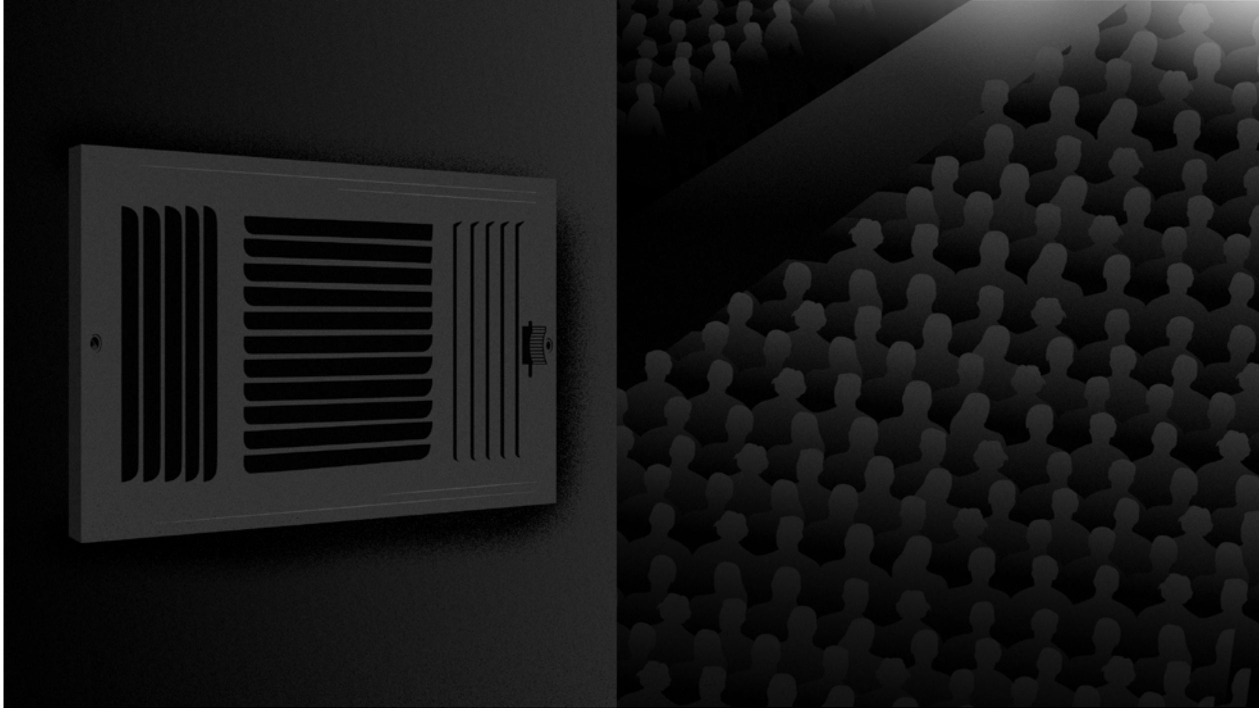
THE RISE & FALL OF MARS HILL

EPISODE
2
06.28.2021

54
MIN



Boomers, The Big Sort, and Really, Really, Big Churches

Post-war suburban church expansion charted a course that Mars Hill would follow.

SHOW NOTES

In the mid-1950s, Rev. Robert Schuller began preaching in a drive-in movie theater in Southern California. He melded traditions like vestments with a theology of post-war optimism and self-esteem. As his ministry grew, guest preaching in his pulpit became a mark of celebrity achievement. Three decades after his drive-in movie days, Schuller would welcome a young Mark Driscoll to the microphone to speak.

To understand the Mars Hill phenomenon, you have to understand how big churches developed in the boomer and Gen X years, how the franchising of churches led to homogenized congregational culture, and how pastors became spokesmen and CEOs. When Mark Driscoll arrived to preach at the Crystal Cathedral, he had already walked a ministry path paved by the likes of Schuller, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren—leaders who dedicated significant time to demographic research as well as expository study.

In this episode of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, host Mike Cosper flips the tapestry of the Mars Hill story to expose the weaving of threads beneath. He explores how the identity of a church can become wrapped around one man and why a host of leaders might fall in step to protect him in order to save the institution.

LINKS

Here, you can read an interview with David Di Sabatino, director of Frisbee: The Life and Death of a Hippie Preacher.

MASTHEAD

"The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill" is a production of Christianity Today

Executive Producer: Erik Petrik

Producer, Writer, Editor, and Host: Mike Cosper

Associate Producer: Joy Beth Smith

Music, Sound Design, and Mix Engineer: Kate Siefker

Graphic Design: Bryan Todd

Social Media: Nicole Shanks

Editorial Consultant: Andrea Palpant Dilley

Editor in Chief: Timothy Dalrymple

Theme song: "Sticks and Stones" by Kings Kaleidoscope

Closing song: "Crush" by The Violet Burning

Transcription: Cheryl Penner

Transcript Design: Alecia Sharp

TRANSCRIPT

@MikeCosper

Mike Cosper: It's Sunday, December 28th, 2014, nine weeks to the day since the members of Mars Hill learned that Mark Driscoll had resigned. Attendance had been falling and spirits were low, but the pastors and staff who remained, wanted to serve the remnant as well as they could. For most of the Sundays since, Dave Bruskas had been providing the prerecorded sermons, but on this Sunday, the last Sunday in the history of Mars Hill, when the video came on, they were greeted by another familiar face.

@RickWarren

Rick Warren: Hello everybody. I'm Rick Warren. I'm the author of the Purpose Driven Life, and for the past 35 years, the founding pastor of Saddleback Church here in Southern California, now with campuses around the world. It's a real honor to be asked to speak to all of you and all of the Mars Hill campuses in your last weekend together before you each launch out to form independent congregations that God is going to use in the future.

Mike Cosper: Warren has been called America's pastor by the likes of Time magazine and CNN, a title previously reserved for Billy Graham. He sold millions of books, he led the invocation at Barack Obama's inauguration, and for more than a decade leading up to that day, he'd been a friend and mentor to Mark Driscoll.

It hadn't always been that way though. In the early days of Mars Hill, Mark had been fiercely critical of pastors like Warren, boomers with big suburban mega churches. He thought their sermons were too thin, their music too feminine, and their preachers too friendly. Here he is at a conference for church leaders in 2001.

@PastorMark

Mark Driscoll: You should be seeker-insensitive. If people are coming, I'm worried. We just… We're hitting a thousand now and I'm wondering where my sin has gone. My goal is not to grow. Church growth is the turning of God into a product to be marketed to a customer. And the problem is, in that mindset, the customer is always what? Right. That's why you have such a hell hole in your church right now is cause everybody thinks that they're king and Lord, and they're supposed to get their needs met. It's like a burger joint. They want it their way, right away.

Mike Cosper: The gap between that ministry philosophy and the one that emerged later at Mars Hill - a kind of no-holds-barred, grow at all costs approach – is as dramatically different as Mark and Rick, and yet by the end Warren was a familiar, welcome face. Someone who had served Mars Hill before, just as Mark had become a regular at Saddleback.

Rick Warren: Sometimes everything seems to go wrong or fall apart all at once. Have you noticed this? A while back, I had a day like that. First I had to stay up all night to meet some deadlines, so I fixed myself a breakfast, blending a protein shake in the blender, but I left the top off and the top spread out all over me and I got covered with blended protein shake. Then I got in the car and I had to go up to Los Angeles. While the traffic was completely stopped, I looked into my rear view mirror and I saw a driver who was texting, coming at me at about 30 miles an hour, and I kept going, he's going to hit me, he's going to hit me, he's going to hit me. He hit me. And then finally, while I was waiting for highway patrol to come and talk about the accident, I turned on talk radio, and some guy was screaming that he wished that Rick Warren was dead. So while I was waiting in the hospital for a CT scan of my concussion, I thought, in one day I've been overextended, blended, rear-ended and offended.

Now, some of you may feel like that after all the changes and all the chaos and all the conflict and all the criticisms that Mars Hill church family went through this past year.

Mike Cosper: In spite of the stark differences in their personalities, and in spite of the early reactionary spirit of Mars Hill, the church owed a tremendous debt to men like Rick Warren. If we want to understand the rise of Mars Hill, then we have to know something about what came before it. Because if we look closely, we'll see that it wasn't just a reaction against that generation's work, but a continuation and evolution of it.

5 MIN

Mike Cosper: From Christianity Today, this is Mike Cosper and you're listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. It's the story of one church that grew from a handful of people to a movement and then collapsed almost overnight. It's a story about power, fame, and spiritual trauma. Problems faced across the spectrum of churches in America, and yet it's also a story about the mystery of God working in broken places. On today's episode, Boomers, the Big Sort, and Really, Really Big Churches.

Big churches aren't necessarily a new thing. Pastors like Dwight Moody, Charles Spurgeon and Aimee Semple McPherson drew thousands and built massive auditoriums in their lifetimes, but they were outliers. There might've only been a dozen or so mega churches in the world at any one time. Until, that is, the 1970s. Then a proliferation begins and mega churches start to pop up at a significant rate. By the nineties, there's more than 300 of them. There's about 1,800 of them today. If you want to understand how we got the modern phenomenon of really big churches, the first character in our story is someone who seems to have tapped into a number of cultural currents earlier than anyone else. He was a young pastor in the Reform Church of America, serving in Illinois, when in 1955, he received a call to plant a church in Garden Grove, California, which is about 35 miles away from Los Angeles. Garden Grove had been a quiet rural town, surrounded by strawberry fields, but in the post-war boom, it was rapidly growing. And in the process of incorporating as a city. That pastor was Robert Schuller, and his approach to church planting would, even by today's standards, raise an eyebrow.

@robertaschuller

Robert Schuller: I started... Because we didn't have property - I went to the orange drive-in theater and preached from the rooftop. Unchurched people came safely in their cars. Had 50 cars every Sunday, and here 53 years later, we have a nice church.

Mike Cosper: In 1961, they built the world's first walk-in / drive-in church with seating in the sanctuary and drive up speakers in the parking lot, for people who wanted to continue to worship in their cars. In 1969, Schuller's friend, Billy Graham, paid him a visit and encouraged him to begin a television ministry, broadcasting his services. That came to be known as the Hour of Power. In 1981, they moved into the Crystal Cathedral.

Announcer: From the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, welcome to the Hour of Power with Robert Schuller. Presenting the face and voice of positive Christianity to the world, now beginning our 30th year.

Mike Cosper: Schuller's brand of Christianity and the culture of his church was a pretty wild mix. In some ways, it was deeply traditional. Music, the vestments. Did I mention the pipe organ or its 17,000-plus pipes? And yet Schuller's preaching and teaching were decidedly progressive. He rebranded Norman Vincent Peale's Power of Positive Thinking as possibility thinking, and a shooed any talk of sin, believing that focusing on the positive aspects of Christianity would by default diminish sin's presence and effects in the world. Self-esteem was central to his message, going so far as to refer to Jesus as self-esteem incarnate. He regularly shared the stage with leaders and teachers of other religions, and taught a Universalist view of salvation, and that message got traction on a global scale.

Robert Schuller: Good morning. Turn around, shake hands with somebody, close to you, and give them a blessing. God loves you, and so do I.

@praxishabitus

Gerardo Marti: One of the reasons that Robert Schuller became so famous is because not only did he have a large church that appeared to be so successful, he also created the Robert Schuller School of Leadership.

Mike Cosper: That's Gerardo Marti, a professor of sociology at Davidson College, and the co-author with Mark Mulder of The Glass Church, a book about Schuller's ministry and megachurches.

Gerardo Marti: He actively invited church leaders from all across the nation to come and learn the template of how Robert Schuller had organized his own church.

10 MIN

Mike Cosper: There's something akin to a rags to riches story, starting with $500 at a rented drive-in, and arriving 25 years later at the Crystal Cathedral with the whole world watching your services. Before you had pastors taking selfies with celebrities and influencers, you got a parade of stars who made pilgrimages to see Robert Schuller. From Evil Knievel to Mikhail Gorbachev. He counted presidents as friends, as well as Mother Teresa. And when Queen Elizabeth visited LA in 1983, she invited Schuller to join her for lunch. In its heyday, a pastor landing a spot in the pulpit at the Crystal Cathedral was kind of like a standup comedian landing a spot on the Tonight Show. It was a sign that you'd arrived, which for our story makes this moment on the Hour of Power all the more significant. It was 2009, and the guest preacher was a rising star from Seattle.

Robert Schuller: How long do you preach?

Mark Driscoll: I preach for an hour plus.

Robert Schuller: You do?

Mark Driscoll: Yeah. And I yell a lot and I get excited, and it's working. So praise God.

Robert Schuller: Well, thank you for coming.

Mark Driscoll: Thank you for letting me,

Robert Schuller: God loves you, so do I.

Mark Driscoll: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Mike Cosper: Let's go back to 1965, when Schuller's ministry was gaining momentum. Down the road about 10 miles in Costa Mesa, there was a dying church called Calvary Chapel, and a pastor named Chuck Smith decided to answer a call to see if he could revive it. His arrival coincided with a surge of cultural upheaval. Quick note, there's some music going on in the background of this clip that we couldn't remove

Chuck Smith: Back in the late sixties, when our conservative orange county was being shaken by hundreds of long hair kids - my feeling was dirty hippie, why don't think they take it back. So one evening about five o'clock, our doorbell rang and there was John, the young father who had been dating our daughter, and with him a real honest to goodness hippie. John said, Chuck, I want you to meet Lonnie.

Mike Cosper: Lonnie was Lonnie Frisbee, a central figure in the Jesus movement that would unfold in the decade to come. And you almost can't imagine two more polar opposite personalities than Lonnie and Chuck. Lonnie looks a good bit like Warner Solomon's portrait of Christ. Chuck looks every bit the part of a Bible-thumping preacher, and you'd be hard pressed to find pictures of him from this era where he isn't in a suit. Where Robert Schuller's ministry was marked by traditional aesthetics and progressive preaching, Smith and Frisbees ministry was its polar opposite. Chuck preached expositional verse by verse sermons from the Bible, but as they embraced the counter-culture of the kids coming in, the church took on its look, sound, and feel. Long-haired, shaggy musicians brought drums and guitars into the church, and Maranatha music was born, essentially starting the praise and worship movement. The church itself would grow to more than 2,000 people, and began planting more Calvary Chapel churches up and down the California coast. Another movement was sparked when Lonnie Frisbee showed up at the Calvary Chapel church in Yorba Linda. It was Mother's Day 1980, and the pastor, John Wimber, was walking out of the morning services when he saw Lonnie and felt prompted to invite him to come back and preach that evening. Here Wimber tells the story.

@john_wimber

John Wimber: So I went to church that night and I'm thinking, Oh, he looks harmless enough. All right, come on up. So he comes up and he starts speaking. And I sat down over to the side, and I'm listening to him, and it's great. I'm thinking, what was I worried about him? And then he does the weirdest thing I've ever even heard of. He's going... He stopped and says, well, that's it. He said, The church has been offending the Holy Spirit a long time and he's quenched, but he's getting over it and we're going to invite him to come and minister. Now, come Holy Spirit, and whamo, the Spirit of God comes! And he says, come Holy Spirit. And the next thing I know, people are falling an bouncing and they're laying on the floor and they're talking like turkey gobbles..... [jibberish]. And Lonnie is going like a banshee, he's running through the crowd and raising his hands. And I'm thinking he's pushing people over, he's knocking them down. But he's not even touching them, he's walking by and I mean they're going, wham, wham, and falling everywhere. And I'm thinking, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, get me out of here.

Mike Cosper: As much as Wimber is enjoying the laughs, he's also a true believer. And in the months to follow, about 40 other Calvary chapel churches would have similar charismatic experiences. In 1982, with Chuck Smith's blessing, those churches would leave, joining with a church in Hollywood called the Vineyard, to form the Vineyard movement. They'd carry much of the DNA of Calvary Chapel with them, along with an emphasis on charismatic expression. And Vineyard music would find its way into churches worldwide. Combined, Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard have planted more than 4,000 churches.

Scott Thumma: So you get Chuck Smith and others to essentially franchise.

Mike Cosper: This is Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary, and someone who's been studying mega churches and church movements for the last 30 years.

Scott Thumma: You can't talk about Smith or Wimber without thinking of McDonald's and the same way that they basically took the model and then sent them out into other towns that they knew that model would be successful.

15 MIN **Mike Cosper:** We could almost stop the story right here. If Schuller's the positive Christianity guy, then Driscoll is the masculine Christianity guy, and both provide pathways to big international platforms. Likewisehe t concept and structure of Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard provide a roadmap for the church planting movements in our day, which includes Acts 29, but also Arc or the Send network inside the SBC, and several others. The connection is to some extent about shared theological commitments. But in another sense, it's about the culture the church creates, or to use the crass word for it, the brand. You can also see shifts in authority in the church. Schuller was part of the RCA, but doctrinally, he veered pretty far away from them. Nonetheless, his ministry was just so big, there really wasn't anything they could do to respond or reign him in. Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard were explicitly not denominations. There are no official structures for accountability. Together, you see a relocation of authority, from institutions like denominations or even established churches to charismatic individuals.

So yes, we could stop there. But as a generation comes of age under these influences and as culture evolves in the late seventies into the eighties, nineties, the next wave of innovation in the church is coming.

@BillHybels5

Bill Hybels: I was comfortably preparing to run our family business that my father had spent his whole life preparing for my brother and I to run.

Mike Cosper: This is Bill Hybels, founder of Willow Creek, speaking at their leader summit in 2005. Willow Creek is part of the next wave in the mega church story. They planted in 1975 and innovated in ways all their own.

Bill Hybels: The only problem was as I was growing up, I attended churches that were so unbelievably inward-focused and self-absorbed, churches that didn't give a flying rip about people far from God. And as I was trying to stay focused on my business career and my business major in college, which was economics, and my minor, which was business administration, the holy discontentedness got the best of me.

Mike Cosper: For Hybels, framing his calling as a businessman first became a central part of his brand as a leader. If you look up almost any profile of Hybels written before 2018, you'll see words like CEO and entrepreneur, and the church itself is often compared to tech startups or fortune 500 companies. And that comparison isn't crazy. When Mars Hills started in 1996, Willow Creek was the largest church in the country with more than 15,000 in attendance every week. Jack Welch, the famed ex CEO of GE, once said, Hybels has everything needed in a leader. He could be running a company, he said, or a country.

Bill Hybels: And the holy discontentedness continued to build where God said, Bill, I'm going to take that firestorm of frustration about churches that don't care for people far from God. And before you know it, we were renting a movie theater in Palatine and selling tomatoes door to door to raise money for sound and lights.

Mike Cosper: There's a bit more to the story than that. Hybels did leave the family business for ministry, but his first work was with a suburban church called South Park, where his friend, Dave Holmbo, was the music minister. The church was open to the kind of creative expression that was spreading through the Jesus movement, and over several years they built a massive youth outreach program called Son City. That's S-O-N. They used music and comedy sketches. There was even a drag contest one Halloween. By 1975, Son City eclipsed, South Park church's own attendance with more than a thousand kids coming. That's when they started thinking about planting a church, and they knew where to turn for guidance.

Here's Daniel Silliman, a news editor here at CT.

@danielsilliman

Daniel Silliman: Willow Creek goes and does a research trip with Robert Schuller and actually has him come and, like, coach the team, and all of their early literature talks about how influenced they are. And then later, both to emphasize their independence and because Robert Schuller's theology seems to not quite fit with what they're doing later, they go and erase all that.

Mike Cosper: If you examine their strategy, though, you can still see it. The idea of seeker sensitivity can be seen as an evolution of Schuller's positive Christianity. Schuller used a drive-in, they used a movie theater. And when they went door to door asking why people didn't go to church, it was part of a strategy that they learned from him.

Another central feature of Willow Creek's DNA is a strong emphasis on vision; particularly the vision of Hybels himself.

Bill Hybels: I got seized by the beauty and power and potential of what a church could become. And I walked away from the well laid out script for my life and swore to myself, I would not go to my grave without at least trying to see if what happened in Acts chapter two could be replicated in the 20th century. Willow has to reach its full potential because it's the hope of the world. Each of its attenders really...

20 MIN

Mike Cosper: The grandiosity of that statement isn't really that unusual in the way many large churches communicate their vision. The urgency, the sense that as members you're in on a kind of secret or a true or better expression of Christianity.

Scott Thumma has written about how this idea of a visionary leader with a singular perspective and mission from God is actually a pretty common thing.

Scott Thumma: It is very dominant and especially in non-denominational congregations because they don't have other competing identities and connections to a whole cadre of other leaders that could be influential.

Mike Cosper: If the pastor's position in a denomination or a church doesn't convey a sense of authority and leadership on its own, it makes sense that both the pastor and the church members will look for additional sources of that authority. And this idea of vision, a unique God given picture of what this church is supposed to do, accomplishes just that in a way that's less abstract than the Bible's own invitations. The pastor's vision makes it clear that if you're on board with the church, you're on a mission from God. Add to that our love of celebrity and the weight of authority we give to celebrities by sheer virtue of the fact that they're famous, and you can see how success in ministry creates a kind of virtuous cycle. You convey authority by communicating a vision. And then success has a way of confirming that authority, further establishing it and expanding it. So growth leads to growth, and growth leads to higher and higher platforms, greater celebrity for the leader, which in turn strengthens their authority. At the heart of this is charisma, the ability to compellingly communicate that vision, and over the years to steward the story of the church in relation to that vision. What's missing, of course, is the need for actual spiritual authority. Or in other words, character, and the resulting potential for imbalance, where the ability to communicate vision and compel a crowd vastly eclipses one's integrity, sets the table for the kinds of spiritual disasters we see when pastors on global platforms like Mars Hill ultimately fall. Maybe we shouldn't call it a virtuous cycle. Maybe it's a vicious cycle, after all. Here again is Diane Langberg, who you heard from on our first episode.

@DianeLangberg

Diane Langberg: When abuse is done by a pastor who has a position of power in the church, and part of that power is to tell people who God is and what he's like, when those skills in that position and everything are used to sanction what is in God's eyes evil - whether it's the sexual abuse of someone in the church, whether it's the way he treats people with his mouth and his arrogance and things like that - it becomes spiritual abuse the way all abuse is, but then it also means that God has been dragged into it and He is on the side of the abuser. I, after all these years, and I'm a word person, I really don't have words for the kind of damage that that does to a soul.

Mike Cosper: This deeper layer of damage that's possible at the hands of a spiritual authority is one of the reasons why the need for character has to trump the need for charisma, and Willow Creek is a particularly stark case study in this. As most listeners are probably already aware, Hybels was accused of sexual harassment and assault in 2018. He denied the charges fiercely as did the board that oversaw the church, and instead of resigning, he retired early. But as time went by and more allegations surfaced, an independent investigation was conducted and determined that the charges were credible. The picture that emerged was an entire culture of dysfunction, both due to sexual impropriety and a broader culture of intimidation and abuse of power. In the end, the entire board resigned, as did the two pastors who were set to take over leadership of the church.

25 MIN

Slightly less well known are the events that took place in 1978, as the church was first finding its footing. At the time, there wasn't really a hierarchy of leadership. Dave Holmbo and Hybels were co-founders and co-leaders, but tensions were growing because of the ambiguity. So as Gregory Pritchard describes in his book about Willow Creek, one day, Hybels called all the staff in one room and said they needed to put someone in charge, flat out asking, Who among you do you think has the strongest leadership gifts. After an awkward silence, Hybels nominated himself and effectively took on the lead pastor role in that moment, sidelining his co-founder. Just a few months later, it was discovered that Holmbo was enmeshed in sexual sin, the details of which have never really been made public. According to Pritchard, Hybels created an elder board specifically for the purpose of helping him figure out how to deal with it, and they met for an entire year trying to resolve the crisis. But when Holmbo did finally resign in the fall of 1979, they attributed it publicly to philosophical differences, hoping that by keeping the nature of the issue quiet, Holmbo could save his marriage. What they didn't expect was the backlash they received from the church, which resulted in two years of conflict and the exit of about 200 people. In the aftermath, an authoritarian spirit clamped down, along with the expectation for loyalty above everything else. They feared being labeled disloyal, and as one staff member told him, the church leadership valued loyalty more than honesty. And that feature finds an uncomfortable echo in life at Mars Hill.

@kkdumez

Kristin Kobes Du Mez: He could demand absolute obedience, and he did. He could demand loyalty from his followers. So you question him, you're out.

Mike Cosper: Kristin Kobes Du Mez is a historian at Calvin University, and the author of Jesus and John Wayne. And here, she's not talking about Hybels, but Driscoll. And there's this framework where if you're not with us, you're against us. And of course, Mark could define who was with us and who was against us. And that was absolutely key to consolidating his own personal and religious power. When you examine the Willow Creek story, you see how the identity of a church can be wrapped around one man and his vision, and why a host of leaders would cover for his abuses for the sake of the institution. This too is a part of the inheritance of the boomers. Not to say it's a universal trait by any means. But the elevation of the pastor to celebrity status, to essential status, as Hybels was, sets the table for disaster, institutionally and spiritually, if the leader falls.

We'll be right back.

Mike Cosper: There's this idea in the startup world called the Founder's Myth. It's the idea that the success of any one organization lies squarely on the shoulders of one person or at most a team of two or three. In America, we love these myths. Men and women working out of dorm rooms, basements and garages. It's kind of the whole idea behind Ayn Rand's philosophy, that the world is made of Titans who build and hold it up, and grifters who mooch off of them. The trouble with these myths is that they're myths, they're rarely true. Behind any success story, there's usually a complex web of social connections, cultural conditions, and sheer dumb luck that made something work. So with Willow Creek, we see the hagiography of Hybels, but we don't necessarily see Son City of Robert Schuller in the background. And there's something else we don't see, something utterly boring that contributed significantly to Willow's success and was just as important as their ministry model. Here's Daniel Silliman again.

Daniel Silliman: I think if you go back and if you ask why the mega churches exist, where they exist, when they exist, the one commonality you find across theology and across time and across - despite different personalities is demographic change. The suburbs, it turns out, are behind a lot of mega churches.

Mike Cosper: You can see the whole thing unfold in census data. Suburbs start to fill during the post-war economic boom of the fifties, right about the time Robert Schuller shows up in Garden Grove. Palatine, where Willow Creek first established their ministry, tripled in population between 1960 and 1980.

Scott Thumma: As these mega churches began to grow, they really became kind of one stop shops for the whole family. You don't know anybody in town and you can join this one entity, and all of a sudden you're connected.

Mike Cosper: With a move to the suburbs, came a new way of life. If you lived 10, 20 or 30 miles out from the city center, you just got used to spending more time in your car.

Scott Thumma: They might have to drive a half an hour to go to work, another half hour to do their shopping. So they didn't think anything of driving past 20 or 30 other congregations to get to their megachurch that they wanted to associate with.

Mike Cosper: It's not just churches that were getting bigger. Houses were getting bigger. So were strip malls, shopping malls, and box stores. Everything in the suburbs just got bigger. Consider too how much infrastructure, technology, and industrial advancement was changing life during this time. Cars, highways, and interstates, audio amplifiers, and sound systems, air conditioning, a staple of the suburban experience, new homes and shopping malls. None of these were really invented for churches, yet it's hard to imagine the proliferation of the megachurch without them. It's also not just the case that people were moving, especially starting in the 1970s, when boomers started establishing themselves and their families. People were moving more and more into clusters with folks who shared their values and culture.

30 MIN

Mike Cosper: The journalist Bill Bishop called this the Big Sort, a demographic shift in which cities, schools, political parties, and churches became more homogenous over time. Framed negatively, you can see it as the impetus for the kinds of division and polarization that mark our politics today. But as it unfolded, and even now as it's reinforced in various ways, it seems the ability to live, work, learn, and worship with people who are just like us. As a result, pastors like Schuller and Hybels could plant somewhere with a pretty clear expectation of who was there, what their values were, what their preferences for music or sports or politics might be, and they could program ministries that were narrower in focus, and well-targeted to the demographic. This isn't the most exciting story to tell though, looking at maps and population data, and figuring out where to plant your church. Unless, that is, your name is Rick Warren.

Rick Warren: During the summer of 1979, I began to do demographic studies on the major metropolitan areas in America, and finally we narrowed it down to four areas on the west coast, and finally narrowed it down to Orange County because I had discovered that the Saddleback Valley was the fastest growing area in Orange County, and Orange County was the fastest growing county in America between 1970 and 1980. So I knew it would need lots of new churches.

Mike Cosper: In the Purpose Driven Church, Warren explains that this idea came about when he discovered the work of Donald McGavran, a missionary who later became a church growth expert. The idea was that you identified common, shared characteristics of the people you were trying to reach, the things that tied them together, and that you communicated the message of the gospel through those characteristics. So rather than presenting Christianity in a Western culturated way, McGavran believed that missionaries should find ways to embody the language, culture, and values of the people they are trying to reach. He eventually applied that thinking to American culture, encouraging pastors and church planters to think about homogenous units in their own communities. And Rick Warren did just that, applying it to the burgeoning sunny paradise of the suburbs in Orange County.

Rick Warren: So we knew that this was where God wanted us to come. So in December of 1979, we packed up everything in a U-Haul truck and began the journey from Fort Worth, Texas, to Southern California.

Mike Cosper: As Warren thought about unchurched people living in Orange County, he came up with a character that was the ideal target. Someone who would fit the label, Likely Mr. South Orange County. His name was Saddleback Sam. Google it. The old images are out there and it's worth a look. He wears a dress shirt with rolled up sleeves and baggy pleated slacks. He's got a cell phone in one hand and a pager in the other. We're told he's well-educated, likes his job, likes where he lives, is satisfied, even smug, about his station in life. He's skeptical of organized religion, and prefers large groups over small groups. Looking at Saddleback Sam feels a bit comical, cheesy now. And seriously, look up the image. It's a time capsule of sorts. But it shows the keen awareness Warren had of the reality of the Big Sort. The fact that at that time, a narrowed understanding of who they wanted to reach was going to be more effective than a broad one.

Rick Warren: This is where Saddleback church began Sunday services, on Easter Sunday in 1980, right here in Laguna Hills High School theater, a little theater seats, about 350 people. I'll never forget when we stood out front over here at the gates, and all these people began coming up that I'd never seen before, and I thought this is gonna work, this is gonna work. And 205 people showed up at the first service. There weren't more than about five believers. I said, Everybody open your Bible; nobody had a Bible. I said, Let's sing these songs; nobody knew the songs. I said, Let's pray; and everyone goes, Umm. It was very exciting because we had hit our target of being a church for the unchurched. And in the first 10 weeks here in this little theater, 82 people gave their lives to Christ, and Saddleback was born.

Mike Cosper: Chuck Smith saw the youth culture around him and invited them in to reshape the life of his church. Warren's approach was similar, only, instead of reaching hippies, he was reaching yuppies. Chuck held baptism services at the beach at Corona Del Mar. Rick's version of this in Saddleback's early days was called Jacuzzi's for Jesus. The common thread was what Chuck Smith first articulated as a Come As You Are attitude. And like Calvary Chapel, Saddleback's success inspired an entire generation of pastors. But there's a downside to allowing the dynamics of the Big Sort shape the culture of your church, and it may just not be avoidable in our day and age. You'll find that as successful as you might be in one place with one approach, by design, it won't work in lots of other places and it may not translate across generations. Here's Ed Stetzer.

35 MIN

Ed Stetzer: The seeker movement was built on the idea that if you updated the church - you spruced up the building, you spiced up the message, and you sped up the music – that that would engage baby boomers. And it did. And it worked. We can actually see numerically the eighties being a bump in attendance in churches. And then what happens is everyone who is going to be moved by that is already... They all got the mailer, they all got the invite from their neighbors. So they're in or they're not.

@edstetzer

Mike Cosper: For many Gen Xers they weren't. And the problem wasn't necessarily the message, it was the culture. Boomers, for instance, were also called the me generation. They grew up in the aftermath of the victory of the second World War, and they had big wins in the cultural struggles of the sixties. They stopped an unpopular war and they won the civil rights battle. They also went to the moon. As a result, they were marked by a spirit of individual freedom and possibility. And in spite of all the worries about lazy, dirty hippies, they went to work and were driven by it. They also in that spirit of freedom, divorced at higher rates than any generation before or since, and their kids grew up with shifting family loyalties and busy parents who were focused on their careers.

These latchkey kids, born to hippies, raised by yuppies, grew up with Watergate, Iran-Contra, the recession of the eighties, and the Challenger disaster, just to name a few. And then when they came of age, a million hand ringing think pieces were written, wrestling with how we ended up with a generation of cynics and slackers, and how the world that boomers have built was doomed if it was handed over to them. Time has proven most of that alarmism wrong. Gen X has done just fine over the years. But what was true was the disconnect. The sense that the values and culture of those boomer churches weren't effectively translating to younger people. Rick McKinley was a pastor and a Gen Xer, struggling with that disconnect.

@RickMcKinleypdx

Rick McKinley: I wasn't raised in the church and I had spent 10 years in ministry and had come to a place of just being like, Man, the churches that I had worked in would never have reached my family, my friends, that sort of thing. And I just felt like there was a more faithful way to be the people of God in the midst of a cultural shift that was taking place.

Mike Cosper: That sense that something big was happening was pervasive. There was clearly a generational transition beginning, but there were a lot of other factors. The end of the cold war, rapidly advancing technology, the coming of a new millennium. Lots of people felt like something paradigm shifting for our culture was taking place.

Mike Cosper: Dave Travis served with leadership network, starting in the nineties up until 2018, including serving as their CEO. Their work often focused on large, influential churches, aiming to understand what made them effective and multiply it. And as this generational discontent began to simmer, They took note.

@davetravis

Dave Travis: Leadership Network helped to catalyze a network of pastors who primarily led churches that were being populated by boomers, and the leadership at the time, my friend, Brad Smith and Fred Smith, looked at that phenomenon and started hearing, Hey, we need to have some expression for this next generation. And this was coming from boomer pastors. And so we searched out some of the best and brightest that we thought were actually applying their ministry in new ways and thinking about it in new ways to reach this generation. So our motivation was really just to put them together and see what happened.

Mike Cosper: This is an important part of the Mars Hill story, because as you'll see, Leadership Network was one avenue that led to Mark Driscoll's national platform. It's also a little like the suburbs, a crack in the founder's myth. Behind the stories of rebels and rule breakers who pioneered new directions for the church in the nineties were boomers saying, We need to help these guys out. The gatherings they facilitated set the table for much that was to come, including what happened in Seattle. One of the people who was invited to that gathering was Doug Pagitt. At the time, he was the youth minister at Wooddale church, a mega church in suburban Minneapolis.

@pagitt

Doug Pagitt: The megachurch of that period, the seventies and eighties, that this conference was clearly responding to was more about a generational divide as we were talking about it, and we were trying to reconcile the generational divide that led to a kind of mega church. We'd all sort of recognized that generationalism was not a large enough category to explain what was going on. We were suggesting that a larger shift in Western civilization was underway that ran under the banner of postmodernism.

Mike Cosper: Tim Conder was around for all of this as well. He's the author of the Church in Transition, a book published in 2006, that reflected on much of what happened in the previous decade. In the mid nineties though, he was a pastor at Chapel Hill Bible Church, an evangelical church in North Carolina.

Tim Conder: And so Doug began networking and he ardently began looking for people who were exploring new models. I think still at that point, a lot of the vision was toward scale, people who were doing new things, but they were still resonating as large because many of us really came in and out of the large church at that point. And so Doug was the catalyst to that group. In fact, at one point, the group was called the group of 20.

40 MIN

Mike Cosper: Eventually Leadership Network hired Doug Pagitt. He'd moved to Dallas and was focused full-time on developing young leaders, and these events around next generation ministry and postmodernism got larger and larger.

Tim Conder: The culmination of the very first expression of it on a scale was in 1997 at Glorietta, a conference called the church and the postmodern transition. And that was one of those moments. Every now and then you do something at the right moment and the right time. I think 700 or 800 people attended. But in many ways it was exactly the right 700 people.

Mike Cosper: Rick McKinley was one of the pastors at Glorietta.

Rick McKinley: There was just this really kind of sense that God was doing something new. You had all these disconnected people from all around the country who were experiencing some of the same shifts. It felt like we had the choice between kind of a traditional church or a seeker church, and most of us were reading New Begin and thinking more critically about culture and gospel and the church's relationship between the church and gospel, and the church and culture. And so out of that really pretty large group of people came a smaller group of us who just began on a journey together.

Mike Cosper: And of course, in the mix in all of this is Mark Driscoll.

Mark Driscoll: I started off wanting to understand Generation X, wanting to minister to my peers.

Mike Cosper: This is his talk from that conference in '97.

Mark Driscoll: Tired of them not going to church. Hosea had a kid, he named him Lo-ammi, not my people. My generation feels like that when they walk into the church, these are just not their people.

Mike Cosper: Tony Jones, who you also heard from on our last episode, was part of these gatherings as well.

@jonestony

Tony Jones: To be in a room with Driscoll, who was, I assume still is, uncommonly smart, incredibly quick, a quick thinker, and so such a sharp tongue… And I'm like a similarly smart-ass Enneagram eight, and loved going nose to nose with him. Mark's hostility that would just come up amongst people was like a feature. It wasn't a flaw. It wasn't like, Oh, there's a problem. It was like, No, that's the thing. From the very first conversation we had, Mark talked about this to me. It's like, I got to work on. He knew himself well enough to know that this was a feature.

Rick McKinley: He had the bravado. I think he's always had that.

Mike Cosper: This is Rick McKinley again.

Rick McKinley: But he also was just… He could captivate an audience. His gifts were pretty clear at that point, people wanted him to speak for an hour.

Mark Driscoll: So if you think that once a year, you can go to a ministry conference, adopt a strategy, and then take a year to ramp it up and implement it and be relevant for the next 15 years, you should save your conference money and get some medication. You're not…That's not going to happen.

Tony Jones: You know, Driscoll in those days, he was an overwhelming force, but also he was a spewer of B.S. too. I remember him always saying, I read a book a day, I read 365 books a year.

Mike Cosper: Here for reference is Driscoll in 2001, talking about how he reads a book a day.

Mark Driscoll: I read a stack of books taller than me on post-modernity. I can read a book a day. I have for years. And I sat down, and I read them all…

Tony Jones: And you're like, Come on, give me a break. Nobody reads a book a day. But he said it with such confidence that people just were like, Oh my God. And he was so smart and he knew so much, and he just talked with such bravado, that you almost were like, Well, maybe he does read a book a day, this kind of thing. But he would just do stuff like that and you just… I look back now and I just roll my eyes, Give me a break, Driscoll.

Mike Cosper: Driscoll was only about 27 here, and Mars Hill was only about a year old, but already he'd distinguished himself for his work, his insight and just his presence. In the substance of this talk, he's in a pretty interesting place. Like here, when he confronts the whole idea of a Christian nation.

Mark Driscoll: But the gospel is bigger than the religious right, it's bigger than the political expediency, it's bigger than the election. And so with this generation, if you're preaching, we need to go back to the good old days. I saw Jerry Falwell on TV and it was funny. I thought it was Saturday Night Live. I didn't understand.

Mike Cosper: At another point he emphasizes the need for pastors to connect with people on the level of emotions. He does this first by talking about the centrality of story. And then he says this:

45 MIN

Mark Driscoll: The thing that connects are the artists, the mystics and the philosophers. We don't have them in our church. Christian art is in such a deplorable, disgusting, unacceptable abomination before God right now, we have lost our heart. It is Jesus junk, holy hardware trinkets, and it's unacceptable. And with that, we don't have philosophers, we're taught what to think, not how to think. And so when we get a new set of dots to connect, we just punt, we don't know what to do. And the mystics, if you are a feeler, there is no room for you.

Mike Cosper: Here's Doug Pagitt again.

Doug Pagitt: So he was also exploring. And what a lot of people at Mars Hill liked - and I was around there when it was just a regular size, kind of small church - and there was a period of real innovative openness, and very loose sense of what the future was going to bring.

Mike Cosper: That sense of openness seems evident, not just in Driscoll's talk, but in all the conversations I've had with people who were around back then. And as someone who was around back then, who was part of planting a church in 2000, I felt it too. There was just this sense of possibility in the air. Church could be what we made it. And we felt both the burden and freedom of making it into something better and more beautiful than what we'd inherited, meaning something that spoke our language and embodied our values more directly. The illusion was to think that we were completely reinventing the wheel. There was certainly innovation and creativity, but behind the window dressing of the cultural expression was the same philosophy that had shaped the ministry of the boomers who'd gone before. Hybels and Warren got to the suburbs as the populations were moving there. Driscoll and others, including my own church, were arguing it was time to get back to the cities, just as the new urbanism was starting. One thing was different though, and that was the support structure. Groups like Leadership Network. And as Dave Travis said, the boomer pastors who were ready to respond when new works were ready to start. Here's Daniel Silliman again.

Daniel Silliman: So I think it goes back to the Jesus people movement and that there are all these boomers who have this experience of evangelical Christianity that suggests that the old forms are bad and that we should throw off these old forms, and we should start new things and we should meet people where they are. But those people clearly met the limits of the lack of institutional support. And so people from the Jesus people era into the eighties and nineties in those mega churches, they're always fighting their elders, and they're always struggling with, There's no support structure, I need money, I need bodies, I need resources. And so my sense is that at a certain point as that boomer generation of evangelicals started building stuff to help the next generation. And so when someone like Mark Driscoll is brash and bold and innovative, there's almost like a Shark Tank approach to it. People are like, Yeah, I'll get behind him, I'll fund this thing that he's doing. And I know that as someone in my fifties or someone in my sixties that I'm not going to be the face of the next big thing, but I can create the infrastructure that will support the next big thing.

Mike Cosper: That infrastructure is a double-edged sword though. On the one hand, we want more churches and more people in churches. On the other hand, those tools and resources allow us to grow churches and expand a pastor's influence faster than ever before. Rick McKinley would experience this firsthand, both in the challenges and testing that came with planting Imago Dei in Portland, and in being close to Driscoll and helping lead and expand Acts 29 through its early years.

Rick McKinley: I remember talking to Rick Warren and he was kind of blown away at how fast all of our churches got to 1,000 / 1,500. He said it took a number of years, if I'm remembering this correctly, for Saddleback to get to that size. And what we were seeing is that these gifted young leaders could blow up a church, but it wasn't necessarily a church yet. You could create a speaking event that was called the church, and we didn't necessarily have the character that was needed for that kind of weight, that kind of success. And in certain personalities, when those gifts are even more than great, but they're just expansive - and Mark is so gifted - the character need is so much greater. Because what happens is you start to believe your own press, right? You start to believe that this is all happening because of me. And that's an extremely dangerous place.

50 MIN **Mike Cosper:** Throughout this series, I'm going to keep asking the question: Why does a fall like Mars Hill happen? Why do we get behind leaders whose character isn't prepared for the pressures of their platform? And maybe, looking closely at this moment in 1997, we can see a couple of hints. One is just the situation. As I said, Mark's about 27 here. He's one year into planting his church, and yet he already has a platform to fly across the country and tell other pastors how to get it done. The other one comes in the talk itself, very close to the end.

Mark Driscoll: Gosh, guys, I love what I'm doing. I got charged by a demon-possessed guy in my pulpit, the night we launched I had to exit counsel, one of my key leaders, 10 minutes before the sermon, I kicked him out of the church. My worship team left three months ago. We moved six miles in the first three months, and it is… I love it.

Mike Cosper: Now you could hear those words and interpret them as smiling in the face of adversity, or you could listen to a pastor celebrating kicking people out of his church and alienating his entire worship team. And you could interpret that sound as alarm bells.

Mike Cosper: A story we couldn't fully explore here is that of Lonnie Frisbee, who had a rise and fall all his own. He died in 1993 and was memorialized at his funeral by Chuck Smith, who described him as a Samson-like figure, someone who did great things, but struggled mightily as well. Smith called him his spiritual son. The audio you heard of him describing his first meeting with Lonnie was from that Memorial service. It was held, interestingly enough, at the Crystal Cathedral, and Lonnie is buried in the gardens there. There's a documentary about him that came out in 2005. You'll find the link to an interview that CT did with its filmmaker in our show notes.

On our next episode, we'll see what happens when Gen X gets the keys to the church van and sets out on their own. We'll hear a bit more about the evolution of the Young Leaders Network and Emergent, and you'll hear a lot about the early days of Mars Hill from people who were there, watching something happen that seemed so unlikely to succeed. We'll see why Mark left Emergent, and we'll also see the first obvious signs of trouble for the longterm health of Mars Hill.

The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill is a production of Christianity Today. It's executive produced by Erik Petrik. It's produced, written, edited, and hosted by Mike Cosper. Our associate producer is Joy Beth Smith. Music, sound design, and mixing by Kate Siefker. Our theme song is Sticks and Stones by Kings Kaleidoscope. Our closing song is Crush, by The Violet Burning. Graphic design by Bryan Todd. Social media by Nicole Shanks. Editorial consulting by Andrea Palpant Dilley. CT's editor in chief is Timothy Dalrymple. Thanks for listening. We'll see you back next week.