

Mars Hill dissolves multisite network after Mark Driscoll departure

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November 6, 2014

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(RNS) Can a megachurch survive the departure of its star pastor?

For Seattle's Mars Hill Church, it's an open question.

Mars Hill announced last week that it would dissolve the multisite network of 13 churches across the Northwest that took root under pastor Mark Driscoll, who stepped down in October after supporters lost confidence in a leadership style that was criticized as bullying, hypermacho, and intolerant.

For many megachurches, a pastor can become larger than the church itself—particularly for multisite churches where the pastor's sermon is the only thing binding disparate congregations connected by little more than a satellite feed. Before his resignation, the name "Mark Driscoll" was more widely known than "Mars Hill." The dueling brands sometimes clashed along the way; some say Driscoll once told staff "I am the brand."

Driscoll's edgy personality built up a congregation of an estimated 14,000 people at 15 locations across five states. Weekly attendance is now reportedly about 7,600. In August, the church saw a budget gap of nearly \$650,000 as expenses exceeded revenues.

According to Mars Hill leaders, by the start of 2015 locations within the Mars Hill network will either become independent and self-governing, merge with another church, or disband completely.

Mars Hill's existing church properties will either be sold or the loans on the individual properties will be assumed by the newly independent churches. Central staff in Seattle will be laid off as the formal Mars Hill organization dissolves.

Megachurches across the country have faced similar dips in attendance once their popular pastor left, a problem that can plague any church but one that can be exacerbated in a megabrand context.

“It’s not uncommon for CEOs to say the first agenda item is to talk about ‘What happens when I’m not here anymore?’” said William Vanderbloemen, co-author of the recent book *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*. “The key is to have an emergency succession plan.”

Every megachurch pastor wrestles with challenges of brand and leadership, said Mark DeMoss, who handled some public relations for Mars Hill before Driscoll resigned.

“If the pastor is the best communicator and preacher and pastor in that local context, I think you can make a good case for that’s who ought to be up there,” he said. “The dangers are sometimes in succession.”

Not all churches with large followings experience a loss in attendance after a pastor’s departure. After Joel Osteen’s father died unexpectedly from a heart attack in 1999, his Lakewood Church in Houston surged from 5,000 to more than 50,000 today.

Attendance at Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, was about 4,000 when he died. Under his son, Jonathan Falwell, the church now has about 10,000 attendees.

Similarly, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, founded by the D. James Kennedy, an icon of the religious right, had an average attendance of about 1,000 (and a broadcast reach of about 3 million) when he died in 2007. After facing turmoil during the transition, under Tullian Tchividjian, Billy Graham’s grandson and a popular pastor in his own right, the church’s membership is around 2,400.

Driscoll’s fall from grace came after a combination of growing scrutiny of church finances, plagiarism allegations concerning his books, and comments he made under an online pseudonym.

Could Driscoll make a comeback at another church or ministry?

“If (Driscoll) can continue to draw people in and have a successful ministry, then his authority—even if it has been questioned—will still rest on what he’s producing,” said Scott Thumma, a megachurch expert at Hartford Seminary.

Yet Wendy Alsup, who attended Mars Hill from 2002 to 2008, said she sees a growing movement of evangelicals asking whether bigger actually is better.

“There’s a big reaction among some to identify with something that has longevity,” Alsup said. “They’re rejecting fast growth and going back to the slow, methodical structure.”