Attendance and Absence of the Laity: 
Acknowledging a Rhetoric of an American Protestant Megachurch

Problem Statement

It has been written that “church growth cannot be ignored” (McIntosh, 2004). What is interesting about church growth is that most surveys and studies indicate that American protestant church attendance is declining (Chaves, 2006; Thumma & Bird, 2015). However, attendance at America’s largest Protestant churches—or, “Megachurches” (churches with weekly attendance of 2,000 or more—is rising (Thumma & Bird, 2008, 2009, 2011, & 2015; Ellingson, 2009; Chaves, 2006 & 2013). While the growth of the American Protestant Megachurch (APM) most certainly has not been ignored, there are aspects of the growth of the APM that have been ignored in the scholarship. Within the scholarship, primary aims and goals have been to explain its historical and monumental growth and its ability to sustain it (Carney, 2012; Chaves, 2006; Eagle, 2015; Eiesland, 1997; Ellingson, 2009; James, 2014; Karnes, McIntosh, Morris, & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2007; Kilde, 2006; Thumma & Travis, 2006; Von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). However, efforts to explain these aspects have thus far been conducted using methods such as surveys, ethnography, textual analysis of written artifacts, and historiography. While it is not necessarily the methods that are wrong per se, it is in the fact that most methods currently do not target the laity of the APM, but rather target the senior pastor and administration of APMS.

Approaching the APM solely through the lens of the leadership and staff silences the voices of the laity, those who choose to visit, return, join, and participate in the practices of the APM. A study designed to target the laity of an APM might be more fruitful towards explaining its appeal and resulting growth. Specifically, what are the rhetorical affordances at work in creating an appealing rhetoric that can explain the growth of the APM? Specifically, what stylistic elements are at play? And how do these components work together that enforce a particular reality for the members of an APM? In other words, how does an APM make religion that helps to build a church from the perspective of its members?

Approaches to Researching the APM

Large-scale research studies (i.e. Megachurch “big data”) from which most other studies glean their information are administered primarily using surveys of the primary church leadership—senior pastor, assistant pastor, or recognized church authorial staff (Thumma & Bird, 2008, 2009, 2011, & 2015; Roozen, 2015; Chaves & Eagle, 2015). For example, Wollschleger & Porter (2011) draw from these data sets in their study on the impact of APM congregations on the local church economy. Their study then draws conclusions from this data making claims as to the “vitality of congregations,” both APM and smaller churches, and the APM’s effect on neighboring congregations. It is not, however, that surveys, in these cases, are a poor method, it is that they silence the voices of the laity. As in the aforementioned study, Wollschleger & Porter (2011) never explore what the laity have to say about vitality and the perceived or actual effects that the APM may or not have on congregations. That is, might laypersons attending both or affected by the presence of the APM provide a perspective that is not being represented in the survey data?
Furthermore, ethnographic methods that have attempted to account for this gap continue to leave the laity largely silent, thus not fully explaining potential deeper reasons for growth and sustainability of the APM (Eisland, 1997; Carney, 2012). For example, while Eisland (1997) made use of ethnography to show the effects of an APM in one geographical area, Decatur, GA, her ethnography was not poised to discover how or why the APM was not only able to attract new laity, but also its ability to sustain its growth. Rather, her ethnography targeted the effects of the APM on the geographical area. Thus, the ethnographic method was not employed to ascertain the deeper nuances for the APM’s growth and sustainability.

Additionally, textual analyses of “preacher texts”—sermons, books, video—does provide, as do surveys of church leadership and ethnographies of the APM, a partial picture of the APM, though limited in the service of providing a thorough explanation of growth and sustainability (Carney, 2012; Chaves, 2006; Ellingson, 2009; James, 2014; MacNair, 2009; Marie, 2010; Von Der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). While it is important perhaps to analyze textual artifacts emanating from the APM, this method still does not provide a space for the laity’s reaction to or relationship with the APM. For example, Marie (2010) analyzes “preacher texts” emanating from one pastor at one APM for the purposes of revealing what rhetorical aspects are appealing to the laity, and therefore an ingredient to its success. In other words, it seems to be taken for granted that the results of the textual analysis “explains” why so many have flocked to the APM.

Moreover, efforts to explain APM growth have come in the form of histories and/or historiographies, but, again, the voices of the laity are noticeably absent (Carney, 2012; Eagle, 2015; Ellingson, 2009; Loveland & Wheeler, 2003; White & Yeats, 2009). For example, Carney’s (2012) analysis of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX, currently the largest APM boasting weekly attendance upward of 48,000 members, looks very specifically at tracing the present iterations of the megachurch back to the roots of the evangelists in the thirties and forties. Her analysis not only traces the appearance of the APM’s massive buildings and staging but also a particular message found in the “preacher texts” of Joel Osteen, Lakewood’s senior pastor.

Finally, the approaches mentioned above do not explore what are the rhetorical components of the APM and how members adopt and manage these components in coordination with various texts and pastors. In other words, they neither identify particular stylistic components nor do they explore how members employ them to create and enforce a collective reality.

**Project Significance**

The goal of my project is to provide a space for the largely absent voices of the APM to add to the current body of literature seeking to explain its growth and sustainability. For the field of rhetoric, a project thus looking at an object-of-inquiry from a different perspective adds richness to the field by demonstrating the usefulness of rhetoric by expanding the practice of rhetoric’s relation to cultural history/studies—an act that does not rely as heavily on the alphabetical texts. Through this expansion, rhetoric will not only seek to transform its place in the academy through listening to “other” discourses (Powell, 2002)—focusing on cultural practices, non-alphabetic texts—but also transform the object of study itself. Thus, the APM culture may witness a transformation of understanding by employing rhetoric as a liberating tool rather than a criticizing weapon, as has been seen in some studies (Miller & Carlin, 2010; Sodal, 2010;
Winslow, 2014). Sodal (2010), Winslow (2014), and Miller and Carlin (2010) have targeted the largest APM: Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, TX. The most recent surveys count weekly attendance at 48,000 parishioners. What is unfortunate about the results of these critical studies is that they employ rhetorical, discourse analyses fixated solely on Joel Osteen’s words via his books and recorded sermons. These analyses often make sweeping generalizations about the laity based on Osteen’s discourse. The resulting scholarship casts rhetoric as a weapon of exclusion. There is no space for the voices of the laity, of even Osteen—there are no people present, only the researcher is present. Employing rhetoric from a cultural rhetorics position, as a research practice that carefully considers community practices as rhetorically meaningful, also provides recognition of all the elements of the rhetorical situation, excluding none, the members. As J. Clifford (1988) intimates, studies of cultures should be written “with people.” Cultural rhetoric’s usefulness, then, provides a space for the people’s voices within the culture as a matter of concern to be written with a current significant gap in the literature concerning the growth of the APM.

Furthermore, my project looks at the growth of the APM with non-prescriptive theory but rather allowing the culture’s practices to be recognized by considering theory as rooted in the practices of a culture. As cultural rhetorics is a constellating, decolonial (not only for the objects of study but also for scholarship), listening, and storytelling practice (Powell et al., 2014), my project considers the theoretical lenses of decolonial scholarship practices with respect to research (Perez, 1999; Smith, 1999). The importance, here, for rhetoric, is the ability to view a matter of concern (i.e. a culture) by considering other relevant theoretical frameworks that serve to reveal the nature of the practices of the culture. Rhetoric’s reach, then, becomes further enriched by demonstrating A. M. Haas’s (2012) definition of rhetoric: “[T]he negotiation of cultural information—and its historical, social, economic, and political influences—to affect social action (persuade). I also believe that every culture has its own rhetorical roots, traditions, and practices” (p. 287). In conjunction, my project aligns with B. Christian’s (1987) call not to “exalt theory.” In other words, it is important to avoid “theories not rooted in practice” and avoid the “prescriptiveness” of assigning theory that excludes and narrows a project and thus provides only “one way” in which the matter of concern is understood (p. 61). That is, rhetoric recognizes that meaning-making practices are rhetorical already and considers the culture in its own milieu of history, sociality, economy, and policy, its own practices. The APM benefits from rhetoric’s reach through its ability to allow this “negotiation of cultural information” to be seen that enlighten these negotiations that “affect [the] social action” of the culture, thus rhetoric’s explanations are not tied to theory but rather tied to the culture’s rhetorical practices, thus creating a new, non-traditional “other” theory.

It is within the conceptual framework of Haas’s (2012) definition of cultural rhetoric, Christian’s (1987) call for theory to be rooted in practice, and Foucault’s (1970; 1972), Augustine’s (397; 462), Foss and Gill’s (1987), and Reid’s (1998) work that will help to recognize both discursive and non-discursive practices working together that create a particular reality (invents religion) from the perspective of the members, and thus a “theory” of how an APM builds a megachurch. Thus, rhetoric as epistemic, stylistic, and inventive will benefit from my project through demonstrating rhetoric at work from the perspective of the members. Demonstrating how rhetoric is epistemic, stylistic, and inventive in a religious setting might further enhance the
field’s understanding of rhetoric in these areas, while also adding to the scholarship within the debates of “What is rhetoric?”

Additionally, while the goal of my project is to consider new, non-traditional theories to enhance our understanding of the growth and sustainability of the APM, I will trace (Clarke, 2005), rather than impose, theories by looking at everyday practices (De Certeau, 1984), bodies in motion (Burke, 2008), and “embodied ways of knowing” (Rios, 2015). While it is most certainly possible to perform a rhetorical analysis through Aristotelian rhetorical theory and seek and find evidence of his theory in the APM, my project resists this move to employ Clarke’s situational analysis and mapping to carve new spaces for rhetoric through tracing. The importance of this move for the APM will be in the way that rhetoric is employed to discover (via tracing) cultural rhetorical practices and their potential epistemic and stylistic roots and why they are bearing so much fruit with the laity.

Moreover, as a result of approaching a study of the APM through the aforementioned methods, my project seeks to dislodge current explanations from solely looking at the APM through predominantly Western eyes, as in an “us” and a “them” and dominant viewpoints of elitists (Said, 1979; Royster, 2003). As the APM is not considered a traditional, “colonized” culture, applying the concepts of cultural rhetorics affords the APM analyses that work to undo previous and current “colonizing” scholarship that may limit our understanding as to other possible understandings of its rise and continued success. What this essentially provides for the APM is not only a deliverable that would be well received but also one that adds to its uniqueness as a respectable culture instead of the much-published scholarship that “others” the APM (Sodal, 2010; Winslow 2014). Rhetoric, further, is shown to have increased application when removed from its strong ties to Greece and Rome by demonstrating scholarship that is more open, especially in this case, to strictly secular, prescriptive ways of understanding not only religious rhetorics but also the potentially abundant offerings that the APM may yield. This yield could benefit rhetoric in the potentially new and profitable rhetorics of religious culture that may have application in other areas of study.

My project also demonstrates respectful, responsible scholarship not only to the field of rhetoric but also to the APM. In the spirit of Clifford (1988), Rosaldo (1993), and Wilson (2009), to name just a few, I am consciously aware of the effects that scholarship can have on a culture and community. As a result, I am concerned with the deliverable/deliverability of my project. By considering these issues, it benefits the field of rhetoric by providing another example of respectful and responsible scholarship for the field; It demonstrates by example. Rhetoric can continue to lead the way in this type of scholarship by building relationships with and among cultures and communities through respectful negotiations of observance and deliverables. “Reporting back” and “sharing knowledge” (Smith, 1999) is of grave importance to this project. This further serves rhetoric’s value outside of the academy by creating a relationship that is both productive and enlightening.

**Project Description**

My project will incorporate a mixed-methods approach to examining the APM. Utilizing the methods of interviews, surveys, and discourse analysis, I will attempt to add to the literature on
the APM by providing a space for the voices of the members to gain further understanding as to their motivations for visiting, returning, and attending an APM. To achieve this, I will seek to establish a research relationship with the lead, or executive, pastor of an APM. This relationship is sought to establish a respectful relationship with one APM. Furthermore, with the blessing of the pastor, I will conduct a survey of the members of the church. Questionnaires are employed to garner fruitful information from the members concerning their reasons for initially visiting, returning, and joining this APM. My goal, here, is to send and collect 250 completed surveys. I will then seek to interview a cross section of members of the APM to gain a further understanding of their motivations for attending, and continuing to attend, that APM. The cross section of members I hope to interview will be a mix of the “decision makers” of both families and singles that attend regularly with a mix of both male and female, as well as a mix of ages. In other words, I seek to interview members that would represent the overall demographic representation of membership of the APM. It is anticipated that I will be able to interview fifty members. Finally, I will engage in a discourse analysis of the textual production of the APM via their online presentation of the persona of the APM organization, sermons, announcements, and books or other textual—oral, written, and visual—production that the laity identify as an appealing factor that contributed and contributes to their attendance practices. The aim of the textual analysis to examine four sermons that represent an overall “theme” of a consistent message, two-to-three books, announcements, or programs, and the online presence (website) of the APM.

The results of the data collected and analyzed will be used to reach a further level of understanding of the rhetorical components that are “at play” within an APM. In other words, while I do not seek to impose a theory upon an APM, I do seek, in the spirit of Christian (1987) and Haas (2012), to understand what practices, both epistemological and stylistic, are being employed by its members. That is, in what ways is the megachurch creating (inventing) a reality, a religion, that members respond to and then enact.

To accomplish these tasks, the selection of the APM is key to achieving the goals of my project. Since the goal of my project is to provide space for the voices of the members of an APM, and since there exist several different “types” of APMs, I am interested in establishing a relationship with an APM that meets or exceeds a set of characteristics that help make the project manageable and possible.

First is the issue of convenience. The geographic locations currently selected take into consideration the ease of transport and proximity to which I would be able to travel to the city in which the APM is located, have accommodations, and reasonable transportation to and from the APM and accommodations. Second is size (as reported by Thumma & Bird, 2015). A minimum of 10,000 has been initially selected as most recent data surveys and scholarship suggests that megachurches are gaining their members from “other” megachurches in the surrounding area (Chaves & Eagle, 2015). To account for this movement, I will choose a church that has grown substantially recently and that is located within an area of other megachurches. Third is the consideration of previous scholarship. The consideration here is to allow an opportunity for the possibility of two fruitful outcomes. On the one hand, if a church has had previous scholarship that has painted the APM in a negative light (see Miller & Carlin, 2010; Sodal, 2010; and Winslow, 2014), my project could serve to distill those effects and restore a positive relationship
between the APM and academia. On the other hand, an APM that has had no scholarship might be more inclined to participate and develop a positive relationship with the academy. Fourth, I am narrowing the field of possible APMs to denominational identification. I am mostly interested in the denominational identification of “Nondenominational,” or no denominational affiliation. This is for two reasons: 1) A larger percentage of megachurches identify as nondenominational, and 2) To allow for any future comparisons of the project as most scholarship has been done looking at predominantly nondenominational APMs. Fourth, the APM must have an online presence, preferably a website that is organized and maintained by the APM, as well as published material in the form of books, announcements, and/or programs of church services, meetings, or other printed, distributed materials.

Lastly, I am interested in the culture of the APM. I use this term to signify an exclusion of predominantly African American Megachurches from the search since the scholarship that exists on African American Megachurches has greater succeeded in respectful representation of the community and milieu of the Megachurch (see Barber, 2011; Barnes, 2011; Johnson, 2011; and Moss, 2003). While there still exists a gap for the voices of the laity, the laity are considerably more present through the treatments in the literature concerning “call and response,” embodiment, and social responsibility in their services and outreach.

See attached Methods Matrix.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter will lay the groundwork and foreground the analyses to follow. I will establish the need for a study of the APM laity that the listening to the voices of the laity, at least to the depths that this study will attempt to reach, has yet been undertaken—to carve out a space for a mixed-methods, laity-centered research approach within the larger landscape of the published literature on the APM. The central research questions concerning the how an APM creates a reality for its members (i.e. invents religion) to build a church and how that building creates a particular reality for its members will be discussed. Furthermore, I will review the literature to establish a “research space” for my project.

Chapter Two: Methods/Methodology

In this chapter, I will detail the mixed-methods approaches that will be utilized in my dissertation. Beyond merely identifying the mixed methods, I will describe the “theory” supporting the mixed-method approaches and provide the practice through which the theory will provide me with a cultural rhetorics project. In short, I will utilize the methods of interviews, surveys, and textual analysis. Surveys will be utilized to report cultural practices of the laity. Employing surveys will allow me to notice traceable practices as per the “situational analysis/grounded theory” practice of research as noted by A. Clark (2005). Additionally, surveys serve an effort to ascertain specific practices that the laity consider as the key reasons for their visiting, returning, joining, and involvement. Furthermore, interviews with the senior/executive pastor will be utilized to note the pastor’s practices as potential “appeal,” or
“cultural object” of the laity. In addition, interviews of the members of the APM will reveal in greater granularity those practices to which the laity respond but also those practices of the pastor to which the members connect. Finally, textual analyses of specific discursive practices identified by the laity will further provide the connective tissue in support of the revealing of a “theory of the rhetoric of an APM.” That is, a theory will be created based upon the practices “at play” within an APM, thus seeking to reveal both the epistemic and stylistic rhetoric from which the members interpret their reality—the reality of how and why this APM was worth visiting, returning, and joining.

Finally, this chapter will detail the method by which an APM is selected as the primary source for the project and the steps through which I went through to develop a relationship with an APM for my project (see attached matrix). While an APM has not been selected, considerations are based upon the criteria as set in the project description.

**Chapters Three - Five**

The specific content of chapters three through five will be determined based on the findings from church member surveys and interviews.

**Chapter Six: Concluding Thoughts: “Building” and “Delivering”**

While it is true that my project has consistently referenced the noticeable absence of the laity, it is in this chapter where I will seek to build a theory of the rhetoric of an APM. The previous chapters’ revelations concerning the APM will be put in concert with one another. That is, an amalgamation of the pastor’s practices, discourse practices, and laity practices will form a theory concerning its appeal and growth through the consideration of a listening to the laity of an APM.

Therefore, since I define cultural rhetoric as, in Haas’s (2012) terms, “the negotiation of cultural information—and its historical, social, economic, and political influences—to affect social action (persuade). I also believe that every culture has its own rhetorical roots, traditions, and practices,” and since I am interested in the components at work in creating an APM religious reality, the theory built will have both epistemic and stylistic components. That is, within the enacting of cultural information, both discursive and non-discursive, the rhetorical elements will form a theory of how the members are creating, and are created by, the components at work in an APM. The “deliverable” then will concentrate and focus on those components that are working together to create a particular reality from the perspective of the members.

Additionally, one of the goals of my dissertation is to allow the nuances of an APM to unfold, be written about, and respected as rhetorically relevant to its growth and sustenance of that growth, not as a cultural phenomenon to be criticized but respected. This concluding chapter will be about the respectful “delivering” of a final product. In other words, how my project will be reported back, shared, and received.

**Project Timeline**

Establish APM Research Relationship—Summer 2017
IRB Application Submitted—August 2017

Conduct Initial Interview with Pastor—October 2017

Conduct Surveys and Interviews—November 2017

Interviews, Surveys, and Observation (Data) Completed—December 2017

Chapter Three—February 2018

Chapter Four—April 2018

Chapter Five—June 2018

Chapter Two—August 2018

Chapter One—December 2018

Defend Dissertation—Winter 2019
References


Miller, C. & Carlin, N. (2010). Joel Osteen and cultural self object: Meeting the needs of the
group self and its individual members in and from the largest church in America. Pastoral Psychology, 59, 27-51.


