

U.S.

How a Megachurch Melts Down

What the dissolution of one of America's fastest-growing churches means for evangelicalism



Mark Driscoll, former pastor of Mars Hill, faces an uncertain future.

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RUTH GRAHAM | NOV 7, 2014

Two years ago, Mars Hill Church was the third-fastest growing large church in the country. Its original location in Seattle had spawned 14 other branches in five states, and 13,000 people attended weekly services at which founding pastor Mark Driscoll's sermons were projected on large

screens. Thousands more connected with the church online, and Driscoll and his wife Grace wrote a guidebook titled *Real Marriage* that hit #1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list in January 2012.

In hindsight, that year was the pinnacle for Mars Hill. Now it's all over. Driscoll [resigned](#) a few weeks ago after a leave of absence that began in August. And last Friday afternoon, Mars Hill Church [announced](#) online that it will dissolve by January 1.

According to a statement posted by executive pastor Dave Bruskas, all of Mars Hill's existing church properties will be sold, with individual congregations given the opportunity to assume their own loans. Those congregations will have the option to become independent self-governing churches, merge with an existing church, or disband. All central staff will be laid off, and Mars Hill Church itself will close up shop by the new year.

In online posts, Driscoll lambasted America as a “pussified nation,” and mocked “male lesbians” and “femans.”

Attendance at Mars Hill has declined dramatically from 14,000 in January to its current worshiper base of 6,000, church spokesman Justin Dean said by email. Donations have also declined, although Dean declined to provide numbers. He framed the dissolution as a “stewardship” issue: Setting the individual churches free was the only way to save them. Dean said pre-established transition plans had always included “local

autonomy” as an option, and the move made sense with the loss of Driscoll’s weekly sermons as a uniting factor for the churches. Dean described the decision to allow each individual congregation to decide its own fate as “ultimately the way that we see the church regaining its footing.” Though individual congregations may survive, however, “the church” itself isn’t regaining its footing; it is dissolving. Dean said about 30 people employed in media distribution, facilities, central finance, and human resources will lose their jobs—including him.

Progressive Christians have never felt fondly toward Driscoll, objecting both to his theology and to its masculinist expression. Mars Hill’s theology is Reformed, a tradition that emphasizes sin (among other issues) in a way that makes some Christians uncomfortable. And Driscoll was a vocal proponent of the idea that the contemporary American church lacks manliness; as he put it in 2006, “real men” spurn the church because it celebrates a “Richard Simmons, hippie, queer Christ.” His message appealed to many people for many years. But recently, Driscoll’s own peers and followers began to turn against him, too. Their disfavor ultimately made it impossible for Driscoll to survive. What went wrong—or, from the perspective of Marsh Hill’s numerous noisy critics, what went right?

Unlike the notorious [televangelist scandals of the 1980s](#), however, there was no single disgrace or crime that brought Driscoll down. Instead, it was a series of accusations: of plagiarism, crudeness, a bullying management style, unseemly consolidation of power, and squishy book-promotion ethics, to name a few.

The trouble started at the end of last year, Christian radio host Janet Mefferd [accused](#) Driscoll on air of plagiarizing a theologian in a recent book. A few months later, the conservative Christian magazine [World](#)

broke the story that *Real Marriage* had only landed on the best-seller list because Mars Hill paid a consulting firm \$210,000 to boost it there. In July, bloggers dug up a series of crude and relentlessly misogynist comments Driscoll made under a pseudonym on a church discussion board. Writing as William Wallace II, he lambasted America as a “pussified nation,” and posted a bizarre glossary that mocked “male lesbians” (men who think like women), “femans” (women who think like men), “momma’s boys,” “Larry Limps,” and “rock-free” men who attend churches headed by female pastors. His defenders pointed out the comments were 14 years old, but they occurred years into his tenure as a professional pastor.

Along the way, the church shed elders, advisory board members, and prominent defenders, and Driscoll issued a series of apologies for his behavior. Disgruntled ex-members and ex-leaders, some of whom started websites delineating their grievances, were gaining attention from the mainstream press. By the end of the summer, things were looking grim for Driscoll. Acts 29, a prominent “church-planting” network that he founded in 1998, removed him and Mars Hill from membership and urged him to “seek help.” Soon after, a group of former Mars Hill pastors formally accused him of abusive and intimidating behavior. When the *New York Times* ran a story on his troubles in August, New York pastor Tim Keller told reporter Michael Paulson, “The brashness and the arrogance and the rudeness in personal relationships—which he himself has confessed repeatedly—was obvious to many from the earliest days, and he has definitely now disillusioned quite a lot of people.”

Driscoll announced he would take a six-week leave of absence while church leaders reviewed the charges filed against him. Then in mid-October, he resigned, to the apparent surprise of his board over

overseers. “I do not want to be the source of anything that might detract from our church’s mission to lead people to a personal and growing relationship with Jesus Christ,” Driscoll said in a statement. He also made clear that the charges did not include “criminal activity, immorality or heresy,” and that he does not consider himself disqualified from future ministry.

When the news broke last Friday afternoon that Mars Hill would dissolve, Driscoll’s critics largely refrained from triumphalism, at least in public. Rachel Held Evans, a popular progressive evangelical blogger and frequent Driscoll critic, [posted on Facebook](#) that her “heart breaks for those brothers and sisters from Seattle feeling wounded, exhausted, and disillusioned by the unraveling of their church.” Others were harsher:

When a pastor resigns & a church "empire" collapses - almost overnight - you can be sure it wasn't built upon Christ, but another. [#marshill](#)

— Jon Talley (@talleytweets) [November 1, 2014](#)

1/4 All those [#MarsHill](#) leaders who stood with [#MarkDriscoll](#) until recently should be stepping down from ministry themselves...

— Kinnon (@kinnon) [November 2, 2014](#)

On a private Facebook page run by Driscoll supporters, the tone was

somber. "This is really a bitter pill for me to swallow," one member wrote. "This feels like Mars Hill just died." Another said she tried out a different church on Sunday, but "I felt out of sorts, out of place and like I was in someone else's home." Many of these posters were drawn to Mars Hill by Driscoll's preaching and personality; they use language of mourning and grief in describing their loss.

As a preacher on stage, Driscoll was passionate, deft, and intense. Despite his reputation for arrogance, his style was often self-deprecating and funny. He talked about dating, marriage, and sex with frankness, and projected a kind of bro-ish swagger that's not uncommon lately in the pulpits of American megachurches. His theology wasn't for everyone, but then again, whose is? For a certain kind of young urban Christian, Driscoll offered proof that conservative evangelicism could be both robust and cool.

And that's why Mars Hill's demise can be read as an object lesson in the dangers of building a church—or any brand—on a single magnetic leader. Lots of people liked Mark Driscoll, and they liked the idea of him even after his flaws began to show. But when he proved to be all too human, his church couldn't survive without him. [Driscoll apparently once told staff](#), "I am the brand," and he turned out to be right.

As Anthony Bradley, a theology professor at the King's College, tweeted:

If you don't think denominations are worth it consider "The Rise & Fall of Driscoll & The Dissolving of Mars Hil" <http://t.co/cUSOInKi14>

— Anthony Bradley (@drantbradley) [October 31, 2014](#)

To translate from Christian shorthand: Churches who belong to established denominations have established institutional methods for excising troubled leaders, and for surviving once they are gone. “Nondenominational” organizations like Mars Hill, built on faith and charisma alone, will always be vulnerable to the fate of losing the popularity contest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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