God Is Not at Church

Digitalization as Authentic Religious Practice in an American Megachurch

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Abstract *In this article, I analyze how increasing digitalization changed the organizational structure of an Evangelical megachurch in the US and how the church theologized and idealized this transformation. My case study Churchome switched from a multisite megachurch model to what I call a 'click-and-mortar church'. It reduced in-person events and worked on making all aspects of church life available online, enabling people in other cities or countries to not only passively consume content but to become active and committed long-distance church members. I show that this transformation in the church's membership structure led to a diversification of how members relate to the church and an eventization of church life. Churchome presents its digitalization as a bold and possibly inconvenient but necessary move to make mission work more efficient and church life more authentic. I argue that Churchome uses its digital approach to emphasize the ideal of communitization and to present itself as an authentic and exciting organization. Through this, Churchome can counter internal and external criticism against megachurches per se and its move into the digital in particular. Churchome's self-presentation thus is an example of how a church theologizes its social forms or, in other words, for a congruence of religious semantics and social forms.*

Keywords *American religion, authenticity, digital religion, Evangelicalism, megachurches, organizational studies*

1. Introduction: Empty pews, full Zoom calls

I had been researching Churchome, a global megachurch based in the Pacific Northwest of the US, digitally for more than a year before first attending an in-person service. More than excited, I made my way to the church on Sunday morning – only to find the large auditorium almost empty. Shaking off the thought that I might have chosen the wrong case study, I returned the following Sunday. This time, the church was packed and excitement was in the air. I quickly learned why: Head pastor Judah Smith was in the house. Whereas the week before, visitors had followed a pre-recorded sermon by Smith on the large screens towering over the stage, we would now get to watch him preach in person. The previous week's solemn tranquility was replaced with a noticeable buzz.

This pattern – a full auditorium when Smith preached live, empty pews on all other Sundays – repeated itself throughout my stay in Seattle. As the video shown in the church is also streamed online, many of Churchome's followers enjoy the flexibility and convenience of staying home when Smith is not present and only visit the church on special occasions. Churchome not only tolerates this, but even encourages its members not to come to church and to attend digitally instead. In fact, in a sermon he preached at the time of the 30th anniversary of the church, Judah Smith announced that he would also stay home at some point in the future:

> I don't expect any of you to be here 30 years from now. I hope you're following Jesus wherever he takes you. Now, if you are still here, I won't be, but that's awesome, seriously, that's great. I won't. But, I mean, I'll still be practicing with Churchome. It'll be hopefully through the technology and it'll be wonderful.[1]

Churchome did not focus on digital technology for its church growth from the beginning. What was founded as "City Church" in 1992 first grew into a local multi-site megachurch until it was relaunched as "Churchome" in 2017. This move was primarily justified as an efficient evangelization strategy. While a local church building was always limited, with digital technologies the church

1 Sermon by Judah Smith. "God Pursues You." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UixDJthl7dU, 29:40-30:06.

could potentially reach millions. The portmanteau of "church" and "home" symbolized how the church's new approach was supposed to restructure followers' religious practice: Churchome intended to make every aspect of church life available online. As the church reduced in-person events, members were encouraged to watch live-streamed or recorded services from home, preferably together with fellow believers in small groups. The differences between services with live preaching and video recordings are just one example of how digitalization changed the organization of religious practice at Churchome and the self-presentation of the church as an organization.

From an organizational perspective, megachurches are an interesting case. Scholars have generally considered religion and organization to have a problematic relationship. In this perspective, religious entities strive toward close emotional bonds between members. The pragmatic decisions and economic entanglements that come with a higher level of organization run counter to this ideal of communitization. Megachurches, however, have not only been compared to businesses by outsiders but consciously present themselves as organizations that follow economic alongside religious logics. They appoint CEOs, publicly speak about having applied marketing strategies to grow their audience, and take membership numbers as the primary marker for success. Still, megachurches are religious entities and thus follow ideals that go beyond those of business organizations. If their organizational structures contradict their religious ideals, they risk being perceived as inauthentic by their followers.

In this article, I analyze how the digitalization of my case study Churchome changed the megachurch as an organization and how these changes have been religiously interpreted and idealized. I am interested in how digitalization has altered the social forms with which Churchome as an organization provides its followers and how Churchome uses its "going online" for its self-presentation. I argue that digitalization reinforces existing organizational developments of megachurches. While all megachurch services are events, digitalization at Churchome has led to an eventization of church life in which in-person services are specifically advertised as "church experiences".[2] Megachurches offer their followers both the option for passive, occasional as well as active, committed membership. Through digitalization, member roles become even more diverse. At Churchome, digitalization has led to a new membership category:

2 Churchome: Churchome Experiences. https://www.churchome.org/monthly-experiences (accessed November 8, 2023).

Long-distance members are committed members who follow the church digitally. Lastly, while megachurch attendees are known to be "promiscuous worshippers" (Abraham 2018: 39), digitalization makes it even easier for believers to follow several churches at the same time. Long-distance members at Churchome tend to approach their faith practice with a "mix-and-match" attitude and use different churches and other institutions for different services.

Churchome understands streaming from home as a means to integrate faith into everyday life and to build up an authentic religious practice that does not depend on spectacular in-person events. Churchome's digitalization thus not only altered the church's social forms and the relation of members to the organization but also the church's self-presentation. I argue that Churchome uses its digital approach to emphasize the ideal of communitization and to present itself as an authentic and exciting organization. Churchome's self-presentation thus is an example of how a church theologizes its social forms or, in other words, for a congruence of religious semantics and social forms. First, Churchome presents itself as boldly going to new places for evangelizing by developing a digital missional identity, which allows it to counter common stereotypes and critiques against megachurches and to distance itself from other churches. Second, as it relocates religious practice from a church building into members' homes, Churchome presents its approach to faith as particularly authentic. In this perspective, by embedding faith into everyday life, Churchome's followers do not depend on an impressive building or an emotional worship performance for their religious experience.

The following analysis draws on material collected for research on my dissertation which focuses on Evangelical boundary maintenance and identity work. I worked with an ethnographic approach and designed my study according to Grounded Theory Methodology (Corbin/Strauss 2015). In the first research phase in 2021, I participated in a digital small group set in Europe, conducted interviews with international Churchome members, and listened to live-streamed Churchome services. This was not a conscious decision, as COVID-19-related travel and contact restrictions made it impossible for me to enter the field in person (Kovac 2021). My second phase, in 2022, when travel restrictions had been lifted, consisted of an in-person field research stay in Seattle and Los Angeles, where I participated in in-person small groups, services, and other church events, and conducted interviews with pastors at Churchome. Later in 2022, I concluded my data collection with several digital interviews with Churchome members in the US and analyzed relevant sermons by Judah Smith from between August 2021 and November 2022. Going back

and forth between digital and in-person ethnography allowed me to follow my interlocutors, whose religious practice takes place in both online and offline spheres (Laughlin 2022: 2). One important limitation of my research, particularly for this article, is that I started researching Churchome after the church's rebranding and digitalization. Thus, I did not personally witness the church's development and transition from City Church to Churchome. For this article, I instead rely on interviews and conversations with long-time members.

In the following, I first explore the particular case of social forms and economic logics at play at megachurches (2). After turning to my case study Churchome and shortly recounting how the local City Church has become the digital and global Churchome (3), I analyze how digitalization has changed Churchome's social forms, in particular events, groups, and the relation of members to the organization (4). My last subchapter aims at how Churchome uses its digital strategy for its self-presentation (5).

2. The laughter of megachurch pastors: Megachurches' religious and economic logics

Scholars on megachurches usually define megachurches according to the criteria of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, that is, a megachurch is a Protestant church that has 2000 or more weekly attendants, possibly across multiple campuses.[3] Although individual large churches had of course existed earlier, megachurches emerged as a distinctive form of organizing Christian faith practice in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, following suburbanization and the surge in privately owned vehicles. Megachurches have been compared to shopping malls (Ritzer 2005: 23), but in contrast to their secular counterparts, they apparently do not see any sign of decline. Wellman et al. (2020: 5) have argued that megachurches have now become "the way Americans 'do' religion".

The success story of megachurches cannot be understood separately from societal and religious developments in the past fifty years. Megachurches, which are usually nondenominational or only have loose ties to a denomination, both profited from and advanced the declining importance of denominations (Wuthnow 1989) and the emergence of a generic Evangelical subculture (Du Mez 2020). Megachurches spread at the time when an Evangelical media market was established, and many megachurches and their pastors became

3 http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html.

successful media producers. Starting with the televangelists of the 1970s and 1980s, megachurches were often headed by famous media personalities. Many churches succeeded in marketing their media products, such as music or books, not only to their members but to a more general Christian or even non-Christian audience. This way, megachurches' ideas and theologies traveled far beyond their pews. The idea that congregation size is an indicator for a church's success and vitality, for example, can also be found in smaller churches (Maddox 2012).

Moreover, the trend towards a concentration of faith practice and the extension of auditorium sizes not only influenced theology but also created a distinctive aesthetic and organizational style: Megachurches can usually be found in car-friendly locations in the suburbs of big cities. Often, they congregate in nondescript buildings that have little to no markers of their being a church. Services are multi-media events centered around a charismatic head pastor and contemporary Christian worship music performed by a band of professional musicians. Most megachurches hold several services per week and have a wide array of different ministries and groups that provide members with services and activities. Worship ministries, for example, produce media products to be circulated and sold beyond the church's membership.

Megachurches usually have a highly differentiated and hierarchical organizational structure and rely on a host of staff that is not only trained in theology but also in areas such as finances, media production, or marketing. Often, these structures resemble those of businesses in name or function, such as when megachurches appoint a CEO to oversee the church's operational side. Arguably, the larger a megachurch gets and the more economic transactions it is involved in, the more it needs to function like a business. Examples would be those megachurches that are at the same time global media empires whose albums reach the tops of Billboard charts, such as the Australian Hillsong or Bethel and Elevation Church in the US. However, functioning like a business is not only a necessity that comes with higher membership numbers. Maddox (2012) and Sanders (2016), among others, have argued that an economic logic is inherent to megachurches, whose primary goal, however theologically framed, is to grow their audiences.

Scholars of organizations usually argue that religious entities do not voluntarily engage in economic endeavors and that, when they have to, this leads to tensions (Petzke/Tyrell 2012). In this perspective, churches do not understand themselves as businesses and are oriented toward otherworldly goals that run counter to the logics of the economic field. According to Bourdieu

(1998: 113), actors in the religious field have a "double consciousness". Like all agents, they cannot avoid following an economic logic. However, to the outside world, they must pretend that economic rationales play no part in their decision-making, or, in Bourdieu's words, play the "religious game". If not, they risk being perceived as unauthentic by their followers. In other words, churches are businesses that deny and conceal that they are businesses. When the Catholic bishops that Bourdieu observed spoke about economic matters of the church or used economic terminology, laughter served to alleviate the tensions surrounding the gap between what the church actually did and what the church was supposed to do.

Megachurches, however, do not only often openly associate themselves with businesses and a corporate culture but also bring together economic and religious rationales. Thus, on the one hand, one could argue that megachurches solve the tensions of organized religiosity by completely blending into the economic sphere. Some scholars of religion, like Berger (1990 [1967]), have predicted that the increasing organization of religion contributes to the secularization of society. On the other hand, megachurches can be understood as an example of how a high degree of organization and vital religiosity do not need to be mutually exclusive (Schlamelcher 2018: 499). Chang (2003: 127) has rejected a clear-cut dichotomy between organizational and religious spheres as an outdated assumption that goes back to Weber's church-sect typology. According to her, in perceiving organization, including economic rationales, and religion as antithetical, scholars make implicit assumptions about what it means to be religious and project these onto the churches they study. Instead, the relationship between religious and economic logics must be understood to be complex and intertwined. For example, when a religious organization wants to change the secular world, including its economy, its involvement in the economic field cannot be understood as entirely secular (ibid.: 129). Similarly, when megachurches interpret a high number of followers as a God-given sign of being on the right theological path, a decision to hire a marketing expert is not exclusively grounded in economic logics.

Megachurches' economic involvement, however, is subject to criticism both inside and outside Evangelicalism. While some critics perceive megachurches as soullessly commodified and suspect pastors to exploit their audience for their fame and fortune (Wellman et al. 2020: 216), others do not have problems with megachurches per se but closely monitor how their church spends its money or makes decisions. In my own research on Churchome, I got the impression that most people had no problems with the church orienting it-

self toward fame and fortune but voiced criticism in those instances when they felt like this negatively influenced congregational life. For example, Churchome has many celebrity members (among them, most notably, pop singer Justin Bieber) and some of my interviewees argued that sometimes the pastors cared for them at the expense of "normal" congregants.

Thus, instead of understanding megachurches as simply reacting to contradictory sets of logics, scholars should be aware of the entanglements of religious and economic logics inherent in megachurches and their theology and faith practice. Rather than asking whether megachurches lean more on the economic or the religious side, it is therefore more promising to closely examine the intersections of the two, or in other words, which economic rationales are consciously presented and which are concealed, what members accept without question and what leads to internal criticism, or how megachurches react to such criticism.

3. From multi-site to click-and-mortar: Churchome as a case study

Churchome did not start with an emphasis on digital media or even an overt intention of global outreach. The name the church was founded under in 1992, "City Church", reflected its rootedness in the Seattle metropolitan area. City Church's founder Wendell Smith grew the nondenominational church into one of the largest churches in the region with several campuses in and around Seattle. In 2009, Wendell's son Judah Smith took over the church as head pastor together with his wife Chelsea because of the declining health of Wendell, who suffered from cancer and died one year later. This second generation of pastors stylistically adapted the church for a younger audience. Judah and Chelsea Smith started doing outreach in Hollywood, opening a church location in Los Angeles and befriending celebrities such as Justin Bieber. Regarding what was preached, Judah Smith accentuated grace theology, a theological view that believes salvation to solely depend on faith, not on actions or repentance. These innovations turned out to be fruitful, as the church continued to grow and Judah Smith became an Evangelical celebrity with a large social media following.

In 2017, however, the church changed its strategy and City Church was rebranded as "Churchome", a portmanteau of "church" and "home". Instead of planting further church buildings, Churchome intended to bring the church to peoples' homes by digitally streaming services. Members were called to gather

in small-group settings (called "church at home") and to watch live-streamed or recorded sermons together. The church started several digital small groups in which people gathered via Zoom. Additionally, Churchome launched an app intended to replicate other aspects of church life in the digital sphere. Through a "pastor chat", anyone interested in the church can seek pastoral care or find answers to their questions. A prayer function in the app enables believers to publicly request prayers from fellow congregants and to react to these requests. Daily "guided prayer" exercises and recorded worship performances help people new to the church to align with Churchome's theology and practice their faith online. Congregants can also give and tithe online, without ever being physically present in church. While online campuses and live-streamed services have become staple in most Christian churches since the COVID-19 pandemic, at the time, Churchome's approach was unusual if not pioneering, and prepared the church well for what happened later. In 2020, when contact restrictions were issued and large gatherings prohibited, Churchome had not only already successfully set up digital options for participation but these had become a normal and much-used part of church practice.

Churchome's digitalization led to an increasing internationalization of the church. Judah Smith claims that services reach people in over 80 countries.[4] There are digital small groups hosted by people from all continents. Churchome, however, did not adapt much to integrate its international following. Sermons are, for example, exclusively in English, and YouTube videos do not come with subtitles other than automatically generated English ones. Many of Judah Smith's examples and anecdotes only make sense in a US context and require an understanding of the country, its politics, and its culture. In my interviews, it became clear that Churchome relies on the small groups and especially the group hosts to adapt the church's content to their respective local culture. As a result, internationally, the church mainly attracts people who are mobile, globally oriented, and highly educated.

At the same time, Churchome sold or demolished the buildings they had owned, keeping only the Kirkland church campus, and reduced the number of in-person services. When large events were prohibited from happening during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Churchome already had all technological necessities in place and ceased in-person services. When in-person services started again, as congregants told me, the pews were not as full as before the pandemic. Many Churchomians who had previously attended services in

4 Field notes, May 8, 2022.

person enjoyed this enforced participation in digital church and did not want to go back to "regular" church. In May 2023, Churchome offered one in-person service weekly at their Kirkland campus and one service per month in a rented location in Los Angeles. At the Kirkland campus, one service a month featured Judah Smith preaching live on stage. The other three Sundays, visitors watched a pre-recorded sermon on the auditorium's huge screens or listened to an in-person sermon by a local pastor, followed by a live worship performance. The services featuring a live in-person sermon by Smith are called "church experiences" and are specifically advertised. In addition to their regular services in Kirkland and Los Angeles, Churchome at times organizes services in other U.S. cities.

With its rebranding of the City Church to Churchome, Churchome has switched from a multi-site megachurch to a church model I designate, in parallel to the business administration term, *click-and-mortar church*. A click-and-mortar church provides its members with both digital and in-person opportunities for participation. It does not understand its digital campus as solely an optional add-on or a lesser alternative to in-person church attendance but instead sees both modes of participation at least equally justified and works on making all aspects of in-person church and faith life available in the digital realm. As seen in the sermon excerpt at the beginning of this article, Churchome plans to rely even more on technology in the future. It will be interesting to see whether the church will at some point give up its Kirkland campus and focus on irregular events throughout the country, or even become a fully digital church.

4. Digital and hybrid social forms at Churchome

In going from a multi-site to a click-and-mortar church, Churchome not only replicated offline social forms for an online audience but also saw changes in its existing, in-person social forms. In the following, I analyze these developments regarding events, groups, and membership in the organization.

4.1 Events

In May 2023, Churchome still held weekly services at its main campus in a Seattle suburb. Head pastor Judah Smith, however, was only present once per

month. These services were specifically advertised as "church experiences".[5] During other Sunday services at the Kirkland campus, Churchome would either show a pre-recorded sermon by Smith or have a local pastor preach the sermon. In both cases, sermons took up the largest part of the service, usually lasting between forty minutes and over one hour. Announcements and pleas for giving and tithing took place either before or after the sermon. At the end of the service, a live worship band played several songs. While church experiences were livestreamed directly and fully from the Kirkland auditorium, on other Sundays those who joined digitally saw the same recording as the church visitors, usually followed by music videos of worship songs.

This similarity of the online and offline experience on regular Sundays explains why "church experiences" draw many more visitors than regular services. While it did not make much difference for my interviewees whether they watched a video recording in church or at home, the experience of participating in a "church experience" could not be replicated in the same way by attending online. "Church experiences" not only feel different than regular Sunday services, but Churchome also markets them as such. Digitalization for Churchome goes hand in hand with and provides a basis for an eventization of church life. In-person services are not simply services but "experiences", made special precisely because of their infrequency. In promoting these events, Churchome draws both on pastor Smith's popularity and the live and in-person aspect of the services. Attendees of a "church experience" can be sure to see pastor Judah Smith live on stage and come specifically to see him. At least in my own experience as a participant observer, Smith's live preaching is not only longer but also more enthusiastic, emotional, and agitated. During church experiences, Churchome also puts more of an emphasis on the parts of a church service that are hard to replicate online, like the worship performances. Instead of having an anonymous worship band, for example, the church invites musicians and uses their names for the promotion of its events. Whether or not attendees have heard of them before, the mention of a special act makes the event seem even more extraordinary.

Hitzler (2011: 39) has argued that in parallel to a tendency to eventization in general society, believers increasingly concentrate their faith practice on special events. By "eventizing" regular church services and marketing them as something special, Churchome enables its followers to experience such events while engaging in the conventional practice of church attendance. Moreover,

5 Cf. https://www.churchome.org/monthly-experiences.

attending services monthly and not weekly appeals to the busy demographic of young professionals and young families that Churchome mainly attracts, and provides an incentive for people who live in the wider surroundings of Kirkland and would not travel to Churchome every Sunday.

By livestreaming its services, Churchome enables all its members, spread out all over the globe, to have a shared experience. Klaver (2021: 95) has argued that the livestreaming of services can contribute to a shared sense of belonging of a globally spread out megachurch. Similarly, Campbell and DeLashmutt (2014: 276) and Hutchings (2017) have observed that churches explicitly reference online visitors to make them feel included. At Churchome, this sense of belonging is encouraged by frequent references to the global membership of the church. When pastors Judah and Chelsea Smith address their audience directly, they often add the phrase "wherever you are" and sometimes list possible cities from where people might be watching. Also, they use many occasions to mention that people all over the world are listening to Churchome's sermons digitally and present Churchome as a "church scattered all over the world".[6]

4.2 Groups

Small groups or house groups have been a fundamental feature of Evangelical church practice at least since seventeenth-century Pietism. Especially in megachurches, they are a means to counter large, possibly anonymous services and to differentiate between occasional visitors and committed members. Usually, these groups meet either in one of the members' homes or in a designated church space. While some groups discuss Bible passages, others speak about how to apply the content of the previous week's sermon to their current struggles in life, read Christian self-help books together, or pray for and with each other (Bielo 2009). At Churchome, small groups are asked to watch the service together. Churchome staff provide group hosts with discussion questions related to the sermon. However, as Churchome employee Philipp[7] explained in an interview with me, whether they use these questions and "what they do before or after […] is really up to them", as is the meeting location and the length of the meeting. With this flexibility, small group hosts are

6 Sermon by Chelsea Smith. "Let Jesus Serve You." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewoVnnVMh08, 02:04.

7 All names of interviewees in this article are pseudonyms.

expected to create a group that "serves their community the best", or in other words, that appeals to as many people as possible.[8]

Both in sermons and interviews with me, Churchome's pastors continually emphasized the importance of watching the digital recordings of sermons not alone but with a group of fellow believers. Conversely, small groups were hardly ever mentioned concerning in-person services. Churchome staff believes digital participation to lead to a lack of togetherness and community that can be countered by watching together instead of alone. "Finding community" is an omnipresent goal at Churchome, often aimed toward people Churchome suspects must be watching the sermons alone. If someone watches from a place in the world where there is no small group, they are encouraged to start their own group. Since 2022, Churchome has also been producing a video series featuring mostly small group hosts outside of Seattle who speak about how they practiced "community" with Churchome from afar.[9] The emphasis on small groups especially for online participants might stem not only from the desire to combat the isolation of digital participation but also from an intention to draw occasional visitors into the church. Those who watch online are "free-riders" (Thumma/Travis 2007: 50) even more than those who occasionally visit a service. By integrating digital members into small groups, Churchome not only expands its number of loyal (and loyally giving) members but also gets insights into and control over the anonymous number of YouTube and app viewers. Thus, groups help counter the anonymity of the megachurch crowd both for individual members, who can get to know fellow worshippers, and for the church as an institution, for whom digital attendees are hard to grasp.

4.3 Organization and membership

Digitalization at Churchome has diversified the possible ways of relating to and engaging with the church. All megachurches offer a variety of possible modes of interacting with the church, some of them more distant and others more active (Thumma/Travis 2007: 50). In megachurches, "low-cost" attendance (Wellman et al. 2020: 20) is tolerated more easily than in smaller, more tight-knit congregations, as megachurch services tend to be anonymous events that attract a lot of infrequent visitors and many megachurches encourage people to consume their media products without ever attending a

8 Interview with Philipp, Churchome pastor, January 14, 2022.

9 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLicUMmdCSpPjuC4NFk-JRzSlOxks5Z-eJ.

service. Membership is usually not formalized but based on participation in church activities, giving and tithing to the church, and a feeling of belonging. In a local, non-digital megachurch, being an active church member usually depends on physical presence. Active members attend services regularly, are part of a small group, and might even take on volunteering roles. In a click-and-mortar church, defining active membership becomes complicated: Can someone be considered an active member who regularly watches services on YouTube but has never gotten in contact with anyone at the church? Is in-person participation a sign of greater commitment than following the church digitally?

Churchome has, through digitalization, attracted a category of followers I call *long-distance members*. Long-distance members live too far from a church campus to regularly attend in-person services but extensively use the church's digital offers and consider themselves active and committed church members. While some of them visit infrequently, others have never been to a physical location of the church, be it for financial, visa-related, or other reasons. Some of them might have been local members before but moved away. Others stumble upon a sermon or book by coincidence and decide to follow from afar. At Churchome, the long-distance members I interviewed either took note of Churchome when they heard pastor Judah Smith speak at an event[10] or when, after watching other faith-related videos, YouTube's algorithm recommended one of Smith's sermons. All of them followed Churchome for a while, watching services online and using the church's app, before reaching out to the church, usually via the pastor chat function in Churchome's app. The pastors referred them to digital small groups or groups that met in their region or encouraged them to start their own group. One example of such a trajectory is Diane, who lives on the US East Coast and had been following Churchome digitally for about ten years before "getting involved".[11] What nudged her to reach out to the church was that someone at Churchome explicitly mentioned that they were looking for people to host small groups outside the West Coast area. While all of the long-distance Churchomians I interviewed were enthusiastic about the

10 Some large megachurches regularly organize events called conferences to which they invite several pastors to give a "guest sermon". Judah Smith gained much of his fame from preaching at conferences organized by the Australian global megachurch Hillsong.

11 Interview with Diane, long-distance member, pastor, and small group host, December 22, 2022.

church, some also reflected on having a limited perspective from afar. Sophia, a long-distance member from Europe, noted that, as an online participant, she did not get insights into church life beyond the digital small group she attended.[12] Thus, she could not know for sure whether the lived-out church culture reflected Smith's preaching.

For some of my interviewees, attending a church digitally was a matter of personal preference. Two of my interviewees, for example, told me that they felt socially anxious and experienced video calls as a relief. Others felt called to Churchome and their missionary vision of reaching people through technology. Some of my interviewees traveled or moved a lot and found it practical to be able to access the church from wherever they had an internet connection. Long-distance member Carmen, for example, had worked as a flight attendant and considered Churchome to be "right in her wheelhouse", as she identified as a "global traveler".[13]

Most of the long-distance members I spoke with, however, simply did not find a church they liked as much as Churchome where they lived. Particularly those living in countries where Evangelical Christianity is a fringe phenomenon explained that they found local churches to be too conservative, services neither lively nor dynamic, and the overall atmosphere not as "unique" or "special" as at Churchome.[14] This resonates with the fact that most of my interviewees emphasized purposely choosing a church that fit their convictions and lifestyle. The internet made it easier for them to design their faith practice, as they can choose from a broad array of church offers and religious content from around the world. In other words, digitalization enormously expanded their "spiritual marketplace" (Roof 1999). Sophia explained that she closely followed three US churches online because each of them focused on a different aspect that was important to her character and faith. In her view, "people are complex, and we all need quite a few things to kinda feed us […] [spiritually]".[15]

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12 Interview with Sophia, long-distance member from Europe, October 15, 2021.

13 Interview with Carmen, long-distance member and small group host, December 15, 2022.

14 Interestingly, some of my non-American interviewees connected their fondness for Churchome with the physical location of the church. Sophia, who lived in a predominantly Catholic area, laughingly mentioned that she might move to Seattle one day because it "seems like it might be my town" (interview with Sophia, October 15, 2021).

15 Interview with Sophia, October 15, 2021.

Long-distance members are often "promiscuous worshippers" (Abraham 2018: 39): Usually, they listen to sermons by several pastors online, and many of them are members of and attend in-person services at a local church. Digitalization has simplified and expanded the possibilities of such "split loyalties" (Coleman 2003: 19). While "church hopping" (Wuthnow 2007: 116), or spending one's Sundays in various churches, is a common practice encouraged by large, anonymous megachurch services, digitalization makes it possible to quite literally be in several places and engage in several activities at once. Followers do not even need to commit to a single church on any given Sunday but can easily close the browser window if they do not like the digital service they are watching and try out something different.

Thus, long-distance Churchomians approached both their membership at Churchome and their religious affiliation more broadly with a "mix-and-match" mentality that led them to consciously design their religious practice drawing on several sources. This resonates with Campbell's (2012) concept of "networked religion", which intends to grasp how believers assemble their religious practice from both online and offline aspects. Churchome's long-distance followers flexibly make use of what the church offers and listen to sermons on other days of the week if they do not find time on any given Sunday or listen to sermons while doing household chores, as one of my interviewees told me. "Mixing and matching" one's faith practice is, however, not only done out of preference or curiosity but also because there are things that Churchome just does not provide its followers with. Especially for long-distance members, but also for those who come to in-person services, Churchome is not a "full-service church" (Roof 1999: 94). Carmen, for example, missed live worship and attended a local church to experience it.[16] One of my interviewees got baptized in a local church, although he was more actively involved in Churchome than the local church he chose for his baptism. Apparently, some of Churchome's attempts to relocate religious rituals into the digital sphere, such as recordings of worship performances or Zoom baptisms, do not satisfy all long-distance members. There are also some important Christian rituals that Churchome does not offer to its members, neither digitally nor in person, such as weddings. Not being able to meet pastors in person, however, was not an issue to any of my interviewees, many of whom were experienced followers of global

16 Interview with Carmen, December 15, 2022.

megachurches with celebrity pastors. To Sophia, for example, it was clear that she "will never have a conversation with [the] pastors that I'm listening to".[17]

5. More digitalization, less organization: Churchome's digital self-presentation

In the following, I will turn to how Churchome religiously interprets and idealizes its digital practices and show how Churchome presents its digital approach as not only efficient and bold but also more authentic than religious practice at other megachurches.

5.1 Digital missional identity

The emergence and popularization of megachurches cannot be explained without their suburban locations and embeddedness in suburban lifestyles. Bielo (2011: 168) notes that the "organizational invention" of the megachurch was a result of a link between conservative Evangelicalism and suburbia that solidified in the second half of the 20th century. Due to their size and car-friendly location, megachurches, like the shopping centers they were often compared to, could draw masses of people who were already used to driving long distances for their daily chores (Loveland/Wheeler 2003: 117). Correspondingly, megachurches designed their buildings to fit the habits and preferences of middle-class suburbanites (Laughlin 2022: 26–27).

This 'suburbian-ness' of megachurches, however, evoked a range of criticism from inside and outside the Evangelical subculture. Due to their isolation from their surroundings and lack of any religious or denominational markers, megachurches have been described as interchangeable "religious non-places" (Sanders 2016). The high level of maintenance (and thus the large amount of money, usually through tithes and donations) needed to uphold megachurch infrastructure has been criticized as inefficient and excessive. Evangelical critics, in particular, accuse megachurches of being inefficient evangelizers, more interested in filling their buildings than in bringing people closer to faith or in building up sustainable relationships with attendees. For representatives of the inner-Christian reform movement Emerging Church, for example, megachurches were a symbol of the conservative Evangelical conviction that

17 Interview with Sophia, October 15, 2021.

it was enough to plant a building and wait for people to come through the door (Bielo 2011: 118). To counter this, Bielo's Emerging Church interviewees initiated church activities in the urban, low-income areas they had chosen to be their mission fields and sometimes even fully relocated there. What they described as "being missional" was not only an ideal but also an identity acted out in everyday life (ibid.: 119).

At Churchome, such criticisms against megachurches are taken up and countered with reference to digital technology. Presenting its technology-focused approach as a way to overcome the isolation of a suburban megachurch campus, Churchome has developed a digital missional identity that works as an add-on to the conventional megachurch model of the church.

In a sermon Judah Smith preached around the time of Churchome's thirtieth anniversary, titled "God Pursues You", he laid out several arguments as to how digital technology was not only more efficient but also meant being able to bring faith to people instead of waiting for them to come. In the months prior, Smith had already begun advertising new "technologies" the church was planning to develop and asking for donations, arguing that a little money put into creating an app or launching a website could go a long way. In "God Pursues You", Smith condensed this to the formula that "we're gonna spend thousands to reach millions" by technology "instead of spending millions to reach thousands", as would be the case with planting a new church campus.[18] Spending money on digital technologies meant that "we're going to spend more money on people than buildings, […] we're going to spend more money on people than events".[19] Thus, Smith directly counters criticism against the inefficiency of megachurches. Churchome might own a physical campus, but it did not plan to build another one. Instead, the money that members donated would be used toward "reaching millions" via technology.

By regularly emphasizing that church, to Churchome, is not a building, Judah Smith can refute accusations that he as a megachurch pastor is primarily interested in filling his pews. Moreover, in his sermons, Smith often mentions that not everyone needs to find their home at Churchome. He wants to bring people to Jesus, and if another church helps them strengthen their faith more than Churchome, so be it. In "God Pursues You", Smith explicitly states that

18 Sermon by Judah Smith. "God Pursues You." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UixDJthl7dU, 1:02:13-1:02:18.

19 Ibid.: 1:02:18-1:02:32.

"this isn't about your allegiance to Chuchome".[20] Carmen, a long-time Churchomian who has experienced both living in Seattle and attending what was then called City Church and being a long-distance member of Churchome, was passionate about Churchome not tying members to the church. She explained to me that when Judah Smith took over as head pastor, the church dropped a lot of conservative ideas. One of the changes was letting go of the idea that "you're committed to this house and you need to stay in this house, this is where you're fed, and this is where you're tied".[21]

Smith not only allows or even encourages attendees to get input from various churches or to find their luck somewhere else if they do not like Churchome's approach, but also calls on church members to stay home and not physically come to church. In his "God Pursues You" sermon, Smith argues that God is not at church, either:

> Everyone thought that God would come and have church friends, but all of his friends didn't go to the synagogue, so that really annoyed people, because they're like, no, God should be in a robe in church putting little Wafers on everyone's tongue for communion, right, it's our picture of God. But instead, he's up late [at] night with knuckleheads [and] drug dealers.[22]

According to Smith, God cares about people, and for that reason, he joins people who would not set foot into or have been excluded from a church. With this quote, Smith makes an analogy to Churchome's approach: With technology, Churchome can also reach people 24/7 and be everywhere at once, similar to God. By not focusing on gathering everyone in a specific building, Churchome can meet people in need instead of waiting for them to come to church. Diane, a long-distance member on the US East Coast who had recently come on the staff of Churchome at the time of our interview, was enthusiastic about this possibility. Her job position included attending conversations on "pastor chat", a function in the Churchome app and website that connects people to Churchome pastors for spiritual care or more general questions. According to Diane, the availability of pastor chat enabled people to reach out in moments of crisis:

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20 Ibid.: 29:34-29:40.

21 Interview with Carmen, December 15, 2022.

22 Sermon by Judah Smith. "God Pursues You." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UixDJthl7dU, 49:14-9:46.

> [Before], there was nothing like that. There was nothing like that at all. Except, maybe you could call your pastor, but how many times are you gonna call your pastor at night? And when you're broken, […] you [need] someone to be there […].[23]

Smith's idea of Churchome, like God, being awake at night helping "knuckleheads and drug dealers", however, is not only directed at external criticism against a perceived ignorance of megachurches. By comparing the effects of Churchome's mission to God's omnipresence, Smith showed his congregation the utmost importance of focusing on digital technologies. In his sermons, Smith regularly mentions that some congregants are not happy about the church's transition from City Church to Churchome and especially the cutback on in-person preaching, and counters such criticism by pointing to the significance and uniqueness of Churchome's approach. Smith presents Churchome's decision to focus on digital technologies as a bold and risky move that people only criticize because they are too comfortable to try out new ways. Just like God's work is excitingly unpredictable, according to Smith, Christians need to be open to trying out new things. In "God Pursues You", Smith declared that God had called Churchome and its members to follow him, even if this meant giving up things they had come to know and love, such as in-person services. In a particularly energized and emotional part of the sermon, Smith presented this need to let go of the familiar as a "prophecy" from God:

> Some of you need to hear that tonight, I'm talking to you, and this just went from sermon to, like, prophecy. Your word is "go" and you know it. You gotta go, you got to do what God told you to do, you got to step out. […] The goal is not that we all stay together, the goal is that we go with him wherever he takes us. […] This church was not set up to stay, this church was set up to go. 30 years ago, we started with a goal. We're not ending with the word safe or stay or convenient or comfortable or predictable, we're going to keep going. […] People are worked up that Churchome doesn't have a service every week where they can hear a live preacher. The word is go. The church is not an event where we come [to] hear a preacher, it's a romance and a journey and you follow Jesus wherever he takes you to. Go! It's unpredictable, it's wild, it's fierce, it's beautiful, it is painful, it's won-

23 Interview with Diane, December 22, 2022.

> derful, it's called your journey with Jesus. It's not meant to be the same, it's gonna be new challenges and new days and new seasons.[24]

The Churchome members I spoke with mostly embraced Churchome's focus on digital technologies. When they mentioned that they missed in-person services or meetings, they often framed this as a sacrifice they were willing to make to support Churchome's vision. Diane, who had only been to in-person Churchome events twice, called technology a "miracle" that God was able to use for good, and compared it to the long history of media use for Christian evangelizing:

> I mean, being in person, you know, being able to hug people, […] that's great, but even if we look at, like, you know, the original disciples, right? A lot of what they had to do was write letters, like, they would go out as much as they could, but it was hard to travel back then. […] And they didn't have the internet, you know. […] We just happen to have the ability now to reach people all over the world […].[25]

Being a worship musician, Diane, however, not only missed "being able to hug people" but especially the live music during in-person services. After listening to her passionate recount about reaching people through technology, I asked her whether she didn't miss live worship. In her response, Diane subordinated her preferences to the larger vision of Churchome:

> I am. […] I'm missing it. But I don't think there's anything wrong with missing something. I'm, you know, I'm a worship leader, I would love to be leading worship. It isn't about me, though.[26]

Churchome's digitalization thus allows members to be part of something bigger than themselves. By using digital media, they can reach people all over the world and be part of a new and exciting endeavor that is still ongoing and constantly changing. Like this, Churchomians can counter the egoism and suburbian-ness that megachurch-goers are often associated with.

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24 Sermon by Judah Smith. "God Pursues You." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UixDJthl7dU, 38:18-40:04.

25 Interview with Diane, December 22, 2022.

26 Ibid.

5.2 Streaming as the path to authenticity

Churchome not only presents its technology-focused approach as an efficient evangelizing strategy and as proof of it caring about people instead of profit but also as a means for people to practice their faith more authentically. Authenticity is a classic Protestant value. Lindholm (2008: 4) argues that the modern aspiration to authenticity was significantly shaped by Protestantism's emphasis on introspection and modesty. For Protestants, salvation could not be attained by performing rituals or following religious rules but through faith alone. Believers thus needed to constantly make sure that their faith was genuine (Scheer 2012: 180).

Striving for authenticity fueled a Protestant reluctance to rely on media or other tools when evoking religious experiences or emotions (Scheer 2014). Believers who attend megachurches, which have been carefully designed to create an atmosphere enabling intimate religious experiences (Rakow 2020), seem to have overcome such skepticism. As my interviews show, however, megachurch services are an ambiguous activity for many attendees. My interviewees were aware of how the architecture of megachurches and the presence of large crowds of other worshippers influenced their emotions. Even though they were not critical of megachurches and their strategic usage of media and architecture per se and found live worship to be an important part of their religious practice, many of them emphasized that their faith should not and did not depend on "putting on a show every weekend".[27] According to pastor Kevin, while a building might draw people in for the show, church at home groups attracted people interested in the same goal as the church, namely building a sustainable and authentic community:

> […] I'm hosting church in a donut and coffee shop […] and people aren't turning up because we have this amazing building with lights and all the things, they're turning up there because they actually wanna meet genuine people […].[28]

Fittingly, to the Churchomians I spoke with faith practice is more authentic when it takes place in locations not usually associated with Christianity. This is true for digital spaces but even more so for in-person meetings in

27 Interview with Natalia, long-distance member, December 16, 2022.

28 Interview with Kevin, local pastor, December 5, 2022.

unorthodox environments such as Kevin's donut and coffee shop, whose usage the livestreaming of services makes possible. The church at home group that was most frequently highlighted in my interviews and conversations with Churchome members was a group that met in a CrossFit gym and watched the service together after their workout.[29]

To Churchomians, staying at home to stream services and connecting with other people outside of a church building in church at home groups was not only more authentic because it lacked the dubious showiness of a megachurch service, but because it integrated faith into everyday life. As Kevin put it, "we see a limitation in only gathering in a church building on Sunday morning. There's just so much more to following Jesus than that".[30] This "so much more", at Churchome, takes on the form of building up a personal relationship with Jesus and involving him in all life decisions. As Luhrmann (2012) has shown, in much of present-day Evangelicalism, God is perceived to be an always available friend, and practicing one's faith means working on this friendship. Churchome's sermons often center around the idea that God wants people to include him in their everyday lives, not only because he is desperately interested in every single human being but also because he

> wants to get in your dirt with you, […] he wants to be involved with […] all of the things that you're facing, that you're struggling, that you're ashamed of, maybe the things you don't even like about yourself.[31]

Building up a relationship with God is so central to Churchome's message that the people I spoke with often used this idea to contrast Churchome with other Evangelical churches. Both my interviewees and Smith in his sermons constructed a binary of churches that focused on relationships and churches that focused on rules. The latter, "legalistic"[32] rule-focused churches that thought behavior to be more important than belief, served as a negative other whom Churchomians could differentiate themselves from. In his sermon "Fruit Over Works", Smith made this binary explicit and explained that integrating faith into everyday life was the basis for a relationship with Jesus:

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29 E.g. Interview with Philipp, January 14, 2021.

30 Interview with Kevin, December 5, 2022.

31 Sermon by Chelsea Smith. "Let Jesus Serve You." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewoVnnVMh08, 10:56-11:12.

32 Interview with Carmen, December 22, 2022.

> […] I'm a fruit over works person, […] I am relationship over rules. […] Our focus isn't supposed to be our moral code or the rules we keep or the disciplines we practice, it is to be [in] a relationship with the person of Jesus. I believe someone who focuses on the fruit of the spirit as opposed to the works of the flesh is someone that truly believes that the person of Jesus is far more important than the principles of Jesus. Your focus isn't about disseminating or even assimilating [to the] principles of Jesus, it's about staying close and following the person of Jesus every day.[33]

Integrating God into everyday life, to Churchomians, also means not being able to hide anything from him. Smith's sermons advise listeners to be completely honest with God and my interviewees strove toward opening up to him in prayer. Transparency and vulnerability are important values at Churchome that are regularly acted out both in conversations between followers and in Smith's self-presentation, as he often touches upon his faults and failures in his preaching. In this perspective, reducing one's faith practice to a Sunday service impedes honesty and transparency, and driving to a designated building for religious practice provides an opportunity for pretense. Practicing one's faith from the intimacy and privacy of one's home instead made it more difficult to hide one's shortcomings from oneself, other believers, and, ultimately, God. At Churchome, this was seen as not only intensifying believers' relationships with God but also with each other. Judah Smith's wife and co-pastor Chelsea Smith mentioned in a sermon that when she thinks about the "significant change" from City Church to Churchome, "what comes to mind is the quality of relationships".[34] This resonates with the emphasis Churchome puts on small groups, particularly for those who digitally stream services.

Many of my interviewees, and I argue that this observation can be extended to Churchome's followership more generally, have grown up in Evangelical churches, often ones that were more conservative than Churchome and, in their perspective, belonged to the "rule-focused" side of the binary. Rachel lived in Seattle but enjoyed the freedom of only driving to church for the monthly "church experiences" and streaming the services from home on the other Sundays. For her, Churchome's approach of integrating faith into everyday life via technology opened a whole new perspective on Christianity. Rachel told me

33 Sermon by Judah Smith. "Fruit Over Works." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ElrUXVabrz4, 16:42-17:48.

34 Sermon by Chelsea Smith. "A Gift From Jesus." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6qLNlbFOZ8, 2:26-2:32.

that, having grown up in a rule-focused church, she had always experienced Sunday services as a time when she and her family had to pretend to be happy and pious and to hide their family's "dysfunctionality". Not "having to go to church to have a relationship with God" helped her understand that she did not have to hide her everyday struggles because "Jesus wants to meet you in all of that". As she could be more honest with Jesus, she also allowed herself to take off the "mask of perfection" she had previously worn to all church-related activities.[35]

6. Conclusion: An "authentic" and "exciting" organization

Going online profoundly changed Churchome as an organization: The church diversified possible membership roles and integrated long-distance members, many of them from outside the US. Also, it differentiated between regular and in-person services and framed the latter as special events. The church's followers increasingly consider Churchome as one tile in the mosaic of their religious practice and combine their participation in Churchome with options from other churches and services. Going "beyond a building" also helped Churchome define its identity as an authentic megachurch. By presenting its digital approach as bold and unusual for a megachurch, Churchome can react to critique against the commodification and isolation of megachurches. Paradoxically, for Churchome and many of its members, digital religious practice is more authentic than in-person church attendance.

As they have emerged from modern consumer and event cultures, megachurches arguably depend more than other religious institutions on offering their followers an exciting, unusual, and continuously new experience. As Wellman et al. (2020: 73) put it, at megachurches, "whenever things become too comfortable, too stable, too predictable, the jig is up". Megachurches have been a relevant part of the religious landscape of the US at least since the 1980s. Having church services in large auditoriums can hardly be considered a wow factor anymore. Churchome's digital approach, however, is something new and unique. As Evangelicals have become used to megachurches, they have also become used to thoroughly structured religious organizations that often make decisions according to market logic. At the

35 Interview with Rachel, Churchome member and small group host in Seattle, December 5, 2022.

same time, megachurches have received lots of criticism from believers and nonbelievers alike. Churchome, thus, does not see a need to generally conceal its high degree of organization. Instead, it uses its digital approach to combine organization and communitization, to specifically counter criticism against megachurches, and to present itself as an authentic and exciting organization.

As it religiously justifies and idealizes its digitalization strategy, Churchome can stand as an example of how religious entities seek to bring the social forms they choose in alignment with their beliefs. By presenting its "church at home" approach as what God has intended, Churchome can counter criticism from church members unhappy with the church's increasing digitalization and from outsiders accusing the church of not being authentic. According to Churchome, God is not at church, and neither do humans need to be. When more and more of the church's followers are not at church, however, there is of course a risk of anonymity. Churchome's emphasis on "community" for those who follow digitally and the creation of in-person meetings for long-distance members show the fragility of the church's technology-focused approach and a longing to complement digital with in-person participation.

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