



## “God Is Like a Drug. . .”: Explaining Interaction Ritual Chains in American Megachurches<sup>1</sup>

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*Megachurches have been criticized as superficial sources of entertainment that do not produce significant feelings of belonging, moral responsibility, or spirituality. This article challenges popular criticisms of megachurches and, drawing on interaction ritual theory, proposes that megachurches are successful interaction ritual venues and powerful purveyors of emotional religious experience. We predict that these interaction rituals produce positive emotional energy, membership symbols that are charged with emotional significance, feelings of morality, and a heightened sense of spirituality. From a census of 1,250 known megachurches in America, 12 were selected that closely represent the national megachurch profile. At each church, focus groups were conducted and attendees participated in a survey. We combine these data sources to provide a more comprehensive picture of the megachurch interaction ritual. The combined qualitative and quantitative results provide strong support for our predictions.*

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**KEY WORDS:** emotion; interaction rituals; megachurches; membership; religion; spirituality.

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of megachurches has transformed the American religious landscape (Chaves 2006). American Christianity has shifted from a smattering of mainline and evangelical Protestant denominational churches to a veritable cavalcade of postmodern, postsuburban, postdenominational megachurches (Ellingson 2010; Thumma and Travis 2007; Wilford 2012). Since the 1970s, these high-profile, high-energy, and highly popular megachurches have been growing and multiplying at an unprecedented rate. In the United States, the number of megachurches has increased from 350 in 1990, to over 600 in 2000. By 2011, there were over 1,600 documented megachurches, and there is no indication that the trend will slow down (Thumma and Bird 2011a). While the median congregation size of American

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Steven Pfaff, Marion Goldman, and Jason Wollschleger for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts. The data used in this article was generously funded and collected by Leadership Network, Dallas, Texas ([www.leadnet.org](http://www.leadnet.org)). We would like to thank Leadership Network, Dr. Warren Bird of Leadership Network, and Dr. Scott Thumma of Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research ([www.harsem.edu](http://www.harsem.edu)) for making the data available to us. The authors also benefited from the support of the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, which provided Corcoran with research support. This research was funded in part through a grant from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

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churches is about 75 persons, the largest 10% of churches account for more than 50% of all American churchgoers (Thumma and Travis 2007). While not a particularly new style of worship (see Wellman 1999), this large stylistically avant-garde church format has all but taken over the religious market in many parts of the United States (Ellingson 2010; Miller 1997; Sargeant 2000; Wellman 2008). Megachurches have not only become potent players in American culture and politics (Loveland and Wheeler 2003; Twitchell 2004; Vaughan 1993; Wellman 2012), but also in their local religious markets, where they have a direct impact on the attendance of nearby congregations (Eisland 1997; Wollschleger and Porter 2011). Some megachurch pastors, because of their immense church membership, have even been asked to endorse campaigns, causes, and products by activists, business executives, and lobbyists (Thumma and Travis 2007:190–191).

The success of megachurches and their foray into business and political domains has garnered extensive criticism. Many have charged megachurches with being merely a form of entertainment with little spiritual or moral challenge from the pulpit and no real sense of group belonging among participants. Stark (2008:45), for example, notes that “some media find them appalling examples of a religious ‘Disneyland’ mentality wherein people flock to be part of an anonymous crowd of spectators rather than worshipers.” He explains that such criticisms are due, in part, to the widespread belief “that to be really close to God, one should worship in a small, intimate congregation” (p. 45). Small congregations are thought to provide more belonging, moral accountability, and spirituality (see Stark 2008 and Thumma and Travis 2007 for further reviews of these criticisms). And yet, megachurches continue to increase in both size and numbers.

Despite the fact that American megachurches have had a significant impact on America’s cultural, political, and religious landscapes, few studies have addressed their remarkable success. Moreover, those few studies that have addressed the megachurch phenomenon frequently exhibit two methodological limitations (Ellingson 2010). First, most prior studies are descriptive rather than theoretical in nature; they have generally neglected the sociology of religion literature and failed to provide “systematic and robust explanations” (Ellingson 2010:263). Second, these studies typically draw on key informant data from pastors and church leaders rather than congregants. As such, they cannot account for “why people attend; why they join, stay, or leave; [and] how they experience worship” (Ellingson 2010:264). Thus, Ellingson’s (2010:264) review of the megachurch literature calls for data on megachurch attendees to determine “if and how megachurch programs resonate with the interests of audiences.” Our study addresses these limitations, while challenging popular criticisms of megachurches.

Drawing on Collins’s (2004) Interaction Ritual Theory, we argue that megachurches are successful interaction ritual venues and powerful purveyors of emotional religious experience. Attendees come “hungry” for an emotional experience and leave energized; in fact, many describe a physical need for the experience like a “high,” a “drug,” or an “energy” that they don’t want to live without. We propose that the size of megachurches facilitates the generation of strong positive collective emotions through large- (i.e., worship services) and small-scale interaction rituals (i.e., small-group participation). We predict that these interaction rituals will

contribute to high levels of positive emotion, feelings of belonging, membership symbols, feelings of morality, and, because they are religious rituals, heightened spirituality or connectedness to the divine. To address Ellingson's second critique of the megachurch literature and to test our hypotheses, we draw primarily on qualitative interviews with megachurch attendees, which we supplement with a large-N survey, to investigate attendees' megachurch experience (i.e., why they join, stay, and how they experience the megachurch).

## INTERACTION RITUAL THEORY

Though classical theorists often addressed the sociology of religious emotions, few contemporary researchers have examined it. Durkheim (1965 [1912]) theorized that commitment to religious groups is achieved and maintained through collective religious rituals that produce "collective effervescence"—a strong, shared emotional experience that connects participants to the collective and its identity and goals. Building on Durkheim's theory, Collins (2004) develops a general theory of interaction rituals that looks closely at the patterns and motivations of ritual participants. Interaction rituals include all types of interaction between two or more people—anything from a conversation over lunch to a football game. Collins (2004:39) portrays humans as seekers of "Emotional Energy" (EE), a "socially derived...feeling of confidence, courage to take action, [and] boldness in taking initiative." EE drives the "market" of options for social action and affiliation, and in fact, the goal of social interaction is to gain and spread EE. People, groups, and activities that effectively produce EE are more attractive and successful.

The extent to which rituals are able to produce high levels of EE depends on four important conditions—the assembly of participants, barriers excluding outsiders, a mutual focus of attention, and a shared emotional mood (Collins 2004). The bodily assembly of people is necessary to create a situation in which people can be affected by the presence of others. The larger the crowd, the stronger this effect will be: "It is the big, intense, religious gatherings that bring forth the emotion and the shift in membership attachment" (Collins 2004:61). Barriers excluding outsiders help define the boundaries of the ritual and the intention of the participants, creating a sense of homogeneity. These barriers can be anything from physical barriers, such as a locked entrance, to symbolic barriers, such as knowledge or language requirements for ritual participation. Requiring "cultural membership capital"—knowledge of group symbols that aid in ritual participation—is a core barrier that excludes outsiders (Collins and Hanneman 1998). Cultural membership capital is accumulated from the "past histories of the participants in Interaction Ritual chains." Through regular participation, participants become familiar with a set of group symbols that are unique to their shared experience of past rituals and which become required knowledge for future rituals (Collins and Hanneman 1998:220). The higher the level of cultural membership capital similarity, the stronger the common mood: "i.e., having similar things to talk about (complaining about the same political enemy; laughing at the same kinds of jokes) enhances the immediate mood" (Collins and Hanneman 1998:220). Having a higher quantity of such capital

contributes to a mutual focus of attention by providing a larger quantity of objects or topics to which participants pay attention.

The successful production of EE is also closely related to what Collins calls “energy stars”—individuals who are able to increase the EE level of others. These persons create a mutual focus of attention for all involved, which, in turn, supports a shared emotional mood (Collins 2004:132). “Energy stars” have “an EE-halo that makes them easy to admire” (Collins 2004:132). Collins (2004:132) notes that “since having high EE allows one to focus attention, one can get a certain amount of rise in one’s own EE by following them [i.e., energy stars], becoming part of their entourage, taking orders from them, or even viewing them from afar.”

These ingredients cumulatively generate collective effervescence, which results in four outcomes: (1) *EE*; (2) *Membership feelings/group solidarity*; (3) “*symbols that represent the group*: emblems or other representations (visual icons, words, gestures) that members feel are associated with themselves collectively; these are Durkheim’s ‘sacred objects’”; and (4) “*feelings of morality*: the sense of righteousness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols, and defending both against transgressors” (Collins 2004:49, emphasis added).

According to Collins (2004), each of the four ritual ingredients and outcomes are themselves variables. While high levels of all four ingredients are theorized to lead to high levels of the four outcomes, other combinations of the ingredients (i.e., high levels of some and moderate or lower levels of others) should also lead to the same outcomes to varying degrees. This is important because two of the ritual ingredients Collins proposes are typically inversely related. Higher levels of bodily assembly occur in larger groups, which often have fewer barriers to outsiders as it is more difficult to monitor and sanction compliance in larger groups (Stark and Finke 2000). Yet, Collins (2004:61) identifies the “big, intense” gatherings as being more effective at generating collective effervescence and group attachment. As such, we argue that high levels of bodily assembly—a large-scale interaction ritual—combined with an energy star who focuses the attention of the group and facilitates a shared mood (i.e., high levels of mutual focus of attention and shared mood) will lead to high levels of the four outcomes even with few barriers to outsiders. We investigate this hypothesis in the context of American megachurches.

## INTERACTION RITUALS AND MEGACHURCHES

Collins’s (2010) theory of interaction rituals may be especially relevant for the study of religion as religious interaction rituals typically entail all four ritual ingredients. Some research has been done applying the theory to religious rituals (Baker 2010; Barone 2007; Heider and Warner 2010; Wollschleger 2012). For example, Wollschleger (2012:899) found that congregations in which worship services produce more collective effervescence have higher rates of church attendance because “people will continue to return to rituals that give them a high level of EE.” Barone (2007) showed that the growth of Soka Gakkai in Italy was driven by the high benefits and low costs of participation combined with intense emotional experiences that

solidified individuals' attachment to the group. We extend this previous work by examining the interaction ritual dynamics of megachurches. In our analysis and application of Collins's theory, we make two important contributions: first, we propose the addition of a fifth ritual outcome when interaction ritual theory is applied to religious rituals; and second, we argue that megachurches generally lack barriers excluding outsiders from ritual participation.

Prior research applying interaction ritual theory to religion fails to consider how religious rituals may have unique qualities that set them apart from secular interactions. Religious rituals differ from secular ones in the divine or transcendent symbols that they entail, which allow individuals to feel as though they are channeling and experiencing the divine (Collins 2010). In this way, the ultimate source of EE is often believed to be rooted in the supernatural. Thus, we argue that successful religious rituals can also produce a fifth outcome—heightened spirituality, an “affective experience of the ultimate” or divine (Wellman and Lombardi 2012).

Past sociology of religion studies have generally shown that certain types of barriers to outsiders in the form of church strictness—behavioral rules or theological exclusiveness—increase member commitment (Corcoran 2013; Finke, Bahr, and Scheitle 2006; Stark and Finke 2000; Whitehead 2010). While all forms of strictness represent barriers to outsiders, not all barriers are a form of strictness. Many denominations and congregations that are considered low in strictness, such as Episcopal congregations, still have barriers to outsiders in the form of traditional liturgy, which requires knowledge of congregational or denominational cultural capital (see Corcoran 2012 for more on religious capital). For example, new members of an Episcopal congregation noted difficulty assimilating into the congregation because they lacked congregation- and denomination-specific cultural capital (Scannell 2003:72).

We argue that megachurches attempt to reduce the amount of membership cultural capital required of ritual participants by minimizing traditional denominational worship and instead adopting more informal programs that draw on contemporary music and arts (see Miller 1997; Sargeant 2000; Thumma and Travis 2007). By eliminating formal liturgies and traditions and instead using familiar institutional forms, megachurches make participation in their services easy by removing most cultural membership capital barriers that prevent outsiders from participating. A brochure from a well-known megachurch (Willow Creek) illustrates this: “Traditional church forms can be barriers to our communicating with unchurched people” (Sargeant 2000:63). Contrary to Collins (2004), we propose that, in combination with high levels of the other ingredients and a senior pastor who serves as an energy star, having few barriers to ritual participation actually facilitates successful rituals by increasing the number of participants, thereby amplifying the collective effervescence of the experience. Thus, while megachurches have been critiqued for being in the entertainment business—offering superficial spirituality and little to no sense of belonging or morality—we argue that the collective effervescence experienced in megachurches attracts individuals to these churches and leads to EE, feelings of belonging/membership, membership symbols, feelings of morality, and heightened spirituality.

## DATA AND METHODS

Since 1992, Thumma and Bird (2011b) have tracked the known population of all American megachurches—Protestant<sup>5</sup> congregations with weekly worship attendance of 2,000 or more adults and children—and have compiled them into a Database of Megachurches in the United States, providing a rough census of American megachurches. In 2007, there were a total of 1,250 such congregations. From this 2007 census, Thumma and Bird (2011b) selected 12 megachurches that closely reflect the national megachurch profile in terms of a wide variety of characteristics, including attendance, region, denomination, dominant race, and church age. While these churches were selected to be representative of the entire population, the sample slightly underrepresents the western region and is slightly larger than the average megachurch (see Thumma and Bird 2009). In 2008, at each church, Thumma and Bird conducted focus groups and gave all present church service attendees a survey. The interviews were transcribed and the surveys coded into a data set. Leadership Network, a nonprofit consultancy and research group, funded and collected these data and they are being used with permission. We also observed at least one worship service for each church and read through various church materials provided on their Web sites. While we use the interviews as our primary source of data, we combine these data sources to provide a more comprehensive picture of the megachurch interaction ritual.

### *Qualitative Data and Analysis*

Focus groups allow individual participants not only to provide their own responses to questions but also to engage and prompt the responses of other participants. In doing so, focus groups are particularly useful for identifying group norms (Kitzinger 1994). Because interaction rituals, and the collective effervescence they produce, are necessarily group experiences, focus groups may be especially useful for capturing the emotional group dynamics. The focus groups also allowed for a larger array of individuals to be interviewed, which is important given the large size of megachurches. Focus groups, however, also have limitations. Participants may avoid discussing deviant or embarrassing topics or opinions and shyer individuals may participate less than others. The large-N survey is less susceptible to these limitations as it was anonymous and required written responses. Thus the findings from it complement and further support the focus group results.

In total, 282 interviews were conducted in focus groups (150 females, 132 males).<sup>6</sup> Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours, during which time respondents answered questions about how they came to the church, how they became involved

<sup>5</sup> Thumma and Travis (2007:xviii) note that while “there are many American Catholic and Orthodox churches, and a few synagogues and mosques, that serve over two thousand attendees in an average week,” those “churches are organized and led in distinctively different ways that separate them as unique phenomena from Protestant megachurches.”

<sup>6</sup> Given the large number of interviews, sociodemographic information was not collected for all interviewees. However, the interview quotes and findings we present are indicative of the responses that permeated the interviews across respondents and churches. We use the quantitative data to further support these qualitative findings for a larger sample.

in their church, and in what ways they had or had not experienced spiritual growth at their church. Our three-person research team read, discussed, and coded transcriptions of the interviews. We first read through the interviews fully and then began to create codes separately; we then compared our work and adjusted and consolidated our coding themes; next, we read through the interviews again, guided by a coding framework emphasizing five major themes: (1) emotional experiences; (2) belonging; (3) admiration for and guidance from the leader; (4) feelings of morality and their expression through service; and (5) spirituality. Expressions relating to sensory or emotional experience were common and cut across all five themes. In addition to providing illustrative interview quotes, we also report word frequencies for the key sensory and affective words used in a context related to the megachurch. This involved identifying every instance in which a word and variations of the word were used (e.g., *love* as well as *loving* and *loves*) and then verifying each instance to ensure the context was related to the respondent's megachurch experience.

### *Quantitative Data*

At each of the 12 churches, surveys were distributed to everyone age 18 and older at all services during a given weekend. The average response rate was 58% from all 12 megachurches. Although we use the focus groups as our primary source of data, the large-N survey is useful because it provides sociodemographic data regarding the overall attendee population in these megachurches. It quantifies data about what initially attracted individuals to the megachurch as well as why they continue to attend, and it asks questions about feelings of belonging, morality as expressed through service, and spirituality. Because the experiences of first-time visitors may be distinct from the experiences of other attendees, we exclude first-time attendees from the sample, which results in a sample size of 16,007 attendees. The average megachurch attendee is female, married, white, and has a college education. While females comprise a disproportionate share of our survey respondents (i.e., roughly 60%), this is consistent with the fact that they also comprise a disproportionate share of American Protestant church attendees and American megachurch attendees (see Thumma and Bird 2009).

### *Why They Joined and Stay at the Megachurch*

Attendees were asked in separate questions how influential the senior pastor, worship style, and the music/arts were for (1) bringing them to the megachurch (1= not at all to 5= a lot) and (2) keeping them at it (1= not at all to 5= a lot).

### *Belonging and Small-Scale Interaction Rituals*

Respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement "I have a strong sense of belonging to this church." Respondents were also asked if they were regularly involved in six different types of small-group activities at their megachurch. If

they marked one or more of these types of small groups, we classify them as participating in small-group activities.

### *Morality and Service*

Respondents were asked whether they agreed that (1) church leaders encourage them to find and use their gifts and (2) the church encourages them to serve in the wider world. They were also asked how frequently they volunteer at the megachurch.

### *Spirituality*

Respondents were asked whether they agreed that (1) their spiritual needs are being met by the church; (2) a recent time when they felt closest to God was directly connected to a ministry or activity of this church; and (3) worshipping at a large church hinders their spiritual growth. They were also asked, (4) “How much have you grown spiritually in the past year?” We focus on the response category “much growth, mainly through the ministries of this church.”

From this survey, we provide descriptive statistics of the megachurch attendees in Table I. We incorporate these statistics into the qualitative findings to provide further support for them.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

### *Ritual Ingredients*

Collins’s (2004) interaction ritual theory provides four ingredients for a successful ritual. First is *bodily assembly*, which allows individuals to watch the emotions of others as they engage in the same ritual. A minimum requirement for this is bodily copresence. The large sanctuaries of the megachurches, combined, in most cases, with cameras that survey the audience and project their images on large screens, easily accomplish this. Collins (2004:82) describes how “there is a palpable difference between being in an establishment where there are lots of people and one that is nearly empty.” Crowds facilitate “more tacit interaction,” “give a sense of social atmosphere,” and make participants feel like they are “where the action is” (Collins 2004:82). Often with two or more thousand people present, megachurch worship services benefit from the effervescent effects of large crowd gatherings.

The second ingredient is *barriers excluding outsiders*. The megachurches in this study generally have lower levels of this ingredient, particularly in terms of cultural membership capital. Across all the megachurches, there was a strong desire to attract new people (i.e., “outsiders”) and a commitment to doing so by removing any obstacles to their participation. These churches acknowledge that attending a new church, especially a large one, can be intimidating, overwhelming, and uncomfortable for visitors. Part of this is due to not having the requisite congregational knowledge (i.e., cultural membership capital) to feel comfortable, such as

Table I. Descriptive Statistics

Sociodemographic		Reasons for Joining		Reasons for Staying	
<i>Sex</i>	%	<i>Senior Pastor</i>	%	<i>Senior Pastor</i>	%
Male	40.78	Not at all (1)	25.15	Not at all (1)	4.38
Female	59.22	2	7.58	2	2.39
		Some (3)	12.81	Some (3)	8.07
<i>Marital Status</i>	%	4	13.81	4	18.29
Not married	44.61	A lot (5)	40.64	A lot (5)	66.88
Married	55.39				
		<i>Worship Style</i>	%	<i>Worship Style</i>	%
<i>Race</i>	%	Not at all (1)	17.14	Not at all (1)	3.96
Nonwhite	27.27	2	8.76	2	3.64
White	72.73	Some (3)	16.22	Some (3)	11.28
		4	19.25	4	23.19
<i>Education</i>	%	A lot (5)	38.64	A lot (5)	57.92
Less than high school	2.58				
High school	40.49	<i>Music/Arts</i>	%	<i>Music/Arts</i>	%
College	56.93	Not at all (1)	29.52	Not at all (1)	13.17
		2	10.29	2	6.89
<i>Income</i>	%	Some (3)	17.80	Some (3)	17.18
Under \$25,000	14.93	4	16.65	4	23.48
\$25,000–\$49,999	20.37	A lot (5)	25.73	A lot (5)	39.28
\$50,000–\$74,999	20.23				
\$75,000–\$99,999	16.04	<b>Spirituality</b>		<b>Service</b>	
\$100,000+	28.44	<i>Church Size Hinders</i>		<i>Encouraged to Use</i>	
		<i>Spiritual Growth</i>	%	<i>Gifts</i>	%
<i>Age</i>	%	Agree/Neutral	20.80	Disagree/Neutral	37.83
18–29	29.54	Disagree	79.20	Agree	62.17
30–39	22.62				
40–49	23.08	<i>Spiritual Needs Met</i>	%	<i>Serve in World</i>	%
50 and older	24.75	Disagree/Neutral	23.52	Disagree/Neutral	24.31
		Agree	76.48	Agree	75.69
<b>Belonging</b>					
<i>Church Belonging</i>	%	<i>Growth Through Mega</i>	%	<i>Volunteering</i>	%
Disagree/Neutral	34.11	Other response	55.06	Never	40.19
Agree	65.89	Agree	44.94	Yes	59.81
<i>Small Group</i>	%	<i>Felt Close to God</i>	%		
No	33.55	Disagree/Neutral	36.57		
Yes	66.45	Agree	63.43		

knowledge of when services start, what happens during the services, where to go, who to ask for help, and so on. These knowledge barriers can inhibit someone from coming into the building from the parking lot or even into the sanctuary from the foyer. Thus, these churches have intentionally created a welcoming, nonintimidating ethos designed to provide the requisite congregational knowledge to make the transition from the “outside” to participation in the ritual as seamless and easy as possible: “We’re very intentional about making you feel welcome.”

When remembering their first visit to the megachurch, many respondents described how important it was that they were greeted and welcomed upon entering the building and in some cases the parking lot. One respondent described how she “was really very intimidated” and that the “very warm and welcoming” greeters eased her intimidation and made her feel more comfortable. Because she “know[s] how important it is [for visitors] to have that warm welcome,” she is now a greeter

herself who specifically looks “for those intimidated people.” Another respondent, recalling her first visit, mentioned how she debated whether to even go because she “didn’t know anybody there,” but that once she arrived, she was greeted immediately upon exiting her car and was handed a welcome bulletin with congregational information. She said the greeters will “keep you, make you come on in and by the time you got in at least 10 people had said something to you by the time you made it to the hospitality desk, by the time you made it to your seat they made sure you were welcome.” Two respondents noted that on their first visit, they arrived at the wrong time, but were immediately helped by a greeter. Greeters “come and they shake your hands and say, ‘Do you need anything? Do you want a coffee? Are you new here? We will show you where to go, how to sit.’ And they will find you a spot even.” This helps reduce the uncertainty and uneasiness of new visitors, who initially lack important congregational cultural capital knowledge but are quickly brought up to speed by greeters.

For the majority of the megachurches, a part of this welcoming environment is having no attire requirements; individuals are welcomed “as they were,” however they are dressed. A mother and new member described how her previous church required one “to wear your Sunday best,” which was difficult with children. One of the things that stood out the most to her about the megachurch was that people could wear whatever they wanted and that her son could “wear his jeans.” Others also mentioned the benefit of being able to go to church in regular clothes—“shorts, flip-flops, whatever”—but also highlighted how this made visitors, including homeless individuals, feel comfortable attending. This atmosphere also makes congregants feel more comfortable inviting others to come to church, because they know the people they invite will be accepted and welcomed with open arms regardless of their appearance.

In addition to easing congregational knowledge and clothing barriers, these churches also intentionally seek to eliminate or reduce any knowledge obstacles to participation in the ritual, such as having to know a particular liturgy, songs, or prayers. A respondent identified how the structure of the church “is such that you’re comfortable with it, you know? There’s not a lot of liturgy and repetition and things that you don’t know are coming.” Nearly all the megachurches display the lyrics of songs on large screens at the front of the church, so that individuals can participate without prior knowledge of the songs and without having to know how to use a hymnal. The music tends to be upbeat, loud, contemporary, and reminiscent of a rock concert, although a few of the megachurches also offered a more traditional service. This allows individuals to draw on cultural capital they already have from participating in the secular world, rather than requiring specific denominational knowledge or cultural membership capital. Not having formal liturgies tied to specific denominations allows the megachurches to appeal to individuals from diverse backgrounds. One church noted a transition from a more formal liturgy (i.e., clergy wore robes and traditional songs associated with their denomination were sung) to a more informal worship service designed to appeal to “folks who come from different traditions” (i.e., clergy dress casually and contemporary songs are sung). Respondents from one megachurch noted that their “loose” connection to Lutheranism, that is, using contemporary music and forms rather than more formal

liturgy, made their church “user-friendly,” “welcoming,” and “refreshing.” Often, attendees described the “authenticity” that accompanies the leaving behind of traditional ritual elements (Sargeant 2000). The respondents identified that everyone, including newcomers and people from diverse backgrounds, engaging in worship together contributes to its “authenticity.” In this way barriers to outsiders in the form of cultural membership capital are viewed as inauthentic and rote “pomp and circumstance.”

The intentional attempt to reduce cultural membership capital requirements (i.e., congregational and denominational knowledge) demonstrates that these churches are attempting to remove barriers to outsiders in order to facilitate newcomers’ participation in the church. While Collins (2004) identifies excluding outsiders as a means of increasing collective effervescence, he also notes that collective effervescence can be amplified when there are more individuals participating in a ritual. The megachurches in this study are effective at increasing the number of ritual participants, thereby creating a larger-scale shared mood. Thus, the lack of barriers to participation does not detract from the ritual, but contributes to it.

The third and fourth ingredients of successful ritual interaction—a mutual focus of attention and a shared mood—interact dynamically to create cumulative effects. These steps for a successful ritual are initiated naturally as the church service begins. Usually, in megachurches, there are three to five songs at the beginning of the service to get congregants in a worshipful mood and to initiate mutual entrainment. A band or choir leads these songs on stage, which directs and focuses the attendees’ attention. The stimulation of emotion comes by way of the lyrics of songs that are emotionally charged, often setting up a need (sinfulness) and presenting a solution (Jesus’s blood). The music is loud and emotive, and it is customary (and sometimes prompted by the worship leaders) for people to raise their hands, close their eyes, and even rock back and forth to the music, representing a bodily commitment to emotional participation.

Rather than a contemplative or inward-seeking exercise, the musical worship time is often an outward expression of praise and sharing of joy—a time for generating collective effervescence. In fact, “contagious” was commonly used to describe worship. This portion of the megachurch service is bursting with what we have coined a *connectic* experience: a multisensory mélange of sensory input. One man described how he and his wife “were kind of blown away by the theatrical set. . . . It touches every modality that we have. And so it was kind of [like] ‘Whoa.’” The singing and music is a vital component of the emotional experiences of attendees: “It’s the singing; you enjoy it. . . . An hour and a half goes by and it’s like we’re done, can’t we hear some more?” Some respondents were so touched by the musical worship that they cried: “The worship was so powerful that I was in hysterical tears the entire time. I couldn’t even sing. . . . I didn’t know what was wrong with me that I couldn’t control myself.”

The collective effervescence evoked during the worship service is intensified by the fact that there are thousands of people contributing to it, a result of having few barriers to ritual participation. Cameras scan the audience and project images of people worshipping, raising their hands with closed eyes, crying, singing, or smiling. Seeing individuals around oneself (or a close-up shot of someone on the projection

screen) facilitates the recognition of a shared experience and mood, which contributes to the growing collective effervescence. Respondents noted how powerful it was for the entire congregation to be engaged fully in the worship: “The singers can stop singing.... You can stop the music and that place will still be vibrating because the whole congregation is singing.” One participant said, “There is just nothing more powerful than when 10,000 or 11,000 people [are] singing at one time.” One couple confessed that the musical worship was even more influential than the pastor in their initial attraction to the church: “His message didn’t bring [us] in.... When everybody’s up there singing, you hear everyone singing,” he said. “You want to sing,” she finished his sentence. Another respondent noted how during this time people are “standing up and excited” that they are “into it” so it feels very “[a]live.” It was common for respondents to describe the collective effervescence produced by the worship as “huge” or “unreal” or to use expressions like “Wow” or “Whoa.”

Once worship produces collective effervescence and sets the appropriate mood, the mutual focus of attention shifts from the worship leaders and other ritual participants to the head pastor who begins to preach. Here the focus of mutual entrainment is heightened as everyone is focusing on the pastor and his (all are male in our sample) sermon. Often a spotlight focuses in on the senior pastor while the other stage lights are dimmed. Rather than complicated theological explanations or critical analysis of a biblical text, the interview responses suggest that the sermons are understood through the emotions—on a level of intuition that “just feels right,” or that “just makes sense.” The ideas are arousing and moving, but not intellectually taxing; they are designed to be understood by everyone. Members from nearly every megachurch in the study constantly praised the accessibility of their pastor’s preaching, repeatedly testifying that “even a child could understand” his message. Several respondents noted that whereas other pastors “use big words or stuff” that not everyone understands, their pastor teaches in such a “way that the most illiterate person would understand.” For instance, one person described how the senior pastor’s sermon sounds like “you are having a regular conversation. It’s not like oh thou art.” This demonstrates not only an intention to evoke emotion rather than critical thought, but also an attempt to eliminate barriers to outsiders by using language and concepts that insiders and outsiders alike can understand.

The senior pastor, through his well-crafted accessible sermons, elicits intense collective emotional responses. For example, one interviewee said, “He’s such a courageous speaker; transparent; baring his soul. When you hear his voice, you feel relieved.” The respondents identified the emotional and spiritual power of the pastor’s message: “And it’s like whoa he really like got to me like got to my heart.” Several respondents experienced bodily emotional responses to their pastor’s preaching. For example, one respondent recounted, “[Pastor’s name] was preaching the word, and then it hit me and I walked up to the altar, collapsed at the altar crying for about 15–20 minutes.”

After the sermon, it is common to transition into a time of quieter music and reflection. However, this certainly does not imply that the intensity of emotion wanes—quite the opposite. The emotion produced and enhanced by the group experience is turned inward. After the pastor speaks, congregants are encouraged to meditate on his message, to allow the words to sink into their souls, and to open

their hearts to change and transformation. This is often the opportunity for the pastor to make an “altar call,” during which he encourages congregants to commit their lives to Jesus and accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. This decision involves coming forward to the front of the church and praying with one of the worship leaders. Often, newly saved members will be taken to another room to discuss further details of their salvific decision.

This portion of the service is poignantly marked with heavy sensory pageantry. The collective effervescence in the room is palpable, people report feeling “released,” as if they had “walked through the waters but never got wet.” When people descend to the front stage to get saved, they often describe feeling “prompted,” and even afterward, the thickness of their emotional experience of being loved is experienced as redemptive and salvific. The ritual is a potent experience for the entire group. Respondents noted how “amazing” and emotional it was to watch others participate in the altar call.

## RITUAL OUTCOMES

### *Emotional Energy*

The production of high levels of EE is clearly demonstrated in the interviews, which are permeated with words conveying emotions and senses. Individuals described their megachurch experience with emotive and sensory terms, such as (word frequencies) loving (385), feeling (680), amazing (81), awesome (43), exciting (51), wow (56), crying (29), touching (38), and feeding (56). The worship and sermon combined create a powerful, emotional experience for attendees, who described this experience in numerous ways—as a high, a drug, a feeling, energy, life, the Holy Spirit, and so on. One respondent expressed how the music energizes him: “I love coming here to a concert every Sunday. It’s the bomb.... It just energizes you that you never know who is going to be there.” Similarly, another said, “And we loved it [the worship service] because of the energy and it just recharges us.” One man raved about the effective preaching of his pastor and how it “opens you up” to God, such that “God’s love [communicated through the sermons] becomes.... such a drug that you can’t wait to come get your next hit.” One interviewee compared the preaching from the pastors to youth camps. He said,

You’d go to these youth camps and you would come back just so jacked up and then... you’d get back to the church [i.e., his previous church] and its already pulling you back down, but this was the first church [i.e., the megachurch] that we ever walked into where I felt like I did coming out of those camps. And that was every Sunday.

A female interviewee in the same focus group responded by describing the feeling of being “jacked up” as a “spiritual high.” Many respondents identified *needing* the experience and used sensory terms such as *hunger*, *thirst*, *being fed*, and *feeling* to describe it.

The lively and powerful singing and music are important for attracting and keeping individuals in the church. Survey respondents identified the worship style and music of the megachurch as influential for why they joined and remain at the megachurch. Out of a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot), roughly 58% of

respondents gave the worship style a 4 or 5 ranking as influencing their decision to join and roughly 81% gave a ranking of 4 or 5 for it influencing their decision to stay. Additionally, 42% and 63% of respondents gave a response of 4 or higher for how influential the music and arts were for why they joined and continue to stay, respectively. One attendee described how the singing and music keep individuals coming to the church, including herself: “I think this [the worship and music] is why it hits people right away. So they don’t want to miss the singing and worship and see all these people enjoying this.” Many respondents concurred.

Of course, the EE that results from the worship and sermons is not permanent. Individuals leave successful rituals charged with EE, which wanes the longer individuals go without participating in a subsequent ritual. Because the attendees experience an emotional need that the megachurch fills (i.e., they receive EE from the worship and sermons), many reported how awful they feel when they miss church services. For instance, “I didn’t miss a Tuesday and Sunday until this week. And I was miserable,” and “I hate to miss a Sunday of church because my whole day’s off.” One woman described how the church service fills up her and her husband and the emptiness they experience when they miss it: “My husband always says that he needs to come on Sunday. Because it gives him a brand-new feeling for [the] entire week.... And sometimes when we miss it..., we felt like so empty.... I know it’s crazy to say this, but we really need it. And we are more happy.” This is consistent with the underlying assumption of Collins’s (2004) interaction ritual theory—that individuals desire EE and they will seek to participate in rituals where they can obtain it. One respondent expressed this desire by wishing that he could have the same experience throughout the week: “I would just love to start every workday here for an hour.... It’s just, you leave here so exuberant and then it’s on us, I know it is, but it’s so easy to get back into that rut.” The megachurches in our study try to meet this desire by offering opportunities for small-group activities (i.e., smaller scale interaction rituals) throughout the week. One important aspect of small groups is that they sustain and build the emotional connection between attendees throughout the week (i.e., between Sundays). As one respondent described, “We get poured into from the sermon.... But during the week we may not get poured into... and some of the small groups are for us to get poured back into from each other.” Another said, “And I can’t go just Sunday morning and close the door.... I want relationships throughout the week.”

### *Feelings of Belonging*

The desire for emotional connections throughout the week led many respondents to join small groups, which further developed their attachment to the megachurch and enhanced membership feelings of belonging and acceptance. Roughly 67% of survey respondents identified participating in at least one type of small group. In the words of the participants, these groups help individuals “build relationships with one another in the body of Christ.” They do not put “pressure on you” or “judge” you, but instead are people that one “does life with” and whom you call if you have “a problem.” Small groups are the “real arms and hands and

feet [of the body of Christ] to love and support people.” These small groups make the large church feel small: “But I don’t consider this a big church because it is broken up into little groups. We’re all part of the same ministry and when we see each other it’s like a family.” Through small groups “you develop relationships and. . . [then] this megachurch becomes just one little small church.” Consistently, respondents identified that they felt at home and accepted, that they belonged in the megachurch, which was in large part due to participation in small groups. The survey results further support this with roughly 66% of respondents reporting that they have a strong sense of belonging to their megachurch. Small groups are enduring and tremendously effective in creating support networks and communities of friends, thereby sustaining loyalty to the group, while maintaining the EE generated at church services.

### *Membership Symbols*

Successful rituals charge membership symbols with emotional significance. During the megachurch service, at periods of high EE, symbols such as the Bible and the pastor are pumped with significance. Collins (2004:60–61) notes how preachers can become sacred objects of congregations and serve as representations of the group. Charismatic leadership is both a product of ritual and a contributing factor to the success of future rituals. Senior pastors who are known for being exceptional speakers “attract many people to their speeches or sermons and create a common mood of expectancy and enthusiasm among them. The greater number and intensified focus increase the emotional energy for the speaker” who in turn channels “very high levels of emotional energy back to the group” (Collins 1988:195). The interviews identified the pastor as one of the most powerful membership symbols in the megachurches. He “is the pole of the social ‘battery,’ through which emotional energy flows from the group and is reflected back to the group” (Collins 1988:195). Respondents mentioned their senior pastor 270 times throughout the interviews without directly being asked about him; many of these comments explicitly identified an emotional element—that they felt loved or cared for by their senior pastor, how much they loved him, or the emotional responses he elicits from them (i.e., crying and laughing).

Often, members would say that the pastor is not the object of their worship, and yet, in nearly the same breath, they would announce the unique spiritual power of the pastor to deliver the word of God, even referring to him as God’s “mouth-piece,” “messenger,” or “vessel.” Many respondents identified their senior pastor as being specifically led or sent by God to their church as a type of “divine appointment.” Respondents consistently described their pastor as having special spiritual qualities that funneled down to the attendees. For example, one respondent said, “[The pastor is] a walking reincarnation of Christ. . . . Jesus was just like overflowing out of this guy’s pores. You don’t get that in any other church.” Another participant attributed the success of his church to the senior pastor: “It’s the testament to this man, who’s one in a million; you know, I’ve never met another guy like that.” By being a symbol of the group, the senior pastor also helps generate membership

feelings (see Collins 1988:195 for how group symbols stir membership feelings). One respondent’s comment exemplifies this: “You know he’s our spiritual leader and we believe in him, that’s why we’re here. You know we love him and we trust him and we want to do what God’s told us to do.” In recognizing him as their “leader” and “shepherd,” they also recognize themselves as a group that has a leader and for which words like *our* and *we* are commonplace. Overall, the importance of the senior pastor was stressed throughout the interviews, which is also conveyed in the survey responses: When asked how influential their senior pastor was for why they joined (1 = not at all up to 5 = a lot) roughly 55% of respondents gave a response of 4 or 5, and an overwhelming 85% of respondents gave a response of 4 or 5 when asked how influential he was for why they stay.

### *Feelings of Morality*

As a symbol of the group, the senior pastor also contributed to feelings of morality—standards of right and wrong that are approved by the group, giving members a sense of purpose through service and a set of normative standards by which to guide their lives. One man described the message of the megachurch as “unapologetic,” explaining that their purpose is to “speak truth” rather than to seek mass appeal: “It’s not because [it’s] what’s hip or what we should be talking about or what’s the flavor of the moment.... It is offensive. I mean it’s in your face and... that’s what the scriptures are about.” Nearly all the interviewees mentioned the importance that the sermons were strongly biblical; this entails an understanding that the Bible is the source of truth and should be read as a factual guidebook. As one person said about their pastor, “He preached the word, talked about Christ unashamedly, salvation, sins, those things, and just *did* the Bible.” Yet the focus of the feelings of morality were not on the specific moral content, such as what counts as sin, but rather on the expectation that if one knows the truth (i.e., the Bible), then one should behave accordingly. As one person noted, “Eventually you ought to be [spiritually] mature.... In other words, you don’t have to do this in order to be a Christian, but if you’re a Christian, you ought to be doing this.”

For the respondents, the core of their morality claims regarding what “one ought to do” was service to God, to others, and to one’s family. In describing this morality, a respondent identified that it isn’t “so much about evangelism but really reaching out to people because you care” that “it’s about going out and finding the homeless people and sharing your lunch with them. You know that kind of sense of serving them not through your words, [but] through your actions.” Another identified how the vision everyone in his church is “in tune with” is “to go serve the community.” Others described their church as preparing them to serve and allowing them to “love and forgive” their families and to “stand for righteousness” in their communities. One man offered a particularly poignant expression of this view: “If you want to come and observe that’s fine. But if you want to be a partner we expect you to live missionally...[in order to] make a difference in the city.” In this way, attendees’ feelings of morality centered on living “missionally” through serving others.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the call to service often came from the pulpit, and many respondents were explicit in attributing their “missional” activity to the exhortations of their religious leaders. One person said, “I think there’s an emphasis from the pulpit to be missional people” and another, “if you were listening at all to that sermon today, there were some enormous incisive calls to action for you personally.” This is also supported by the survey data in which roughly 76% of respondents identified their church as encouraging them to serve in the world. In particular, many respondents identified their senior pastor, his sermons, and his example as propelling them to engage in service activities: “When he demonstrates the giving, not just monetarily, but of service, it’s hard for us to sit back and say, I don’t want to serve tonight.” Thus, many participants were prompted to service through calls from the pulpit and the example of their senior pastor, who serves both as an energy star and a symbol of membership.

Across the focus groups, the respondents also emphasized that individuals were never pressured into service nor were they judged for not participating. They identified that there is “no such thing as a set of rules. . .or a legalistic type of standard to abide by.” Church members won’t “hammer you” for not serving and “if you don’t show up at something they’re not going to say where were you?” One couple said that “everybody that we met just embraced us, you know, and didn’t put any pressure on us to get involved.” Instead, individuals are encouraged to serve where God leads them, because they experience a spiritual and emotional desire: “It wasn’t serving out of obligation it was serving because you wanted to do it. . .out of love as opposed to out of duty of some sort.” Another described how service is about “finding your gifts, wanting people to give. . .[and] to serve because of the joy that they found in doing that.” Service is therefore an entirely voluntary activity that many participants engaged in because of the motivational energy gained from the ritual, and the emotional and spiritual benefits derived from the service activity itself.

Because the emphasis is on individual choice and calling for how people can best use their gifts to serve, respondents discussed the large size of megachurches as an advantage, because it provides them with a greater array of service opportunities to select from. For example, one man said that “the larger [church] size really gives you the freedom to go wherever you feel like your gifts and callings fit best.” Numerous respondents mentioned the importance of finding service opportunities that allow them to use their “gifts” and highlighted that the large size of the church supports that. Sixty-two percent of survey respondents agreed that church leaders encourage them to discover and use their gifts and skills for ministry and service. Consistent with these interview responses, roughly 60% of survey respondents indicated volunteering for their megachurch at least occasionally during the past year.

### *Heightened Spirituality*

In addition to Collins’s (2004) four outcomes of successful rituals, we proposed that heightened spirituality is a fifth outcome of successful *religious* rituals. An overarching sentiment conveyed throughout the interview responses was the spirituality of the worship. For example, one interviewee said, “I just feel like the spirit is

here. . . . Not only [in] the sermon [and] the message but the singing and the drama ministry.” Another respondent concurred: “I’m going to say that the message and the worship, this place is full of the Holy Spirit and God is more real than I’ve ever imagined in my life.” One respondent expressed his joy for worship by saying, “I just need to get it in, it feels tangible, I was thirsting for God.” A female attendee described the worship as “unreal. . . . the Holy Spirit is there.”

The respondents also identified the spiritual power of the pastor’s message: “He reads the verses and then he gives you the story behind it, so you’ll know that and it’s just spiritual. We just have spiritual lifting all the time.” One interviewee exemplifies this sentiment: “[Pastor’s name] is so open to the Holy Spirit speaking through him that it always touches. . . . And so when you feel that connection, you just feel loved. You just know that God is just so thick here.” Many respondents identified the accessibility of the pastor’s sermon as contributing to their spiritual growth: “And it’s easy to follow a man like that and you can grow spiritually because you don’t have the suspicion like all the time, well, what’s he mean, what’s he trying to say.” It was particularly important that the sermons had practical applications for their lives. For example, one woman stated that she grows spiritually because the sermons teach her “how to deal with life lessons and disappointments and the joy of life and everything.” This is consistent with the survey responses, which show that respondents report high levels of spirituality in connection with the megachurch: roughly 63% of respondents agreed with the statement “When I last felt close to God it was in connection to this church,” 76% agreed that their spiritual needs are being met by the megachurch, and 45% reported that, in the last year, they had experienced “much growth” in their faith, primarily through the megachurch. It is also not surprising that roughly 80% of the survey respondents *disagreed* with the statement “Worshipping at a large church *hinders* my spiritual growth.”

Overall, the combination of the qualitative and quantitative data clearly demonstrates that megachurches succeed in creating successful interaction rituals. The processual ingredients of the large-scale worship services, enhanced by the pastor as an emotional energy star, and supplemented with small-group participation create an effective interaction ritual chain, promoting collective effervescence and EE, membership feelings, membership symbols, feelings of morality, and a heightened sense of spirituality.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While research on megachurches is growing, most of it is primarily descriptive, rather than theoretical, and generally draws on data from the point of view of the pastors and church leaders (Ellingson 2010). As such, we know very little about the experiences of megachurch attendees including why they join and choose to stay. To address these gaps in the literature, we drew on Collins’s (2004) interaction ritual theory to analyze qualitative and quantitative data on attendees of 12 American megachurches to theoretically explain, rather than merely describe, their experiences. The results provide strong support for viewing the megachurch worship

service as an effective interaction ritual, which is, according to Collins, driven by the exchange and creation of EE.

The individual interviews are permeated by rich descriptions of positive emotional, sensual, and spiritual experiences brought on by the process of the worship service and the pastor. The music and collective singing facilitate the shared mood and intense experiences of collective effervescence. Once the emotional climate is set, the senior pastor heightens the mutual focus of attention and sustains and focuses the emotional energy. The sermons are generally accessible and tend to be more operative at the emotional, rather than rational, level. They also touch attendees spiritually and call them to service, which is the core moral principle of these megachurches. After the sermon, the senior pastor invites those who have been touched to come to the altar to experience spiritual and moral transformation, which intensifies the emotional and spiritual energy of all participants. As the spiritual and moral leader, the senior pastor becomes a sacred symbol for the group, helping to promote group cohesion and to increase feelings of membership. The survey data also show the relevance of the worship and pastor for why individuals join and stay: on average, attendees ranked worship as the most influential factor for why they joined, followed by the senior pastor, and, on average, they ranked the senior pastor as the most influential factor for why they stay, followed by the worship. These results provide strong support for the importance of emotive worship and the pastor as an energy star for the success of megachurch interaction rituals.

Many attendees described an intense need or desire for the EE and spirituality produced from the megachurch experience. Some equated it to a type of drug or high, analogous to how some exercisers describe a “runner’s high” and being addicted to exercise. Although Collins’s (2004) book only briefly describes some of the physiological underpinnings of EE, more recent work in cognitive science and evolutionary neuroscience may provide a more complete biological foundation for understanding EE. Studies have found that cooperation, trust, generosity, and attachment are sensitive to oxytocin (i.e., a chain of amino acids) levels, such that when oxytocin levels rise, stress levels decrease and the person experiences feelings of love, calmness, trust, and motivation to interact socially (Carter et al. 2008). Neurological research corroborates the importance of copresence for the production and proliferation of oxytocin. For example, Grape et al. (2003) found that after a group singing session, oxytocin increased significantly for singers. We suggest that EE may primarily represent oxytocin, which generates feelings of being “high.” Megachurch services may be particularly conducive for increasing oxytocin, because they combine group singing with the display of others’ emotional experiences in an aesthetic context that encourages emotional expression.

As Collins (2004) identifies, EE is highest during and immediately following a successful interaction ritual, but attenuates over time. Thus, maintaining high levels of EE requires regular participation in successful interaction rituals. For many megachurch attendees, the “high”—the emotional and spiritual energy they receive from the worship service and sermons on Sundays—becomes something they want to experience throughout the week. These attendees then seek ways to perpetuate this energy outside of Sunday services and many do so through participating in smaller scale interaction rituals, that is, small-group participation. Like previous

studies, we find that small-group interaction increases feelings of belonging and group membership (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011; Martin 2007; Stark and Finke 2000); however, we extend this research by highlighting how the desire for emotional and spiritual energy throughout the week contributed to many individuals' decisions to join small groups, which help sustain this energy from Sunday to Sunday. Unlike studies of church strictness in which small groups serve to monitor and sanction compliance with organizational rules (Stark and Finke 2000; Whitehead 2010), we found no evidence of this. Individuals indicated that small groups support and encourage them emotionally and spiritually and do not place pressure on them or make them feel guilty for not being more involved. This suggests that small groups may operate differently in different congregational contexts; in some they may be more concerned with enforcing organizational rules, whereas others may be more focused on providing emotional support.

Although Collins proposes barriers excluding outsiders as a means of facilitating a mutual focus of attention and shared mood, we highlight how having few barriers, particularly in terms of cultural membership capital, is actually advantageous for megachurches. By eschewing traditional liturgy and providing first-time visitors with congregational information up front, megachurches intentionally require little cultural membership capital. As such, they have few of the types of barriers that would exclude individuals from participating in their rituals. By having few barriers to participation, megachurches encourage newcomers who then increase the amount of people in attendance (see Barone 2007 for a similar finding regarding Soka Gakkai in Italy). The large size of the worship service serves to amplify the collective effervescence and EE. Past congregational research has found that church size has a negative effect on member commitment, support, and belonging (Dougherty and Whitehead 2011; Finke et al. 2006; Stroope 2011; Whitehead 2010). Our findings suggest that in addition to the disadvantages of large church size, it also provides certain advantages. Interviewees frequently mentioned the size of their church as a benefit and often described the worship services with words conveying appreciation for the largeness of the experience due to the number of participants. Many respondents appreciated the fact that a large church meant a wider variety of service and small-group opportunities. Because most past research on church size used the 2001 United States Congregational Life Survey (USCLS; see Dougherty and Whitehead 2011; Stroope 2011; Whitehead 2010), which includes only three megachurches based on Thumma and Bird's (2011b) definition, more research is needed on how megachurches compare to smaller churches and the advantages and disadvantages of their “mega” size.

Even though the megachurches have few barriers to participation in their interaction rituals, there are some cognitive boundaries. Ellingson (2010) notes that by incorporating secular technology and ideas into their rituals, megachurches generally have lower levels of tension with the outside world and yet their beliefs still create “sect-like” boundaries. As such he calls for more research on how megachurches generate “selective sectarianism,” which, “creates meaningful subcultures with semi-permeable cultural and social boundaries” (Ellingson 2010:264). The current study contributes to this line of research by showing how megachurches, in a way, redefine the boundaries of insiders and outsiders. Rather than requiring cultural

membership capital in the form of traditional liturgical boundary markers, by incorporating secular technology and ideas, they draw on participants' prior secular cultural capital (see also Wellman and Corcoran 2013). This reduces barriers to outsiders participating in their interaction rituals and thereby facilitates a large-scale emotionally charged collective experience. At the same time, their very clearly defined beliefs on sin, the Bible, salvation, and service toward others create cognitive distinctions between the insiders who hold these beliefs and outsiders who do not. Yet these beliefs are rarely enforced legalistically and megachurch attendees do not express feelings of obligation or pressure to do anything. The megachurches in this study exemplify selective sectarianism, which allows them to reap the benefits of sect-like cognitive boundaries as well as those gained from large organizational size.

These findings also contribute to studies of interaction rituals. All four ingredients for successful rituals are variables that may be higher or lower depending on the particular ritual or context. We identified how having fewer barriers to outsiders can still lead to collective effervescence when it is combined with a heightened sense of bodily copresence, shared mood, and mutual focus of attention. In the megachurch context, this translates to low cultural membership capital, a large crowd of ritual participants with cameras displaying their emotions, emotionally charged musical worship, and a senior pastor who serves as an emotional energy star. However, having few barriers on its own, as past research on church strictness suggests, is unlikely to lead to collective effervescence and the resulting ritual outcomes. On the other hand, having high barriers to outsiders may make up for lower levels of the other ingredients. Because group size and barriers to participation are typically inversely related due to it being more difficult to monitor and enforce barriers in large groups (Stark and Finke 2000), we expect that high barriers may make up for having smaller-scale rituals and therefore lower levels of the "bodily assembly" ingredient (i.e., not having a crowd). Future research would benefit from exploring how having few barriers to ritual participation may be advantageous in some contexts, such as when it generates a large ritual and magnified collective effervescence, but not in others.

Popular criticisms of megachurches suggest that they are merely a source of entertainment without any real substance and that large churches cannot produce feelings of intimacy, morality, and transcendence. Contrary to these claims, we find that megachurch attendees have high levels of belonging and spirituality. Moreover, the majority of attendees report that their megachurch makes a strong effort to help them realize and use their gifts to serve the wider community with most attendees volunteering for their megachurch at least occasionally. And while there may still be spectators as indicated by 40% of survey respondents never volunteering for their megachurch, this is not unique to megachurches as there are also spectators in smaller congregations. For example, Stark (2008) found that only 34% of survey respondents from small congregations (i.e., 100 attendees or fewer) volunteer through their congregation. But this does not mean that megachurches are inherently better than smaller churches at generating intimacy, spirituality, and service. In fact, smaller churches may be just as good as (if not better than) megachurches at generating those outcomes, but such conclusions are beyond the scope of the

present study. However, by investigating the within-group dynamics of megachurches, we can say that the large size of megachurches does not inhibit them from facilitating these types of experiences as popular criticisms have suggested and that, in fact, megachurch attendees seem quite happy with the level of intimacy, spirituality, moral substance, and size of their churches.

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