.<sup>30</sup> Here one can hear echos of Christian Lalive d'Epina's work.

When it comes to the more recent phenomenon of the Pentecostal megachurch, however, the conclusions reached by Wilson and Clow do little to explain the huge accumulation of wealth that is central to every contemporary megachurch's identity today. Wilson and Clow do not address how Pentecostalism, the so-called religion of the poor, has been so successful in creating wealthy

megachurches in virtually every Latin American country, as well as the United States. The same can be said of all the other scholarly works previously cited, and for good reason. Prior to the 1970s, Pentecostal megachurches, which were almost wholly a US invention, did not exist in Latin America. But, by the end of President Ronald Reagan's first term, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and Puerto Rico each had witnessed the arrival of the first of Latin America's now numerous Pentecostal megachurches. It was no accident that the wealthiest Southern Cone economies were among the first to produce Pentecostal megachurches.

As the initial neoliberal shocks were being applied to the Southern Cone, with Chile being the first, the more affluent of Latin American society began taking advantage of the situation. The more affluent within Pentecostalism did not act any differently. Because it was during the period of applied neoliberalism that Latin American megachurches proliferated, I argue that megachurches founded during that period were not the products of poor Pentecostals, but the more affluent. As such, the megachurches that proliferated throughout Latin America, and specifically in Chile, underwent changes in their organizational structure that reflected the class biases and sensibilities of the affluent much more so than the poor. Although megachurches existed long before neoliberalism, this powerful representation of world wide Evangelicalism, as a whole, could not have proliferated to such a great extent until the era of neoliberal shock that gripped Chile after dictatorship had begun.

To include tiny Puerto Rico among the first places within Latin American to produce megachurches is to recognize the island's unique relationship with the US. It also makes for a fascinating case study, one that is presented in the third section of this thesis. The 1967 work of Anthony L. LaRuffa titled, *Pentecostalism in a Puerto Rican Community*, is the only significant sociological study of Pentecostalism in Puerto Rico before the election of President Ronald Reagan.<sup>31</sup> LaRuffa's work is well documented and lays the foundation for the state of Pentecostalism as a



movement on the island, which can be described as small and fervent, but definitely growing fast.

Unfortunately, no works, including LaRuffa's, address neoliberalism's effects on Pentecostalism and megachurches in Puerto Rico. Hector M. Martinez-Ramirez's 2005 work, "Pentecostal Expansion and Political Activism in Puerto Rico," is a major work about Puerto Rican politics and religion, but neoliberalism is left out of the analysis.<sup>32</sup>

Although Martinez-Ramirez did not address neoliberalism, per se, he does bring into focus the relationship between populism and politics as it pertains to the island's megachurch pastors. Resonating with Anthropologist David Harvey's view that "cultural and traditional values [...] can be mobilized to mask other realities," Martinez-Ramirez's work lays bare the close working relationship between political parties and megachurches on the island.<sup>33</sup> As I will show, megachurches in Puerto Rico have adopted populist strategies for advancing their own political agenda. It is an agenda that has been beneficial to neoliberal politicians, but has been detrimental to Puerto Rico's poor.

This section of the thesis also serves to show how constitutional concepts of the separation of church and state become meaningless when populism mobilizes religion to mask agendas that benefit megachurches. Martinez-Ramirez's work barely addresses the wider implications and long term effects that the neoliberal policies of the Reagan-Bush era had upon the political climate of Puerto Rico, nor on the island's religious culture as a whole. These omissions become ever more noticeable thirteen years after Martinez-Ramirez's work. This is especially true, in light of the island's recent recovery efforts in the wake of hurricane Maria. Recovery has been hampered by Puerto Rico's economic plight, which I will trace back through the island's history with neoliberalism. The long term effects of neoliberalism on the island's economy and infrastructure are starkly revealed as decades of privatization have produced neglect and economic stagnation. Puerto Rico's power grid, still under repair seven months after the hurricane struck, leaving more than one hundred thousand without electricity, is just one

example of the what the island's history with neoliberalism has wrought.<sup>34</sup> This has compounded an economic crisis that has seen many of Puerto Rico's best and brightest leave the island. It is estimated that the recover efforts in Puerto Rico may cost as least \$90 billion, which is on top of the billions in government debt accumulated before hurricane Maria.<sup>35</sup> Because of its unique position of being an American colony and yet retaining its distinctly Latino culture, Puerto Rico will also serve to show how Pentecostalism has combined with US neoliberal politics to become a catalyst for major change of the island's Latino culture and politics.

As this thesis moves closer to the US, many of the aspects of neoliberal-induced change happening within Latin American Pentecostalism, especially vis-a-vis the emergence of the megachurch, foreshadows many current issues in US national politics. By constructing a paradigm that views neoliberalism and Pentecostalism as mutually reinforcing ideologies, I hope to provide an alternative account for the success of both movements. One of my primary contentions is that, just as Latin American immigrants are crossing the American border, so too are the lessons learned from the neoliberal experiment in Latin America. But the context is markedly different: in the US, Evangelicalism is a major component of the establishment. To view the megachurch phenomenon as merely big, belies its entrenchment within mainstream American culture. This means that megachurches cannot be seen as champions of a religious insurgency (as they were, supposedly, in Latin America), but rather, as champions of long-established religious influence in American politics. Although, as megachurches seek to increase their influence, they often depict themselves as champions for a religious underdog.

The emergence and proliferation of megachurches throughout the suburban United States represents an exercise of the restoration of class power.<sup>36</sup> Despite many theories and myths about megachurches proliferating today, what has not yet been studied seriously is how the “borrowed models

of organization” that mark megachurches from their smaller counterparts are distinctly neoliberal in origin.<sup>37</sup> If these models are based upon neoliberalism, we must ask; How has neoliberalism redefined the “distinctly religious organization” of Evangelicalism, especially within megachurches?<sup>38</sup>

In the US, we have grown accustomed to viewing politics and religion as intertwined forces. The megachurch as such is not new in American politics. But when asking when did this phenomenon come about, researchers have yet to arrive to a popular agreed upon consensus that definitively inaugurates the political significance of the megachurch. As for American Evangelicalism, it is likely true, that since the founding of the nation, evangelicals have had an influence in politics. But scholarship generally locates the beginning of Evangelicalism's political cohesion as a movement somewhere in the 1960s. For example, biographer Rick Perlstein, in his marvelous book *Nixonland*, covers the important role evangelicals played, including the collusion between Republican candidate Richard Nixon and influential southern conservative-evangelical, Reverend Billy Graham, in the 1968 presidential election.<sup>39</sup>

In a similar vein, Professor of Political Science Joseph Lowndes argues that the history of evangelical support for Conservative Right presidential candidates began even earlier, with George Wallace's bid for the presidency in the 1964 election.<sup>40</sup> Wallace was well known for his odious oratory: he once suggested he would run demonstrators over with his limousine if they ever protested in front of it.<sup>41</sup> Instead of focusing on such inflammatory rhetoric, though, Professor Lowndes examines the tailored speeches and talking points Wallace actually put effort into carefully crafting. In his 1962 Gubernatorial inaugural address - the very speech which made infamous the phrase “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!” - Wallace condemned the federal government as “a basically ungodly government.”<sup>42</sup> The address, condemning the federal government with religious overtones, pandered to religious conservatives who may not have seen themselves as racist, yet

generally shared Wallace's contempt for federalization run rampant. Wallace's words echoed speeches given a century prior by secessionists inaugurating the Southern Confederacy. Lowndes argues that the “Wallace juggernaut was successful to the degree that it was politically disruptive,” but its real breakthrough was to combine “laissez-faire economics and Christian morality into one political identity.”<sup>43</sup>

I have chosen these points of reference because of the weight that evangelical votes had in what turned out to be pivotal moments in US history. They also serve to illustrate that it is almost impossible to tell a similar story about Evangelicalism in Latin America, because the scholarship has too often disregarded evangelicals, and Pentecostals in particular, as politically neutral. The treatment which has been given to the subject of Latin American Pentecostalism would suggest that evangelicals emerged as a political force in Latin America only after periods of dictatorship began to ebb. This would place Evangelicalism's political emergence in Latin America roughly around the same time as the Pink Tide of socialist victories spread across the continent – during the last years of the twentieth century. This would be wrong. Still, it is understandable, because dictators and juntas were, still, so numerous, much of the origins of the political mobilization of evangelicals, has been obscured and overshadowed..

What has resulted is a disingenuous representation of both US and Latin American megachurches, which megachurch apologists have take advantage off. Of the former, it has been argued that US megachurches are simply a natural extension of evangelism - that they emerged and organized themselves “out of necessity because of their size”, which suggests that US megachurches are just the result of religion getting “big.”<sup>44</sup> Accepting that American Evangelicalism would naturally produce so many megachurches since the 1970s is analogous to the assumption that neoliberalism would naturally become global. It is an argument from nature or destiny or both. This thesis offers another way to examine the relationship between religious and political beliefs. Within today's

entrenched partisan politics, and recognizing the importance that religion plays within it, it seems right to inquire into how the most overarching paradigm shift since the New Deal has affected one of America's most potent voting blocks. Whether they be Latino or evangelical - or, increasingly, both - the question has very real political relevance.

This political relevance also has very real resonance between the United States and Latin America. It has made what was an already uncomfortable embrace between US politics and Latin American immigration deeper and increasingly more painful. This is not to imply that the early history of neoliberalism in Latin America was excusable. Journalist and filmmaker Naomi Klein, in her book *Shock Doctrine: The Rise Of Disaster Capitalism*, argues that if a regime is brutal enough, through the effects of shock, it is possible to “establish a new order,” and inaugurate a neoliberal state.<sup>45</sup> But to assure the establishment of its new order, neoliberalism requires the removal of “those sectors that got in the way of the ideal configuration.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Klein argues that defenders of neoliberalism did not acknowledge that attempts to achieve “balance and order[...]required a monopoly on ideology,” which was only achievable through force.<sup>47</sup> The early history of the neoliberal experiment in the Americas seems to prove that dictatorships were best suited to impose neoliberal orthodoxy. It seems logical to agree with Naomi Klein’s conclusion that “human rights abuses” went hand in glove with neoliberalism.<sup>48</sup> With Chile often being identified as patient zero in the spread of neoliberalism in Latin America we are forced to ask, Why did Pentecostalism prosper in Chile during the neoliberal experiment that inaugurated dictatorial rule?

As I have argued above, the emergence of Pentecostal scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s was an exercise in exposing the limitations of secular social sciences as much as it was an attempt to explain Pentecostalism boom in Latin America.<sup>49</sup> This scholarship has its flaws. But theologians did not get it right, either. Theologians often dismissed too lightly the very real social, economic, and

political changes that were occurring in Latin America during this time. A third way, I argue, must be attempted, one that takes into account both theological belief as well as political and economic realities. For many of its apologists, even sociologists, such as Bernice Martin, Pentecostalism “began as a grass-roots movement *of* rather than *for* the poor.”<sup>50</sup> And that, for Martin, is where scholarship should focus if it wants to truly understand the subject. However, Martin does acknowledge that Pentecostalism “later developed a middle-class sector among the business class and the new professionals, and elaborated an explicit prosperity theology which has further intensified its unfavorable reception among those critical of capitalism and materialism.”<sup>51</sup> To simply leave it at this, and to avoid looking into how, and under what conditions, a religion originally of the poor adapted itself to the more affluent, begs too many questions.

Within ten years there may be as many as two-thousand megachurches in the U.S.<sup>52</sup> This will mark a new period in American history. Although this is a remarkable achievement, and should not in and of itself be a cause of concern, it must be noted that American politics and religion are becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate. In order to better understand politics across the Americas, it is necessary to better understand the rise of the megachurch. The conditions of the emergence and proliferation of the megachurch is a modern phenomenon, which cannot be exempt from prevailing politics and its fusion with the prevailing economic ideology of the twenty-first century. This is just as true of the United States as it is of Latin America.

Looking back we can say the Cold War era was “the early days of another Pentecostal phenomenon - explosive Pentecostal growth in Latin America.”<sup>53</sup> It just so happens that this era coincides with the United States' explosive investment and meddling in Latin American economies and politics, particularly through proxies, such as the World Bank. The many justifications for these incursions include fighting communism, the war on drugs, and the eradication of poverty. All serving

to cloak neoliberalism under the false mantle of Western democracy. The scholarship of this era analyzed the explosive growth of Pentecostalism from the perspective of either Rational Choice or Marxist theory, both of which fixed their subjects firmly within a binary of liberal democracy or communism. This perspective, unfortunately, still dominates the scholarship of megachurches nearly thirty years after the end of the Cold War.

This thesis argues that such works were mistaken, because they did not detect the complex interplay of religious beliefs and neoliberal ideology even before the Cold War era ended. The scholarship produced during the earliest days of explosive Pentecostal growth in Latin America is relevant only to an era that no longer exists. As the lessons of neoliberalism return to the United States, to be applied to the hemisphere's most powerful political and religious power, it is important to revisit what had happened during the early contact between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism. Today, neoliberalism transcends the binaries of the Cold War, it is what old capitalism once crusaded to be: global, unchallenged, and (almost) absolute. It leaves nothing unaffected, not even faith.

## Notes

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## Section II

### **Chile: The Point of First Contact, 1973**

Chile has long been the locus for scholarship on the subjects of neoliberalism and Pentecostalism in Latin America. When studying the origins of the neoliberal contagion that spread across Latin America, Chile is patient zero. Because it was the first nation to undergo neoliberal shock therapy and has one of the longest historical connections to the global spread of Pentecostalism, Chile can be thought of as the point of first contact between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism in Latin America. This first contact happened during the height of the Cold War, which had Western scholarship divided by two competing geopolitical poles. It was Liberal Western democracy in a forty-six year struggle against Soviet Union led communism. The mirage of enlightenment that Western-centric Area Studies operated under was little more than a litmus test, which was used to identify socialism wherever it was present.

Communism beyond strongman political leadership never materialized. Neoliberalism, for its part, was seen by many proponents of Area Studies as a treatment to restore democracy to nations that have fallen under the sway of communists through the imposition of supposedly democratic free markets. The effect of this ideological divide produced a scholarly binary, which too easily sorted emerging social and political movements into one of two camps.

Sadly the flaws and biases resulting from this neoliberal-infused binary - which called for the restructuring of nations and their economies by force, if necessary - were largely ignored. So too were the few who recognized and protested against the inevitable misguided exercises undertaken in the name of liberty. The scholarship that has emerged on Pentecostalism in Chile has painted it with the same brush that was used to whitewash neoliberalism's cozy relationship with dictatorship.

Neoliberalism and Pentecostalism were characterized interchangeably with supporting dictatorship, but

this is an easy corollary. It was rigid and myopic, because Pentecostalism is a movement that began among the poor, which cannot be said of neoliberalism. Yet, this does not mean that Pentecostalism has remain unchanged, nor that it remains apart from neoliberal values.

Two influential scholars of Pentecostalism in Chile, Emilio Willems and Christian Lalive d'Epina, who wrote in the late 1960s, were, as sociologist Bernice Martin has argued, “implicitly reductionist, looking for underlying 'real' processes that religion merely expressed indirectly.”<sup>1</sup> Martin noted that Willems and d'Epina were influential simply because there was “little else” to challenge their respective works.<sup>2</sup> As Willems analyzed anomie in the Chilean countryside in 1967, and as d'Epina searched for evidence of class struggle in the urban centers in 1969, nobody paused to contemplate the hermeneutics of the conditions in which these scholars worked. That only a few years later Chile would be under severe repression, which lasted for nearly twenty years, is probably a good reason why nothing better could be produced to challenge Willems's and d'Epina's works on Pentecostalism in Chile. Nevertheless, the labels that Willems and d'Epina applied to Pentecostalism stayed in place in Chile long after the years of dictatorship. In fact, d'Epina's work, even more so than Willems, came to be applied to Pentecostalism all over Latin America. It was he who called Pentecostalism, as his book was titled, the *Haven of the Masses*.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the scholarship produced during the Cold War era has rightly come under fire. Theologian William K. Kay, has rightly argued that sociological scholarship had missed the point about Pentecostalism's power to influence the poor and called for political, social, and economic theories that must take into consideration new paradigms for the “real” circumstances that existed then, and which continue today.<sup>4</sup> Having the benefit of historical distance has uncovered previous scholarship's weakness, especially the conspicuous omission of a lack of interdisciplinary integration. This resulted from the inflexibility of an intellectual paradigm mired in preconceived Western notions about the

Third World, a paradigm that tended to oversimplify Latin American Pentecostalism's role in greater social, political and economic developments that were taking place just as neoliberalism was on the rise in Latin America.

The realities of poverty, wealth disparity, anomie, class, and political machinations, including dictatorial politics, all of which secular social science attempts to understand, cannot and should not exclude religion from the equation. Although compelling arguments can be made that faith and religion are often misunderstood by secular studies of society, we cannot refrain from asking – What happened when Pentecostalism and neoliberalism first came into contact with each other in Chile?

Previous scholarship was unable to account for Pentecostalism's growth and its demonstrated sustainability, both in terms of belief and praxis. But theologians, including Kay, have attempted to use past sociological failures to pare away Pentecostalism from sociological analysis altogether.<sup>5</sup> To use such failures to excise the social sciences altogether from the phenomenon of Pentecostalism leaves out human experiences that are just as vital for understanding Pentecostalism as faith is to understanding religion. The hardships of poverty, migration, urbanization, and the politicized subjects of housing and labor cannot possibly be viewed as incidental to religious conversion and faith. It is incumbent to ask: what factors were at play as mass conversion to Pentecostalism in Chile was underway during the 1960s and 1970s? What connection was there, if any, between the momentous social and political changes happening in Chile and the rise of Pentecostalism? Asking these questions about the first contact between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism that took place in Chile is still important today. Especially since migration, wealth disparity, and religion-driven politics are just as powerful today in both the United States and Latin America as they were during the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps, even more so.

Explicit in Kay's argument is the need for “new theories with regard to politics, with regard to

explanations and with regard to ecumenism,” which would presumably give us a better understanding of Pentecostalism.<sup>6</sup> Yet, one facet of particular interest that is omitted from Pentecostalism's boom, as Kay understands it, is the growth of megachurches that occurred during Pentecostalism's first contact with neoliberalism in Chile. Although Pentecostalism's overall growth in Chile was well underway in the 1960s, it was during the years of dictatorship that Pentecostal megachurches truly began to proliferate. Because neoliberalism, like its polar opposite Marxism, says little about religion, it might seem plausible to expect that a religion would expand only with difficulty during the shock of neoliberal conversion. But Pentecostalism not only expanded, megachurches in fact proliferated at a rate never seen before. Although it is clear that some dynamic was in play between these two forces, it remains unclear exactly how Pentecostalism and neoliberalism grew closer together. That is, until the megachurch is factored into the dynamic between these two forces.

This section will address the dynamics at work between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism in Chile during the decade leading up to dictatorship and the initial stages of Pinochet's regime to consolidate their power. It will be argued that during these years, Pentecostalism demonstrated a capacity to adapt to rapid political and social change. Pentecostalism's adaptability, or pragmatism, has often been mistaken for political ambivalence and even as far as politically removing itself from greater issues in society. But Pentecostalism has successfully become accepted across class divides in Chile, which has a culture with a long history of class division that has rarely been bridged. This should be considered as a sign that Pentecostalism can express political views, especially those of the affluent classes who have rarely remained removed from politics. The advent of the megachurch will be presented as a clear indicator that Pentecostalism has incorporated the political interests of the more affluent in Chile, just as it has been successful with the poor.

Also to be presented is how beginning in the Frei-Allende years of the 1960s and very early

1970s, and most demonstrably during the years of dictatorship, Pentecostalism was not just growing with the influx of converts; it was also consolidating its position among the more affluent. It will be argued that the Pinochet regime provided an opportunity for a more affluent Pentecostalism to entrench itself in Chilean society by becoming formally endorsed by the regime, thus making good on promises of social acceptance. This argument is a departure from previous scholarship, which maintains that Pentecostalism is a religion ensconced firmly within the poor. The proliferation of megachurches that took place in Chile during the Pinochet regime will be presented as evidence that Pentecostal leadership moved away from the poor classes and closer to the more affluent class. Central to this argument is the matter of how Pinochet's ultra-conservative regime and Pentecostalism came to terms with each other. Because most who suffered from the harsh repressions of the regime were the poor of Chilean society, not the affluent, Pentecostalism must have moved away from Christian Lalive d'Epina's view that it was a haven for the masses.

A final argument in this section of the thesis will center upon the political and physical locations of megachurches during the 1960s and 1970s. I will show where in Chile's society, segregated by class and politics, megachurches were founded. I will present research based upon the state of urbanization of Chile's capital, along with the politics that led to the coup and into the early years of Pinochet's regime. I will argue that Pentecostalism, which may have once justifiably been a religion dominated by the poor, embraced the more affluent and promoted their agenda, during the initial neoliberal shock of dictatorship. This means that Pentecostalism during Pinochet's regime may in fact mark a schism of sorts, which explains how and why the religion of the poor could so comfortably expand and consolidate its gains within a neoliberal dictatorship that repressed labor unions, socialists and any other dissidents who openly criticized the regime or expressed political values contrary to the imposed free market ideology of neoliberalism. This leaves Pentecostalism open to the question; After the

advent of the megachurch is Pentecostalism a bottom-up religion or has it become a top-down religion?

To ask questions and to attempt to pursue meaningful insights for an era shrouded in outmoded theory means to begin anew. The first notion that should be jettisoned is the prejudice that framed much of the analysis of Pentecostalism during the Cold War. Guilt by association encumbered much of the era's scholarship about Pentecostalism's relationship with neoliberalism. The most damaging aspect of this is that few hard questions were put forward at the time to challenge Willems and d'Epina's analysis. Serious scholarship did not ask how the poor suddenly become wealthy enough to establish megachurches, and in wealthy neighborhoods no less? It could not ask how had Pentecostalism crossed long standing social and class barriers? We must include accounting for how a cold-blooded upper-crust Catholic-conservative dictator endorsed and even did business with a religion not his own and one supposedly inimical to his class interests? For many academics, Pentecostalism's association with dictatorship has been hard to shake. But, guilt by association is just too easy, and it has left out more nuanced analysis that can explain how, for example, social stigma was overcome.

Identifying the underlying factors that have allowed Pentecostalism to flourish under dictatorship will be possible when we free our scholarship of enclosed binaries and too-easy-to-be-true explanations. The early works that defined Pentecostalism as a bottom-up religion should be measured against critics, such as Bernice Martin, who has conceded that Pentecostalism has evolved to appeal equally well to affluent classes, and able to accommodate Chilean society's long history of social hierarchy.<sup>7</sup> Because Marxism has proved less than successful in the southern cone, such critical analysis no longer needs to fall into the Cold War binary: it can encompass the fluidity, the finer points of class formulation that more recent theories, such as Martin's, proposes. This allows us to examine Pentecostalism's relation to issues of class, especially as they relate to the surprising growth of the Pentecostal churches themselves. Such questions bring studies of religious practice into conversation



with topics in urbanization, migration, and segregation within Chilean society. By utilizing a more interdisciplinary approach, it is possible to combine paradigms to form a more coherent understanding of Pentecostalism and perhaps begin to better explain how “Pentecostalism, for all of its subjectivity and schismatic tendencies, is not simply a diffuse collection of believers.”<sup>8</sup>

The contention here is not to search for *the* reason Pentecostalism became a success, especially during the era of dictatorship in Chile, but to gain a better perspective of what was happening within and without Pentecostalism as it came into contact with neoliberalism. Everett A. Wilson, in his contribution of new theories about Pentecostalism, argues that there was a point of “critical mass” that led to “popular social mobilization, an improbable development in societies where social change invariably begins with the elites, not with essentially marginal groups such as the Pentecostals.”<sup>9</sup> That there was a notable gain in the “collective strength” of Pentecostalism in Chile during the years of dictatorship, Wilson argues, is evidence that Pentecostalism reached a critical mass to do what rarely has happened before, namely to mobilize the Chilean masses.<sup>10</sup> But it is unclear if this improbable change originated from the marginalized or if it came from the more affluent members of Pentecostalism's middle-class professionals and their penchant for producing megachurches.

The scholarship from the Cold War era could not explain Pentecostalism's status as a religion of the masses that cultivated support for dictators and socialists alike. The political binary of the era prevented the social sciences from fully grasping the complexities of Latin American society. The region was deemed too backward for more complex social structures to function and, as a result, all studies of Pentecostalism failed to investigate other aspects of Latin American society that may have played an important role in Pentecostalism's rapprochement with neoliberalism. Yet it seems that the pendulum of prejudice has swung the other way. Theologians, having correctly identified the prejudice arising against Pentecostalism, are now guilty of being overly protective of Pentecostalism, which also

hinders analysis. The presumption is Pentecostalism exists outside the purview of the social sciences, and more so, outside any connection with the rise of neoliberalism. The theologians carry on as if these two phenomenon coexisted, yet had only incidental contact with each other.

In order to better understand Pentecostalism in Latin America, Chile offers a rich and interesting case study. It also happens to be the point of first contact between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism. That megachurches proliferated during this period begs the question: what if anything about neoliberalism facilitated the proliferation of megachurches in Chile during dictatorship?

### **Pragmatic Pentecostalism**

The shock therapy of neoliberalism and the boom of Pentecostalism, which overlapped in Chile and then, subsequently, across the rest of Latin America, is often analyzed within the confines of cause and effect. Political scientists were among the first to notice the emergence of politicized Protestant evangelicals and search for the cause of this. Their ranks included Timothy J. Steigenga, who studied Protestant political movements in Chile and Costa Rica, and David Stoll whose influential 1990 work expressed the growing sentiment: *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth*.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, Theologians such as Calvin L. Smith, Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino, and Edward L. Cleary have pushed back against social science theories that mistakenly view Pentecostalism in Latin America as a predominantly political movement.<sup>12</sup> Searching for the specter of covert US foreign interference or economic coercion by its proxies obfuscates Pentecostalism's intrinsic attributes. Economics and politics, for many theologians, was a poor place to begin analysis of the Pentecostal movement.

Searching for Pentecostalism's success from a purely social science understanding strangely left it removed from other social phenomena and cultural-social turmoil in the region. Long before

neoliberalism was first introduced into Latin America, Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) was already well under way. Also underway was the mass migration of the rural population into urban centers. ISI was an economic model for less industrialized nations to follow in an attempt to catch up with the fully industrialized first-world nations of the time.<sup>13</sup> Proponents of ISI never fully comprehended how the world economy is skewed towards the Global North; as a blueprint for development it produced a great deal of change without actually achieving its desired results.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly ISI had a profound impact on the development of Latin American urban centers as well as their economies. Yet, little is said by social scientists about Pentecostalism's development as ISI was underway. That Pentecostalism is viewed as the religion of the poor during a period when the poor were migrating en masse should have raised some questions about their dynamic.

Calvin L. Smith sums up the view of sociologists by asking “to what extent does it represent an ideological and cultural invasion?”<sup>15</sup> Although this question seeks for a sociological understanding of Pentecostalism, it explicitly accepts a limit upon how far such an understanding can or should go. Implicit is the poor record of sociologists to satisfyingly understand religious movements within the greater context of social and political movements that most often capture the attention of social scientists. What often results is the view that Pentecostalism is exogenous of Latin American cultural norms, including long standing prejudices. These and other fallacies predominate in the subject of Latin American Pentecostalism, perhaps more than most. Indeed Smith is making just that point by stressing Pentecostalism's indigeneity to Latin American culture, and especially within the poor-classes, as he points out how largely independent of foreign missionary involvement Pentecostalism has been.<sup>16</sup>

The central point of this section is not to find the reason for Pentecostalism's success, but to locate factors that most facilitated its growth during the Frei-Allende years and, then, especially during to years of dictatorship. In doing so it is possible to contrast Pentecostalism's growth during democratic

and dictatorial rule. Smith himself pointed out Stoll's and, to a greater degree David Martin's, work in 1990 which "explored Pentecostalism's potential to facilitate the emergence of a bourgeoisie espousing democratic capitalism across Latin America."<sup>17</sup> Implicit in those works is an alternative way for studying the nature of Pentecostalism's relationship with Western democracy. These works have an open-ended nature, freed from the confines of cause and effect and thus pared down into more manageable portions. It makes political and economic theories applicable without sacrificing Pentecostalism's cultural and religious significance. In this manner neoliberalism's economic conservatism need not be conflated with Pentecostalism's religious conservatism. Yet it becomes possible to piece together a before and after image of Pentecostalism vis-a-vis neoliberalism's advent in Latin America.

Anthropologist David Harvey, in his insightful study of neoliberalism, made a similar observation. As he puts it: "In seeking to understand the construction of political consent, we must learn to extract political meanings from their cultural integuments."<sup>18</sup> To understand Pentecostalism in Latin America by attempting to strip the subject of its cultural and religious outer-shell has led many to view it solely through a political lens. In other words, Pentecostalism has often been viewed as a political rather than a religious movement. In acknowledging Pentecostalism's religious significance it becomes clear that its outer religiosity is a membrane of sorts through which Pentecostal ideas become exchanged with greater social and political ideas that permeate the cultural fabric of Latin America.

It is important to remember that Pentecostalism's success must be defined by how well it has attracted people, not by how exclusive its has been. Harvey showed how well neoliberalism attracted differing interests by becoming useful in forging alliances between varying groups and constructing an identity around which "class power" could be restored.<sup>19</sup> The same can also be said of Pentecostalism in Chile just prior to the rise of Pinochet and during the dictatorship that followed. Everett A. Wilson

has argued that Pentecostalism is a movement of personal transformation and revolutionary change,” one rooted in an organizational model that is best expressed as “cellular or segmented units.”<sup>20</sup> These units encourage independence, which has facilitated Pentecostalism's acceptance by people of differing class origins. This is a deeper understanding of the shared pragmatism between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism: flexibility.

Sociologist Ashley Davis-Hamel argued in 2012 that many Latin American leaders had applied a form of “pragmatic neoliberalism” as opposed to a pure or literal implantation.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Chile specifically, Davis-Hamel argued that even the “Pinochet regime [had] to modulate the orthodox neoliberal approach” in response to its economic failings and because of demands from constituencies that the regime was trying to reach.<sup>22</sup> Neoliberal pragmatism is a phenomenon Harvey had already identified in Chile following the 1982 debt crisis.<sup>23</sup> But the crux of both arguments by both Davis-Hamel and Harvey centers on how neoliberalism could not be implemented without significant augmentation. Their arguments also imply that the reception of neoliberalism as an ideology could still be at its core neoliberal despite some changes in its execution. As an example, Harvey argues that President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair took what had once been a minority position - i.e. neoliberalism - and helped it become “mainstream” as a consolidated “alliance of forces” which these leaders “could not help but sustain.”<sup>24</sup> The “alliance between big business and conservative backed Christians,” also included “the media and universities,” which implies a certain minimum level of diversity in terms of message and appeal. Neoliberalism needed this flexibility in order to endure beyond the Reagan-Thatcher era that initially gave it life.<sup>25</sup>

As for the pragmatics of Pentecostalism vis-a-vis its reception and endurance in Latin America, William K. Kay has written that “the willingness of Pentecostals to engage in the political process, either on the left or the right” has confused many secular scholars, but is nonetheless a very real and

consistent characteristic of Pentecostalism.<sup>26</sup> Sociologists and political scientists since the late 1980s have observed the fluidity of Pentecostalism's political behavior in Chile. The most notable are the studies of Timothy J. Steigenga and of Maria Soledad, who have observed how Pentecostals were split in support of President Allende then again when Pinochet came to power.<sup>27</sup> Issues of political history, as well as cultural and religious formations, including class, come to the fore in these studies. What remains constant is Pentecostalism's pragmatic response to vastly different political eras. Both before dictatorship, when a wave of socialist reforms swept through Chile, and during the repression of dictatorship, Pentecostalism grew in the rural and urban poor, as well as the professional and more affluent classes.

Flexible interpretation is a feature of Pentecostalism that allows the faith to be conceptualized and practiced in different ways by different people from differing social strata. The poor can have their own form of Pentecostalism that is conceptualized and practiced differently from that of the more affluent segments of society; both would still be seen as equally Pentecostal. It is in this manner that a religion originating in the poor could be just as well received by more affluent classes. At times, Pentecostalism has been fervent and quite vocal about government policies towards the poor; at other times, however, is mute, tacitly endorsing the economic status quo.

As an explanation of Pentecostalism's ability to be received across class divides, the notion of pragmatism, while helpful, comes dangerously close to promoting misconceptions of homogeneity among Latin America's poor or middle-classes. It is necessary to keep in mind that class in Latin America is not some homogenous mass, something we came to understand about class dynamics in the Global North some time ago. As a way of testing for diversity within class as well as between classes, focusing on issues of wealth and politics can be a means of highlighting fissures and organizational anomalies. Focusing on situations in which tantalizing sums of money are accumulated, or when

greater access to power is involved, helps expose the actual pragmatics of Pentecostalism in action.

Asking where the most accumulation of money and power occurs within the Pentecostal movement, the one consistent answer is the megachurch. This is why it is relevant to focus study on the megachurch, because no other organizational structure of the Pentecostal movement has accumulated more wealth and access to power. As Pentecostalism grew in membership and political relevance, “the religious movement itself has adopted the corporate strategies and organizational forms” that have harnessed the potential strength of a the movement.<sup>28</sup> It turns out the “haven of the masses” that Christian Lalive d'Epinay described in 1969 Chile is an amorphous construct. This is why more recently theologian Allan Anderson has argued that there is “no meta model of Pentecostalism” that crosses across regions, classes, or political affiliations.<sup>29</sup> What Anderson's argument clarifies can help us to understand where the megachurch fits within a religious movement that is without an archetype.

If Anderson had explored this question in detail, he would have benefited from Edward Cleary's earlier published work, in which Cleary noted that after the Pinochet era in Chile, newly minted middle-class Pentecostals were “repelled” by the lack of formal education, especially college education, prevalent among pastors who originated from the poor.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the Chilean middle-class began to produce their own pastors and built new and more opulent churches that better suited their views and class lifestyle. Cleary's observations of class preference within the Pentecostal movement in Chile, along with Pentecostalism's well documented pragmatics, uncovers at least one archetype that can be applied more widely in other case studies. This shows us that the Pentecostal megachurch can be an archetype, of sorts, strongly associated with the more affluent classes because. Therefore, it can be said that megachurches are archetypical to the affluent classes of Pentecostalism, rather than the poor.

Regarding Pentecostalism receptivity across cultural divides;

These historical roots in the radical fringes of ‘free church’ Evangelicalism tend to create a certain

fundamentalist rigidity while paradoxically, Pentecostalism's emphasis on 'freedom in the Spirit' renders it inherently flexible in different cultural and social contexts, and made the transplanting of its central tenets in different parts of the world more easily assimilated. With the passing of a century, the historical roots are not as easily recognizable. Yet Harvey Cox observes that 'the great strength of the pentecostal impulse' lies in 'its power to combine, its aptitude for the language, the music, the cultural artefacts, the religious tropes... of the setting in which it lives'.<sup>31</sup>

What becomes clear, from this perspective, is that Pentecostalism is not only easily interpreted and spread, but also that it can be easily implemented. In other words, the praxis of Pentecostalism stems from its flexibility. This accounts for opulent megachurches being considered just as authentically "Pentecostal" as small storefront churches or even parlor room churches which meet in different members' home on any given day of the week.

What is, or is not, physically present in the church has little to nothing to do with it being legitimately Pentecostal. Yet the observation can be made that the earthly concerns of members must differ from one church to another, even if the spiritual needs supposedly remain the same. This means that the megachurch is not simply a byproduct of more money being available in certain areas. Instead, we should see the megachurch as a manifestation of secular concerns, within a religious context, that more strongly reflect the affluent than the poor. Megachurches project economic and political potency much more strongly than smaller, modest, churches can. With this understanding of megachurches in mind, one can review their history in Chile during either the Allende or Pinochet era as that of meaningful symbols, as well as actors in turbulent times.

In reference to Pentecostalism's political ambiguity, although William Kay had noted Pentecostal political involvement, Calvin L. Smith argues that Pentecostals also exhibit a form of political neutrality that espouses stepping away from the political process, so as to avoid "becoming entangled by the affairs of the world."<sup>32</sup> In one instance, political neutrality "paid great dividends"



during the Nicaraguan-Sandinista war, because neither side viewed Pentecostals as opposed to their views, and as a result even during the conflict Pentecostalism grew.<sup>33</sup> Those who discount this idea that Pentecostals are politically mute, and thus politically impotent, have not understood the effectiveness of neutrality from a position of weakness. It is in fact a form of Pentecostalism flexibility. Smith himself makes it a point to clarify that the form of Pentecostalism that was present in Nicaragua is “classical”, meaning small churches created in poor communities and led by the poor.<sup>34</sup> These small churches had neither the means nor the connections to project themselves as a potent force either economically or politically, so by projecting neutrality Pentecostals quite literally removed themselves from the crosshairs of more powerful groups. That Pentecostalism grew during this period suggests that many may have opted to join Pentecostalism as a means for coping with the war.

As it pertains to the point of first contact between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism in Chile, megachurches should not be viewed as simple byproducts of enterprising Pentecostals, nor of the raging political forces outside of Pentecostalism. Consequently, the phenomenon of the megachurch has been a kind of coping mechanism. Although it reflects primarily the attitudes and capabilities of the more affluent classes, the megachurch has retained its symbolic importance to Pentecostalism. From this perspective, megachurches can be bastions against political antagonists or ambassadors seeking to form alliances, thus offering more flexibility in turbulent times. This seems consistent with the relative wealth and political strength between the poor and the more affluent. Even in developing nations such as Chile in the 1960s, megachurches came to symbolize a religious engine of political expression and wealth accumulation. Yet, megachurches move beyond merely coping with turbulent times; they also represent a means of consolidating the economic and political positions that Pentecostals have struggled for long before the emergence of the megachurch.

Although critical of Emillio Willems's and Christian Lalive d'Epinay's view of Pentecostalism's

capacity for recreating rural social structure during mass urbanization, many Pentecostal apologists, nonetheless have themselves suggested understanding Pentecostalism as a haven. Pentecostalism's success in forming “organic communities” in response to the atomization of the family unit in the urban environment “gave many converts a new world view, one that related them to a like-minded community and provided an intimate network of spiritual and social support.”<sup>35</sup> And yet, the very critics of Willems and d'Epinaay have argued that “exogenous factors that have little to do with Pentecostals”, such as “deprivation, demographic upheaval” and others, have confounded sociologists, because they have failed to note that not all evangelical groups “have experienced growth at essentially the same rate” nor with equal success.<sup>36</sup> The nuance of their criticism, although good at pointing out the heterogeneity of Pentecostalism, nevertheless too easily segregates Pentecostalism from the effects of social upheaval.

Pentecostalism has far and away outpaced all other evangelicals in terms of worldwide growth. This is abundantly true in Chile and the rest of Latin America. But it is self-serving to be critical and deny sociological explanations for Pentecostalism's growth and then speak of organic communities and network development during these times. Everett A. Wilson, in his analysis of Pentecostalism reveals it to be a movement dominated by “cell-like congregations” averaging “30 to 80 adults,” that promote the development “of leadership rather and followership.”<sup>37</sup> To be fair, Wilson emphasizes the holistic creation of community that begins “when the church takes care of the whole person,” which includes providing a community, home and employment as it is needed.<sup>38</sup> This holistic approach is, to Wilson at least, more organic and thus can be said to be following the “natural order” of people's lives.<sup>39</sup>

Even if one is inclined to accept Wilson's differentiation between sociological analysis from religious analysis that the former is perhaps too focused upon specific cause and effect and the latter being more holistic is thus better, then what can we make of Pentecostalism when it is expressed outside the church and its organic community? Wilson does little to help understand Pentecostalism as

it is expressed in terms of votes or purchasing power, except perhaps to say that these, too are an expression of evangelizing. In other words, everything that Pentecostals do can be reduced to proselytism. Wilson seems too fixated upon the “polycephalous” nature of Pentecostalism, yet in his argument it is possible to see attributes that promote its flexibility and thus pragmatic nature.<sup>40</sup> To apply Wilson's arguments, if Pentecostalism is “a movement of personal transformation and revolutionary change” emerging naturally from small groups, then what does the megachurch have to do with Pentecostalism?<sup>41</sup>

By their very nature, being the representation of a huge community of Pentecostals, megachurches are far less decentralized. In fact, megachurches are best described by how successfully they have accumulated and organized converts, wealth, property, and political influence. Using Wilson's logic, one could say that megachurches are just the natural result of successful growth. The logic of Wilson's argument is simple: gather enough people, regardless of class, and megachurches are bound to emerge. The weakness of Wilson's organic communities argument is that megachurches closely resemble the entrenched Catholic church, Pentecostalism's theological other in Latin America. Even William K. Kay noticed the “danger of over mighty ministers and the extreme interpretations of doctrine that fosters greed,” is evidence for the growth and entrenchment of notions in favor of theocracy.<sup>42</sup> With all this in mind, it is difficult to conclude that Wilson's ideas about organic communities apply to megachurches, especially when it comes to promoting revolutionary change in the name of the poor.

### **Contextualizing Growth from Consolidation**

As a percentage of the Chilean population in 1952, Protestants comprised only about 4.06%, which increased to 5.58% in 1960.<sup>43</sup> In 1970 this grew to 6.18%, and by 1973 it had reached 8.00% of the

population.<sup>44</sup> In those twenty years, the percentage of the population of Protestants in Chile had doubled. It should be noted that Pentecostals account for “some 80% of the Chilean Protestant population.”<sup>45</sup> Historically Pentecostalism spread in the “urban and rural *bajo pueblo*” (low or poor people), including the Indigenous who speak Mapuche and Aymara, and was only beginning to develop in the middle-class during the 1960s.<sup>46</sup>

It was also during the 1960s and early 1970s that much of the initial scholarship was produced about Pentecostalism, including the influential works of Emilio Willems and Christian Lalive d'Epinau. Pentecostal growth must have been conspicuous to Chileans, but the transformation from a grass-roots movement located primarily in the poor communities, to a movement adapting itself to the middle-class escaped Willems and d'Epinau. If one accepts this, then the scholarship also missed the transformation of Pentecostalism's identity out of the poorer classes into something else. Because the scholarship was primarily focused on Pentecostals themselves and not on how other segments of Chilean society were behaving towards them, it missed significant features of Pentecostal identity.

Referring back to Everett A. Wilson's notion of Pentecostalism as achieving a critical mass of marginalized groups for mobilization, such as Pentecostals in Chile, we can see that the advent of megachurch proliferation from a new angle. We can begin to see how a grass-roots movement, as Bernice Martin has described Pentecostalism, goes on to produce wealthy and politically influential megachurches in a nation that has little to no history of successful mass movements.

Combining notions of critical mass with grass-roots movement, when deconstructed, requires understanding the conditions in which Pentecostalism emerged as a established movement in Chile. This clarifies the difference between the very beginnings of Pentecostalism from when it later became a fully-fledged coherent movement. This also allows us to identify when the movement goes from being a grass-roots movement to becoming part of the establishment. This is important because as a grass-

roots movement, Pentecostalism is still an outsider or new-comer, essentially, which is a very different identity from when it became an established part of the political and economic landscape.

Megachurches, by their definition, cannot be defined as grass-roots. Their wealth and political influence clearly put these organizational structures of Pentecostalism within the mainstream of Chilean society. Although Pentecostalism is a minority religion, with the advent of the megachurch it can no longer simply be said that its churches and its members represent only the poor and marginalized segments of society. All of this leads to asking, What was happening in Chile that enabled Pentecostalism to firmly establish itself so successfully?

The period in which President Allende was killed and the transition into dictatorship which took place provides the best starting point from which to analyze the corresponding transition within Pentecostalism from a grass-roots movement to an established phenomenon in Chile. Within weeks after President Salvador Allende's death, political scientist Laurence Whitehead tried to explain “Why Allende Fell.”<sup>47</sup> It was during these initial weeks that many Chileans who had expressed opposition to the coup would disappear as part of General Pinochet's plan to wipe the slate clean in Chile. As we know, all of this happened with the tacit support of the US, clandestinely through the CIA, and following the blueprint laid out by the Chicago Boys and their mentor Milton Friedman.<sup>48</sup>

At the beginning of Allende's term, “64 percent of the electorate seemed to endorse” more reforms than those that had already been enacted.<sup>49</sup> Even though reforms had begun in Chile during the Frei administration, many expressed frustration with the speed at which they were progressing. Whitehead argues that, given the apparent sentiment of the electorate, Allende may have felt emboldened to push for more reforms. Whitehead points out that the political parties, such as the *Unidad Popular* (UP) which had originally instituted land reforms, and the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (Christian Democrats, PDC) of which Allende was a part, were themselves urging for

greater change in Chile.<sup>50</sup> Whitehead states: “it is essential to recall the polarized condition of civilian public opinion,” which dominated during Allende's term.<sup>51</sup> Voters and party leaders alike were a part of the general clamor for greater political change that had gripped Chile at the time.

To give some context to the high pressure of Chilean politics at the time, Whitehead's analysis suggests the following;

The dynamics of Chilean party politics can be explained only by focusing on the exceptional degree of mobilization and commitment required of militants and the growing strains caused by the extension of party conflict into every area of public life as 'participation' was extended ever further. One motive for the PDC's increasingly hysterical anti-government campaign was probably the need to maintain unity and momentum in a multi-class political grouping threatened by acute internal conflicts unless it could achieve rapid results.<sup>52</sup>

From Whitehead's analysis it becomes clear that not only was traditional party politics becoming increasingly mobilized, non-traditional political participation could now enter the fray because political participation was extended even further than it normally had been in previous eras. We can include Pentecostalism within Whitehead's more inclusive, yet ever more partisan and increasingly volatile, Chilean politics of the time. Within what can be described easily and honestly as a period of hyper-partisan politics, Whitehead argues, “democratization and mass mobilization” had been “extended to its maximum.”<sup>53</sup>

Under such conditions, it seems likely that mass mobilization included Pentecostals both wealthy and poor alike. To address the poor, those who traditionally are marginalized in Chilean politics, these conditions must have opened up new dimensions for them to express themselves beyond the ballot box. Party bosses, civic organizations, even the traditional *caudillo*, must have become seemingly more receptive in response to their new-found political relevance. Surely it was not a political paradise for the poor, but their increasing presence could not have gone unnoticed. In

reference to the rest of Chile, Bernice Martin had suggested that during the 1960s, which led up to the Allende presidency, “Pentecostalism drew in more layers of the popular classes, including the lower middle-class element” than it had ever before.<sup>54</sup> Extreme partisan politics was, it seems, no hindrance to Pentecostalism's appeal and growth.

Political scientist Henry A. Landsberger, taking his cue from Whitehead, has labeled the period that encapsulates the administrations of Eduardo Frei (1964-1970) and Salvador Allende (1970-1973) as one of 'hypermobilization.'<sup>55</sup> Churches were not excluded from this politically polarized, hypermobilized climate in Chile at the time. If we borrow the term “political opportunity structures” from Timothy J. Steigenga, who in turn borrowed it from political scientist Sidney Tarrow's 1991 work, we can say that churches and their organizational structures were ready to be incorporated into the existing political structures of Chilean party politics.<sup>56</sup> Traditional party politics, during extreme polarization, by necessity, became more willing to include views that hitherto was considered out of the mainstream. In this manner, Catholics and Protestants alike could, during this period, mobilize more of their religious beliefs into their political alignments. Five thousand miles north, and some fifty years later, this is just as true in the United States.

Some Protestant Pastors joined Catholic clergy in 1972 “to form the Christians for Socialism movement.”<sup>57</sup> Steigenga argues “it was significant because many members actively espoused liberation theology and became involved in left-wing parties.”<sup>58</sup> It also allowed them to express “their class interests during the Allende years.”<sup>59</sup> Another example is provided by social scientist Tad Szule in his 1965 work, which had argued even then, that “Christian Democracy makes it possible for young people to be ardently critical of the old order - including the Latin-American version of capitalism without being forced into the extreme of communism.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Szule argued that “On another level, Christian Democracy apparently has an appeal to women, especially of the middle class.”<sup>61</sup> These are

examples of religious beliefs that gained a foothold in traditional party politics.

Said another way, religion had found a way into politics. Though expressed differently according to age, gender, class, and openness to ecumenism, religious life nevertheless included an explicitly political cast. Whitehead's assertion that democratization, which meant increased involvement in the political process in Chile, also included diversity. Catholic and Protestant, poor and affluent, liberal and conservative were emboldened to express their interests within a politically charged environment.

Henry A. Landsberger, who had first written about hypermobilization in Chile in 1976, stressed that “although this hypothesis may be true in a very broad sense, it neglects to distinguish among the various forms that the mobilization of the underprivileged may take, and therefore the different consequences which it may have.”<sup>62</sup> This leaves open the distinct possibility that Protestants became increasingly more politically organized around their churches instead of more traditional centers of organizations, such as civic centers, labor unions, and, of course, the Catholic Church. Landsberger argued that rather than analyzing mobilization within a Marxist perspective, we instead should view such political mobilizations along the lines suggested by Karl W. Deutsch, who first introduced “the concept 'mobilization' into the literature in the early 1960s.”<sup>63</sup> Deutsch viewed mobilization in “highly positive terms,” but Landsberger although agreeing that Marxism was not the best orientation for viewing mobilization, cautions it was a “double-edged sword.”<sup>64</sup> In regards to Chile, especially, Landsberger presented mobilization as “uncontrolled” and dangerous, from which “Unity is not likely to result.”<sup>65</sup>

As a consequence of hypermobilization all political avenues had become “virtually exhausted,” yet no political organization “had achieved a decisive advantage over the other”<sup>66</sup> Although greater political participation and some measure of reform had been achieved, the end result was a stalemate.



“Meanwhile, the right-wing press and opposition parties would continue to feed distorted information to a middle-class which was only too determined to believe that every conceivable atrocity was a Machiavellian move instigated from the Presidency.”<sup>67</sup> When Pinochet's generals made their final deliberations for a putsch, Laurence Whitehead suggests that it was the military's overall class preferences that decided whom they would repress.<sup>68</sup>

To the question of whom the military would repress, as it relates to class preferences, Landsberger suggests that the hypermobilized environment produced a process laden with “subjective” aspects, such as increased economic and political aspirations.<sup>69</sup> It also had a “behavioral” aspect as well.<sup>70</sup> The significance of this is that increased political participation may have encouraged groups not only to “demand more respect,” which reflected “new levels of aspirations,” but it also may have encouraged groups to alter their understanding of their own identity.<sup>71</sup> This means that groups once lumped into identities by more powerful groups, e.g. the working poor being identified by the wealthy classes as simply poor, conceivably demanded the right to identify themselves in their own terms. An example of this, in the US there are some who prefer to specify their identify as white non-Latinos, even though this does little to clarify their actual ethnicity.

David E. Dixon, in 2000, concluded that just as Catholics in Chile are more likely to identify with established political parties, Protestants are more likely to identify as independent.<sup>72</sup> Pentecostal political neutrality in its willingness to engage either side of the political spectrum simply baffled many social scientist during the Cold War. If one accepts that the scholarship of the era was perhaps too eager to apply a litmus test of sorts, to identify Pentecostalism as either socialist or not, then Pentecostalism's political ambiguity was often used as evidence for placing it on one side or the other. Within the binary of the era, political ambiguity simply was not compatible with the prevailing theories of the time.

If one examines how other political actors behaved towards Pentecostalism, one can view its pragmatics in action. On the eve of the Chilean coup, the military did not target Pentecostals as a group in their initial sweep of those that might organize in opposition. Furthermore, in relation to “conditions of lesser open resistance” i.e. individuals and small groups of the poor classes, repression by traditional police and the penal system did not exhibit noticeable judicial prejudice towards Pentecostals.<sup>73</sup> Paul C. Hathazy, in his 2013 work about neoliberalism in Chile, Peru, and Argentina, argued that even among the most repressive regimes that instituted neoliberalism, their policies underwent an “evolution” in response to “the transformations of leftist or 'popular' political parties and to the impacts of urban poor grassroots mobilizations.”<sup>74</sup> The obvious meaning of this is that the policies of the Pinochet regime adjusted in response to the emergence of new factions as they became organized. Although it seems logical that the regime would have initially viewed any organization of the poor as a threat, their assessment could have changed regarding Pentecostals. In fact, the regime's policies was altered towards Pentecostals. It would be too strong to say all Pentecostals were spared from the first disappearances, but as a minority religion Pentecostalism was not repressed as a matter of course. This did not change, even after the initial declaration of martial law.

In December, 1974 “the leaders of thirty-two Pentecostal churches published a statement in the newspaper *El Mercurio*” in support of the “intervention of the armed forces” and thus ensuring that Pentecostals would remain outside of the opposition.<sup>75</sup> The statement was a signal to Pinochet that Pentecostals were prepared to do business with his regime, which led to Pinochet officially opening the newly constructed Pentecostal cathedral in downtown Santiago on the two-year anniversary - almost to the day - of the coup.<sup>76</sup> The Protestant Church Te Deum in Chile, just after the opening of the cathedral led by Pastor Javier Vasquez and supported by “2,500 other evangelical leaders placed an advertisement in the national newspaper supporting the Pinochet regime.”<sup>77</sup> This clearly marks a rapprochement

between evangelical Protestants, including conservative Catholics, with Pinochet's regime.

Interestingly, as an example of pragmatic Pentecostalism, a religious leader that had “signed on with the Council of Pastors,” reversed his position in 1991, a year after Pinochet was safely out of office.<sup>78</sup> Still, it cannot be said that all Protestants supported dictatorship, especially because a schism began to appear among the Protestant leadership after the Te Deum. By 1982, many among the “Pentecostal laity” broke with the more powerful leaders to form the “*Confraternidad Cristiana de Iglesias* which rejected the 'Catholic' model of partnership with the state.”<sup>79</sup> This provides a small insight into divisions within greater Pentecostalism in Chile that may indicate how subgroups can exist based upon class. It should be noted that there is scant little scholarship about Pentecostal schismatic behavior in Latin America vis-a-vis class, therefore this suggestion is presented only as a possible thesis for future scholarship and as a general point of curiosity. In the case of Chile it is telling that the “laity” was the center of the break.

It is conceivable that during the Frei-Allende years hypermobilization and political neutrality enabled Pentecostals to assert themselves and to realign themselves according to how other powerful political actors saw them. In other words, Pentecostalism successfully changed its political identity, during the Frei-Allende years and after, in response to Pinochet's coup. In light of this, one can begin to understand why Pinochet quickly reached out to Pentecostals, especially after the Catholic Church in Chile, led by Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, expressed “public concerns” about the coup.<sup>80</sup> One would think that Pinochet, himself a conservative Catholic, would have had some qualms about seeking Pentecostal support for his rule. Chile's cultural and religious history was not favorable towards Pentecostalism before the 1960s. This was changing, though, at least in so far as to how the government publicly stated its position toward Pentecostalism during dictatorship.

To this day Pentecostalism's significance in the scholarship is bracketed solely by its challenge

to five-hundred years of Catholicism and its remarkable plebeian origins. Bernice Martin exhorts “Pentecostalism in Latin America as a decisive breach in the Catholic religious and cultural monopoly, the first installment of a voluntarist movement from below.”<sup>81</sup> She stresses the transformative capacity of Pentecostalism within a culture that many view as rigid, even inimical to change. But viewing Pentecostalism's transformative capacity strictly within the frame work of Marxist notions of class consciousness leaves out what can be described as class inclusion. Marxist theory does not allow for a class consciousness to extend to other classes, thus the class consciousness of the poor cannot extend to the affluent nor vice versa. Nevertheless, the Pentecostal movement during the Cold War was regularly viewed within Marxist theory, which meant that the fact that many of the more affluent were also converting was over-looked and unaccounted for. When Chile's middle-class began to identify themselves within the same Pentecostal movement that originated among the poor it must signal a change in how other political actors in Latin America viewed Pentecostalism. The change in how others perceived Pentecostalism, quite simply, is the key point that was overlooked in earlier scholarship.

To go back to the question that began this subsection - how did a grass-roots movement go on to produce megachurches during dictatorship? - we can hypothesize that Pentecostalism was no longer simply a grass-roots movement by the time of the coup. Pentecostalism had achieved, as Wilson argues, a critical mass by 1973: it had transformed from an old identity into a newer identity. This means that Pentecostalism had by 1973 begun to consolidate its position in Chile. That the percentage of people who identified as Protestant during Pinochet's dictatorship doubled, yet again, from 8% to 16%, and that the number of indigenous megachurches located in the capital increased from two to at least ten, indicates that Chilean Pentecostalism was past simply being an emerging grass-roots movement and was poised to make even larger gains as it began emerging as a member of the

establishment.<sup>82</sup> Pentecostalism defined by its political pragmatism, facilitated by its flexibility, entered into alliances with varied political actors, such as a populist socialist president or a hard-line dictator, yet still espoused political neutrality.

### **Segregation, Megachurches, and Party Politics: Bottom Up or Top Down?**

It is fair to say that the poor, far and away have been the most receptive to Pentecostalism than any other class of people, the world over. Allan Anderson, Professor of Mission and Pentecostal Studies at the University of Birmingham who wrote about Pentecostals in 2013, suggests that “more than three-quarters of its members in the world today are not ‘white’, and this proportion continues to increase,” especially in the most impoverished sections of Latin America.<sup>83</sup> Anderson believes that Pentecostalism's message is tailored to appeal to the poor, by appealing to their values, attitudes, and aspirations. Anderson writes that “most Pentecostals belong to a grassroots movement appealing initially to the disadvantaged and underprivileged, whose desire for upward social mobility is nurtured and sometimes realized by what Pentecostalism offers.”<sup>84</sup>

Anderson promotes a bottom-up direction of values that suffuse the religion. This should affect the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of churches and those unspoken communal rules of behavior. As a whole, the praxis of Pentecostalism by this logic should reflect value sets more strongly associated with the poor than any other group. What is promoted is a notion of a world-wide Pentecostal movement of "redemption from below," by definition, revolutionary in its zeal.<sup>85</sup> But to examine Chile as a prime example of Pentecostal revolutionary zeal, the characteristic of political neutrality based on pragmatic Pentecostalism, appears to be more opportunistic than Anderson and others have emphasized. Regardless of political inclination and class, Chile during the Frei-Allende years, was hypermobilized and thus, out of necessity, more politically inclusive. Politically motivated

Pentecostalism was just one group out of many that benefited. In this manner, Pentecostalism is less revolutionary and more reactive, if one defines revolutionary as proactively creating the conditions for change. This means that Pentecostalism has exhibited great success as an opportunist movement. Adapting to changing conditions, rather than actively creating the conditions for change as a revolutionary worldview. In view of this difference of perspective, Pentecostalism in Chile, was adept at promoting itself as being supportive of change without challenging the overall status quo. Pentecostalism changed dance partners without having to change its tune, which is precisely what it did when Chile was forcibly changed from a democratically elected government to a dictatorship.

One telling point here is the proliferation of Pentecostal megachurches in Chile, which Everett Wilson refers to as "neo-Pentecostal" groups that are "representing generally more affluent social sectors than the classical Pentecostals."<sup>86</sup> The reason to be sceptical of Pentecostalism's supposed revolutionary attributes is because of how well the more affluent classes have incorporated Pentecostalism's central tenets and praxis, yet have been able to retain their own pre-existing identity and status separate from the poor who are often viewed negatively in Latin America. Does the incorporation of Pentecostalism by the more affluent not also signal a degree of co-optation? Without hard studies about differences in praxis and expectations from Pentecostalism based upon class identity, it is impossible to know why so many of Latin America's affluent overlooked entrenched social perceptions about the poor and readily converted to Pentecostalism. Beyond merely referring to the quality of the message, there must be something more to explain how and why the message was not seen as only pertaining to the *bajo pueblo*. To solely focus on Pentecostalism's message as it related to the poor does not address how the message successfully overcame cultural segregation in Latin America.

Wilson in particular, because of his critical mass theory of Pentecostalism has, side-stepped the issue by focusing mostly on classical Pentecostals. To once again address Wilson's take on critical mass

and the question of how megachurches arise, one would expect them to emerge where Pentecostalism is strongest. One way of testing this is by marking the distribution of megachurches. If Wilson is right, megachurches should be distributed more or less where most Pentecostals live - if one agrees that this is the most logical way to represent Pentecostal strength.

Many Chilean Protestant churches were founded before 1973. However, the distinction of being considered a megachurch requires some clarification. The North American model, which dominates the literature about megachurches, does not necessarily apply to megachurches in other parts of the world. History, culture, and economic development only begin to describe the list of factors that influence how Pentecostalism as a whole and megachurches in particular developed in any given nation. Chile, in broad strokes, has not developed the obviously large churches that have mushroomed across the US since the Reagan era. In the capital of Santiago, there are perhaps, three edifices that can be recognized as physically large Pentecostal megachurches. The most prestigious is the *Catedral de Jotabeche*, located in central Santiago, which is also the very church that Pinochet inaugurated in 1975 sealing the accord between Chile's influential Pentecostal leadership and the regime. The cathedral was built by *Primera Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal de Chile* (First Methodist Pentecostal Church of Chile), with the other two built by *Primera Iglesia Evangelica Bautista* (First Evangelical Church located in Bautista, Santiago) and the *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile* (Pentecostal Church of Chile).<sup>87</sup> There are also many foreign megachurches in Chile, often affiliated with indigenous churches, for example the First Methodist Pentecostal Church of Chile has a fifty year association with a US megachurch, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

To focus on megachurches established by Chileans, in total there are about nine indigenous megachurches in Chile's capital. The *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile* is a good example of an Chilean church that was established in the capital in 1947, but became a megachurch in membership, wealth

and political presence in 1980 when it opened its flagship church in central Santiago.<sup>88</sup>

Not all megachurches fared well during dictatorship, as was the case with *Mision Iglesia Pentecostal*, founded in Santiago in 1954. It emerged as a megachurch in 1964 when it became a founding member of the Evangelical Theological Community of Chile.<sup>89</sup> In 1982 the church allied itself with the Christian Fellowship of Churches, thereby splitting from the 1975 Te Deum in which the majority of Pentecostal leadership expressed support for Pinochet's regime. As a result the church lost much of its membership after 1982.<sup>90</sup> It can only be imagined how many of the smaller Pentecostal churches found themselves in the uncomfortable position of choosing between unity in their religion or breaking with it in resistance to dictatorship and facing the very real prospect of government repression. Still, the Pentecostal leadership who felt that Pinochet's regime was necessary, and perhaps even good for the nation, was not ever seriously challenged from within.

Alejandro Portes, studying Latin American urbanization, produced a demographic map of 1985 Santiago based upon class.<sup>91</sup> Portes analyzed the migration of Chile's rural poor into the capital. His analysis suggested that migration was uneven, marked by neighborhood segregation. He described it as an "accelerating influx directed toward a few receiving centers," especially in the capital as the poor went in search of jobs.<sup>92</sup> The most remarkable aspect of accelerating migration is the "highly unequal income distribution" that produces ghettos and enclaves for the wealthy.<sup>93</sup> Yet, the sheer number of people who filled Latin American capitals was enormous. Santiago in 1970 had a population of 2.6 million people, but by 1985 it swelled to just over four million, which was one-third of the entire Chilean population.<sup>94</sup>

According to Portes' mapping of Santiago, the majority of the poor lived in the southern districts of the city, with the affluent residing in the north and especially in the northeast.<sup>95</sup> By mapping such "class polarization" it is possible to locate where and what type of neighborhoods megachurches were



in during the period of dictatorship.<sup>96</sup> In this manner Wilson's critical mass theory can be tested to see where flagship megachurches (or for one megachurch its corporate offices) were located with respect to areas where the poor, working-class, middle-class, and wealthy were living in the capital. It can be seen that *Iglesia Evangelica Autonoma Pentecostal*, *Iglesia Asamblea de Dios Autonoma*, *Primera Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal de Chile*, *Primera Iglesia Evangelica Bautista*, *Corporacion Iglesia Evangelica Vitacura* (CIEV), *Mision Iglesia Pentecostal*, and *Iglesia Unida Metodista Pentecostal* (or at least its corporate offices) are all located in wealthy neighborhoods when their locations are compared with Alejandro Portes' map and supporting data.<sup>97</sup> This places seven of the nine megachurches in Santiago located in wealthy neighborhoods, with two megachurches, *Las Asembleas de Dios* and *Iglesia Pentecostal de la Trinidad* located in working-class neighborhoods that closely border middle-class sectors of the capital.

The *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile* which has been left out of the group because it originates in the town of Curico, nevertheless, is a good example of a Chilean megachurch that is a large collection of small to mid-sized churches throughout the nation that are collectively organized.<sup>98</sup> Of its fourteen churches located in Santiago, two are in wealthy areas, five in middle-class areas, six in working-class areas, and one in a poor area.<sup>99</sup> It could not be ascertained which location was its main representative in the city, nor the workings of its hierarchy in general. This megachurch is like many of Chile's megachurches, in that its main church was founded outside of the capital, but has founded many churches in the capital, especially during dictatorship.

To compare, the *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile* with a similar megachurch listed above, such as the CIEV founded in 1933, which is comprised of many smaller churches throughout Chile, and was at one time affiliated with *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile*.<sup>100</sup> The CIEV has twenty-four smaller churches in Santiago; of those ten are either in wealthy or middle-class areas, seven in working-class areas and four

in poor areas. This leaves three that are located in sections of the city not covered by Portes' data of 1985 Santiago. To be thorough, the CIEV also has a group of seven other mid-sized churches that are listed as the governing body for all its churches in the city of Santiago. Of this governing body, the church listed as the superintendant in the capital is located in the district of Nunoa, a wealthy area of the city, with four of the other mid-size churches located in poor or working-class areas, and two located in middle-class areas.<sup>101</sup>

Noting the distribution of the smaller churches within the collective of *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile* and CIEV, especially when referenced to Portes' data, it can be said the smaller churches are close to being evenly distributed among the combined total of forty-five churches. Twenty are located in wealthy or middle-class areas, and twenty-two located in poor and working-class areas, leaving three that could not be accounted for. It is likely that all megachurches have an even distribution of their smaller churches across the city. However, when locating the flagship or headquarters of the megachurches studied above, only two are located in working-class areas, and none in poor neighborhoods. Of this group of megachurches, then, the majority are located in the areas of the capital where the more affluent live, both today and during Portes' study. It can be said that megachurches are more integrated and thus more reflective of the lifestyles of the affluent than the poor.

Theologian Virginia Nolvos has argued that Pentecostalism is a "paradigm shifts for the masses" representing "renewed perceptions of their own identity and significance," reflected through its "theology and praxis."<sup>102</sup> As worthy as Nolvos' argument is, like so many others it reinforces the myopia that has defined so many theories about Pentecostalism's appeal to the masses. Nevertheless, notions of identity perception, especially when examined through the lens of how one lives their daily life can be useful when the other groups that comprise Pentecostalism are taken into account. Regarding the proliferation of megachurches and where they are situated, spatially and spiritually in the

lives of Pentecostals, highlights notions of praxis that can be examined according to class as much as religious doctrine.

"The extreme polarization of urban growth" that was present in Chile during dictatorship did not go unnoticed by the regime.<sup>103</sup> Despite attempts of urban renewal during the Frei-Allende years, Santiago's *callampos* (shantytowns) had, afterward, continued to exhibit "an unusually high level of political mobilization" that had brought "mass arrests and even executions by" Pinochet's regime.<sup>104</sup> Provocatively, Howard Handelman, who studied shantytowns in Chile and throughout Latin America, "suggested that the major determinant of politicization and radicalization in the campamentos appeared to be the nature of outside leadership."<sup>105</sup> Handelman may have noticed the influence of outside megachurches, as well as other political actors, in poor areas of Santiago.

David E. Dixon, in his work on religion and political loyalties in Chile, notes the tendencies of "conservative Protestant ministers" who reject attempts to liberalize or even streamline legal recognition of Protestant churches.<sup>106</sup> During the Pinochet regime, Dixon suggests, the conservative Pentecostal leadership responding to socialist attempts to mobilize Protestants against the regime would not support socialist legislation, even legislation that would make it easier for Protestants to establish more churches.

It seems that conservative ministers were responding to threats to their power through the application of seemingly pro-Protestant legislation which had ulterior motives. The *personalidad juristica* is one such attempt, through legislation, to attract Protestants to support pro-socialist reforms.<sup>107</sup> The *personalidad juristica*, which was put forward just after Pinochet was voted out of office, would have removed much of the red tape that had been used in the past to hinder Protestants from establishing churches. It would have, in effect, bypassed the established order that placed the more powerful megachurches in the position to dictate their demands to smaller churches who seek to

establish themselves during a long, complicated, and often expensive legal process. It should also be mentioned that the conservative ministers who rejected this initiative were very likely the same ministers who had worked out Pentecostalism's accord with Pinochet's dictatorship. With Pentecostals, one should be cautious about slipping into the quadmire of the old *patron* system of Latin America to look for hidden strings being pulled by the powerful. However, it cannot be discounted that if megachurches are heavyweights within Pentecostalism, then it seems likely that many smaller churches that sought legal recognition, had to acknowledge the influence that more powerful megachurches wielded in the Protestant community and in Chilean politics as a whole.

Concerning Wilson's theory about Peneticotalism's critical mass, megachurches should not simply be thought of as byproducts of overall growth, but intead as indicators of growth and change that has taken place most significantly in the more affluent sectors of society. That the poor areas of Chile's capital do not have one indigenous megachurch located there, seems to be a telling sign that Pentecostalism, despite its supposed origins among the poor, cannot organize these behemoths wholly from within the poor. It seems Pentecostalism requires the more affluent in order to achieve critical mass and to fully realize its supposed revolutionary aspects. If megachurches are more specifically representative of the more affluent within Pentecostalism, then more study about what was happening with the more affluent during repressive dictatorship is required in order to understand the significance of the megachurch phenomenon in Chile.

Political scientist Marcus Taylor has argued that the Pinochet regime was a neoliberal exercise "of nation-building" through an altered form of "strategies of national developmentalism."<sup>108</sup> Taylor suggests that neoliberalism was viewed by the regime as an alternative to the hypermobilized uncertainty that marked the Frei-Allende years. Taylor claims that the dictatorship "aimed to construct a new national society that would reproduce itself in a largely depoliticised fashion," through the

implementation of neoliberalism.<sup>109</sup> The whole point of this was to reduce the tensions that produced highly partisan, and thus intractable, positions that marked the behavior on all political sides. Conveniently, neoliberalism and its indulgent attitude towards repression, for which Taylor uses the economic euphemism "creative destruction" to encapsulate all of Pinochet's politics, provides a treatment to hypermobilization, by "annihilating and replacing" the old order with new structures that would be controlled by the "seemingly neutral disciplines of market forces."<sup>110</sup> Simply put, political terror can be used to wipe the slate clean and start fresh.

Within Taylor's argument, the Pinochet regime would have repressed any organization that could not or would not embrace, at least in principle, neoliberalism. David Harvey argues that with "the whole world in economic recession, a new approach was called for" in order to regain control over what many, especially the Pinochet regime, saw as democracy run amok.<sup>111</sup> Thus neoliberalism became "a potential antidote to threats to the capitalist social order," which is exactly Taylor's view of Pinochet's attempt towards nation-building in Chile.<sup>112</sup> A synthesis of Taylor's and Harvey's theses may seem natural, but what Taylor is suggesting modifies Harvey's argument about neoliberalization creating "conditions for class formation," because the Pinochet regime was utilizing it to also reorient established class formations.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, this fits with Harvey's interpretation of "the restoration of class power, [because] it has not necessarily meant the restoration of economic power to the same people."<sup>114</sup> Pentecostals, during the coup, can be viewed as being potentially for the restoration of class power, by Pinochet and his junta. To use this understanding of how neoliberalism was being utilized during dictatorship can change the understanding of the dynamic at work when the Pentecostal movement went from being generally supportive of Allende then, seemingly reversing its position, being supportive of dictatorship. Pentecostalism was successfully reoriented during dictatorship, and in doing so it once again renewed perceptions of its own identity to others, in particular Pinochet's regime.

In this way the regime not only used neoliberalism as a test, of what or whom to repress or promote, but also as a means of reaching out to those sectors of society with characteristics amenable to neoliberalism. In other words finding allies. Neoliberalism was not solely shock; it could lure and negotiate as well. The *Iglesia Pentecostal de Chile*, which was once prominent in the Chilean Pentecostal constellation of churches during the Frei-Allende years, could have been initially as receptive of Pinochet's attempt at nation-building through neoliberalism as other Pentecostal churches were. But, because they broke from the Protestant Te Deum of 1975, which had endorsed the Pinochet regime, they represented an element of Pentecostalism that had to be cast off in order for the larger body to integrate into the regime's new order. That megachurches emerged in greater numbers in the capital means that the more affluent Pentecostals were comfortable with the new order being established along neoliberal lines. In this context, we can broaden perceptions of Pentecostalism beyond the binaries that first defined it, even beyond its simplistic classification as a religion of the poor.

Pentecostalism can be many things, but what it cannot be is a truly revolutionary movement of and for the poor, because its most powerful organizations are largely led by and made up of members who are not themselves poor. In this light, it can be said that Pinochet and his regime only had to deal with elements of Pentecostalism that they would have already felt comfortable with before the coup had even begun. Furthermore, it can be argued that the poorer segments of Pentecostalism were not well represented during the initial deliberations on the subject of dictatorship, punctuated by the 1975 Protestant Te Deum. In other words, some possibly were pressured into supporting oppressive dictatorship. With respect to nation-building and restoring class power, dictatorship under neoliberalism afforded an opportunity for some within Pentecostalism while also being a catastrophe for others. As a point of first contact with the neoliberal contagion that eventually swept throughout Latin

America, it would be unfair and untrue to simply say that all of Pentecostalism was a willing enabler to the shock of dictatorship. But a strong argument can be made that elements of Pentecostalism, epitomized by megachurches, were a vital component of establishing a symbiotic relationship between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism.

## Notes

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3. d'Epinay, 1969.
4. An eloquent essay that rightly points out the failures of past scholarship on the subject of Pentecostalism's growth. But it does not explore similar failures from theologians. William K. Kay, "Concluding Remarks", Calvin L. Smith, ed., *Pentecostal Power: Expression, Impact and Faith of Latin American Pentecostalism*, Brill, 2010, page 278.
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8. Everett A. Wilson, "Redemption from below: Emergence of the Latin American popular Pentecostals", Calvin L. Smith, ed., *Pentecostal Power: Expression, Impact and Faith of Latin American Pentecostalism*, Brill, 2010, page 10.
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11. Timothy J. Steigenga and Kenneth M. Coleman, "Protestant Political Orientations and the Structure of Political Opportunity: Chile, 1972-1991", *Polity*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Spring, 1995), pp. 465-482; Davis Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth*, University of California Press, 1990.
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13. Werner Baer, "Import Substitution and Industrialization in Latin America: Experiences and Interpretations", *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring, 1972), pp. 95-122.
14. Ibid, see tables on pages 99 thru 103, for analysis see pages 108 thru 110; Patrice M. Franko, *Puzzle of Latin American Economic Development*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pages 52, 53.
15. Smith, 2010, page 3.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, pages 39 & 40.
19. Ibid, page 31.
20. Everett A. Wilson, 2010, page 31.
21. Ashley Davis-Hamel, "Successful Neoliberalism?: State Policy, Poverty, and Income Inequality in Chile", *International Social Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3/4 (2012), pp. 79-101, page 84.
22. Ibid.
23. Harvey, 2005, page 9.
24. Ibid, page 62.
25. Ibid, pages 50 & 40.
26. Kay, 2010, page 277.
27. Catoggio and Brena's conclusion, although conceived within theories of nationalism, is modern and still relevant for twenty-first century politics; Timothy J. Steigenga and Kenneth M. Coleman, "Protestant Political Orientations and the Structure of Political Opportunity: Chile, 1972-1991", *Polity*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Spring, 1995), pp. 465-482; María Soledad Catoggio and Mariana Ortega Brena, "Religious Beliefs and Actors in the Legitimation of Military Dictatorships in the Southern Cone, 1964—1989", *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 38, No. 6, QUESTIONS OF POWER (Nov., 2011), pp. 25-37.
28. Michael Dodson, "Pentecostals, Power, and Public Space in Latin America", Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino, Edward L. Cleary, ed., *Power, Politics, and Pentecostals in Latin America*, Westview Press, 1997, page 31.
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55. Henry A. Landsberger & Tim McDaniel, "Hypermobilization in Chile, 1970- 1973," *World Politics*, 28 (July, 1976): 502-41, pages 505-06.
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65. Ibid, pages 529 & 538.
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67. Ibid, page 473; For context regarding mobilization within labor unions read, Landsberger & Coleman, 1976, pages 527-29.
68. Whitehead, page 473.
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[http://www.academia.edu/9198004/Pentecostals\\_in\\_Chile\\_Prejudices\\_Power\\_and\\_Potential](http://www.academia.edu/9198004/Pentecostals_in_Chile_Prejudices_Power_and_Potential) (Last accessed 2/2/2018)
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81. Martin, 2010, page 114.
82. Dixon, 2000, page 78.
83. Anderson, 2013, page 2.
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85. Everett A. Wilson, 2010, page 9.
86. Ibid, page 11.
87. Back in 1975 the *Catedral de Jotabeche*, was the largest Pentecostal church in the country. It was also the most expensive. Today there are larger churches, but none have the old world architecture of the *Catedral*.;  
<http://iphc.org/gso/2017/04/27/international-pentecostal-holiness-church-first-methodist-pentecostal-church-chile-celebrate-50-years/> (Last accessed 2/2/2018);  
[http://www.iglesiapentecostaldechile.cl/?page\\_id=110](http://www.iglesiapentecostaldechile.cl/?page_id=110) (Last accessed 2/2/2018);  
<http://piebs.cl/> (Last accessed 2/2/2018);  
<https://www.jotabeche.org/historia/> (Last accessed 2/2/2018).
88. The trend of founding churches in the capital has remained high since the Pinochet regime. Santiago has the most churches than any other Chilean city. It could not be established exactly how many megachurches are operating in Chile, and how many of those are located in the capital; [http://www.iglesiapentecostaldechile.cl/?page\\_id=110](http://www.iglesiapentecostaldechile.cl/?page_id=110) (Last accessed 02/02/2018).
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91. Alejandro Portes, "Latin American Urbanization during the Years of the Crisis", *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1989), pp. 7-44, page 23.
92. Ibid, page 7.
93. Ibid, page 8.
94. Ibid, pages 13 & 14.
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96. Ibid, page 16.
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98. [http://www.iglesiapentecostaldechile.cl/?page\\_id=52](http://www.iglesiapentecostaldechile.cl/?page_id=52) (Last Accessed 2/3/2018).
99. Ibid
100. <http://www.ciev.cl/index.php/superintendencias/zona-metropolitana> (Last accessed 02/02/2018);  
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103. Thomas Klak, "Latin Urban Development: Review of the 1980s and Prospects for the 1990s", *Yearbook (Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers)*, Vol. 17/18, BENCHMARK 1990 (1991/1992), pp. 283-292, page 287.
104. Howard Handelman, "Political Mobilization of Urban Squatter Settlements. Santiago's Recent Experience and Its Implications for Urban Research", *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Sum., 1975), pp. 35-72, page 35.
105. Ibid, page 43.
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## Section III

### **Neopopulism and the Megachurch in Puerto Rico, 1992**

There is no doubt that the notion of “the people” does have certain theological connotations and a history within theological disclosure. Yannis Stavrakakis<sup>1</sup>

Latin American populist leaders, who resorted to neoliberalism are often referred to as neopopulists, a brand closely associated with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and the neoliberalism they championed. Before the Reagan-Thatcher era, classic populism in Latin America was most often associated with charismatic socialist presidents such as Juan Peron, Getulio Vargas, and Salvador Allende, who all declared their causes in the name of the people. In the early 1990s, there was a “new variant of populism,” to use political theorist Kenneth M. Roberts's analysis of populism in Latin America.<sup>2</sup> Roberts was referring to president, turned dictator, Alberto Fujimori in Peru. Roberts, however, was also alluding to other president, such as Menem in Argentina and Collor in Brazil. These and other Latin American leaders were responding to deteriorating economies and "serious internal divisions," by resorting to neoliberalism to counter these "threats to the people."<sup>3</sup> These were Latin Americas first neopopulists.

This new variant of populism turned to neoliberalism to bring economic prosperity and eradicate real and imagined threats to the state. It demanded “embracing the basic tenets of market liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation and foreign investment.”<sup>4</sup> To entice the people to follow them, these leaders resorted to naked populism delivered with a promised "'salariazos' (huge wage increase) and a 'productive revolution'" for rich and poor alike.<sup>5</sup> Invariably “the neoliberal 'shock' program" that was meant to save the people would instead fail the people, with weak results or outright failure.<sup>6</sup> In Roberts's analysis, this turn to neoliberalism that “swept across Latin America with seemingly inexorable force is neither so theoretically compelling nor empirically successful as to

warrant such irresistible force.”<sup>7</sup> For Roberts, the turn to neoliberalism was a poor choice.

During the 1990s, promises of salvation from severe economic distress proved too appealing for many voters to pass on. The use of populism by neoliberals effectively sided many of Latin America's poor with wealthy elites. That the poor sided with elites should be an indication that the situation was not only bad, but probably had been so for a long time. The serious situation of internal divisions and economic free-fall that raged in the decade leading up to elections in the 1990s presented a “critical juncture,” to use Roberts's term. Roberts observed that festering economic stress can leave established political party systems susceptible to radical leaders and the changes they wreak.<sup>8</sup> In this way it can be explained how these neopopulists so radically changed government once they came into power. Parties that had once been staunch supporters of unions turned neopopulists and accepted neoliberal economic solutions for the working poor.

Within the neoliberal era “one could perhaps argue that the use of the label 'neopopulist' can be justified - but only if there were a real gain in clarity.”<sup>9</sup> For the sake of clarity, then, we can ask, What do a unionist, an autocrat, and a president turned dictator have in common with populism? If neopopulists are defined by the ability to adopt populist discourse to get elected, followed by their willingness to institute neoliberal reforms while in power, then we can see how populism and neoliberalism might fuse into a single ideological discourse. With this discourse in mind, we can identify at least one other Latin American neopopulist in this period: his name is Pedro Rossello and he was elected governor of Puerto Rico in 1992.

In the decade preceding Rossello's election, Puerto Rico too, was at a critical juncture. Pedro Rossello was a member of the New Progressive Party (*Partido Nuevo Progresista*-PNP). The PNP was a pro-statehood party and “in the 1970s, in particular after the advent of food stamps, the PNP promised that 'statehood is for the poor' guaranteeing a bonanza of federal aid to the poor as well as preserving

the Spanish language and Puerto Rican culture.”<sup>10</sup> The PNP had attempted to enact some reforms that would appeal to their working-class constituents by doing away with corporate tax breaks. However, the PNP came under intense corporate lobbying and soon found itself "forced" to keep corporate tax breaks in play.<sup>11</sup> During the early 1980s, the PNP had been unable to make good on its long standing image as the guarantor of entitlements which became "particularly damaging for the PNP's electoral prospects" in the 1984 election.<sup>12</sup> During this period before Rossello was to take office, Puerto Rico was experiencing severe social welfare cutbacks, all in the midst of high crime, and a deepening AIDS crisis on the island.<sup>13</sup> When Rossello took office he would institute new neoliberal policies over previously established neoliberal policies, which in effect can be characterized as doubling down on neoliberalism to address the island's woes.

Little was left little untouched. “The Rossello administration has privatized the operation of the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority,” including “seven hospitals and 78 clinics,” as well as selling off the cash cow of the economy, “the Puerto Rican Telephone Co., popularly known as La Telefonica,” to Verizon<sup>14</sup> It wasn't long before Verizon sold La Telefonica to the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, who at the time was “the world's wealthiest man.”<sup>15</sup> Under worsening social conditions “Rossello has made privatization his chief public policy to bring the island into a free-market global economy,” in an attempt to made good on the neoliberal bet that had yet to payoff.<sup>16</sup>

Before the Reagan-Thatcher era, populist leaders were often champions of socialist reforms. During the 1990s, populism and neoliberalism would become intertwined. In this transformation, Governor Rossello has too often been overlooked. More significantly, the critical juncture that made Rossello's neopopulism possible has not only been largely overlooked, it has also been misunderstood. It is common for scholars to focus on candidates that became elected through populist means. Understandably the charisma that these leaders display attracts voters and scholars alike. In the case of

Puerto Rico, though, the tendency to focus on Rossello's populism has left shrouded the active participation of megachurches within populist discourse. David Harvey had argued that "the active construction of consent," which is necessary for neoliberalism to spread, has at its core a populist discourse reflecting "powerful ideological influences" that were already circulating through corporations, the media, universities, churches, and think-tanks.<sup>17</sup>

By examining this period of critical juncture which set the stage for Rossello's victory in the 1992 gubernatorial election, we see the enormous political influence of Puerto Rico's first Pentecostal megachurches. The history of Puerto Rican megachurches reveals how their emergence is concordant with their growing political influence. Their history is inline with Harvey's analysis, namely that there is an "unholy alliance between big business and conservative Christians backed by the neoconservatives" who actively seek to create "a climate of opinion" to establish neoliberalism.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Puerto Rican megachurches played a major roll in Rossello's 1992 election as purveyors of conservative politics which staunchly supported the turn towards neoliberalism on the island. As the research will show, it seems highly unlikely that Rossello could have been elected without the evangelical vote, which megachurches were crucial in delivering. The repercussions of Rossello's neopopulist victory in 1992 are still be felt today. The 2017 Puerto Rican debt crisis has its roots dating back to Rossello's administration.

Although Rossello was yet another politician in a long list of politicians who turned to neoliberalism to rectify the island's troubles, the difference here is that Rossello's brand of neopopulism was in harmony with a pre-existing form of conservative Christian-populism endorsed by Pentecostals megachurches. Conservative Christian-populism was present in Puerto Rico more than a decade before Rossello ran for office, the same period that in theory represents Puerto Rico's critical juncture. In other words, Rossello's neopopulism tapped into populism that megachurches had created more than a



decade earlier. It was a variant form of populism propagandized by megachurches that not only made Rossello a viable candidate, but was also essential for his victory. During Rossello's tenure it was megachurches that acted as bulwarks against outcries against his neoliberal policies. And it was megachurches that, as a consequence of his own hubris, would abandon Rossello at the end of his second term.

To analyze this case, one must first explore the critical juncture created by Puerto Rico's quest for economic self sustainability as a commonwealth. It is in this context that Pentecostal megachurches and their form of populism first emerged on the island.

### **Puerto Rico 1940-1990: Quest for Economic Self Sustainability**

In its history Puerto Rico has had four political parties to speak of. First, is the *Partido Nuevo Progresista* (PNP), a pro-statehood party. Next is the *Partido Popular Democrático* (PPD), which advocates maintaining the current status of the commonwealth. There is the small, but vocal, *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño* (PIP), a Pro-Independence Party, and the *Partido Estadista Republicano* (PER), a Republican State-hood Party, which is the conservative wing of the PNP. Throughout Puerto Rico's political history the PNP and the PER have shown themselves to be uneasy political allies. Of all these parties, the PNP and the PPD are by far the most influential in gubernatorial elections. Since the beginning of open elections in 1948, seven governors have come from the PNP and five from the PPD, which accounts for all of Puerto Rico's Governors. The current governor of Puerto Rico is a member of the PNP.

Puerto Rico, like the rest of Latin America during the Cold War, changed dramatically. The population of Puerto Rico in 1950 was just over two million; by 1980 it increased by nearly 50%.<sup>19</sup> In the span of one generation Puerto Rico had experienced a population boom. There were more people

under the age of twenty-five than there were people over the age of fifty. One can view Puerto Rico during this period as a youthful paradise, rich in sugarcane fields, with lush mountains and an exploding, young labor force eager for jobs. Such a view belies the exploitation by corporations in search of cheap labor and tax havens which has contributed to the long-term erosion of Puerto Rico's economy and infrastructure, continuing well into the twenty-first century. One need only see the island's inability to cope with the aftermath of hurricane Maria that struck in 2017 as evidence of neoliberalism's long-term effects in Puerto Rico.

What greatly abetted Puerto Rico's turn to neoliberalism as a strategy for sustainable economic growth is the island's long history with privatization. In 1942 the Puerto Rico Industrial Development Company (PRIDCO) and the Government Development Bank of Puerto Rico (GDB) were established.<sup>20</sup> The bank was to serve Puerto Rico as its “foundation for its economic and social development.”<sup>21</sup> These initiatives were led by Luis Munoz Marin, who would campaign as a member of the PNP and become Puerto Rico's first elected governor in 1948. Munoz Marin hailed the founding of the bank, calling it the “Bank of the people.”<sup>22</sup>

With the advent of Operation Bootstrap and the Industrial Incentives Act of 1947 “a tax-exemption policy became the main engine of growth” by offering a “10-year tax exemption to companies that established new manufacturing operations on the island.”<sup>23</sup> From this point on much of Puerto Rico's economic policy since the inception of PRIDCO and the GDB, has been based upon privatization and the concept of the island serving as an offshore US corporate tax haven.<sup>24</sup> During the 1960s, the strategy to lure mainland corporations through tax incentives seemed to work well enough, at first. Privatization and tax incentives, saw employment from manufacturing increased from 55,000 to 82,000 people in 1960, but total employment actually decreased from 603,000 in 1951 to 543,000 in 1960.<sup>25</sup>

Professor of Latin American Studies, Pedro A. Caban, has argued that the era of Puerto Rican flight from the island "was accompanied by social stability and relatively peaceful labour relations".<sup>26</sup> It seems odd to describe Puerto Rico during the 1950s and 1960, as stable. According to the Library of Congress between 1945 and the mid 1960s more than one million Puerto Ricans had migrated to the mainland.<sup>27</sup> As for peaceful labor relations, it would be difficult for unions to bargain from a position of strength when much of the workforce moves away. Although in 1952 Puerto Rico was granted commonwealth status by an act of Congress, the policies from Congress and the island's government that were designed to empower the "people," as Munoz Marin put it, actually drove many of the people off their island and into the ghettos of mainland US cities.

Professor Caban was correct, though, when he suggested that the state did take a central role in directing economic development, and that it relied heavily upon foreign investment to stimulate the economy. The first investors to come to the island and stay for good were the pharmaceutical companies: "by 1972, 47 pharmaceutical companies had established operations in Puerto Rico," and continue to operate there to this day.<sup>28</sup> On the PRIDCO website the list of industries that it supports includes biotechnology, agricultural research, aerospace, and electronics to name just a few. But, as a selling point for why corporations in these fields should open operations on the island the website states:

With five decades of pharmaceutical manufacturing under its belt, Puerto Rico has a highly experienced workforce knowledgeable in GMP, FDA and other global regulations. Although 60% of employees in the life sciences have at least a bachelor's degree, Puerto Rico offers the lowest labor costs of any region under US jurisdiction – with hourly earnings in manufacturing averaging 65 to 80% of the US average.<sup>29</sup>

The development company whose mandate is to stimulate economic growth for Puerto Rico, does so by selling out Puerto Rican labor at a discount, which meant that by "1996, the average manufacturing

wage was 60 percent of that paid in the U.S.”<sup>30</sup> Given Puerto Rico's economic history, this strategy that undercuts Puerto Rican labor is probably as old as colonization itself.

With the creation of the Puerto Rico Municipal Finance Agency in 1972, began the selling of municipal bonds to American and European investors. The practice of selling bonds by various municipal authorities, including the Housing Authority and public waterworks and the electrical company, continued to 2015, exacerbating the debt crisis which broke that year.<sup>31</sup> In 1976 Congress passed legislation for federal tax exemption for corporations seeking to open facilities in overseas US territories. This legislation was known as Section 936 of the US Internal Revenue Code. This act of Congress stimulated a corporate rush to Puerto Rico in order to take advantage of what eventually became massive tax dodging.

Section 936 set Puerto Rico up to become an offshore tax shelter, without having to leave US jurisdiction, and the protections that it provides. The tax shelter given to corporations meant that "the benefits of Section 936, to the extent that they helped grow Puerto Rico's economy, were primarily felt by the investors, not by the residents of the Island."<sup>32</sup> "Pharmaceuticals in particular received 267% in tax savings," which meant that they literally could write off \$2.67 in taxes for every dollar paid to their workers.<sup>33</sup>

None of the tax savings were passed on to workers or the government of Puerto Rico. This fleecing of Puerto Rico's tax base coupled with low wages for workers practically assured government dependency for selling municipal bonds to make up the inevitable short fall in its budget. This strategy was seen by some to be the linchpin for privatization plans "to transform Puerto Rico's economy and its government-owned enterprises and services into one resembling a mainland state."<sup>34</sup> Ironically, the more successful PRIDCO was at attracting mainland corporations, the more the GDB and the Puerto Rico Municipal Finance Agency needed to sell their bonds. In effect, Puerto Rico needed to prostitute

itself for the dubious distinction of placing itself into ever-increasing debt. At first the strategy of selling bonds to boost government revenue did seem to work, mainly because the safety net of federal funded social welfare programs, like the Foodstamps Program and public housing subsidies, were in place. The precarious balancing act of stimulating foreign investment with tax breaks and low wage labor, only worked so long as the number of new jobs being created kept pace with the unemployment rate or it would have to be made up for by welfare subsidies. Once the safety net of federal welfare funding was severely cutback by the Reagan administration, the strain on Puerto Rico's infrastructure reached a breaking point by 1990.

Steadily, throughout the 1980's Puerto Rico's infrastructure and social moorings unraveled. Almost like a neoliberal ponzi scheme, Puerto Rico's economy could not meet the social needs of its people. Despite neoliberal initiatives, the unemployment rate in Puerto Rico reached a "high of 23.4%," in 1983.<sup>35</sup> Crime from drug lords plagued the island so much that by 1993 "for the first time, the authorities here and in Washington said, American military reserve units have been routinely deployed to assist local police in fighting crime."<sup>36</sup> As a result, 3,000 new prison cells were under construction by two private companies in 1993, to deal with overcrowded conditions.<sup>37</sup> Along with this, healthcare crumbled under the weight of "the second highest per capita incidence of AIDS in the US," on an island where "sixty-percent of which lacks health care insurance."<sup>38</sup> Puerto Rico was in the midst of a critical juncture. The gubernatorial election of 1992 was ripe for the neopopulist Rossello to take advantage of.

There was one other result from Puerto Rico's quixotic quest to find economic and social stability in neoliberalism: the proliferation of colleges. Prior to 1960, there were only a handful of colleges of the island.<sup>39</sup> Between 1960 and 1990, at least thirty-four colleges were established in Puerto Rico.<sup>40</sup> By 2003, there would be 46 separate colleges operating satellite campuses all over Puerto

Rico.<sup>41</sup> Enrollment levels soon increased almost exponentially. In 1970, "Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions" for Puerto Rico was 63,073 student, and by 1980, total enrollment more than doubled to 131,148.<sup>42</sup> The huge growth in collegiate enrollment did not go unnoticed. In 1981 the GDB established the Puerto Rico Higher Education Assistance Corporation and the Student Loan Association which "guaranteed loans granted [to] students by private banks under a federally sponsored program."<sup>43</sup> The new policy of guaranteed student loans, certainly helped students afford college. But is also provided private banks with a guaranteed stream of revenue and provided the government its share of revenue in the face of a tax base that was shrinking during the 1980s. By 1990, total enrollment in Puerto Rican colleges increased to 154,065 and by the year 2000, it rose again to 183,290 students.<sup>44</sup> According to the 2000 census, there were 835,523 people living on the island that were between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five.<sup>45</sup> This means that perhaps 15%, or more, of Puerto Rico's young adults were attending college. Beginning in 1960, college in Puerto Rico emerged as an industry of its own.

The colleges of Puerto Rico reflect the economic reality that the higher-wage jobs were located in the bio-tech/pharmaceutical industry. In the early 1990s nearly a million people were employed in Puerto Rico, "about 110,000, or more than 11 percent, are in manufacturing jobs generated by about 300 companies that enjoy the benefits of Section 936."<sup>46</sup> It seems that higher education in Puerto Rico served to supply its largest employers with educated, but cheap, labor. Many of the new colleges were liberal arts institutions, but without graduation data it is impossible to know how many Puerto Rican students graduated right into the pharmaceutical industry. The proliferation of colleges, including the mega-college that the University of Puerto Rico would eventually become, with its current enrollment of 63,000 students, can be viewed as a testament to education having become a market driven growth industry.<sup>47</sup>

The growth of colleges in Puerto Rico was commented on by a Puerto Rican scholar who noted that higher education, when interpreted through the notion of "human capital theory," becomes a "service industry for private gain."<sup>48</sup> Although economists are unable to find the "real rates of return" for a college education, on the whole it "is still a good investment."<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the question to ask of Puerto Rico's service industry of colleges is, Have the students benefited as much as the corporations, banks, or the colleges? Although there was industrial growth, including greater access to education, under neoliberalism Puerto Rico still suffered from high unemployment, low wages, rampant crime, and poor healthcare. These circumstances fueled mass migration for decades. These were the conditions out of which the megachurch would emerge from in Puerto Rico.

### **The Emergence of Puerto Rican Megachurches**

During the Cold War, Puerto Rico like the rest of Latin America, was experiencing a profound period of urbanization. As poverty and crime soared, urbanization became increasingly associated with concepts of anomie to explain "marginal urban groups" that were crowding into Puerto Rico's growing cities.<sup>50</sup> The uniquely Caribbean phenomenon of "coastal gentrification," when elites flee crime ridden cities, buying up inexpensive beach front properties in small fishing villages is common in Puerto Rico.<sup>51</sup> Sociologist Hector M. Martinez-Ramirez, in his study of Pentecostalism's political activities in Puerto Rico, emphasizes that Pentecostal expansion in Puerto Rico was most successful in the rural poor sections of the island.<sup>52</sup> Martinez-Ramirez argues that Pentecostalism' positive reception in rural Puerto Rico happened because Catholic "churches neglected the rural areas by remaining mostly urban" in their outreach programs.<sup>53</sup> One reason the Catholic church focused its resources in urban centers can be because of the limited availability of priests. In 1984 it was reported that there were "nearly 800 priests" spread throughout parishes in Puerto Rico, with San Juan alone having "126 Catholic

parishes."<sup>54</sup>

Because there is a Catholic church in just about every Puerto Rican town large enough to have a public square, there are not enough priests to administer to them all at once. Yet this is not a problem for Protestant churches. In San Juan, there were possibly "200 to 300 Protestant churches" that likely had more than one pastor or lay minister present.<sup>55</sup> As an example of Protestant church organization, one of the largest and oldest megachurches in the US, the Church of God, which is located in Tennessee, established branch churches in Puerto Rico in 1944.<sup>56</sup> In 1962 the Church of God had "5,556 congregations" world wide, administered by 6,386 ordained or lay ministers, with approximately "65 churches" located in Puerto Rico.<sup>57</sup> Every church within the Church of God organization, including Puerto Rican churches, had leaders present. The same could not be said of Catholic churches.

For the rural poor who migrated to cities in search of jobs, to see how well Catholic churches are administered there compared to churches in the smaller towns they had left, could not have gone unnoticed. Considering that the "language and the national origin of pastors" in Protestant churches was overwhelming Puerto Rican, it is likely that these factors facilitated an image of Protestant churches, and leadership, as more accessible and in tune to the needs of the poor.<sup>58</sup>

If every Catholic parish in San Juan had at least one priest, then it is possible that nearly 16% of all Catholic priests on the island were serving in the capitol alone. Yet to say that the poor were catered to and made to feel welcome in all urban Catholic churches would belie the social dynamic of Puerto Rico's cities. There is very little information about segregation in Puerto Rican cities before the 2000 census, but if a study based on the 2000 census is any indication of segregation within Puerto Rican cities ten or twenty years before, it reveals that overall segregation in Puerto Rico was lower than in the U.S.<sup>59</sup> Although lower than the US, segregation did exist in Puerto Rican cities, with the highest levels of segregation registered with socioeconomic status, more so than any other indicator, including race



and education.<sup>60</sup> To think the Catholic church funded every parish equally would be like expecting the distribution of wealthy households to be evenly spread throughout all neighborhoods. To paraphrase Anthony L. LaRuffa's 1966 account of urbanization in Puerto Rico: "unprecedented socio-cultural change" after "years of feverish industrialization" has produced "at almost incredible speed one 'urbanizacion' after another."<sup>61</sup> What resulted were "status groupings" based upon "individuals who share a style of life – food, clothing, house furnishing, membership in similar associations, etc."<sup>62</sup> In part, LaRuffa was describing in 1966 reflected the way people were being grouped together by socioeconomic status as they were integrating into burgeoning Puerto Rican cities.

It seems plausible that as Puerto Rican cities were filling with new people, long established social orders became altered, sometimes dramatically. Under these conditions, the Catholic Church may not have been able to fully comprehend or adapt to the accompanying growth of Pentecostalism during these times. Writing about Pentecostalism and its ascent, historians Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Gambino argued that “Pentecostalism had quietly become the largest Christian movement of the twentieth century.”<sup>63</sup> The operative word is “quietly,” which is how to best describe the majority of Pentecostals, because they attend small modest churches. LaRuffa, recorded that, in the early 1940s, there were 86 Pentecostal churches in Puerto Rico, with a total of 7,611 members.<sup>64</sup> These statistics puts the average membership per church at 88.5. More contemporary scholarship confirms LaRuffa's accounting of Pentecostal churches as having small memberships.<sup>65</sup> If a major component of the worldwide growth of Pentecostalism is its quiet growth, then LaRuffa's account is not unique, but rather indicative of a movement that spread street to street, and town to town in small but fervent groups throughout Puerto Rico.

That Pentecostalism's spread was advocated by the few to the masses, does not mean that Pentecostals enjoyed the benefits of belonging to the majority. Part of being a member of a Pentecostal

church is an awareness that one belongs to a church with less history and less overall membership than the dominant Catholic Church. In 1962, the Pentecostal population for Puerto Rico was roughly 23% of the Protestant membership,” which was a marked increase from the 1940s, when LaRuffa counted Pentecostals as only 8.5% of all Protestant on the island.<sup>66</sup> The term small best describes the population of Protestants in Puerto Rico, but still, the numbers were increasing, with as many as 500 churches throughout Puerto Rico in 1964.<sup>67</sup>

Influenced by Emile Durkheim, LaRuffa asked why the Puerto Rican poor sought refuge from anomie in Pentecostalism. He believed he saw “the emergence of a tripartite social status class system, which in a general way, resembles the system characteristic of the United States.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, LaRuffa believed that Puerto Rico was becoming an island where one did not have to be either poor or rich. The emergence of the Puerto Rican middle class, identified as “*los comodos*” (the comfortable), not to be mistaken for “*los ricos or patrones*” (the rich or landowners), would challenge old notions on the island.<sup>69</sup> If the middle-class was emerging during the 1960s, then by the 1980s they had arrived. In 1980 the average family income in Puerto Rico was \$14,858, which after calculating for the rate of inflation this would be \$46,888 today.<sup>70</sup> Not exactly comfortable, but it is indicative of a growing middle-class on an island that previously had never had such. Unfortunately there was high unemployment, which combined with a growing middle-class, is indicative of growing wealth disparity on the island. Wealth disparity is one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Growing wealth disparity means that, as the middle-class was becoming much more noticeable, so too were the jobless, the homeless, and hungry.

It was during the 1960s when a lawyer by the name of Rafael Torres Ortega left his legal profession to found a Pentecostal church, *Defensores de la Fe* (Defenders of the Faith), which is presently named *La Iglesia de Jesucristo El Caballero de la Cruz* (The Church of Jesus Christ the Man

of the Cross).<sup>71</sup> Torres Ortega was a member of the middle-class that LaRuffa saw emerging. In a 1980 work LaRuffa updated his assessment of the established middle-class and said that as a consequence "Pentecostalism [has] adjusted itself to more affluent conditions," thus reflecting constituencies including professionals and the wealthy classes.<sup>72</sup> *Defensores de la Fe* became a megachurch. For a lawyer to establish what would quickly become a prominent megachurch in Puerto Rico is perhaps a coincidence, but with three of the island's four megachurches founded by members of Puerto Rico's middle-class, it seems like more than mere coincidence.

By the 1980s *los Defensores*, as the church was commonly known at the time, had become one of four megachurches in Puerto Rico. It was during the 1980s that *los Defensores* was reported to be a "3,000-member church" that was in the process of "building a \$2.2 million, 5,000-seat temple" in the middle of the town of Bayamon.<sup>73</sup> It was Rev. Torres Ortega who in 1986 founded the first Evangelical Christian television station in Puerto Rico, WECN. Presently, WECN's revenue is listed at \$800,000, and is now owned by Unico TV, Inc., which has merged WECN with other stations in a \$1.9 million deal.<sup>74</sup> In 2015, aged 84 years, Rev. Torres-Ortega died, leaving his daughter Rev. Iris Nanette Torres to lead the church.<sup>75</sup>

It was no accident that *los Defensores* grew into a megachurch within twenty years, because the era of quiet Pentecostal growth in Puerto Rico was coming to an end. Because *los Defensores* had 3000 members, and it was able to demonstrate it could fund multimillion dollar projects, and had expanded into multimedia (Radio and Television) ownership, it classifies as a megachurch along the lines of what is commonly seen in the mainland US. Just about all megachurches buy real estate, start up or go into partnership with other business, including banks and colleges, and even become involved in shell corporations, just as multinational corporations do. Back in the pre-internet 1980s, *los Defensores* was expanding, buying property and media outlets, namely printed newspapers, radio and TV. But *los*

*Defensores*, or more specifically its leadership, was not content with just expanding economically. *Los Defensores* would soon expand its influence politically as well, and it would not be the only megachurch to do so.

In 1984 the *Concilio Fuente de Agua Viva* (FAV) was incorporated by its founder, thirty-four year-old Rodolfo Font.<sup>76</sup> It became Puerto Rico's second megachurch in less than ten years. Rev. Font has a history of denying that he or his megachurch is Pentecostal, yet under Font's charismatic entrepreneurship, the FAV became affiliated with the Pentecostal General Council of the Assemblies of God church, in Springfield, Missouri.<sup>77</sup> Through this affiliation Font gained international connections, especially assistance for establishing US mainland churches. By 1994 the FAV established its first churches in Florida and Texas, as the IFAV, under the guidance and leadership of Rodolfo Font's son Ontoniel Font.<sup>78</sup> Despite denials, the FAV operates no differently than other megachurches, even sharing many of the same political allies as *los Defensores*.<sup>79</sup> Whether Pentecostal or not, the FAV was nevertheless a megachurch in Puerto Rico. Like other megachurches it was operating a television station, from which it regularly broadcast a popular childrens' show on the island.

In 1997 Rev. Font, along with a business partner, got involved in a private development deal worth \$4.7 million, and incorporated themselves as The Garden Village Inc.<sup>80</sup> In 2002 the deal floundered. Perhaps related to the development deal, the FAV Church in 2012 filed in Puerto Rico Bankruptcy Court under Chapter 11, and had to forfeit property, including its commercial television license for TV station WQHA.<sup>81</sup> As of December 2016, the FAV in Puerto Rico is under bankruptcy proceedings.<sup>82</sup> Rev. Font himself reportedly owes well over half a million dollars in Puerto Rican back taxes, but this hasn't dampened his success elsewhere.<sup>83</sup> For his birthday, in 2017, Rev. Font received a Mercedes-Benz convertible sports car from members of his church in Houston, Texas.<sup>84</sup>

The third, and largest, megachurch, of the 1980s, was founded by a man of German lineage,

Reverend Jorge Raschke. Raschke is “the founder of the *Clamor a Dios* Ministry and[...]the *Clamor a Dios* event, an evangelical mass gathering that takes place every Labor Day in San Juan since 1974.”<sup>85</sup> In 2008 Raschke's megachurch was renamed *Ministerio Clamor a Dios Internacional* to reflect the increasing number of satellite churches located in the US, Latin America and Africa.<sup>86</sup> “*Como un evento que trasciende fronteras,*” the *Clamor a Dios* event and the megachurch are both meant to transcend frontiers and unite all evangelicals together in Raschke's vision which places Puerto Rico at the center of a Caribbean ecumenical community.<sup>87</sup> The event takes place at the north entrance of Puerto Rico's Capitol building, in San Juan, where Raschke's daughter the Hon. Kimmey Raschke served as a member of the Puerto Rican Senate from 2009 to 2012.<sup>88</sup>

In his youth Rev. Raschke was a firebrand and was “one of the country's most popular radio Evangelists.”<sup>89</sup> His radio broadcast “discusses public issues and encourages his audience to realize that evangelicals are a social power of their own, with the capacity of participating in politics and competing for positions of power.”<sup>90</sup> “Raschke's discourse is highly charged with political content in both the *Clamor a Dios* event and his daily radio broadcast,” which are indicative of the man and his megachurch.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps early in Raschke's career he envisioned Puerto Rican Pentecostals, with him leading the way, exerting their influence beyond the Island. The *Clamor a Dios* annual event brings tens of thousands to the capital. In 2015 “the police estimated more than sixty thousand people attended,” the *Clamor a Dios* event, along with fifteen leaders of other evangelical organizations, which included the 24-hour Pentecostal television station Ebenezer Broadcasting Network (EBN-*chanal* 46) which had broadcast a satellite feed to twenty-eight countries, along with domestic broadcasting which includes Raschke's own radio station.<sup>92</sup>

Since the inception of the *Clamor a Dios* event, Rev. Raschke and Pentecostals as a whole have been emboldened to become politically active in Puerto Rico. Although much had been written

describing Pentecostals on the whole as only quietly expanding their ranks, Puerto Rico has a long history of high political participation. It could be said that high participation may reflect the boisterous nature of Puerto Rican politics – if one is being generous. The reality of the island's politics is that it is all too frequently smeared with scandal and corruption. Nevertheless, between 1972 and 2000 “Puerto Rico averaged 79 percent turnout in its quadrennial elections” for governor.<sup>93</sup> No US state can claim such consistently high voter turnout for their gubernatorial elections. Perhaps, because of Puerto Rico's unique history of high political participation, one can begin to understand why Pentecostals, who are a distinct minority on the island, are so comfortable being politically active. Raschke, more than most, was likely already comfortable with openly voicing his opinions as publicly as possible. That his own daughter went into politics probably underscores his family's comfort level with politics. Include the fact that Raschke is the mastermind of the island's largest annual religious event, on Labor Day no less, steps from the capitol building and openly expounding his political views, made him a political power-broker in Puerto Rico almost from day one.

During the decade leading up to the the 1992 Puerto Rican Gubernatorial election, *los Defensores*, the FAV, and the *Clamor a Dios*, were the island's three largest, wealthiest and most influential megachurches. Although there were many other evangelical churches, there were also associations of small but still influential churches within evangelical circles. The largest group is the *Asociacion de Iglesias Evangelicas* (AIE, The Association of Evangelical Churches), which had “become a religious and political force” as early as the 1940s.<sup>94</sup> The largest wing of the AIE was the *Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal, M.I.* (Pentecostal Church of God, International Movement). *Iglesia de Dios* was a collection of hundreds of small Pentecostal churches from across the island. This fact harkens to LaRuffa's study of small Pentecostal churches beteen 1940 and 1960. During the 1980s and much of the 1990s this church had yet to develop the institutional presence, especially in media, other

megachurches had attained. Nevertheless, it was in the 1980s, beginning to following the example of other megachurches. *Iglesia de Dios* purchased radio station Triunfo FM 96.9 and began twenty-four hour religious broadcasting and commentary.<sup>95</sup> In 1994, the *Iglesia de Dios* began constructing television studios, which transmitted their first program in 1997.<sup>96</sup> By 2011, *Iglesia de Dios* was an association of "approximately 600 churches with close to 60,000 members," making them the largest collection of evangelicals on the island today.<sup>97</sup> In effect a defacto megachurch.

It bears mentioning that the AIE and *Iglesia de Dios* are organized differently from Puerto Rico's other megachurches. The AIE and *Iglesia de Dios* has an elected leadership. Although some leaders have maintained their position for decades, leadership is decided through a convention, which results in voting.<sup>98</sup> Although there is no major study of the inner workings of Puerto Rican megachurches, both Comparative Politics Professor Michael Dodson and Martinez-Ramirez have commented on Pentecostalism's receptivity with the wealthy classes once it reaches a certain point of success.<sup>99</sup> What both agree on is the corporatist changes megachurches seem to undergo.

In an effort to explain how megachurches operate, through analysis of their economic activities and organizational structure, it should be possible to contrast the three other megachurches from the AIE and the *Iglesia de Dios*. To begin, megachurches are organized along the lines of a family business model.<sup>100</sup> One might think of a mom-and-pop neighborhood store front, and for most Pentecostal churches this is true. But megachurches are not mom-and-pop establishments, they are multi-million dollar enterprises, so the better example is a family-owned corporation on the level of the Ford Motor Co. Puerto Rico's three major megachurches were, despite their scope, essentially family enterprises. Megachurches have one man (back then it was always a man) who serves as the titular head of the church. This position is self-appointed, due to the fact that it was usually his money, savvy leadership, and vision that got the church to where it is.

Megachurches are incorporated entities, although some begin listed with the IRS as religious tax exempt institutions. Simply said, an actual church, while others begin as not-for-profit organizations. In order to expand more easily, leadership of megachurches increasingly register some or all of the church under US tax code 501(c)3, a not-for-profit tax exempt status – in other words a charity. Being a charity instead of a church, allows for the creation of a Limited Liability Company (LLC), that can buy and sell and provide services with limited legal liability and avoid some legal restrictions that purely religious institutions might face. Becoming an LLC encourages greater freedom to take financial risks because the owner's personal wealth - e.g. personal savings accounts - is not at risk from lawsuits and creditors.

Even though being a not-for-profit entity requires incorporation, which means having a boardmembership, like a college Board of Trustees, for example, it should not be inferred that one person or family cannot hold a majority stake in the organization. This is how the Ford family continues to own Ford Motor Co. When Rev. Torres-Ortega died it was natural for his daughter to be the new leader of the megachurch, because ownership can be passed down in a simple will. In Rev. Rodolfo Font's case, the Texas and Florida branches of his church were founded by his son, Ontoniel Font. In light of this, one can begin to understand how the elder Font, who is in tax debt in Puerto Rico, can receive an expensive sports car as a birthday gift. When it was reported that the members of the Texas church gave Rev. Font this gift, it could be said the gift may actually be from his family. If receiving the gift causes legal difficulties for the elder Font, all he need do is donate the gift to the church and thus legal ownership passes from him onto the church - the same church his son operates.

By viewing megachurches as family-owned corporations, it becomes less surprising to find that Pentecostal churches, including megachurches, in the 1990's "own over 25 radio stations and four TV networks" in Puerto Rico, compared to "two radio stations and one TV station" owned by the Catholic



Church.<sup>101</sup> An island with four hundred years of Catholic Church dominion has seen Pentecostals churches outspend the Catholic Church by more than 10 to 1 in mass-media. It is comparable to Rupert Murdoch's strategy of media domination. Having one man in charge gives megachurches the decisiveness and clarity of strategy that the anachronistic Catholic church, whoever long entrenched, could rarely exhibit. It seems that Pentecostalism exhibits a high degree of organizational flexibility which has facilitated entrepreneurialism. This organizational flexibility has facilitated megachurch leaders to organize megachurches as a modern business.

It should be noted that for these megachurches political strategy often goes hand in glove with corporatist strategy. The PPD party established in the 1930s, had their political base located in "the working people of the rural areas and the countryside as well as cane workers," which is exactly where Pentecostalism on the island was originally rooted.<sup>102</sup> The PPD was a populist party advocating the commonwealth status, and "to gain support of Catholics and evangelicals together, the PPD program of rural and social reform allocated ground plots (*parcelas*) in every rural community for the construction of a Catholic chapel and one Evangelical church".<sup>103</sup> In this manner, Pentecostals shared grassroots history with the PPD and viewed them as staunch political allies.

In the 1980s the "phenomenon" of Pentecostal growth could no longer be ignored, especially as Catholic priests lamented that "in only 80 years of Protestant propaganda, it's an enormous success"<sup>104</sup> Three years before Ronald Reagan would challenge Soviet Premier Gorbachev at the foot of the Berlin wall, Rev. Torres Ortega had hailed tearing down the "iron curtain between the people and the altar," which the far away Vatican had long ago erected.<sup>105</sup> The megachurch had arrived in Puerto Rico, and it was already exhibiting undertones of populism.

Despite the indigenous nature of Puerto Rican Pentecostalism, it is difficult to avoid the observation that in Puerto Rico, and throughout Latin America, as Pentecostalism grew in membership

and political relevance, it reflected many of the "characteristic[s] of the traditional Catholic culture of Latin America."<sup>106</sup> But, megachurches did not operate in the same manner as the Catholic Church. Each megachurch was controlled, essentially by one man, its founder and leader. These men answered to no one, and could effectively decide any and all matters within the megachurch – within reason. "Religious autocrats" is not a term that would accurately characterize megachurch leaders, but their power was enormous. Their power often stemmed from the ability of these leaders to make effective and beneficial alliances with other evangelicals as well as political leaders. In business parlance, megachurches were leaner in their organizational structure which allowed them to be more aggressive and innovative. They could cut deals quickly and quietly or use their media bully pulpit instead. Their mutual cooperation with the Rossello administration held firm in this manner, until the last months of his second term.

The quiet rise of Pentecostalism in Puerto Rico had given way to politically influential and media savvy megachurches that had been founded and led by charismatic middle-class religious entrepreneurs. These were men who exhibited a highly developed sense of opportunism. They had each responded to Pentecostalism and identified its potential for growth both economically and politically. Outside of becoming politicians themselves, it is difficult to imagine these megachurch leaders being able to express themselves so powerfully on the island in any other role.

In the 1980s, theologian Dr. P. Felix Struick, director of the School of Theology at Bayamon Central University, claimed "the Catholic Church is old-fashioned here and is afraid of new things," and continues to associate aid to the poor with naked "socialism."<sup>107</sup> Catholicism's rigidity on social issues, religious rites, political involvement, and its perceived foreign origin, had Torres Ortega and other Pentecostal leaders believing the Catholic church "is not getting to the people's heart."<sup>108</sup> What resulted was Pentecostal megachurches aggressively exploiting an opportunity to capture the lion's share of

mass-media, to more effectively out-perform their competition, the Catholic Church. With this development Pentecostal megachurches were poised to exert their political influence that far exceeded their actual numbers.

### **1992 and Beyond: Governor Rossello and the Megachurch**

Political theorist Kenneth M. Roberts uses the phrase "creative destruction" to refer to the effects populism has on established political party systems.<sup>109</sup> Roberts suggests that elections of populist leaders represents a type of political process that "tends to undermine established party systems by mobilizing the excluded or the alienated."<sup>110</sup> One could say that the elections of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher resulted in the creative destruction of conservative party politics. Before the Reagan-Thatcher era, conservatives were not known to represent the majority. Yet Reagan and Thatcher handily won their respective elections, jettisoned the more moderate members of their parties, and inaugurated a conservative tide in Western politics that not only lasts to this day, it has grown.

Roberts had borrowed the phrase "creative destruction" from economist Joseph A. Schumpeter who had first coined the phrase in his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.<sup>111</sup> Schumpeter had derived the term from a section of the *Communist Manifesto*, in which Marx argues that "previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed" as a direct result of the modern conditions of commerce under bourgeois control.<sup>112</sup> Schumpeter interpreted Marx to mean that "Capitalism, then, is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary."<sup>113</sup> Schumpeter's wording, "method of economic change" updated Marx's nineteenth century notion of commerce for the twentieth-century. In turn, neoliberals reinterpreted Schumpeter's analysis, transforming it into the oversimplified idea of innovation through competition. This specious interpretation expresses a strongly held neoliberal belief that, regardless of conditions, all innovation is

benign. In any case, what all of these notions of creative destruction have in common is change.

Roberts went on to argue that the effects of populism cannot be predicted and very often cannot be fully understood until some time has passed, nonetheless the effects on the party system “rarely leaves them unscathed.”<sup>114</sup> Roberts goes on to argue that the reason why populism thrives during critical junctures is because it has either “mobilized support among nonparticipants,” historically the poor, or those “who previously supported an established party” but have been left behind or overlooked during times of crisis.<sup>115</sup>

Before Roberts wrote his theory, Ernesto Laclau stated that “a movement or an ideology – or, to put both under their common genus, a discourse,” can be viewed as more or less being analogous to populism.<sup>116</sup> The caveat for Laclau is the degree of “equivalential logics” that the discourse articulates.<sup>117</sup> In other words, it depends on how successful a notion of the “people” is promoted.<sup>118</sup> Laclau argues that any notion of the people must be used within the context of creating a “social frontier.”<sup>119</sup> The social frontier is the creation of an “Us” versus “Them” identity, representing “an underdog as an historical agent.”<sup>120</sup> This is a schism in society, a notion of the people that has successfully placed some within it and other outside of it. Laclau's definition of a social frontier allows for populist identity to be formed around anything, including a religion, so long as it results in political discourse that has one group defining itself as Us and all others as Them.

In choosing Pentecostalism over Catholicism there emerged among the poor a new identity that played its part as “the different forces converging in the Puerto Rican religious and political landscape” clashed in elections on the island, beginning in the 1960.<sup>121</sup> In effect, Pentecostalism in Puerto Rico had successfully created a social frontier, the Us versus Them identity, based upon religion, which itself became politicized and articulated through the discourse of elections. In part, Martinez-Ramirez's conclusion states that “the fear of a Catholic take over in an independent Puerto Rico is still deeply

inserted in the mind of many Puerto Rican evangelicals, even when it is not likely to occur.”<sup>122</sup> Because Catholics are the clear and historical majority of Puerto Rico, Martinez-Ramirez's conclusion serves to confirm that there was a constructed underdog identity personified by Pentecostals, which is also in accord with Laclau's theory.

Despite some early loose association, it was not until the dominant “Catholic Church's intervention in party politics in 1960,” began to have “the effect of consolidating the ties between” various evangelical groups on the island.<sup>123</sup> As a result, the activities of evangelicals in Puerto Rican politics became more concerted. They would exerted their influence beyond what their minority status would lead one to expect. For the first time in four hundred years, religious views within the island's political discourse emerged that did not originate from Catholics. A new politicized religious identity had emerged in Puerto Rico. Evangelical groups coalesced to form associations that could maintain a high level of electoral discipline and form a voting bloc that, at first, was content with merely resisting Catholic hegemony. Megachurches provided the key component for electoral cohesion. In the larger context of gubernatorial politics, before the advent of megachurches as political bases, it would be next to ridiculous for candidates to expect that by visiting a few churches they had successfully garnered the evangelical vote en masse. Megachurches provide both resources and the bureaucracy to manage and maintain discipline that is required of large organizations, especially when it comes to politics.

After the advent of megachurches, evangelicals not only became better organized, political parties and individual politicians also now had a group that they could more easily approach and do business with. Luis Raul Camara Fuentes, in 2004, wrote an excellent book about *The Phenomenon of Puerto Rican Voting*, which shows how “patronage is strong and pervasive, and highly developed.”<sup>124</sup> As a result, “Parties are powerful forces not only in the Island's political environment but also in the social and economic lives of its citizens.”<sup>125</sup> If megachurches were crucial in transforming evangelicals

into a potent political force, then megachurches must have replicated the patronage system to work within evangelical society. Whether Catholic or Protestant, all families need homes and jobs. To refer back to LaRuffa and the life style list of status groupings, perhaps we also should include the associations that provide benefits that people expect from the pervasive patronage system present in Puerto Rico. Megachurches, viewed from the prism of patronage and their political potential, provide excellent means of finding employment, housing, education, and other opportunities for evangelicals.

Megachurches could not have emerged outside the patronage system, nor would there be any incentive to try and buck the system. Camara Fuentes noted that political partisanship was a strong and permanent feature of island politics.<sup>126</sup> When measuring levels of partisanship, only "9 percent" of all voters identified themselves as independent or independent leaning.<sup>127</sup> That over ninety percent of voters belong to a political organization, Camara Fuentes argues, is an indication that voters have a high degree of loyalty to these groups. If, when it comes to politics, Pentecostals as a group had behaved differently than everyone else, then the percentage of independent voters would have been much higher, because Pentecostals are over a quarter of the island's population.<sup>128</sup> Although Pentecostals, especially megachurch leaders, would and did portray themselves as political outsiders and underdogs, they played the political game by the same set of pre-established rules, which means patronage must be just as strong and pervasive in megachurches as anywhere else.

With three Pentecostal megachurches and with a fourth emerging, Catholic politicians took notice. In 1988 "Governor Rafael Hernandez-Colon implemented a policy of *acercamiento* (rapprochement) to Spain," which was seen by evangelicals on the island as an attempt to re-entrench the Catholic hegemony on the island.<sup>129</sup> Three years later the "1991 Referendum on the Democratic Rights of Puerto Rico," was an attempt to form a "Congress-binding plebiscite on the island's political status," which pitted those who wanted independence against those who wanted to maintain the status

quo.<sup>130</sup> For Puerto Ricans who had long campaigned for independence, the referendum was seen as step towards their goal. But Martinez-Ramirez research shows that the evangelicals would not support independence out of fear that Puerto Rico might become an outright Catholic state, thus losing vital legal protections for their religion.<sup>131</sup>

The politics of Puerto Rico's status has never been resolved. Camara Fuentes argued that "every election is an opportunity to rehash and vote on the question of status."<sup>132</sup> Despite the fact that few referendums held in Puerto Rico have been legally binding with regard to the island's status, Puerto Ricans have become "emotionally attached to their status choice."<sup>133</sup> The perceived importance of the island's status in gubernatorial elections must have been increased when an actual referendum on status was held in 1991. Roberts believed that critical junctures and the populism resulting from them do not amount to "random political occurrence," instead they represent "decisive political change," fueled by "uncertainty."<sup>134</sup> In terms of statehood status, "only 8 percent said that was of little or no importance" to their political views, especially when voting for governor.<sup>135</sup> For Pentecostals and Catholics alike, a referendum on status being held after the devastating decade of the 1980s, especially for Puerto Rico's economy and social foundations, probably reflected everyone's uncertainty about the future. The situation being what is was, the 1991 referendum reflected the all-too-real situation that all Puerto Ricans were in, rather than the aspirational desires arising from the question of status.

Because the referendum took place just before the gubernatorial race of 1992, it was in effect a referendum about which political party would occupy the governor's mansion (*La Fortaleza*) in the midst of deep economic crisis. Slightly over seventy-two percent of registered voters went to the polls. Combined with a "level of partisan attachment" that is measured higher than that of the US, Great Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, and Finland, the importance of political associations is, indeed, very high. Camara Fuentes concluded that higher voter turnout is likely the result of the high

levels of voter organization that takes place in Puerto Rico, which means "belonging to any organization is associated with increased turnout."<sup>136</sup> In effect "those who belong to groups (political or not) tend to out participate those who do not."<sup>137</sup> Hence, megachurches must have been instrumental in mobilizing evangelicals to turnout and vote.

The evangelicals were led by Reverend Jorge Raschke.<sup>138</sup> Leading up to the referendum Raschke, was the most vocal, and unabashedly broadcast through his media services a "campaign against a 'YES' vote."<sup>139</sup> Pentecostals easily flooded the air-waves with their opposition to the referendum. In the end, the 1991 Referendum was defeated. Although evangelicals are a minority within Puerto Rican society, Martinez-Ramirez has noted that in larger Puerto Rican political issues, such as the 1991 Referendum and gubernatorial elections, evangelicals have consistently voted as a bloc against candidates and policies that would threaten their constitutionally protected status.<sup>140</sup> The ascent of the Pentecostal megachurches in the 1980s along with their growing political potency as a voting bloc, elicited the Catholic Governor's policy of rapprochement as a response to a perceived threat to traditional Catholic hegemony. The coming election in 1992 would be the true test of the emerging political strength of evangelicals.

During the 1992 election in Puerto Rico, Pentecostalism emerged as a form of populism. The strategy that evangelical leaders employed was populism based upon an Us-versus-Them political attitude, which had been sharpened during the calamitous 1980s. It fits within Roberts' logic of critical junctures facilitating popular movements, and links Pentecostal megachurches established during decisive political change and uncertainty to the prevailing populist discourse. Pentecostalism also exhibits Laclau's distinction for political articulation. To quote from a recent *Clamor a Dos* event: "Oponernos a leyes que son para deformar nuestra sociedad" (We oppose laws that disfigure our society).<sup>141</sup> Puerto Rican Pentecostal megachurches, through their successful exploitation of mass



media and popular culture, have politically opposed laws and political candidates who were unsupportive of or antagonistic towards their goals.

A new “religious-political dynamics” emerged during the 1991 referendum and carried over into the 1992 election.<sup>142</sup> Pentecostal megachurches regularly invited political candidates who were moderates or openly opposed to independence to share in church services and appear on their radio and television programs, regardless of their own religious affiliation. This worked for the moderate Catholic mayor of San Juan elected in 1988, Hector Luis Acevedo, a high ranking member of the PPD, “attended religious services, and made numerous appearances in their radio and TV programs,” which earned him solid support from many evangelical voters.<sup>143</sup> The 1992 mayoral race of San Juan was won by another member of Acevedo's PPD party, Sila Maria Calderon who was the first woman to be elected mayor of San Juan.

The gubernatorial election of 1992 saw Rafael Hernandez-Colon, the strident incumbent Catholic Governor who had proposed the 1991 referendum and the policy of rapprochement with Spain, pitted against Yale-educated cardiovascular surgeon and self-professed evangelical Pedro Rossello. Rossello was a pro-statehood leader of the PNP, but had religious leanings that favored evangelicals and ultra-conservative Catholics. The Pentecostal media machine went to work. Newspaper, radio and TV networks churned out their support. The Doctor made his rounds to megachurch services, gave speeches, pressed the flesh, and participated in photo-ops.

Rossello campaigned as an outsider, capitalizing on an “anti-incumbency sentiment” that seemed to predominate across the island.<sup>144</sup> Yet, Rossello campaigned with the same policies of privatization that marks the GDB and PRIDCO agenda of the previous forty years. It was Rossello who wanted to privatize public schools and hospitals while crime and AIDS were ravaging Puerto Rico.<sup>145</sup> A seasoned *New York Times* columnist who had Puerto Rico in his beat, Larry Rohter, suggested; that

because the forty-eight year old Rossello was perceived as an outsider and a doctor, whose wife was a social worker, he was able to pass himself off as someone who has compassion for the average Puerto Rican.<sup>146</sup>

Despite Rossello's seeming youth and energy, incumbent Governor Hernandez-Colon was only a year older than Rossello. Furthermore, his administration was no less neoliberal in its policies. Hernandez-Colon had made many trips in the 1980s to Washington, ostensibly to cope with the budget cuts and to formulate a new strategy for Puerto Rico's economic woes. Such trips, along with his inability to reverse the downward trajectory of the economy had the effect of making him look distant to Puerto Rican voters.<sup>147</sup> The referendum brought 1.7 million Puerto Ricans to the polls.<sup>148</sup> Because the referendum was rejected after practically half of the entire population of Puerto Rico came out to the polls, Rossello was poised to “sweep into the governorship.”<sup>149</sup>

Evangelicals got their man in, Rossello defeated Hernandez-Colon. But for many the media blitz worked, perhaps too well. During the campaign Rossello had essentially become the political face of Puerto Rican evangelicals. Some began to wonder if his closeness with Pentecostals was too close. Following Rossello into office “the relationship between the Rossello administration and the Pentecostal and Post-Pentecostal leadership was so close as to convert the separation of church and state into a controversial public issue.”<sup>150</sup> Before Rossello was even inaugurated, his administration was dealing with a public relations issue revolving around his connections to megachurches. Rossello would go on to win his reelection and be a two-term governor, yet this controversy and others would dog Rossello's administration to the end.

One of Rossello's lesser controversies revolved around his attempt to legalize naturopathy. Rossello himself called it the “'medicine of God' and justified it by citing biblical passages.”<sup>151</sup> The bill, proposed late in his first term, was heavily opposed by both the Medical Association and the Doctors

Association of Puerto Rico because of its lack of hard scientific research.<sup>152</sup> Despite the opposition, Rossello held off signing the bill, but still “disregarded the opposition of his colleagues” and signed the bill after being reelected in 1996.<sup>153</sup>

Perhaps Rossello's most controversial policy was “the 5 minutes of meditation in public schools,” drafted in 1995, and commonly misquoted as “5 minutes of prayer.”<sup>154</sup> It was drafted without consulting evangelical leaders, especially the big three, Reverends Raschke, Torres-Ortega, and Font, all of whom “denied being consulted.”<sup>155</sup> A portion of the official document states “God gets in our schools through the heart of every Puerto Rican child,” the policy “proved to be a public policy fiasco.”<sup>156</sup> The policy and its language which is described as drafted “directly from *La Fortaleza*” (Governor's mansion), brought widespread opposition, and was publicly criticized by Pentecostal leadership.<sup>157</sup> Possibly without realizing it, Rossello had begun to drift away from his political base. Rossello nevertheless kept the policy in place. In practice, though, the edict was openly ignored by students and school officials alike before it was eventually “declared unconstitutional by the *Comision de Derechos Civiles* 1996.”<sup>158</sup> An adviser to the Rossello administration who was interviewed about the subject “claimed that the proposal was the result of both 'careful planning' and the Governor's personal consultation to the people.”<sup>159</sup> Rossello's personal consultation to the people, serves to point out that the “people” had more than one meaning in this case. In this manner, it helps to explain why Rossello had refused to bow to public opinion, which was being expressed in major Puerto Rican news outlets, not to mention the Pentecostal media machine. Evidently, Rossello's definition of the “people” differed from everyone else's.

Governor Rossello's alliance with evangelicals nonetheless held during his reelection campaign in 1996, but soon after, the alliance frayed and then ultimately unraveled. Rossello had always been an ardent supporter of statehood for Puerto Rico, but suppressed his sentiments during his first campaign.

Early in his second term he submitted a non-binding referendum on Puerto Rican statehood, which lost him the support of many evangelicals, including the fiery Pentecostal megachurch leader Rev. Jorge Raschke.<sup>160</sup> The vote, scheduled “less than two months after the island-wide disaster caused by Hurricane George” was intended to take advantage of the situation by reminding the people of the protections that come with being a part of the US.<sup>161</sup> Evangelicals, ever suspicious of notions of statehood being put to a vote, helps to explain why they, especially Rev. Raschke, would not support their man in office when he introduced a referendum on statehood.

On a more sensitive issue, Rossello introduced a “proposal to distribute birth control devices among public schools students,” that brought evangelicals and Catholics together in opposition.<sup>162</sup> By the time Rossello ran for his third term in 2000, the presence of Pentecostal radio and television stations had further matured and solidified their position within Puerto Rican media, displaying how “religious media became a forum for political debate” that could make or break a politician.<sup>163</sup> Rossello and his wife, during his first reelection campaign in 1996, had visited the “main FAV temple” where they were blessed and “assured the Governor's reelection [is] according to God's will.”<sup>164</sup> Things changed in 2000.

In the 2000 campaign the very same political apparatus that had been instrumental for Pedro Rossello's early victories was turned against him. During Rossello's second term, a corruption scandal emerged that plagued Rossello's administration throughout the campaign. The scandal and its investigation played in all news outlets, which must have had a significant impact upon the island's Pentecostal leadership's decision to bring “to an end the alliance between Governor Rossello and the Pentecostal and post-Pentecostal leadership,” and saw the Pentecostal leadership “adopted a position of 'neutrality' during the 2000 electoral campaign.”<sup>165</sup> Neutrality meant the media machine that had supported Rossello now turned away from him. It could only be interpreted by lay Pentecostals that

Rossello was not to be trusted. It seems reasonable that Pentecostal neutrality played a large role in Sila Maria Calderon's subsequent victory in the gubernatorial election. The popular mayor of Puerto Rico's capital, became the first woman elected Governor of Puerto Rico. She was a member of the Popular Democratic Party (PPD), the main opposition to Rossello's PNP.

In Puerto Rico, many evangelicals have a “historical identification with the *Partido Popular Democrático*-PPD” that dates back to the 1930s, when Pentecostal charismatic Francisco Olazabal first arrived on the island from the US.<sup>166</sup> The PPD, because it advocates commonwealth status, is not a bitter pill for evangelicals to swallow. Rossello had failed to understand that he was not the only game in town for evangelicals. He also failed to acknowledge that his political base, the megachurches, had continued to gain in political strength and savvy. As useful as the megachurch media machine was in 1992, it became even more of a force to be reckoned with in 2000.

Governor Rossello is an archetype of political leadership arising from a populous movement, firmly believing that he alone best understands the will of the “people.” Political theorist Enrique Peruzzotti, argues that when a populist leader is elected, the leader believes they have a mandate “to execute popular aspirations” as they see fit.<sup>167</sup> In effect, populists behave as if they can and should “ignore or dismantle the institutional apparatus of representative democracy” in order to carryout their mandate.<sup>168</sup> This inflated sense of mission leads to the deconstruction of representative democracy, which in turn leads to “electoral authoritarianism.”<sup>169</sup> The aim of this is to promote those policies that the “people” seemingly want in a populist form of “true democracy,” regardless of preexisting constitutional constraints.<sup>170</sup> Surely Rossello interpreted his reelection in 1996 as a reaffirmation of his original populous mandate to continue promoting pro-evangelical and neoliberal policies, however controversial they have been.

Being “at odds with any idea of accountability,” including respecting "checks and balances and

of the separation of powers" not only describes Rossello very well, it clarifies his rationalizations for "his program for the 'reformation of moral and Christian values'" on an island that has a constitutionally guaranteed separation of church and state.<sup>171</sup> Rossello's policies and programs answer to his own construction of the "people," which in essence became, to use Laclau's wording, a floating signifier, one that even Rossello himself could not always capture and define.

Greek-British political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis has delved into the "symptomatic reading" of populism vis-a-vis religion in Greece during 2000 and 2001.<sup>172</sup> Stavrakakis argues, that by "registering, for example, the status of 'the people' as a signifier" one has enough for a point of departure from which to begin examining a populist discourse, provided the discourse has "divided the society between dominate and dominated."<sup>173</sup> Therefore, it becomes possible to identify politicized discourse originating from ecclesiastical leaders as populist, so long as it has within it a definition of "the people" that is "fundamentally antagonistic" towards what they perceive as the dominating portion of society.<sup>174</sup> Stavrakakis writes:

"It is not the first time that the politicisation [sic] of religious discourse has been described as 'populist' – liberation theology in Latin America has been given this characterisation [sic] by certain analysts, while others have noted the 'semi-theological' language of classical American populism, and its relationship with religion".<sup>175</sup>

This statement is also applicable towards Puerto Rico during the 1980s and 1990s. Notions of the "people", whether defined by the press, politicians, or megachurch leaders, were swirling within the political discourse of elections and referendums. Definitions of the "people" created rifts in society, transforming groups previously not known to be politically powerful into vital voting blocs. The long standing balance of power between Pentecostals and their political allies had swung in favor of Pentecostal power brokers. The decade that saw the establishment of Pentecostal megachurches in

Puerto Rico was also witness to the rise of Pentecostal populism in Puerto Rican politics.

In 1996, Section 936 was repealed by an act of Congress. Section 936 was seen by some as “a welfare program for the Fortune 500.”<sup>176</sup> It was phased out over ten years, likely giving corporations already in Puerto Rico time to reap more profits before the 2006 deadline. During Pedro Rossello's administration, especially in light of the repeal of Section 936, little to nothing was done to adjust economic controls away from established neoliberal policies. It was business as usual. After Rossello, things would only get worse. The years between 2005 and 2016 are known as the “lost decade,” which was marked by the economic stagnation of Puerto Rico's economy, resulting in a poverty rate of “46 percent.”<sup>177</sup> The glue that had kept the neoliberal house of cards from falling was removed. After decades of privatization, there was (almost) nothing left of Puerto Rico's infrastructure to pawn, the Rossello administration had made sure of that.

The GDB and the Puerto Rico Municipal Finance Agency, which specialized in public-to-private financing, did what they had always done - they sold more municipal bonds. They sold promises by the Puerto Rican government that if one bought a bond, the government would pay them back over a period of time, with interest, even though the debt incurred by previously issued bonds had yet to be paid off. In the process, during the lost decade, they increased Puerto Rican government debt to the tune of \$123 billion.<sup>178</sup> The government is now so desperate to find every last dollar of tax revenue, that for the first time ever, the Puerto Rican Treasury may investigate all megachurches for tax evasion.<sup>179</sup> Puerto Rico in May of 2017 filed for bankruptcy. The neoliberal state came crashing down under the weight of its own neoliberal-fueled debt making. The newly elected Governor of 2016 is Ricardo Rossello, son of former Governor Pedro Rossello.

In January of 2018, four months after Hurricane Maria hit the island, Governor Ricardo Rossello announced his intention to privatize the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA). It is the “largest

U.S. public utility as measured by the number of customers - 3.3 million."<sup>180</sup> It is also the last of Puerto Rico's infrastructure that has not been privatized. PREPA's infrastructure "averages about 45 years old, compared to about 18 years for utilities on the U.S. mainland."<sup>181</sup> As a result of unchecked neoliberalism, PREPA accumulated nearly a billion dollars of debt in every year of the lost decade.<sup>182</sup> PREPA is the only source of electrical power for the entire island. Privatizing PREPA, in effect, would give whoever buys it, a monopoly over the entire power supply of Puerto Rico. Governor Ricardo Rossello uses every opportunity to expound on the "obsolete system" that PREPA is, and how it is an obstacle to Puerto Rico's "economic development."<sup>183</sup> Yet conveniently, Rossello, avoids discussing the role his father played in the neoliberalism which ensured PREPA's obsolescence. Some call out Rossello's message as a "manipulation" of the crisis situation that Puerto Rico is in.<sup>184</sup> The hallmark of disaster capitalism is to take advantage of, by manipulating, a crisis situation in order to promote neoliberalism as its remedy. This is what Ricardo Rossello's neopopulist father had done over twenty-five years ago. Whatever results from the lost decade cannot be predicted, but it is already unfolding in Puerto Rico, and like a once in a hundred year hurricane, it is certain nothing will be left unscathed.



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## Section IV

### Ministry Inc.: Latinos, the Megachurch and Neoliberalism in the United States, 2016

Since the days of early megachurches, such as Amiee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Church, Pentecostals, like evangelicals as a whole, have been an outsized presence in American culture. Still, although the centennial anniversary of America's most storied megachurch is only a few years away, the phenomenon of the megachurch did not become a topic of serious research until the 1990s, spurred on by Rich Warren's popular 1995 book *The Purpose Driven Church*.<sup>1</sup> But it was Scott Thumma's 1996 book, *Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context*, which was the first scholarly work to examine the phenomenon of the megachurch beyond ecclesiastic concerns and delve into its cultural effects.<sup>2</sup>

Today, there is a rich body of literature that focuses on the American megachurch, exploring many of its aspects, but little of it focuses on the role that Latinos play in its continuing growth and prosperity. Theologian Carmelo Alvarez argues that because 85% of Protestant Hispanics are Pentecostal there is an "exportation of Latin American Pentecostalism to the north," and a "re-exportation of this Hispanic Pentecostal expression back south," which has produced "rich cross fertilization between Latin America and Hispanic Pentecostalism."<sup>3</sup> One example of Latin American Pentecostalism being exported north to the US, is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, founded in 1979 by Bishop Ednir Macedo in Brazil, which has established churches in Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Orlando, and New York, including churches in over one hundred and fifteen countries since 2006.<sup>4</sup>

Although megachurches are few in comparison to the overall number of churches across the United States, when it comes to measuring membership and the frequency of attendance, "mega



churches have 'the same number of attendees of weekly services (roughly 4.5 million) as the smallest 35 per cent [sic] of churches in the country'.<sup>5</sup> The Center for the Study of Global Christianity in 1970 recorded that the percentage of North Americans who identified as Christian was over 90%, but by 2020 the estimated percentage of North Americans who would identify as Christian is expected to fall to just under 80%.<sup>6</sup> Yet the number of Latinos who identify as Protestant has actually increased, so that today 1 in 5 Protestants is Latino, with somewhat less than half of those being Pentecostal.<sup>7</sup>

This section examines Latinos in relation to the American megachurch. Many Latino immigrants in the United States are Pentecostal and thus evangelical. World-wide, Evangelicalism is on the rise, especially in its most potent form, the American-style megachurch. As megachurches become infused with neoliberalism, the association between Latinos and neoliberalism deepens as more and more Latinos join megachurches. This section acknowledges the increasing political influence megachurches have in American politics, especially in their championing of conservative evangelical political aspirations. But the lines of influence do not only radiate out, megachurches are influenced by external political operatives and business entities as well. This section argues that the emergence of corporatist practices within the organizational structure of megachurches has changed the relationship between megachurches and their membership. Neoliberalism has so influenced megachurches that their praxis and their interpretation of religious doctrine have changed to better accommodate neoliberalism.

Of the corporatist practices that megachurches employ to attract new members, C. Kirk Hadaway of the Episcopal Church, states, these “cannot be considered religious – but rather sentimentality and psychological techniques of emotional arousal.”<sup>8</sup> What Hadaway finds disturbing is the increasing reliance on corporate practices and how a resulting corporate culture has intruded directly into religious doctrine itself. Hadaway is especially disturbed by how religious praxis has been interpreted through

Madison Avenue marketing techniques. The more megachurches utilize corporate practices, the more they “also epitomize the drift toward using essentially secular rituals to energize the ritual environment.”<sup>9</sup> In this manner evangelical spiritual practice is transformed. But rather than transforming as a result of a deep theological schism, it does so as a result of the infiltration of the prevailing secular paradigm. With its emphasis, first and foremost, on unfettered growth, the resultant strain of corporatism that is practiced today by virtually every major industry leader can be traced back to the global transformation of open and unregulated markets - in a word, to neoliberalism.

This is how neoliberalism is incorporated into religion. Through faulty logic enabled by convenient pragmatism, neoliberalism, by creating globalization characterized by too-big-too-fail conglomerates and ever-growing wealth disparity, has also worked its way into religious doctrine and praxis. As a result, Evangelicalism, through its megachurches, serves as neoliberalism's ambassador to religion. Although megachurches predate the advent of neoliberalism, the proliferation of politically influential megachurches does not predate the globalization of neoliberalism. In fact, the worldwide emergence of these two phenomena coincide from their first contact in Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship. Although, in the US, one may look towards the likes of Billy Graham as the father of the early precursor of the modern megachurch phenomenon, beginning in the 1960s, megachurches changed by the 1980s. None of the largest megachurches today operate like they did in the 1960s, not even Billy Graham's.

The influence of neoliberalism has led to a redefinition of Evangelicalism itself. The consequence of this is that it has relegated evangelical Latinos to subaltern status even as megachurches seek to increase their Latino membership. This is because the infiltration of neoliberalism into megachurches has resulted in the creation of a hierarchy that maintains the economic status quo while hiding behind a veneer of religious freedom. In their pursuit of religious freedom, megachurches have

sought to expand beyond traditional church walls and re-create a supposedly "deregulated religion" so as to have a "free and open religious market."<sup>10</sup> In this context, Latinos become a sought after commodity. However, with respect to the benefits that Latinos can claim, Latinos have yet to move much beyond the cosmetic. For megachurches, Latino net worth in the United States has allowed megachurches to claim diversity and enrich their coffers. But there is the added benefit of reducing the ranks of Latinos who would be in opposition to conservative politics. This, perhaps more so than Latino money, is paying large dividends in conservative politics.

Although both political parties court Latinos voters, it is erroneous to conclude that Latinos can greatly influence the political agenda of conservative evangelicals. In 2012, political opinion writer for the Washington Post Michael Gerson noted the rising importance of the evangelical vote. He addressed the evangelical aversion to "swollen government", a selling point of the Republican strategy to win back the White House.<sup>11</sup> Gerson went on to say, "Every four years, Republicans eventually realize that they need a hopeful domestic policy agenda - some vision of the common good - that appeals beyond their base."<sup>12</sup> Some Republicans believed that immigration reform could unite evangelicals under a common cause. That same year, David Sessions, editor of the *Daily Beast*, noted the "complex feelings about immigration" that evangelicals exhibit. He believed that many would agree with Senator Marco Rubio's stance on immigration, which argued that, for Republicans, "holding out on policies like the DREAM Act is eventual political suicide."<sup>13</sup>

Rubio and Sessions were wrong. Republicans had repeatedly defeated the DREAM Act in multiple votes stretching from 2015 through January of 2018. The DREAM Act would have granted many undocumented people, including minors who had been brought to the US by their parents, a legal path to citizenship. Republicans have also sought to undo President Obama's executive order, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which was signed in 2012. DACA addresses many of

the same immigration issues that the shelved DREAM Act had. In response to the lack of Republican support for compassionate immigration reform, prominent evangelical Latinos in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, including Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, pastor of the largest Latino-American megachurch in the US, have said "if Republicans continue on this path this time around, silence will not be an option on my end."<sup>14</sup> Rev. Rodriguez, a conservative evangelical Latino, had espoused a belief that "the Latino electorate is up for grabs," for either Republicans or Democrats, in the presidential election in 2016.<sup>15</sup> But, as it will be shown, Rev. Rodriguez's actions shortly before and after the 2016 election would belie his words, serving only to confirm the fact that evangelical Latinos can be influential in megachurch politics only if they support white conservative-evangelicals and vote Republican.

In a 2011 survey of megachurches, "77% of them self identify as conservative, [with] 65% as Evangelical."<sup>16</sup> With 60% of all US megachurches "located in the sunbelt", Rev. Rodriguez is likely under the impression that because Latinos are pivotal voters in presidential elections in key swing states like Florida, Texas, and California, megachurches in these states must become increasingly responsive to Latino political demands.<sup>17</sup> As the number of megachurches dramatically increased between 2007 and 2010, up from approximately 1,250 megachurches to at least 1,667, with annual membership growth rates of more than 20%, this conclusion seems plausible, but it is overly optimistic and premature.<sup>18</sup> Both the Republican Party and conservative evangelicals abandoned Latinos in the 2016 election, likely shocking the conservative Rev. Rodriguez just as much as it did liberals across the nation. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Rev. Rodriguez did not let his scruples come between himself and President Donald Trump and, instead, chose to abandon his previous stance in order to maintain cozy relations with more powerful evangelical leaders.

Evangelical Latinos often cite increasing Latino immigration into the US as the harbinger of

future Latino dominance. In 1980, immigrants accounted for little more than "6% of the US population, but in 2010 immigration accounted for nearly 13% of the US population."<sup>19</sup> This has contributed to the increasing presence of Latinos in the US, which is approximately 52 million Latinos, or 16% of the total US population.<sup>20</sup> Of the twenty largest megachurches in the US, twelve are located in the states of Florida, Arizona, Nevada, and Texas (Texas alone has six). With this in mind, it is perhaps understandable how many evangelical Latinos, especially Rev. Rodriguez, could so badly misjudge the role that Latinos play in conservative evangelical politics, especially in megachurches.<sup>21</sup>

In light of the fact that Rev. Rodriguez is the leader of the largest Latino megachurch in the United States and in this capacity miscalculated the prominence of Latinos in conservative evangelical politics, we must ask the question: Just what roles do Latinos play in American megachurches and in evangelical politics more broadly? As immigration steadily increases, it becomes more and more clear that Latinos are the largest growing group not only in terms of numbers, but also, and perhaps more significantly, in terms of influencing the development of Protestantism in the United States. This is significant, especially when we take into account the fact that the average growth rate of megachurches founded before 1990 is about 39%, but for those founded after 1990 it is 91%.<sup>22</sup>

There are many factors that help explain why megachurches founded after 1990 have a significantly higher growth rate, but immigration is surely chief among them. A recent study by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, which is located at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, found that, worldwide, Pentecostalism in 1970 represented "5.1% of all Christians," but by 2010 this number "had grown to 25.8%." This reflects how Pentecostals have become the largest and fastest growing group of either Protestant evangelicals or charismatics, and with "nearly four times the growth rates of both Christianity and the world's population."<sup>23</sup> Even though Pentecostals represent a minority of Protestants, the vast majority of Latino Protestants are evangelical.

American megachurches "have been dramatically increasing in number only since the 1970s", and are increasingly evangelical.<sup>24</sup> Because the majority of Protestant Latinos are evangelical, it seems that as Latino-Americans increase in numbers, it is conceivable that the majority of megachurches founded in the United States will, as the century progresses, increasingly cater to Latinos. In other words, the twenty-first century American megachurch is likely to be evangelical and increasingly Latino, in stark contrast to the megachurches of the previous century.

The history of the development of Pentecostalism in Latin America as it pertains to the importation of neoliberalism provides some clues about the American experience of megachurch proliferation and its role in conservative evangelical politics. Once upon a time, the guiding assumption was that cultural, religious, economic, and political influences flowed only in one direction in the Americas: from the US to Latin America. But studying the significance of megachurches in both Latin America and the United States suggests that influence in fact flows in both directions.

Just as Latin American Pentecostalism had developed in tandem with US exported neoliberalism, US megachurches have also developed in tandem with neoliberalism, with one major difference - both megachurches and neoliberalism are endemic to American culture. In other words, megachurches and neoliberalism must have emerged from a preexisting feature of American culture. As for Latinos, evangelical or otherwise, there is a long and well established history of otherness in the United States, which effectively designates Latinos as foreign and often unwanted. Megachurches have shown themselves to be a non-factor in this history. In fact, it could even be argued that the emergence of politically influential megachurches since the Reagan era, when it comes to national politics, has done little more than give lip service to the needs of their Latino congregants and constituents. Still, many evangelical leaders, especially Catholics, who have spoken out in support of immigration reform have been dismissed for speaking out only to serve their own self-interest. President Trump's adviser,

Steve Bannon, himself a Catholic, has declared that evangelicals, in particular evangelical Catholic Bishops, speak out because “they need illegal aliens to fill the churches.”<sup>25</sup> While it may appear that evangelicals are united in defense of immigration reform, few evangelical megachurch leaders have turned their backs on Trump over this issue. In fact, the prevailing sentiment from evangelicals about Trump's policies is approval, which has been expressed as “apart from the president's choice of words, 'Trump is right on target in his policy,' putting the needs of the U.S. above those of other countries.”<sup>26</sup>

This reverses the situation we have examined in Latin America. Here in the US, it is Latino people who play the role of the imported commodity not the religion or the economic ideology. Seen from this perspective, overly optimistic evangelical Latinos clearly did not recognize that the Latino immigrant, in this case, has to make the perilous leap from otherness to inclusion. This is what imported Pentecostalism tries to facilitate for the poor in Latin America.

Although full inclusion has eluded evangelical Latinos, this does not mean that, in the US, they do not have an important role to play in conservative evangelical politics. But the role Latinos play in conservative evangelical politics has been misunderstood. This is probably because the role Latinos fill in megachurches has also been misunderstood. Rather than filling leadership positions and providing the support that is recognized as crucial for the growth of megachurches, Latinos fill few prominent leadership roles, and provide less money and resources than wealthier megachurch members. As a result, Latinos are viewed as necessary for the growth of megachurches, but not to be included in the planning and development of megachurch political and economic aspirations. In effect, as Latino membership rates increase, Latinos are treated less as partners, and more as a disposable commodity.

The 2016 presidential election is a clear sign that the presence of Latinos in Evangelicalism, and its brand of conservative politics, is far from pivotal to sway white evangelicals from a political agenda that is not inclusive of Latino voices. At least not yet. Just as some evangelicals in Chile had rejected

the Protestant Te Deum in 1975, which had endorsed the Pinochet regime, some evangelicals, such as Rev. Rodriguez, initially rejected the Republican Party's presumptive nominee for President in the 2016 election. In an article by Kate Linthicum published in the *Los Angeles Times* in May of 2016, Rev. Samuel Rodriguez said that he and the Latino community had been “offended” by remarks made by Republican nominee Donald Trump.<sup>27</sup> Rodriguez was not alone in his sentiment; other Latino megachurch leaders, such as Pastor Sergio De La Mora, Rev. Walter Contreras, Pastor Eddie Rodriguez, and Pastor Tony Suarez also voiced opposition to Donald Trumps nomination.<sup>28</sup> Yet Linthicum reported that there were indications that “some of those evangelical Latino leaders are winnable for Trump.”<sup>29</sup> One reason for this was that evangelical Latinos “are more likely to identify as Republicans than are other Latinos.”<sup>30</sup> In effect party loyalty was expected from evangelical Latinos.

As the number of evangelical Latinos grows, they have yet to exhibit enough influence upon other evangelicals, especially southern white evangelicals, to change their stance on immigration. Nevertheless, the growth of evangelical Latinos has benefited the overall conservative evangelical agenda by cutting into the overall Latino vote in general elections. In other words, as the number of evangelical Latinos grow, there are fewer votes cast against conservative politics.

The percentage of evangelical Latinos in the US has risen “from 12% in 2010 to 16% in 2013.”<sup>31</sup> As Latinos in the US grow in numbers and enter into megachurches, megachurches have gained more votes for their cause. This means neoliberalism in the United States is gaining Latino supporters by way of religion. But what has not changed is that Latinos remain a segment of the American population that continues to gain far less from American prosperity than their white counterparts, which is no less true in megachurches.

The megachurch extends the reach of neoliberalism into the Latino communities. This creates what David Harvey had described as “the construction of consent.”<sup>32</sup> As segments of the Latino-



American population are peeled off into conservative-orientated political groups, the historically Left-leaning Latino voting bloc becomes diffuse. Harvey suggests that religion in the United States has been reorientated to support neoliberalism in the Gramscian notion of "common sense," which provided an easy explanation for the uncertainties of difficult economic times.<sup>33</sup> This means the evangelizing of Latinos into megachurches today is not solely about providing ecclesiastical solace in uncertain times. It is about propagating notions and values that are supportive of neoliberalism, with the ultimate aim of passing off such beliefs as simple common sense. An example of this is the notion that success in a field of business or private practice can directly qualify someone for public office. The patience of diplomacy, the minutiae of social welfare and public housing programs, and even complexity of national macroeconomics, is believed to be well within the expertise of oil tycoons, surgeons, and real estate developers.

As they increase their ranks in megachurches, Latinos are being purposefully targeted by conservative politics in order to weaken overall support for liberal politics. The mere presence of evangelical Latinos in megachurches provides a counterpoint used against Liberals as proof that conservative religious politics is compatible with the prosperity of Latinos in the US. As such, Latinos have become subsumed under the holy grail of American religious conservatism, namely the pursuit of religious freedom.

Religious freedom is now epitomized by the worldwide proliferation of megachurches, especially where Evangelicalism and neoliberalism coexist. In the United States, religious freedom echoes the neoliberal model, which requires unregulated expansion of megachurch activities. Unregulated megachurches would be free to expand their activities into economic and political concerns. The more successful they grow, the more ardent megachurches become as advocates for the reorientation of religion to incorporate neoliberalism as a part of its evangelical foundation. David

Harvey argues that cultural and religious values "can be mobilized to mask other realities"; behind vague notions of freedom, religious elites are pursuing their own goals.<sup>34</sup>

A consequence arising from megachurches cojoining neoliberalism with religious freedom, is to emulate big corporations, which reflects their new-found ideology of growth. According to social scientists J.B. Watson Jr. and Walter H. Scalen, for US megachurches "Getting big became an obsession."<sup>35</sup> This obsession has so captured megachurch leaders that practically all debate about megachurches, including interpretation of doctrine, revolves around just this one issue. Secularization, which occurs when "idealistic religious ideas are replaced by greater emphasis on material success or other pragmatic concerns," has progressed to the point that it seems impossible to conceive of megachurches expanding so successfully without emphasizing economic corporatism over religious doctrine.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the secularized megachurch has over taken the prominence of religious doctrine when considering organizational models and strategies for increasing membership.

In reference to secularization, Watson, quotes theologian Alan Wolfe of Boston College: "In every aspect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture – and American culture has triumphed."<sup>37</sup> Watson and Wolfe are suggesting here that there is a long history in the US of religious practice being affected and changed by cultural developments. Watson and Wolfe play devil's advocate, arguing against the notion that faith, as it is practiced, should be held in higher esteem than the ephemeral developments in pop culture, entertainment, or even politics. If American corporate culture is included in Watson's argument, then one must acknowledge that American corporate culture has been dominated by neoliberalism since the 1980s.

The reorientation of religion along neoliberal lines involves the injection of secular corporate practices into a religious context, which ultimately characterizes churches according to their business acumen. The relative health of churches comes to be measured through matrices that emphasize

economic gains over doctrinal or spiritual concerns. This process results in a subordination of religious doctrine. As growth becomes synonymous with religious prosperity, "the essential model for church growth" begins to "openly incorporate a business model in a local church context."<sup>38</sup> This has resulted in Evangelicalism's search for a "worldwide strategy" as megachurches become more centralized and adhere to a corporate model.<sup>39</sup> The evangelical drive to grow, not only in numbers but also in intensity, has established a powerful advocate for religious freedom. But the religious doctrine, particularly as it is practiced by megachurches, is so infused with secular practices that it has redefined it in a new way: it is now a religious doctrine that incorporates neoliberalism. This means that the drive to grow has also tethered megachurches to pursue the same goals of neoliberalism.

What has resulted from the neoliberal reorientation of religion is a certain differentiation between those who are religiously affiliated with megachurches and those who are not. "While both extremes are finding favor with US adults, most low-commitment religions, or the middle, are not faring so well" in an environment where "33 million Americans (16% of the adult US population) had changed their religious affiliation."<sup>40</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that there is a market for religious converts and megachurches have emerged as a key component of what some sociologists describe as the "McDonaldization" or "Walmartization of religion."<sup>41</sup>

Megachurches, because of their size, can offer both more religious, as well as more secular services to their membership than smaller churches can. In this sense, the megachurch becomes more valuable to converts, offering something beyond just social connections that are focused solely upon theological concerns. This crosses into the territory of religious-based social networks, which operate under principles similar to those of better known virtual networks, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. The incorporation of both traditional Sunday church services and virtual social networks reflects the growing priority in megachurches of attracting younger and more educated members. J.B. Watson Jr.

and Walter H. Scalen suggest that American evangelical churches have been seduced by corporate culture's "intoxicating appeal"; they now "reflect some level of accommodation to many of the dominant values, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize American secular life."<sup>42</sup> As a result, Evangelicalism has become indistinguishable from many secular practices.

One of the most evident features of secular American life that characterizes corporate culture is the strong association between corporations and government, which is commonly brokered by special interest groups and lobbyists. Researcher Ashley E. English, in her thoroughly researched dissertation on megachurches and their economic development, has noted that in her sampling of 136 megachurches in Texas "19% of megachurch leadership serve on government or community boards."<sup>43</sup> English has sought to explain how Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) have been viewed by local governments as natural partners for social programs. Of the megachurches she analyzed in Texas, English found that 100% of their leadership is male, 79% of the senior pastors are white, 85% of senior pastors had attained a graduate level degree, and 48% had even earned a doctoral degree.<sup>44</sup> These statistics show where the crossover in leadership between local governments and megachurches occurs. Examples of crossover between private enterprises and government regulators, include Wall St. executives who become the heads of agencies that regulate banking practices, or civil servants who enter into private practice in the fields they once regulated.

These statistics also suggest that the same values that dominate governments, especially pertaining to ideas about economic development programs, have filtered into the makeup of megachurches. This means, as megachurches increasingly organize and represent themselves in the same manner that businesses do to government agencies, the leadership of megachurches become indistinguishable from the leadership of businesses and civic organizations. This is especially true with the preponderance of highly educated, religiously conservative white males who will very likely

support conservative economic development programs over liberal ones.

As megachurches increasingly adapt corporate strategies, local governments are increasingly including megachurches in their economic planning. Indeed, many local governments and the federal government see little difference between megachurches and corporate entities since both lobby using many of the same tactics.<sup>45</sup> Because nearly a fifth of megachurch leadership in English's study serve on community boards, it is likely that community boards regard megachurches with a great deal of favorable bias. It is also likely that notions about what makes for a successful business leader, or a good political leader, are now being ascribed to successful religious leaders. And why not? As megachurches grow ever larger they affect local economies all the more.

To begin to understand why local governments increasingly consider partnerships with megachurches in social welfare and economic development programs, one must include the relationship - and the biases - shared by community boards and church leaders. The significance of college education yields a clue about biases present in megachurches. One has to remember that the percentage of college educated leaders in megachurches is high, with nearly half having at least "some college education."<sup>46</sup> This is a higher ratio than the typical small or medium sized business.<sup>47</sup> In reality the level of college educated leadership for megachurches, especially at the highest levels, is approaching the level of international corporations. Yet as local governments formulate their economic stimulus programs that are meant to address poverty, data from megachurch researcher Mark Chaves's 2008 study showed that only 10% of all megachurches congregants attended megachurches that are located in "poverty-stricken" communities.<sup>48</sup> This means that few of the megachurches that are partnering with local government's attempt to address poverty have first-hand experience working in poverty-stricken communities.

Comparable to what had happened in Chile, the placement of megachurches in the US favors

the affluent even though many of their members are in fact poor. Chaves's data, which reveals high rates of college education in conjunction with megachurch participation, strongly suggests that the decision-making process of the megachurches is skewed in favor of the better educated, those people who do not tend to live in poverty-stricken communities. This suggests that whatever value system is used to judge social welfare programs reflects the biases of the better off as opposed to those of the poor.

As one begins to unravel the inner workings of the megachurch, one finds the wide-spread exercise of what sociologist J.B. Watson called "practicality in church organization," which in this case means operating under an existential mandate best described as growth or die.<sup>49</sup> In this regard, the organizational structure of megachurches has come to reflect the educational make up and management styles of its leadership. The "practicality" that Watson is trying to describe, represents a rationalization of church organization based upon the prevailing business doctrines of our time. Growth has supplanted the traditional method of church organization, which for centuries had been based upon doctrine, especially a doctrine grounded in eschatological beliefs. This is not to deny that churches have never been large. Just look at the cathedrals of Europe. The history of the Catholic church clearly marks the origins of big churches and their money and bureaucracy. But to grow within a business definition means that money and bureaucracy must merge under some form of rationalized, strategic, and innately corporate vision of growth. Corporate growth moves churches away from old religious doctrines and closer to new, business-orientated models of measurable growth. Words that once were used to describe the health of a church as measured by the faith of its followers have given way to the marketing of "consumers of religion" who are interested in increasing their "religious investment."<sup>50</sup> Religiosity takes on new meaning as evangelicals exercise their own personal religious freedom in the deregulated religious market.

In 2008 Silvia Federici published *A Feminist Critique of Marx*, excoriated the foundations of contemporary Marxism, as well as Capitalism. Her point of contention was their shared understanding of the work force, or more specifically, how it is produced. Federici asserts that within both systems, “No difference is made between commodity production and the production of the work force,” as if “One assembly-line produces both”.<sup>51</sup> Federici posits that workers themselves are a commodity and therefore have their own inherent value, beyond what they produce. What Federici astutely points out is that “capitalist production relies on the production of a particular type of worker,” that must be able to replicate the conditions that produce them in the first place.<sup>52</sup> Plainly said, workers are not simply born they are made. Federici suggests the first labor that takes place in any society is the reproduction of its workers and the processes that make them useful. Societies and organizations alike, in order to grow and endure, must have its workers reproduced or they eventually die out. Therefore the worker has innate value beyond what they produce.

Federici helps us to see how megachurches view their congregants. Megachurches have redefined the meaning of membership, the most important aspect of which is now related to growth. Hence the term "religious investment," first used by Marc von der Ruhr and Joseph P. Daniels in 2008, is used to describe the religiosity of megachurch members, not the organization. Although Evangelicalism in the US had originally been rooted in smaller churches, a sea-change has occurred since the 1990s. Since the 1990s, the obsession to get big has changed the identity of the religious worshiper to that of religious consumer. When religious consumers decide on their level of religious investment in a megachurch, they are participating in the construction of a new kind of corporatism, one that often bears little relation to spiritual goals or needs. As a consequence of megachurches prioritizing their growth above all other considerations, the saving of souls becomes merely a means to an economic end – the growth of the megachurch. This is one of the effects of neoliberalism being

evangelized through American megachurches.

The ideology that many megachurches follow is a relatively simple one: unless a church can successfully operate within secular reality, such as pay its bills, it cannot do what it is meant to do, namely save souls. Watson argues that this is "best viewed as a by-product of a fundamental paradigm shift in religious organizations among evangelicals, that is, churches restructuring themselves according to a corporate business model."<sup>53</sup> The corporate model, Marc von der Ruhr argues, is the "preferred tool for 'church growth' professionals."<sup>54</sup> It has led to "practical programming and general lack of demoninational affiliation."<sup>55</sup> This Weberian attitude, stressing more rationality and thus more professional accountability and efficiency, also corresponds to the culture of American businesses, in particular the elitism that dominates Fortune 500 companies. The demographic statistics of megachurch leadership that Ashley E. English had gathered in Texas also reflects the demographic makeup of the leadership for much of the Fortune 500, almost perfectly: white, male, and college-educated. For some evangelical Latino, namely those who have reached high levels in megachurches, this is not an issue. But for evangelical Latino who have not, and especially if they are poor, they find themselves once again subordinated, relegated to a minority position within their own religion. Megachurches in the United States, like their counterparts in Latin America, serve the poor in as much as they welcome them into the church. But the poor are represented only so far up the chain of command, which means that there is no difference between the modern megachurch and the Protestant or Catholic Church of the bygone colonial era, when the poor were subordinated to support the values of elites.

The most salient feature disntinguishing the American megachurch from the rest of the world's megachurches is that it reflects a majority religion that has long enjoyed a position of privilege in society and power. This understanding means that American megachurches are not merely more



prevalent, or on average wealthier; what truly distinguishes them is how much more integrated they are into society and government. Just like Wall St. banks, the US auto industry, big Pharma, or Hollywood studios, American megachurches have their own lobby network, which promotes their interests and even insulates them from intrusive government oversight. The emergence and proliferation of American megachurches in the 1980s and 1990s was not, therefore, the phenomenon of a fringe religion. It was, rather, thoroughly mainstream. In this context, a nexus of cultural biases; cozy relationships between powerful sectors of government, neoliberal proponents, fringe conservatives, and megachurches have emerged to shape evangelical politics. But now, Latinos, who have been historically excluded from what David Harvey had suggested was the "unholy alliance" between evangelical conservatives, rightwing politics, extremists, and corporatism that champion neoliberalism, are now being enticed by megachurches to join the ranks of an unholy alliance.<sup>56</sup>

### **Megachurch Inc. & The Drive to Grow**

The American megachurch has been called the “spiritual phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” yet no two surveys agree upon how to measure its overall growth and influence within American society.<sup>57</sup> Despite the growing scholarly interest in megachurches, this powerful force of Evangelicalism remains firmly rooted in the notion that modern megachurches are strictly a natural outgrowth of American Evangelicalism. It has even been suggested that in order to provide ample parking for its membership, megachurches are, therefore, logically located primarily in suburban areas with greater access to highways.<sup>58</sup> Such notions reinforce the mistaken belief that megachurches are established where it is simply the most logistically expedient in order to better service its membership. This leaves out consideration for differences in power between groups, and who decides where megachurches are located.

In other words, too many scholars have accepted the idea that modern megachurches were simply bound to develop. By not searching for outside influences that have crept into Evangelicalism, it leaves out the cultural influences that are shaping the development of the megachurch. This is not to say that megachurches have developed or emerged only as a result of secular cultural values, it merely takes into account the various cultural influences that have interacted with religion. With this starting point in mind, it is possible to examine the varied characteristics of megachurches and to trace their origins and what has influenced their development, not just within religion, but also in the greater culture as well.

Distinctive American cultural influences have been instrumental in the emergence of certain American industries, such as Hollywood, Silicon Valley, the Country Music industry, and Wall St. When it comes to megachurches, although they can be found in practically every region of the US, the Sun Belt has by far the largest number of them. Of the top 50 megachurches listed in the US, twelve, or almost 25% are in the state of Texas alone.<sup>59</sup> Currently, the top 50 megachurches each have at least 5000 members.<sup>60</sup> The 2010 US Census listed the city of Houston as the fourth most populous city in America, with a population of just over 4 million people, of which approximately 49% are Latino.<sup>61</sup> Houston is surrounded by many smaller suburban municipalities and is home to the Second Baptist Church of Houston, the nation's second largest megachurch, with an annual operating budget listed at \$53 million.<sup>62</sup> Similar to Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, there are just as many people, if not more, living within an hour's drive of Houston's city limits. It is also the home of Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church, which has an 8,200 seat sanctuary and over 25,000 members that live in state, making it the largest megachurch in the United States.<sup>63</sup> Combined, the 50 largest megachurches in the US may have over 350,000 members. Currently, there does not seem to be any research that calculates the combined total worth of megachurch assets. But if one counts the total membership of the top 50

megachurches, it would qualify to being within the top 20 credit unions of the U.S.<sup>64</sup> The Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA), which is a not-for-profit organization, by itself has total assets, listed in 2016, at over \$394 million.<sup>65</sup>

The overlap in the American Sun Belt between the growing Latin-American population and the proliferation of megachurches marks this region as a fault line for religious conservatives and Latino-American politics. The state of Texas in particular, which has so many of the largest megachurches, can be viewed as the geographical nexus of evangelical Latinos and megachurches in the US. Yet this does not mean that the significance of evangelical Latinos can be measured purely in terms of a geographical node. Across the United States, evangelical Latinos have, only recently, begun to penetrate the upper echelons of conservative US evangelical leadership. To date the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC) is the largest Latin-American evangelical network in the United States. The leader of the NHCLC is the Puerto Rican-born Rev. Samuel Rodriguez.<sup>66</sup> The NHCLC has over 40,000 churches worldwide. One of the largest megachurches within the NHCLC network is currently Puerto Rico's largest megachurch, with over 3,500 members.<sup>67</sup> It is difficult to measure the scope of the NHCLC network, but it is directly associated with the mammoth BGEA. Still, as was stated before, none of this means evangelical Latinos leaders have been able to exercise meaningful influence in altering prevailing evangelical attitudes towards Latinos.

Despite being poorly represented in the upper echelons of megachurch administrations nationwide evangelical Latino leadership has encouraged Latinos to consider megachurches as welcoming places where they can voice their concerns. Because at least fifteen percent of Latin Americans identify as evangelical, with many of them being recent immigrants who may have been members of a megachurch in their country of origin, it seems that many seriously consider joining a church that is within the NHCLC organization as they integrate into American society.<sup>68</sup> The NHCLC,

especially, has positioned itself to be the final destination for evangelical Latinos immigrants who are seeking a better life in the United States.

As an example of how encompassing life in megachurch communities can be for recent Latino immigrants, in the small country of El Salvador, the church *Mision Cristiana Elim*, led by Pastor Sergio Solorzano, had at its peak, had as many as 200,000 members spread across the nation during the early 2000s.<sup>69</sup> For Latinos who have experienced life in, and the benefits of, an influential megachurch community, it seems likely that they will search out for the same in the US. The NHCLC has capitalized on the opportunity to provide evangelical Latino a similar experience that few American megachurches can do as well as they can. With its Hispanic membership and leadership the NHCLC can recreate a fully immersive religious and cultural experience for newly-arrived Latin American immigrants to the United States. This goes beyond the scope of establishing neighborhood communities, because through a megachurch jobs, education, and other necessities for a better life can be found either near or far from home. Visiting an American neighborhood that predominantly speaks a language other than English, one can see why many who live there rely upon the comfort and relative security that a community sharing a common language and culture provides. In twenty-first century America, evangelical Latinos need not travel beyond their neighborhoods to find information about employment opportunities, government services, and general advocacy for their needs. To have influential megachurches extend to evangelical immigrants, and the American-born alike, the same opportunities that more established Americans take for granted is a powerful incentive. But it seems that these services create a side effect beyond merely increased megachurch membership or megachurch brand loyalty; these services can create a dependency, one that the NHCLC is perfectly positioned to capitalize on.

A key component for the success of megachurches in expanding the range of their community

services is the vast digital footprint they have online. This, perhaps more than any other reason, has empowered megachurches to reach far beyond their physical locations to successfully plant churches in other states and countries. This has enabled megachurches to diversify their membership across cultural boundaries and national borders. Their crossover into international relief efforts, which had traditionally been the purview of long established not-for-profit charitable organizations, has also served to open political and economic opportunities that a generation ago were simply too difficult for most megachurches to manage. This has facilitated their ventures in economic development efforts that were previously the exclusive domain of large multi-national for-profit corporations, banks, resource extraction conglomerate, etc.

The penetration into these areas of international aid and economic development defines the phenomenon of the megachurch as a revolution in Evangelicalism's development. The business interests of the twenty-first century megachurch have been so thoroughly developed that it has become impossible to separate their business acumen from their religiosity. Now, more than ever, megachurches are viewed by governments as qualified partners in helping to stimulate economies and provide aid relief when disasters strike.<sup>70</sup> After the ravages of Hurricane Maria in 2017, the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, BGEA, and the NHCLC, have all raised millions in aid for Puerto Rican relief efforts.<sup>71</sup> Pastor Wilfredo De Jesus, who's megachurch is located in Humbolt Park, a major Puerto Rican enclave located in Chicago, and is the largest chapter in the Assemblies of God collective, with 20,000 members, was in the very first days after the hurricane struck, the single largest contributor of aid to Puerto Rico after the American Red Cross and FEMA.<sup>72</sup> Amidst all this, megachurches still retain their religious identity, which liberates them from many of the legal restraints to which for-profit businesses must adhere to. This creates a legal ambiguity, of which megachurches can take advantage. As megachurches export their aid relief programs internationally, they are competing with long

established actors of civil society. What marks megachurch aid relief organizations is that they are closely associated with conservative evangelical political groups across the US. This is in contrast to the long held convictions of most well established international aid relief organization – their political neutrality - both domestically and abroad.

Online websites StartChurch.com, Churchlawtodaystore.com, and Christianitytoday.org, provide information for megachurches to establish a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization in their own name, then find legal advice about tax deferment and reductions, including a how-to guide meant to “help the church *think globally*” and incorporate with other organizations overseas.<sup>73</sup> What has emerged with the proliferation of megachurches is evangelism that seeks to utilize every means of technology in order to communicate its message. But it does not stop there. One should remember, the implementation of organizational models that specifically use social media strategies. This means that social media and marketing theories are actively incorporated into the daily operations of megachurches as they plant new churches, export their products and missionaries, and acquire businesses to support their ventures using the same techniques and organizational philosophy of the corporation that coined the terms “synergy.”

Incorporating the corporate models that have pioneered and created the most effective social media and their marketing strategies, has also led megachurches down the path of corporatization, and a for-profit business model. Megachurch researcher Stephen Ellingson estimated in 2015, that in the US alone megachurches collectively bring in over “\$8.5 billion” in profit from direct sales of their products and services.<sup>74</sup> However, as early as 2007, it was becoming apparent that megachurches were connected to income beyond their stated holdings.<sup>75</sup> The point here is that while many big corporations have established charitable funds, it is unheard of for these funds to be so large relative to the corporation that established it in the first place. BGEA and Samaritan's Purse aid organization, as

examples, are both enormous international organizations, sharing the same CEO and founder, but the total value of their assets alone is nearly 5% of the total profits from over sixteen hundred US megachurches.<sup>76</sup> This is if Ellingson is correct. Of course comparing the total assets of a business as a percentage of an industry's estimated gross profit is not an accurate measurement of under reported profits, but in this case because of BGEA's extremely large ratio to, what is presently, the best estimate of the industry's gross profit, does bring into question the possibility that Ellingson's estimate is either too low or that BGEA may be over valuing their assets.

Taking into account Christian television networks, not-for-profit organizations that have megachurches as parent organizations, as well as for-profit businesses that, if not wholly, are at least partially owned by megachurches, it becomes difficult to trace how much money actually flows through this new and unregulated religious economy. Included within the mix of shell holdings and quasi-religious charities are the businesses that are owned by individual prominent church members. Although not illegal, some megachurch websites link directly to, and endorse, certain banks, insurance companies, retailers, realtor management companies and colleges; to name just a few non-religious or quasi-religious organizations that have owners, share holders, or board member who have at one time or another served in a leadership capacity within a megachurch. Easily the most high profile, and politically influential example of a megachurch leader who has his hand in many religious and/or quasi-religious organizations is Franklin Graham. He is also a key evangelical leader, in what Walter Russell Mead, the Henry A. Kissinger Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, calls “hot religion.”<sup>77</sup> Mead argues that “within the world of conservative Protestantism, a fundamentalist and an evangelical camp,” have emerged in identity politics, and are increasingly trying to affect US foreign policy.<sup>78</sup> The key feature of this group is that they express themselves in every aspect of their lives, including politics, through their religion. Religious groups that believe their

religious belief should remain private, and thus, removed from politics, are members of “cold religion,” which Mead suggests is “fading.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite Franklin Graham's denials that he or the BGEA is in support of a particular political party or candidate, Graham through his organization, is a heavyweight advocate for conservative evangelical politics.<sup>80</sup> Because many megachurches are connected with aid organizations and are influential entities within conservative evangelical politics, the lines of separation between church and state are now blurred. As megachurches establish aid organizations to operate within foreign nations it is unclear if those nations are aware of the political connections between megachurch aid organizations and the US government. As academics turn their attention to this field of study, it will be difficult to untangle political considerations from the good intentions of aid relief programs.

The association between aid organizations and megachurches goes beyond megachurches being larger than smaller churches; it is about how much more integrated they have become economically and politically. An example of this is the Church of God, located in Cleveland, Tennessee. This is a megachurch that has a 40-acre campus where its Pentecostal Theological Seminary is located, which offers many different degrees, including a Doctorate of Ministry.<sup>81</sup> In total, the Church of God lists fourteen seminaries and schools of ministry around the world, including chapters in Russia, Germany, Ecuador and Puerto Rico. Included within a wide array of religious and secular services is its association to the Church of God Foundation, which is a financial services organization.<sup>82</sup> Along with investment and financial planning services, such as those offered by traditional banks, the Church of God Foundation specializes in ministry loans for young would-be pastors aspiring to found a church domestically or abroad. The Church of God Foundation can also operate as a financial adviser to wealthy individuals, families and small business operators; or as a wealth-management fund, similar to a small Wall St. hedge fund, complete with tax-sheltered plans. It can also behave as a regular



neighborhood bank that specializes in local business and home loans. Nothing that has just been said of the Church of God can be said of any major international aid relief organization including Medicines Sans Frontiers, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Americares, Oxfam, or UNICEF.

Ostensibly, the focus by megachurches is evangelizing the faith, yet this diversification of services becomes necessary as megachurches expand their own business assets and portfolios. The strategy of asset diversification and overseas activities creates possibilities not dissimilar to emerging markets investment opportunities, that Wall St. banks broker. While many scholars consider the size of membership as the first characteristic of megachurches, this over simplifies the magnitude of change that distinguishes megachurches in the twenty-first century. From the early days of megachurch proliferation in the 1980s to the present, the literature has focused, almost obsessively, on the size of megachurches. What has resulted are studies of megachurch characteristics that either overlook the services they provide to their members, or, more recently, place too much emphasis on the range of services alone. These studies acknowledge the central mission of megachurches, which is to evangelize, but they use the very success of megachurches in their efforts to reach the masses as evidence to support their criticism of megachurches. What results is misinterpreting the megachurch's significance, centered primarily on the the notion that size is evidence to a change in religious doctrine. This has led to a backlash of criticism from megachurches against researchers, that their works are biased or worse, that it is a coordinated attack against religion.

Proponents of megachurches argue that the most effective way to evangelize has always been to grow. Criticism based upon growth is likened to criticism about an athlete who has bigger muscles than other athletes. In effect, if some churches are bigger than others, they should not be faulted for this because evangelism literally means to spread the gospel. As a result, more academics now focus on

other characteristics as they scrutinize megachurches. But it is still all too common for critics to circle back to the size of megachurches as their primary piece of evidence.

To judge one characteristic as more essential for understanding megachurches seems arbitrary. For instance, focusing upon the “notoriety of some megachurch leaders, and the reach of their books, the ratings of their television and radio programs, and the way the public views them,” has led to the criticism that these observations contribute to bias against megachurches more than they help to clarify them as a subject of inquiry.<sup>83</sup> In short, the more conspicuous features of megachurches, such as their large size or their charismatic televangelist leaders, have encouraged false assumptions. A common misinterpretation occurs when megachurch analysts conflate the sheer size of megachurches or their marketing strategies with an inverse correlation in religiosity, leading some to suggest that the larger the church the worse it is for Evangelicalism.<sup>84</sup> Another example is the myopic fixation on charismatic televangelists who preach a prosperity gospel, in other words religious avarice, often taken to extremes.<sup>85</sup> These assumptions have led to a plethora of works that closely scrutinize the symptoms of the megachurch phenomenon; but in dissecting the subject in such ways, without ever offering coherent narratives that explain how all of these characteristics emerged in the first place, they take us only so far.

As I see it, there is one way to study the megachurch that takes into account all of its characteristics in a coherent fashion. Study of the organizational structure of the megachurch, by definition, must include every aspect of what constitutes a megachurch. Tracing the corporate structure of megachurches and what follows from corporatization, namely a corporate culture, is not only relevant to the subject of megachurches, it is essential. Corporate culture, as it defuses throughout the megachurch, arguably is the most important feature that defines a modern megachurch. Analysis of how megachurches have changed by embracing an organizational structure founded on neoliberal

ideology will provide a historical timeline of their development that can be expressed in stark, simple terms: the megachurch before embracing neoliberalism and the megachurch after embracing neoliberalism.

This focus also serves to reveal the schismatic nature of neoliberal Evangelicalism. This means that the advent of neoliberal Evangelicalism has changed the existential equation of evangelical churches. In essence, churches have been put into the position of grow or die. The study of the organizational structure of megachurches provides a means of accounting for the corporatization and secularization that now defines the evolving megachurch. It takes into account the varied responses of Evangelicalism to globalization, and why some adaptations have flourished in the modern megachurch while others have withered. This focus also includes the struggle for the soul of the megachurch, which many theologians argue is too often what is missing when discussing the subject of these hugely influential institutions. I believe study of the megachurch through the prism of neoliberal Evangelicalism will bridge the considerations of theologians with secular scholarship for a fuller understanding of the subject and its ramifications in American society.

Addressing the growing intrusion, not to mention the corrosive effect, of corporate culture in megachurches, theologian C. Kirk Hadaway, who has spoken out against religious corporatism, nevertheless acknowledges that churches of all sizes “must be *viable and self-supporting*” and concedes “the congregation is a *small business* operating as a voluntary organization.”<sup>86</sup> Hadaway's admission touches upon the quandary faced by megachurches, which is whether they should reject or accept the growing reality of corporatization and its particular brand of growth. The idea that a globalized economy requires a willingness of megachurches to embrace an orthodoxy that is defined by corporatism seems unavoidable to some theologians. Therefore, “in this context the only truly viable economic model for a religious organization is the megachurch.”<sup>87</sup> Hadaway, and other theologians,

although suspicious of the corporate culture that permeates megachurches, accepts that Evangelicalism, in order to survive, must adapt to the changing conditions of the day.

As a result, megachurches have developed “pull rather than push strategies” for increasing their membership.<sup>88</sup> Part of this reflects the notion that “churches increasingly need to compete in a market for followers.”<sup>89</sup> Identifying churchgoers as a market may be a new development in the study of religion, but redefining them to suit a political agenda is not. One need only read what Christian Lalive d'Epinau in 1969 suggests about the *patron* system that defined much of the way of life for the rural poor, and how it was replicated by Pentecostal pastors in the urban centers of Latin America, to see how this works:

Pentecostalism has provided a new, vigorous legitimation for the persisting image of the *patron* in South American society: the pastor a new personality in Chilean society, fulfills a function which social change has not eliminated but left vacant, to the great peril of the masses.<sup>90</sup>

The *patron* in Latin America is someone who caters to the needs of a community in exchange for favors, money, and political support. This person is an institution unto himself. It was very rare for women to fill this role within a culture defined by *machismo*. Most often, the *patron* does not even owe his power to an office. Because they are so effective in turning out votes or, on the other hand, withholding them, parties and politicians throughout Latin American often cannot attain their stated goals without cultivating the *patron's* support of their causes. The same also works in reverse, with workers and labor unions, jobs and even housing often mediated through the informal yet culturally institutionalized patron system.

Latin America, though, is not the US. How could it be that megachurches fulfill some comparable social role on this side of the border? Perhaps megachurches provide a space where the more affluent, and those aspiring to be affluent socialize and develop quasi-social/professional

networks. This includes establishing social currency as well as economic opportunities for members. Indeed, informal social networks that are used to gain political and economic opportunities are not alien to the American way of life. Each, in their own way, is an equivalent of the *patron* system that has been socially institutionalized in every society. Because religion in the US has always been a factor in the political development of the nation, and with megachurches as enormously influential as they are, they must represent some American version of the *patron* system at work.

Sociologists Kimberly Karnes et. al. describe “these dramatically outsized and often wealthy congregations” as communities unto themselves.<sup>91</sup> Providing everything from preschools for young families to retirement communities, including health care management and business development, as well as overseas charitable activities, megachurches have enterprisingly noted an opportunity to fill social, economic, and political vacancies that uncertainty and the changing times have brought into suburban communities.<sup>92</sup>

These opportunities have been identified and measured by the level of “religious investment” of megachurch memberships. Accordingly, megachurches have implemented “a strategy of differentiated religious product lines that target potential member groups.”<sup>93</sup> “Through modern marketing techniques” that reflect the “value of networking” for members it is not difficult to imagine friends at the church campus Starbucks, talking about their religious investment as they peruse their smartphones to get the latest updates relating to their church investment portfolios.<sup>94</sup> The suburbanization of megachurches are, statistically speaking, “positively associated with income,” and because “well over 70 percent of all megachurches are found in the Southeast and West,” notions of exclusion on the basis of income and race invariably involve the growing number of Latinos in those regions, especially when it comes to the issue of immigration.<sup>95</sup>

How suburbanization affects Latinos, especially evangelical Latinos, as they choose a place of

worship is a subject that needs more scholarly attention. In a statistical study by Jason Wollschleger, megachurches “are giants with which everyone has to cope.”<sup>96</sup> Not just other smaller churches, but also all communities near them; “their inherent political, social, religious, and economic influence, makes them a salient social phenomenon.”<sup>97</sup> Similar to the Facebook model that has created a corporation with over two billion users, who have decided that the benefits of belonging to the social network outweigh the invasive aspect of personal data collection that comes with membership, megachurches have created their own method of offering evangelicals a choice to religiously opt in or, alternatively, to be left out.

There are also aspects that parallel the practices of retail giants, such as Walmart, because of the multitude of affiliated smaller churches. Taken together, as both physical and virtual locations, the megachurch presents integrated networks that allow for the maximum application of all of the megachurch's products and services to its members. Conceivably, a family can relocate into a megachurch community by using the resources available for finding housing, work, and schools for the children. They can also take out a loan so as to enroll into the megachurch's college. Potential friendships and business partnerships can be conducted through megachurches, with the church not only acting as a place of contact, but also as an active facilitator for those members who have fully invested themselves into the community.

What becomes apparent in all of this is how much megachurches come to resemble gated communities. And just like gated communities, one may enter only under certain conditions. The first condition is that megachurch members must commit themselves to deepening their religious and financial investment. In a 2010 study by megachurch researchers Scott Thumma and Warren Bird, “85% of megachurches provide financial counseling or education,” 55% provide some sort of day care or after school program, 42% provide job placement or employment training, but only 16% provide

“programs for migrants or immigrants.”<sup>98</sup> To be fair, there is no universal guideline that governs how megachurches interpret when a member has met the necessary minimum religious investment. Conceivably, the minimum religious investment could be the moment a new members joins a church. But, if the prevalence, or lack thereof, for immigrant programs is any indication, it seems that it is the responsibility of the immigrants themselves to further their assimilation before they can increase their religious investment in a megachurch. Secular reorientation of religiosity, makes it possible to say that megachurches are simply responding to the higher demand from its membership for financial services. In this manner, in order to maximize a member's religious investment it just makes sense to prioritize financial services because, apparently all other programs have less demand from membership. Whether one agrees with this or not, what results is a religiosity that becomes increasingly parsed by secular business practices, rather than through the interpretation of, or adherence to, religious doctrine.

Interestingly, as greater numbers of megachurches turn toward corporatism to organize and expand their membership, the diversity of religious praxis may have actually declined. Megachurch researcher J. B. Watson states, “one is increasingly more likely to find a McDonald's-like uniformity as large numbers of churches adopt the church growth movement model of organization.”<sup>99</sup> Like Google, which, because of its enormous success, has been so duplicated by other Silicon Valley companies, megachurches face competition through replication. Still, as they try to establish their own unique brand, “distinguishing between traditional sermons and motivational speeches becomes increasingly difficult” as megachurches mine the same sources that Fortune 500 CEOs rely upon to help them motivate their workers and tantalize stock holders.<sup>100</sup> Just as corporate presentations are often lamented for their unoriginality, megachurch services are exhibiting uniformity, because they search for the newest methods in all the same places.

This, too, can be extrapolated from Latin America and the rest of the world as well. As Watson

states, “religious monopolies have been supplanted by the highly differentiated conditions of consumer capitalism,” which means that megachurches the world over are “reaching the culture by becoming the culture.”<sup>101</sup> Still, megachurches are not “a monolithic movement.”<sup>102</sup> They should be viewed as independent religious organizations, because even though their religious praxis is often similar, they consider themselves to be representatives of the communities in which they are located. This can be compared to representative government. Just as congressional representatives are unified under one nation and constitution, they are mandated to advocate for the interests of their constituency. Yet, despite the ubiquitous declaration by megachurches in support of ecumenism, megachurches rarely form cooperatives led by openly elected representatives. Megachurches are therefore fiercely independent, and parochial, especially in relation to their leadership and power, despite their strongly shared evangelical beliefs.

Another effect of their homogenizing corporate culture is the fact that megachurches view each other as potential competitors just as often as allies. Returning to Wollschleger, although “very different” megachurches are being lumped together, there is an on-going debate as to whether “megachurches either grow at the expense of other congregations or that megachurches are beneficial for other local congregations because of increased competition.”<sup>103</sup> Either way, in this scenario, all churches become wary of one another. This means that even when a megachurch is not present in the community, smaller churches still develop within a general religious environment suffused with corporate strategies. This likely has small church pastors wondering when will a megachurch appear in the community and how will it affect the smaller church? The consequence is “that religious traditions, which previously could be authoritatively imposed now have to be marketed.”<sup>104</sup> Big and small churches alike increasingly seek feedback from their membership about their presentations, services and activities. It may appear egalitarian to have members express their ideas for improving church



services, but the practice of seeking feedback from members increasingly involves gathering information about the activities of church members in all aspects of their lives. But megachurches, have greater resources at their disposal, which means that they gather much more information about their members. To some, like Wollschleger, megachurch marketing strategies exhibit manipulative intentions that have little to do with doctrine or increasing the popularity of the megachurch brand. The subject of how invasive megachurches are as they gather information on their membership has, as far as I can tell, not been explored by anyone.

Megachurch marketing has led to secular cosmetic practices, such as “trained greeters, a hospitality booth, a coffee bar” along with gym membership, and a general college campus-like atmosphere.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, the boardrooms of megachurches all appear interchangeable from one to the next. Smaller churches, Wollschleger and Watson seem to agree, often differentiate themselves from megachurches as more intimate places of worship, in an effort to compete or, in many instances, just to survive.<sup>106</sup>

Two salient points ensue from the homogenization of religion. The first is that the methods for choosing leadership are almost identical to those found in corporate boardrooms. Biases that favor race, gender, education, and wealth become institutionalized. The poor find their representatives to be delegated to them. People who have traditionally been excluded from the highest levels of power, such as Latinos, are included only after they have met a minimum level of assimilation, too often demanding the abdication of all but the most tepid reforms. Diversity becomes a buzz word for megachurch marketing executives as they seek to increase membership. But in the boardroom membership, diversification is reserved for the assets and services that they manage rather than for the people that occupy the offices of leadership.

A second point arising from these marketing strategies, is the polarization between churches that

fully embrace a religious marketing approach, one that is driven by the obsession for getting big, and churches that reject this. What results is a schism of sorts, one that began in 1990. Megachurches that were founded before 1990 grow noticeably slower - or, actually, are slowly dying - when compared to megachurches founded after 1990. Based on a 2015 megachurch survey by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research and Leadership Network, the average growth rate for megachurches founded before 1990 was 39%, yet for those founded after 1990 it is around 91%.<sup>107</sup>

As early as 2008, the separation between older and newer megachurches was becoming evident to several scholars and theologians. Mark Chaves noted that the “liberal mainline” of churches was in decline, with a corresponding increase in megachurches of nondenominational status.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, even as this was happening, churches of all sizes during the same period increased their “voter registration efforts.”<sup>109</sup> J. B. Watson Jr. noted “the emerging church movement[...] emphasizes building community, and encourages participants to contextualize their beliefs by systematically addressing social problems in local communities.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly, Kirk Hadaway perceived that of the rise of the “competitive parish” which seeks “to corral back in the population, make them members, and reestablish control (both social and religious),” is indicative of social evangelism, which is the marriage of social media with Evangelicalism.<sup>111</sup> The tenor of this is the emergence of religious conservatism spread through social media - a far cry from soap box street preachers or door-to-door evangelism.

Of neoliberalism, David Harvey has said, it strives to “increase efficiency and productivity, improve quality, and reduce costs, both directly to the consumer through cheaper commodities and services and indirectly through reduction of the tax burden.”<sup>112</sup> Harvey's words can also apply to megachurches. Using business methods to enhance evangelism, megachurches have come to the realization that they must also strive to become a dominant special interest group, especially in presidential politics in order to ensure their secular activities remain unregulated.

David Harvey argued that for an idea that to “become dominant, a conceptual apparatus” has to exist that appeals to “our institutions, values and desires.”<sup>113</sup> Although he was speaking about neoliberalism’s successful infiltration into Western governments, his argument also holds true for neoliberalism's successful infiltration into Western religion. Here is Harvey, quoting Margret Thatcher: “economics is the method', she said, 'but the objective is to change the soul.’”<sup>114</sup> Thatcher's words aptly describe megachurches as they revise their definition for saving souls, using economic strategies as the method and their guiding principle. This is a coordinated effort, that integrates their evangelical efforts with a political agenda that has been maturing since the Reagan Era.

The current fallout stemming from Facebook's association with British political-consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica, placed Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in the defensive position of defending his companies privacy policies to congress.<sup>115</sup> Many of the same elements which play key roles in the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica situation, such as the unregulated and secretive data mining of the social network's clients, and their high stakes, of what literally can be billions of dollars in future earning for Facebook, can also apply to megachurches.<sup>116</sup> This still leaves the ethical questions surrounding the manipulation of citizen's political views unanswered, for now. The religious economy, as it has developed, is virtual unregulated. This does not mean that megachurch businesses, for example, can flout the laws that are already in place. It does mean, however, that megachurches can use their religious status to circumnavigate some laws and regulations and obscure the scope and depth of their activities. In 2016, BGEA did just that. BGEA “changed it tax status from non-profit to an 'association of churches,’” which allows BGEA to disclose less information to the public, as well as to the IRS.<sup>117</sup> Just as it is for billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, it is in the financial interest of megachurches to influence lawmakers, or, when necessary, appease any misgivings from the public, about their activities in order to maintain a deregulated religious economy.

The emerging megachurch of the twenty-first century has gone a step further than Cambridge Analytica had. Churches during the Civil Rights era had been a crucial ally for Liberals and voter registration drives in the American South. Though few, in the vast collection of churches across the South, were megachurches. Today, megachurches have been fundamental allies for conservatives, and have used the exact same tactic of voter registration drives. The difference is the turbocharged speed, invasiveness of social media. What Ronald Reagan could not do directly in his day, megachurches today can – namely openly espouse the merger of politics and religion. The example of former Alabama prosecutor and would-be senator, Roy Moore, during the special election for a vacant senate seat in 2017, highlights the distance that religious politics has traveled since the Reagan era. With the successful integration of religious conservatism into the mainstream of American politics, politicians can openly decry the loss of American morals, denounce other religions as “false religion” and openly say “God's law will be publicly acknowledged in our court.”<sup>118</sup> What has developed is a political battle between religious politicians, as champions for conservative Evangelicalism, against anyone who upholds the constitutional separation of church and state.

This is not simply to say that churches have become co-opted en masse into the “neoliberal fold.”<sup>119</sup> Some megachurches have been slow to adopt current corporatist strategies, while others espouse a variant of conservative interpretation of doctrine that eschews technology and popular culture. When surveying the leaders of the largest and most influential megachurch organizations, it quickly becomes apparent that few at the top have resisted entering into the neoliberal fold. Perhaps some evangelical leaders do not see it this way. It may very well be that Evangelicalism believes this dynamic works the other way around, with secular neoliberals being brought into the global Evangelical movement.

Nevertheless, conservative evangelicals have taken full advantage of their alliance with

neoliberalism. It has emboldened them to act more forcefully. As a result, the national political climate has become accustomed to their forays into hot-button political issues. Evangelical pastor Franklin Graham publicly supported Roy Moore, as he ran for the senate: “he's got guts,” because “he's one of the few willing to stand firm for the truth and against the erosion of biblical principles.”<sup>120</sup> A review of public statements by megachurch leaders, including online content, clearly shows that megachurch leaders are growing openly zealous in their endorsements of political candidates who toe the religious conservative line, regardless of constitutional constraints.<sup>121</sup>

An important facet of megachurches' unrestrained use of social media to foster their brand of politics is evident in their dominance in this arena. Moderate and liberal megachurches, it must be stated are a minority, but as a group, have shown little aptitude in this medium. As a consequence, the message that is overwhelmingly broadcast to religious-minded voters is a conservative one, one which brazenly endorses specific political candidates. Although somewhat less than half of the Christian voters in Alabama are evangelicals, the message that dominated the air waves and online mainstream news content during the special election was conservative.<sup>122</sup> Studies into the linkages between social media and politically-infused religious conservatism are absent in the current debate of social media's effects in American politics. Perhaps it is too soon after the revelations exposed by the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica incident, but it bears noting, nonetheless.

The “alliance” between evangelicals and conservatives has lasted, and has deepened, for nearly forty-five years. This is neither a temporary nor a recent development in American politics.<sup>123</sup> It is not clear how many smaller churches have been swept into the conservatism of megachurches, especially as these smaller churches seek to compete with their larger counterparts. Moreover, the neoliberal alliance that David Harvey identified has evolved. Just as economic and political conservatives have developed bigger more powerful institutions and employ lobbyists to further their agenda, so too has American

conservative Evangelicalism. As megachurches mature into their role as champions of conservative Evangelicalism, their strategies become indistinguishable from their corporate and political allies. Yet there are those who would argue that megachurches are only best understood within a religious context, apart from their secular neoliberal allies. But this is not what their practices demonstrate. The American megachurch has incorporated corporatism and thus neoliberalism so thoroughly within its organizational structures that it has penetrated its doctrine as well. Furthermore, if at first the turn to neoliberalism might have been the means to an end, the twenty-first century phenomenon of the megachurch suggests that means and ends are no longer separate matters.

### **Evangelical Citizenship and Megachurches**

In 2005 sociologist Tanya Erzen inquired into the connection between the religious right and megachurches. For her research, Erzen focused on the megachurch World Harvest, located in Ohio. She correlated the politics and voting trends of megachurch members and pastors with the general trends of religious conservative voters in other states. Erzen argued that megachurch pastors and their members, who can be considered doctrinally conservative, were also likely to share the overall sentiments of the conservative right more broadly.<sup>124</sup> The main point of Erzen's research was that megachurches are very good at shepherding members into political action which has helped to elect many religious conservatives, especially those who openly espouse a form of biblical inspired politics.<sup>125</sup> Erzen's research outlines how the religious right has coalesced and become formalized within many conservative megachurches, into what can be called “values-based voting.”<sup>126</sup>

Attempting to isolate either the economic or political aspects of the megachurch phenomenon overlooks the fact both work in conjunction with each other. Both inform the chief strategy of megachurches, which is the obsession to get big and stay big. Although megachurches have involved

themselves in local and national politics for decades, going back to Reverend Billy Graham and his support of Richard Nixon in the 1968 presidential election, more recently megachurches have begun to define their interests along increasingly economic, and specifically corporate lines. Simply put, megachurches are focused just as much on creating opportunities to help them grow as they are in advocating evangelical values or saving souls. This is not to say that doctrine is absent from how megachurches and their memberships assert themselves politically. Just the opposite: “Citizen Christians” believe they have “both earthly and spiritual” responsibilities. As they often declare: “ultimately our loyalties belong not to any political party or candidate, but to God Almighty.”<sup>127</sup>

This declaration of political neutrality is similar to Pentecostals in 1973 Chile, and later, in Puerto Rico during the 2000 gubernatorial election. In fact the 1980 presidential election that produced the Southern Reagan Democrats also produced evangelical megachurches that staunchly support the Republican ticket. Evangelical southerners have abandoned or switched their loyalties to the conservative wing of the Republican party, a switch of allegiance that continues “a crucial link between churches and the Bush-Cheney campaign,” and has carried over to the election of President Trump.<sup>128</sup> It is a form of political neutrality that actively seeks out alliances or withholds support just as easily. But it is hard to ignore their strong preference for conservative politics.

Megachurches have increased their efforts to attract Latinos into the evangelical fold. One way of attracting evangelical Latinos is by “Reconciling Billy Graham's message of salvation through Christ with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s march of prophetic activism.”<sup>129</sup> Evangelical leaders hope this strategy will increase the number of evangelical Latinos in megachurches even as many of these leaders endorse President Trump, and tacitly, his administration's punitive immigration laws. This strategy represents a melding of conservative Evangelicalism and liberal Civil Rights era activism which can only make sense if one suspends the historical record of Southern conservatives and their

general support of segregation. The largest Latino-American evangelical organization, the NHCLC, believes that they can do just that. The NHCLC attempts to “evaluate the optics and the metrics of the movement” in its pursuit to place Latino-America on par with mainstream white America.<sup>130</sup> But during the 2016 presidential election evangelical Latinos and their commitment to the conservative evangelical movement was tested as never before. Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, as the leader of the NHCLC, found himself in the position of having either to repudiate the Republican nominee, who had publicly disparaged Latino immigrants, or endorse him. At the time, Rev. Rodriguez, like many evangelical leaders, seemed locked on one side of a divide that had the appearance of a major schism in the evangelical community.<sup>131</sup>

In Chile, during comparable circumstances, conservative Pentecostals, when faced with a repressive dictatorship, not only endorsed Pinochet, but also remained staunchly loyal to the Pinochet regime for nearly twenty years. And for their part, Puerto Rican evangelical conservatives are still loyal to neoliberal politicians, such as the present Governor, Ricardo Rossello, a neoliberal like his father twenty years before. A survey of evangelicals in the US found that “77% of them self-identify as conservative.”<sup>132</sup> With so many evangelicals identifying as conservative, it becomes apparent that whatever the historical schismatic tendencies of Evangelicalism, within the conservative ranks, at least, they have managed to stay in lock step since the Reagan era.

Initially, for evangelicals, the 2016 presidential election appeared to be shaping up to be a repeat of the Bush-Cheney ticket. That changed when Donald Trump became the Republican nominee. Although some evangelicals voiced their doubts, by April 2016, Trump was holding many large rallies in evangelical territory, including the northern sections of the US, such as Youngstown, Ohio.<sup>133</sup> His speeches, which to some had under tones reminiscent of “Norman Vincent Peale’s 1952 best seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*” had just enough of the religious tone in them, to appease many



conservative evangelicals.<sup>134</sup> For some evangelicals who thought religion had been largely left behind from presidential rhetoric after the Bush-Cheney years, it was an encouraging sign that bold Evangelicalism had returned to American presidential politics.<sup>135</sup>

Similar to the Prosperity Gospel espoused by many charismatics, such as Creflo Dollar, T. D. Jakes, and Joel Osteen, Trump's message of returning America to greatness, anchored to his supposedly successful business track record, help sway many evangelical voters to believe in him. Still, some influential pastors were less than convinced, but they nevertheless gave Donald Trump their endorsement. During the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, evangelical leaders such as “Jerry Falwell, Jr., the president of Liberty University, Ralph Reed of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, activist Gary Bauer, and Penny Nance of Concerned Women for America” endorsed Trump “despite his personal impieties and previous reticence to embrace conservative social causes.”<sup>136</sup> A sense of repetition was in the making, as conservative evangelical leaders, despite their trepidation, began to come together in support of Donald Trump.

Others, such as Russell D. Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, resisted endorsing Trump during the run up to the Republican National Convention. He was joined by “Robert Morris, pastor at Gateway Church, and Tony Suarez, vice-president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (and previous supporter of Marco Rubio).”<sup>137</sup> The president of NHCLC organization, the largest religious Latino organization in the US, Reverend Samuel Rodriguez, had also initially voiced his own worries that “Donald Trump is jeopardizing the very future of our churches.”<sup>138</sup> But, on January 19<sup>th</sup> 2017, Rev. Rodriguez changed his tune and said, “Are there any politicians I will not work with? Wow. It would require an extreme sort of agenda coming out of a politician, or rhetoric coming out of a politician, that would prompt me somehow to say, ‘I can’t work with this person,[...] Something that is so derogatory. Something that is

anatema [sic] to who we are as Christians.”<sup>139</sup> The next day, January 20<sup>th</sup> 2017 Rev. Samuel Rodriguez became the first Latino pastor in American history to deliver a presidential inaugural prayer.

It can be argued that many conservative evangelicals leaders saw the writing on the wall, which placed them in the position of either endorsing a less than ideal political candidate or risk losing touch with the base of American Evangelicalism. For evangelical Latinos specifically, this situation was much less than an opportunity. It was, in effect, an ultimatum: get on board or be outside of the conservative evangelical fold altogether. One can sympathize with this situation only if the other choice for president could have been depicted as being worse for Latinos than Donald Trump. Despite the demonizing of candidate Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election, it is difficult, to say the least, to imagine a choice more antagonistic towards Latinos, in terms of both policy and sentiment, than Donald Trump. Therefore, evangelical Latino leaders who endorse Donald Trump, it can be said, placed their own political interests above the well-being of Latinos immigrants. Unlike the arguments that have been used to defend Pentecostal leaders who supported dictatorship in 1973 Chile, US evangelical Latino leadership during the 2016 election were never in danger of being brutally repressed for withholding their endorsement of Donald Trump. As it stands under President Trump, all Latinos in the US face increased discrimination, deportation, and political marginalization within a narrative that characterizes Latinos as illegal aliens who need America more than America needs them.

In part, the alliance between conservative evangelicals and conservative politics, especially in the Latino community, is a relationship that was formed most strongly within megachurches. Their politically influential leaders led the way, even if these leaders did not always see eye to eye on all things. The political pragmatism that Chilean Pentecostal megachurches displayed during dictatorship is also present, I would argue, in American megachurches today. Values-based voting is an extension of “the idea that religious organizations can function as mini-welfare states”, which serve to “absolve the

government of responsibility for social workplace protections, welfare, healthcare, and social security.”<sup>140</sup> Under conservative megachurch leadership the welfare provided would be cleansed of socialist ideology and be more inline with good Christian based morality. This is very similar to the anti-socialist stance that Chilean megachurches adopted during the Frei-Allende years, which greatly aided them to be spared from repression during the coup. Megachurches simultaneously voice their family and religious values through prosperity-based doctrine, yet they remain loath to endorse social services that do not have a religious component, or candidates who propose them, even when those services are aimed at helping the poor who are among their ranks.

So long as political parties and politicians show themselves to be consistent with conservative religious doctrine, whatever their actual religiosity, citizen Christians will favor them over all other options. For this behavior to be described as political neutrality creates a false narrative that belies the intent of religious conservatives to reorganize society within their interpretation of Evangelicalism. Recreating society along evangelical aspirations already happened in Latin America five hundred years ago, and more recently with neoliberalism's attempt at social engineering. This is currently happening here in the United States. Of this ideological aim Erzen has stated:

In her insightful account of the rise of the New Right in Orange County, CA, in the 1950s and 1960s, historian Lisa McGirr argues that after the defeat of Goldwater in 1964, the New Right built a national grassroots coalition comprised of people whose attachment to the democratic New Deal contract withered as they attained middle-class security and status. These suburban populists felt acutely the loss of community as they moved to the exurban areas around Orange County. Conservative Christian churches emerged in this period as antidotes to peoples' sense of anomie and isolation.<sup>141</sup>

Already in 1969 Christian Lalive d'Epinay had described the replication of informal cultural institutions that had been left vacant by social changes in Chile. The megachurch has served not only to meet such

vacancies in the twenty-first century, it has also evolved into a far more expansive evangelical desire to recreate and export their idea of community to the rest of the world. This is the manifestation of united earthly and spiritual responsibilities under one evangelical doctrine, expressed through their megachurches socially, economically, and politically. But this doctrine is not wholly evangelical in origin. The intersection of large multinational megachurches that would fill the social vacancies of suburbanization, with the political aspirations of the New Right, did not exist before 1964.

Furthermore, the religious corporatism that permeates megachurches, which has reorganized and rationalized megachurch strategies, did not exist within Evangelicalism before the 1990s. This strongly suggests that neoliberal ideology merged with conservative evangelical aspirations during the 1990s. It seems to have taken some time, but there are signs that Evangelicalism has aspirations for social and political re-engineering of the American culture. Further research is needed to better understand such audacious aspiration of Evangelicalism.

Viewed in this manner, it could be argued that the American megachurch developed in three stages. Before the 1950s, megachurches, epitomized by Amiee Semple McPherson's Foursquare church, were large but organized around traditional religious doctrine, however characteristic and innovative their founder was. After the 1950s, but most noticeably by the 1970s, new megachurches proliferated as the fermentation of the New Religious Right matured. The third stage of development happened during the 1990s, when neoliberal corporatism was introduced into megachurches in order to rationalize their organizational structures, maximize their membership, and religious investment. This last stage marks the beginning of the obsession with getting and staying big.

The obsession to get big did not arise without a legal and political mechanism. As it happened in Puerto Rico, and in Chile, megachurches in the United States have been actively propositioned by political parties within the highly charged, partisan atmosphere of American politics. Within this

atmosphere, the megachurch began to exploit legal provisions that were intended to protect all religions from government discrimination. The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 (RLUIPA), was passed by Congress to maximize the constitutionally allowed extent of the “exercise of religion.”<sup>142</sup> This helped churches to seek redress from perceived unfair zoning or landmarking laws that had been used in the past, mainly against minority churches, to confine them only within minority neighborhoods. It also helps churches in acquiring land within reason, i.e. “a parking lot” so they may accommodate a growing congregation.<sup>143</sup> Yet, some churches have used the RLUIPA act to place such facilities as “a gym, parking, and a drive-in amphitheater” under the church tax codes, which would have all proceeds from these auxiliary enterprises become entirely tax-free revenue streams.<sup>144</sup>

It should be noted that for all the possible exploitations of RLUIPA, there is a long history of real bias against minority churches, notably orthodox Jewish groups and Muslims.<sup>145</sup> Very often the disputes between municipalities and churches “arise from concerns about noise, lost property taxes, and Sunday-morning traffic jams,” which can also serve as cover for subtle forms of bigotry.<sup>146</sup> Yet it can just as well be that a municipality has genuine concerns about community development and lost tax revenue which could have otherwise been used for the greater good. There is also the concern that churches might raise about the cost of acquiring land under an “auxiliary use” permits by filing lawsuits under the RLUIPA act in court.<sup>147</sup> For one New Jersey congregation it took three years and \$1.2 million to successfully pursue a RLUIPA lawsuit in order to move into a new and larger building.<sup>148</sup>

The RLUIPA in its present form, is better utilized by larger wealthier churches than smaller ones. But with so many megachurches, and other, well funded mid-sized and small churches, the result is that hundreds of small municipalities and churches “around the country [are] in a series of legal battles pitting property rights against religious rights.”<sup>149</sup> Of these pitched legal battles being fought the larger implication is that “RLUIPA has created something new in American life: federal intrusion into

the most local of all issues, community zoning and land-use decisions.”<sup>150</sup> Whether one is inclined to see protection for religious freedom or exploitations by churches for economic gain, the megachurch from all of this has gained the most from RLUIPA, because it is the only religious institution that can comfortably fund a multi-year lawsuit without fear of going bankrupt.

Since the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, a Clinton era initiative that established a formalized legal process allowing Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) to apply and receive federal funding “without such organizations [having] to modify their religious perspectives in social service delivery,” a growing partnership between the federal government and religion has emerged.<sup>151</sup> In 2001 President Bush created the Office of Faith-Based and Community Partnerships with federal funding directed towards social welfare programs.<sup>152</sup> This initiative was “supported during the Obama administration as well,” and was then led by Reverend Jennifer Butler, as the council's first chairwoman.<sup>153</sup>

Behind the scenes of federal government partnerships with FBOs has been a push from megachurches and religious academics to identify the potential of megachurches to “help improve the financial condition of Americans in local communities.”<sup>154</sup> This idea was premised on the presumption that megachurches have a “proximity to communities in need,” which helped to create a “field of public administration” focused on partnerships with megachurches to address the economic deficiencies of these communities.<sup>155</sup> Considering how megachurches are often located in wealthier suburban locations, should they be seriously considered by city planners and social services directors as well being situated to understand the intricacies of communities in need?

In this manner, the “multifaceted” problems of communities in need, which are often viewed as “wicked problems” by religious groups, become, by default, redefined by those who provide the actual services to the community.<sup>156</sup> Once again, outsiders, because of their proximity to power, impose judgments and values on the poor, who are too often left out of the deliberations that directly affect

them. In this case academia has gotten involved with well meaning and seemingly well reasoned arguments on the subject. This has passed off religious doctrine as academic reasoning, which is something the latter cannot be. Yet, nonetheless, it is being argued that megachurches be considered practical participants in providing essential social services for the poor.

This means that the social sciences, which try to identify and to understand problems are systematically removed from the last, yet critical, point of the process of helping communities in need - the point of implementation. Academia has inadvertently argued social science out of the front lines of social welfare policies. In other words, the social worker is replaced by the pastor, job training becomes religious based re-education, and after-school programs will include religious studies in schools. Problems of substance addiction, spousal abuse, general mental health and hygiene, become defined within a religious context. Although some might welcome these changes, this creates a disconnect between government officials who are using social science tools to identify and strategize while churches use religion to implement them. At least one academic has acknowledged that there is no “uniform definition of faith-based economic development” in the scholarship.<sup>157</sup> This means that addressing social problems through FBOs is likely to produce practices that will vary on a church by church, or religion by religion basis.

In response to these and other criticisms some proponents of FBOs have resorted to arguing that the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), which was founded in 1979 in response to “questionable fundraising practices in the nonprofit sector,” is a good faith attempt to administer transparency and accountability in churches and their partnerships with non-profits in social programs across the nation.<sup>158</sup> Likening itself to a college accreditation board, the ECFA provides the “Good Housekeeping seal” to church affiliated non-profits in the U.S.<sup>159</sup> This is a self-governing organization, comprised of religious representatives independent of government oversight, which emerged to

advocate against government regulation of megachurches. It opposes the total separation of church and state around a variety of issues that intersect with social welfare services, yet does not tolerate intrusion by any government regulator into religious businesses. This organization, it must be said, was not established to regulate practices and standards in delivering social services to the poor. It is strictly a pro-megachurch lobby organization that argues against government regulation of megachurch activities as they pertain to social services, on the grounds that regulations are exceedingly intrusive of religious freedom. This presents, yet another facet of the greater pursuit by evangelicals of what they call religious freedom.

As previously stated, nearly one in five who serve on megachurch boardrooms also serve on some form of government or community board. Yet, curiously, Ashley E. English, in her work on megachurch involvement in economic development, found that "the average number of people served across all economic development activities is very low ranging from just 3% to 9% of the congregation."<sup>160</sup> This begs the question: Just what kinds of economic development are being funded by megachurches and who is actually benefiting from these programs? Without public oversight it is highly unlikely that megachurches and their associated non-profits can come together and unify their standards and practices, as well as report their progress so that data can be organized in a way that might be useful for future programs. Until such time, one can only speculate as to how to reconcile the discrepancy between the low numbers of people served by FBO's economic development programs and the high praise that some have given to the concept of FBOs as mini-welfare states that can meet the needs of the poor.

Here again, related to these questions about economic development and self-policing initiatives like the ECFA, it is possible to see some similarity between what is happening in the United States and the Protestant leadership of Chile during the Pinochet era, especially in two very significant regards.



The first was the established Protestant leaderships decision to reject the *Personalidad Juristica* initiative, which would have liberalized laws governing the founding of churches.<sup>161</sup> It can be argued that this rejection of government intervention within churches enabled established Protestant leaders to continue to assert their authority over newer churches, thus cementing a power structure that made it impossible for newer liberal leaning churches to effectively voice their opposition to dictatorship. The second decision was the Te Deum of 1975, which formally endorsed the dictatorship effectively entwining the fortunes of the Pinochet regime and Pentecostals in Chile. The important point is that government incursion into religious organizations was thwarted. This had the effect of maintaining the status quo of religious leadership. Megachurches in the US are also entrenched in a religious status quo and thwart attempts to institute government oversight. So far the effect has dissolved any opposition from liberal leaning evangelicals, including Latinos.

Religious autonomy has been extended into social welfare programs to the point that, for now at least, "it may favor religion over irreligion."<sup>162</sup> As for megachurches, one must wonder how much representation they have within religious policing organizations in relation to how much funding they receive from government to perform social services. Consider the analogy of the representation of former executives of large banks within the leadership of government financial regulators, except imagine the regulating organization being established by the banks themselves in the first place. What is evident here is the way megachurches have come together to form a cooperative lobby organization aimed at diverting lawmakers away from any initiatives that would regulate their social welfare programs.

In his 2013 book *Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumers and Markets*, Francois Gauthier warned of the dangers beyond the "paradigm of secularization," that might obscure "the immanentisation [sic] of salvation and the interweaving of health and therapeutics with religion,"

including "the impact of the internet and electronic media in religious governance, community, communication, and their emergence as primary resources for information on religion."<sup>163</sup> Gauthier's argument was based upon "the perspective of economic liberalism, [where] there is no society, only interactions between self-interested individuals," which makes churches purveyors of commoditized religious.<sup>164</sup> To simplify Gauthier's argument, secularization changes everything about religion, including how it is practiced and spread. Churches will behave as self-interested parties that should - or must - guard against any threat to their markets. Furthermore, Gauthier argued; "According to neoclassical (and neoliberal) economic theory, religion today is like a collection of enterprises operating in an unregulated open market," as "self-interested, rational, maximising individuals" who become invested in maintaining the system from which their authority is derived from.<sup>165</sup> The system that has redefined the megachurch begins first and foremost with the coporatist management strategies and culture that come with it, which Gauthier argues is "Far from being a neutral vessel directed at maximising rationality and efficiency, [as] management promotes an array of values in tune with neoliberal/consumer age capitalism."<sup>166</sup>

David Harvey argues that neoliberalism must "put strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable institutions" that can insulate the markets from regulation.<sup>167</sup> One result of the formation of these unaccountable institutions is the promotion of supposed experts who have a mantle of authority that can be used by the more powerful to maintain their hegemony. This actually retards competition and innovation, which is the opposite of what neoliberals preach in regard to deregulated open markets. If one is inclined to believe that FBOs are simply a group of enterprising small churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples, then it would take a large number of these churches to raise significant funds to effectively lobby all levels of government at once. Although there is little research pertaining to the lobbying activities in government, funded by

and on behalf of megachurches, it seems logical to conclude that most of the initiatives that the government enacts in relation to organized religion's participation in social services benefit megachurches more than any other form of religious organization, just as RLUIPA has. In May of 2017, President Trump signed an executive order aimed at "rolling back" prohibitions on religious institutions that date back to the Johnson era in order to benefit the current "struggle for religious liberty."<sup>168</sup> It should not come as a surprise that many influential megachurch pastors, including Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, was present at Trump's side, when Trump signed the order.

In her study, Ashley E. English found that 84% of the megachurches collaborate with non-profits.<sup>169</sup> But why do so many partner with non-profits, and why are so many megachurch websites campaigning for this? A church's offer of services, such as traditional soup kitchens and food pantries for people in need, brings to mind the long history of the American Salvation Army and the army of small neighborhood churches located in impoverished communities. In reference to more recent programs that include job training, substance abuse counseling, tax literacy education, and help with enrolling in low-cost healthcare programs, churches, particularly small churches, would appear to be out of their depth. But megachurches, which have, on average, congregations of "3,597 people," and thus have the resources to organize, suggest to some that they would be better suited to provide the more complex social outreach programs that modern life requires.<sup>170</sup>

Size notwithstanding, this approach does not help us understand why a megachurch would create a mirror organization of itself in the form of a non-profit with the legal distinction of being incorporated under the tax code as a 501(c)3. Take the case of the non-profits Samaritan's Purse and the Billy Graham Evangelical Association (BGEA). The former is a giant in international aid relief, the latter is a giant in domestic American politics, baseball stadium filled gatherings notwithstanding.<sup>171</sup> These two organizations may claim to be separate entities, but how does one reconcile their supposedly

independent roles when they have a shared CEO, especially when he meets with an elected official? If politicians openly support only one program from either organization, does it not stand to reason that they are also supporting the other, even if indirectly?

Another prominent example is the influential Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, who began his career as an ordained minister for the megachurch Assemblies of God and is on the board of directors for Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, National Association of evangelicals, Empowered 21, Pentecostal Churches of North America (PCCNA), and the publication Christianity Today.<sup>172</sup> He is also the president and founder of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC) which is headquartered in Sacramento, California, and has over 40,000 members, 10,000 of whom reside in the state of Texas. The NHCLC is one of the largest evangelical based non-profits in the US, and happens to be affiliated with the even larger evangelical based non-profit, BGEA.<sup>173</sup> In 2015 the NHCLC merged with the giant Latin American association Conela (*Confraternidad Evangelica Latinoamericana*), which very easily can be described as an evangelical non-profit with active aid projects in almost every Latin American nation.<sup>174</sup> Conela is a Latin American evangelical alliance of over 487,000 churches across Latin America, whose president Ricardo Luna, seems to have ambitions to challenge, in Latin America at least, the World Evangelical Alliance, which is a non-profit organization that defines itself as a "global ministry" operating in 129 countries.<sup>175</sup> The question that arises from Rev. Rodriguez's case is, At what point do domestic evangelical concerns cross over into American foreign-aid policy? As political support for the NHCLC and the BGEA grows, it can be argued that overall American foreign policy is being subtly shaped by Evangelicalism's activities abroad. This constitutes an added dimension in the formulation of specific American foreign-aid policies, which increasingly are including religious concerns along with more traditional interests of economic development and national security.

As evangelism in the form of aid-relief organizations reach levels comparable to international aid giants - such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies or UNICEF - governments around the world are without reliable information to help them assess the distinction between evangelical and non-evangelical aid organizations. One major aspect, obscured by the lack of critical close examination of megachurches, is the intimacy that megachurch organizations have with American politics. In fact, megachurches are so ingrained at all levels of American politics that it can be argued that accepting their aid programs is a tacit endorsement of their politics. It is in this manner, as Latinos become increasingly involved with American evangelical aid organizations. Latinos are not only becoming increasingly involved in American politics when they are in the US, but even when they are not, they are also indirectly aiding the conservative evangelical political agenda when they participate in the the foreign aid programs of American megachurches.

As evangelical Latinos tout their presence in American Evangelicalism, they have yet, however, to do more than support its status quo. Immigration and the future of DACA, specifically, have exposed how irresolute evangelical Latino leaders are when push comes to shove on these crucial issues. The consequence of this is the siphoning off of many Latinos from both the affluent classes and the poor, who would rather focus on specific key issues or candidates, than support the mainstream evangelical agenda wholesale. But, it is the poor who suffer the consequences the most, because they have the least means to protect themselves against repressive government policies. Latinos who are poor, in this position, for all the talk of megachurches embracing them, find themselves members of megachurches who support politicians who would deport them. This means that the benefits and protections that poor Latinos seek in joining megachurches have been a political fiction aided and abetted, in part, by evangelical Latino leaders. As it stands, in the world of megachurches, there is a power hierarchy that has subordinated and exploited evangelical Latino support for the greater

conservative evangelical cause. It is a cause rife with neoliberalism, which has subordinated those who will gain the least from unregulated religious markets under those who will gain the most. Latinos under these conditions should expect little more than cosmetic accommodation as megachurches expand their sphere of influence globally.

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## **Section V**

### **Conclusion**

The megachurch is the most politically, economically, and socially organized structure of Evangelicalism in the US and Latin America today. Whatever role it plays in responding to the needs of its membership, growth remains its lifeblood. Growth is as much a part of the megachurch as faith is to religion. It is within the dialectic of growth and faith that megachurches have defined their mission: To serve the people by prioritizing its own growth first. One of the objective of this thesis has been to question the means by which megachurches pursue their stated purpose of evangelizing, as well as how the definition of Evangelicalism has changed. This is important because all too often efforts undertaken on behalf of “the people” have been less about the people and more about those who would define them.

Some have argued “that the greatest contribution of megachurches is not about growth or being large so much as it is about learning how to address the contemporary needs of people in the community.”<sup>1</sup> Such statements misunderstand the significance of the megachurch phenomenon today. Such statements would examine the methods by which the needs of the people are identified, but leave out how the needs of people are redefined and even constructed to serve the growth and influence of megachurches. It would also leave out how megachurches have changed in their point of view, to the point that they now equate their growth with the successful pursuit of global Evangelicalism.

To argue otherwise, to claim that growth has little to do with megachurch methods for addressing the religious needs of the people, suggests that growth is incidental and therefore of no relevance to the importance of the megachurch. This argument rests upon the idea that growth is nothing more than the manifestation of religious zeal. To maintain that “megachurches have become a

mainstream phenomenon” without inquiring into how megachurches achieved this status, or how they have influenced society, does not dispel myths or “lay a factual foundation for a significant religious reality.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, searching for the lost narrative of Pentecostalism's emergence as a movement in Latin America during the onset of neoliberalism - and examining the conditions under which it thrived – I hope to provide a better understanding of the origin of what continues to be a powerful global movement.

In 1973 Chile, when Pentecostalism first came into contact with neoliberalism, Pentecostalism underwent a transformation that enabled it to survive Pinochet's repressive dictatorship and the subsequent imposition of neoliberal shock therapy. Otherwise, just as the Catholic Church had become an enemy of the neoliberal state, defined by its dictator, Pentecostalism too would have been repressed and targeted by the regime. Instead, Pentecostalism flourished. It produced wealthy and politically influential megachurches situated in the midst of a growing professional class. Although Pentecostalism as a whole expanded throughout Chile, an increase in wealth and political clout was much more plentiful for megachurches than it was for the masses, whom Pentecostalism was originally out to serve.

Despite all this, the academic works devoted to Pentecostalism in Chile, both before and during the dictatorship, did not seem to take much notice of the megachurch phenomenon. Few, if any, works took notice of the proliferation of megachurches during the Pinochet regime, and fewer still sought to explain it much beyond religious zeal. Much of what obscured the subject of Pentecostalism and megachurches was the fact that the most influential academic works that defined the subject were produced before neoliberalism had taken root in Latin America. As a result, Pentecostalism was viewed as a haven for the masses and megachurches, by default, were seen merely as their sanctuaries. This distorted future scholarship. The origins, demographic make up of members and leadership, and

especially the means by which megachurches emerged and proliferated went unexamined in the literature, even after neoliberalism arrived in Latin America. Throughout it all, Chilean Pentecostalism was misrepresented by proponents and detractors of neoliberalism alike. Within this crossfire, in an effort to shed much too broad accusations of collusion with dictatorship, theologians suggested that Pentecostalism was ideologically neutral, that it was only incidentally involved with secular concerns.

This supposed neutrality has propagated a view of Pentecostalism without economic or political aspirations beyond the private concerns of its individual members. This includes obfuscating the accumulation of wealth and political influence that is evidenced by the proliferation of megachurches worldwide. It also serves to discredit changes in the organizational structure of megachurches that emerged most noticeably during the 1990s. These are changes that go beyond increased participation in secular matters of business and politics; it also includes the incorporation of secular practices into the praxis of the global movement of Evangelicalism itself. The consequence of this is that doctrine-prescribed evangelism has become antiquated, and has been supplanted by secular strategies for growth. This has altered how evangelicals interact with secular society, creating a power structure that ensures the prevailing secular paradigm of growth.

As megachurches increasingly prioritized their growth, they became receptive to the economic and political opportunities that dictatorship offered. By accepting these opportunities megachurches hitched their fortunes to oppressive dictatorship. As a result, megachurches were to give General Pinochet a means of removing potential Pentecostal opposition to his regime without the use of force. In essence, I am arguing that megachurches served as a form of soft repression. This was accomplished by evangelizing political neutrality to the Protestant masses. For doing their part, megachurches were rewarded with greater access to power, economic opportunity, and a free hand in overseeing matters that concerned Protestants who complied with megachurch political neutrality. All this means, that as



megachurches thrived, they did so at the expense of those who bore the brunt of brutal repression.

In the case of Puerto Rico, this process was taken a step further. Under the Reagan administration, Puerto Rican megachurches went beyond a supporting role, taking on an active and full partnership with Puerto Rican politicians. Essentially, megachurches have played the role of king maker in gubernatorial politics since the 1980s. By purchasing mass media outlets, then later flooding social media, Puerto Rican megachurches utilized populism to control the narrative of conservative evangelical politics. Their reward for being so successful has been to be free of government oversight and to retain their license to openly influence elections. This means that Puerto Rican megachurches constitute a de facto political party despite the constitutional separation between Church and State.

Research has been able to identify Puerto Rico's many individual actors in the drama of religion and politics. This level of detail has facilitated insight into personal motivations, especially as they pertain to government policies that were being proposed and enacted. But it is the proximity to President Reagan's domestic policies, namely his brand of neoliberalism, eponymously known as “trickle down Reaganomics,” which gives Puerto Rico a unique place among Latin American case studies of US-exported neoliberalism. Laid bare are tantalizing insights into how neoliberalism got exported to Latin America and then later returned back to the US through megachurches and the immigrants who seek a better life in and through them.

In Puerto Rican politics, megachurches evangelized neoliberalism under the guise of advocating for the underdog. In this manner, megachurches, just like those in Chile, became instrumental in pacifying potential opposition from those who would benefit the least from the policies of neoliberal governors – the island's poor as well as its under paid college graduates. But unlike Chile, where neoliberalism was instituted practically over night, Puerto Rico was already in the midst of a long descent before the Reagan administration's policies induced wholesale neoliberal displacement. The

island's poor, so many of whom depended on government subsidies, were left to fend for themselves during a time of social and economic crisis. This delivered the island into neoliberalism's grip and laid the foundation for the Puerto Rican debt default crisis of 2017. Just as had happened in Chile, deeply polarized politics during a critical juncture marked by prolonged economic malaise forged Puerto Rican megachurches which eagerly incorporated and then evangelized neoliberal ideology to the masses.

Examining the pivotal role megachurches played in dividing and suppressing opposition to their doctrines and politics, in both these case studies it is possible to suggest that Pentecostalism may have fractured along class fault lines. Although Pentecostalism has shown itself prone to schism, my research suggests that megachurches take advantage of class divisions in order to entrench themselves more fully in society without showing signs of breaking with deeply held evangelical interpretations of doctrine. Presently, the available literature does not address the emergence and proliferation of megachurches along these lines.<sup>3</sup> In a 2007 article J. Samuel Valenzuela et. al. argue that it is necessary to acknowledge a “new political-cultural cleavage” that has “crystallized” from the referendum that resulted in the dismissal of the Pinochet regime.<sup>4</sup> Valenzuela and his colleagues argue that the forces that voted 'no' to the Pinochet regime and those that voted 'yes' remain divided by a post-dictatorship fault line.

Megachurches insinuated themselves in, then magnified, what David Harvey had identified in the US and Europe as “the two long-standing religious and class cleavages that shaped the party system's political tendencies.”<sup>5</sup> This was also true in Puerto Rico, especially when one considers the conspicuous endorsement of neopopulism by megachurch pastors. One provocative way of restating this is to suggest that Puerto Rican megachurches more than take advantage of religious and class cleavages – they help to create and widen class cleavages through the use of blatant populism.

Bringing this thesis to the United States, what becomes evident is that megachurches here do not

behave much differently from megachurches in Latin America. Political polarization and hyper-partisan politics are just as prevalent in the US as they are in Latin America. In this environment, it is not surprising that megachurches should be courted as political allies by parties searching for an advantage over their rivals. But as the evidence has made clear, megachurches are not passive political participants. In fact, a defining characteristic of megachurches is their willingness to pursue political alliances as part of their strategy to evangelize and grow. This is not to say that small churches have not tried to do the same historically, but megachurches have the means to cross over into many different secular domains, just as easily as they cross national borders.

US megachurches are indeed far wealthier, although not always bigger, than their foreign counterparts, and this lead some to conclude that their very size and wealth is their most defining characteristic. Understandably, the means of megachurches are impressive enough to draw the attention of scholars, but focusing on size and wealth shifts focus away from how they have changed themselves and Evangelicalism in other ways.

It is also important to ask, who is benefiting the most from influential megachurches? For more than half a million Latinos DREAMers, influential megachurches have not been very beneficial. This is not to say that the sentiments of all megachurches are inimical to Latinos, but for all their political influence, research strongly suggests that megachurches, on the whole, have been ineffective advocates on behalf of Latinos, especially the issue of immigration. Current data shows that “Nearly 70 percent of evangelicals believe Dreamers should be allowed to stay in the country,” yet few megachurch leaders have withdrawn their support of President Trump over this issue.<sup>6</sup> In fact, most evangelicals continue to support President Trump regardless, even after his inflammatory statements about immigrants who come from impoverished nations.<sup>7</sup> The issue of immigration serves to expose at least one rift within American evangelicals. But the issue of immigration is treated as just one issue by white evangelicals,

and as such, it is insulated from the overarching question of whether to support President Trump or to disavow him. As of the spring of 2018, evangelicals continue to overwhelmingly support the president.<sup>8</sup> This situation, as evangelical Latinos continue to broadly back conservative politics, places them in the position of supporting current immigration policies, which, ironically, may lead to some of them being deported.

Moving on to the prevailing corporate culture in megachurches, what has emerged most noticeably is the obsession to get big. One of the more profound ways megachurches have altered evangelism is by changing the definition of successful evangelism so as to include getting as big as possible. The obsession with growth has become the overriding goal of megachurches. Although this may appear to unfairly minimize Evangelicalism's significance as a religious movement, evidence points to the fact that megachurches are spending more money and energy on growth than anything else. Megachurches are designed to grow physically in membership, and politically in influence. This is the result of viewing both as equal parts of an equation, as it is understood from a neoliberal paradigm. Megachurches have rationalized growth not only with successful evangelism; they also suggest that their strategy is essential for the preservation of the global Evangelicalism as a whole. This means that as US megachurches go global they will evangelize neoliberalism. This is what I have attempted to document in the case studies presented in this thesis.

As for what all this means for evangelical Latinos, important clues lie in the foundation of the obsession to grow. Neoliberalism, and its doctrine of open unregulated markets, through political pressure and lobbying in conjunction with economically dominating an unregulated religious market has infused the organizational structures of megachurches. This reflects a corporate culture that is assimilated into megachurches and brings with it outlooks and principles that can only be labeled as neoliberal. Neoliberalism, far from being a moderating influence upon megachurches, instead has

fueled notions of religious freedom, which are in line with the ideologies and values of white conservative evangelicals more strongly than all others. This has entrenched conservative evangelical politics, which resists efforts by Latinos to achieve equal consideration at the highest ranks.

As David Harvey has argued, neoliberalism is clearly not an ideology that supports reforms aimed at addressing discrimination. Neoliberalism is instead, an ideology of “restoring/reconstitution of class power,” and has always favored elites above all others.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, neoliberalism represents the “commodification of everything,” driving religion into “endless capital accumulation,” a process which describes megachurches very well.<sup>10</sup>

Applying Harvey's definition of neoliberalism to understand the behavior of megachurches and their strategies, it becomes clear that neoliberalism has guided the megachurch to seek reforms that would favor its current leadership's position in politics. When evangelical Latino megachurch leaders faced presidential candidate Donald Trump, it was no surprise that, in the end, many chose to support him instead of opposing him. Simply put, opposition to politicians who advocate neoliberalism is opposition to an alliance deemed critical by evangelicals for their pursuit of religious freedom.

Evangelicalism's neoliberal ideology hides behind a notion of religious freedom, which is bound to neoliberalism's goal of free and unregulated markets. This means that evangelical Latinos are placed in the position of choosing either to toe the conservative evangelical line, or be left out of the alliance between conservative evangelicals and secular neoliberal politicians. Sadly, rather than trying to make a fresh start with moderates, evangelical Latinos have chosen to toe the line.

The definition of religious freedom is fixed in another way, because it favors the current establishment of conservative evangelicals. Thus religious freedom is not the same freedom for all. As evangelical Latinos increasingly clamor for more responsiveness, the gated communities of the current megachurch establishment are nonetheless dictating the terms of inclusion. Evangelical Latinos leaders

who are hopeful that the future prospects of religious freedom can be equally beneficial, do so as they turn a blind eye to what is happening today. As it stands, the research shows that conservative evangelicals are as open to the full inclusion of Latinos, as much as than they are unified in opposition to President Donald Trump, or Roy Moore, or a multitude of other politicians of their ilk.

For those who believe the United States affects Latin America more than the other way around, believing that it is less than useful to seek lessons from Latin American and apply them here, the subject of megachurches argues otherwise. Several instances throughout this thesis provide correlations between the development of megachurches in Latin American and the US. This thesis has attempted to show how behaviors, strategies, and political goals are very similar between Latin American and US megachurches because there is a common overarching concept that they share and is guiding their growth – neoliberalism.

One possible lesson to learn about future consequences can be found in the case study of Chile. In Chile, fractures along class interests have placed wealthy Catholics at odds with poor Catholics. Political scientist J. Samuel Valenzuela's work on Chilean politics just after dictatorship argues that “deeper divisions stemming from enduring social cleavages do not simply disappear,” even as parties themselves change in efforts to engage more voters or to reassure their political base.<sup>11</sup> During dictatorship Protestantism, especially Pentecostalism, in Chile experienced huge gains in growth, wealth, and cultural acceptance. After dictatorship, there has been no reduction in any of these areas for Protestantism. Chile remains today one of the most Protestant nations in Latin America.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that whatever gains conservative evangelicals acquire during Trump's term in office, they will likely keep them long after he is gone. The experiences of both Chile and Puerto Rico suggest that entrenchment is one of the key characteristics of megachurches. As megachurches successfully cross into new political territory they are likely to stay there and become active and powerful forces to

contend with. This means that US megachurches are likely to grow more influential than ever before. They will have their say in how the new political norm emerges in the foreseeable future. It also means that US-exported Evangelicalism, along with its evangelized neoliberalism, will continue with the tacit approval of the world's foremost superpower.

The new normal in American politics may include the continued rise of religiously infused populism. As was shown in the case of Puerto Rico, its most arresting lesson, religious populism fits all too easily within the framework of American democracy. The power of populism, has a way of warping notions of freedom, including notions of American-style upward mobility and entrepreneurialism.

Experiments with neoliberalism, mistakenly believed to embody the best of American democracy, led Puerto Rican leaders to wreck the island. This was enabled by a particularly virulent form of religious populism, created by megachurch leaders to champion their candidates in Puerto Rican elections. Populism takes on dimensions that often escape the control of those who use it to further their political goals. Sociologist Francisco Panizza wrote of populism:

A third circumstance favouring the emergence of populist politics are changes at the level of the economy, culture and society, such as processes of urbanization and economic modernization, shifts in the demographic balances between social classes, and between regional and ethnic groups, as well as, more recently globalization. Social turmoil and social mobility alter established identities, loosen traditional relations of subordination and open up new forms of identification.<sup>13</sup>

In the US, it remains to be seen what mutations of populism will crop up in the era of Trump. This is one of the many reasons why it is important to understand the changes currently taking place within the American political climate. High on the list of changes should be politicized evangelical support for a president who embraces neoliberalism, although a warped version that is different than that which Ronald Reagan had preached. Trump's version of neoliberalism, though, is not a departure from past

experiments with neoliberalism, in that it only works when the government imposes controls on, what is supposed to be, neutral economic mechanism.<sup>14</sup> This is inherently artificial, yet another failure to implement unregulated markets without authoritarian supervision.

What happened in Puerto Rico in the 1990s, which eventually led to the collapse a generation later, was fomented by evangelized, conservative religious populism. What is happening now in the US is also fomented, I would argue, by evangelized, conservative religious populism. There are many forces at work in American politics, with religion being just one of them. Nonetheless, of the multitude of different religions practiced in the US, conservative Evangelicalism, because of its megachurches, is by far the most influential religion in American politics.

The influence of religion is in not new to American politics. But the present strain of conservative evangelical ideology is different from previous manifestations of conservative Christian politics. This is partly because the megachurch has never been so numerous, and thus, so influential as it is now. The contention here is that neoliberalism has been the engine of change within the megachurch phenomenon. This explains so much of its behavior, organizational structure, proliferation, and influence. This also means that neoliberalism did not simply act upon religion, it has become fully integrated with religion.

In the US it has become impossible to clearly detect where neoliberalism ends and Evangelicalism begins, just as it has become impossible to separate religious belief from politics. The proof is that the very notion of American freedom is now loaded with neoliberalism. Thus, challenging religious freedom with regulation is likened to threatening Wall St.'s economic dominance with greater regulation. It is in this way that neoliberalism's true victory materializes, because it merges with traditional religious values so thoroughly that it is no longer distinguishable from them. It becomes nearly impossible to par away religion from freedom, and insert regulations that could ensure a



measured freedom for all. Just as neoliberalism is marked by uneven wealth accumulation, religious freedom is marked by growing benefits disparity in Evangelicalism.

Throughout its twentieth century ascent, Pentecostalism provided a measure of autonomy in the lives of the poor in Latin America. But with the proliferation of the megachurch, Latin American Pentecostalism branched into two parallel paths of development, with one branch remained tied to the poor of Latin American societies, and the other assimilated into the more affluent in a manner that reflects their class interest. This happened during an era marked by the convergence of massive migration, urbanization, and political mobilization, as well as the spread of the neoliberal contagion that would eventually change the world.

In the United States, during an era marked by the demise of manufacturing, oil shortages, and inflation, the turn towards neoliberalism was proclaimed as the antidote for a superpower's economic malaise. It was during this time that Evangelicalism in the US also fractured. One group developed primarily in the suburbs of the American Sun Belt, and grew into megachurches. The other stayed small and as a result became overshadowed by its larger counterparts.

For evangelical Latinos who desire to join in with influential megachurches, prospects arising from religious freedom seem tantalizingly close. But present notions of religious freedom are dominated by an entrenched religious elite, who have exhibited few signs of relinquishing control. The affluent have essentially hijacked a religion that originally benefited poor and rich without distinction. What has emerged in Evangelicalism is a binary no less frozen than the bygone Cold War era from which neoliberalism sprang. Following the example of evangelicals in Latin America, affluent evangelicals in the US have outwardly projected their class interests through megachurches. In the process, they have conscripted evangelical Latinos to support them.

Some might argue the proliferation of megachurches is an unintended, benign outgrowth of

American exceptionalism. This is an erroneous argument that requires discounting the prevailing political discourse concerning Latinos, and how American exceptionalism has been too long denied to them. The lessons megachurches provide are noteworthy because they expose the changes neoliberalism has wrought in both religion and society. The twenty-first century megachurch is like the neoliberal economy it increasingly resembles: wealthy, influential, and too big to fail.

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