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Book Review

CARTLEDGE, Mark J., Sarah DUNLOP, Heather BUCKINGHAM and Sophie BREMNER. *Megachurches and Social Engagement: Public Theology in Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 400p. Pbk. ISBN: 9789004402645. $80.

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London is home to ten megachurches – defined as churches with a weekly attendance of at least 2,000 people – the most by far of any European city. Five of these megachurches consented to be studied by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, funded over three years by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. This book is a result of the project, analysing the social engagement of these churches, defined as "social action for the benefit of those outside of their communities" (p. 27): food banks, soup kitchens, support for the homeless and prisoners, to name but a few examples.

The book is significant not just because it studies megachurches but because it studies London, a megacity that seems to buck the trend of religious decline and would be a portent of any "postsecular" future. It opens with three introductory chapters, outlining the religious traditions studied, prior research on megachurches, and the broader fields of public theology and social policy. This is followed by two case study chapters: one on two Anglican Evangelical churches and another on three Pentecostal churches of the "African diaspora". The work ends with three chapters of analysis, which to some extent mirror the introductory chapters, and a conclusion.

The research is primarily empirical and qualitative, combining participant observation with interviews and focus groups. It considers the perspectives of church leaders as well as ordinary members. This enables the researchers to give a nuanced description of these churches and their members' faith, avoiding stereotypes about prosperity preaching, for example. The research includes well-known congregations such as Holy Trinity, Brompton (home of the Alpha course), as well as the not widely known New Wine Church in east London (not related to the New Wine network of Charismatic churches) whose forms of social engagement are perhaps the most surprising of any of the churches studied.

It is commonplace for megachurch studies to view these churches as players in a religious market and to critique perceived consumerism. This study goes beyond that by pointing to the wider impact of these churches on society, in what one might call a post-welfare state. The study describes how these churches' focus on individual transformation can enable individuals to become active participants rather than passive consumers or beneficiaries. It notes that

the altruistic impact of these churches' members goes beyond their involvement in explicit church activities, in ways that are hard – although perhaps not impossible – to quantify.

Nevertheless, the authors still have an eye for the pragmatism of the leaders of these churches, which leads in part to a lack of engagement on systemic injustice, to avoid political controversy. It may also lead to a lower overall social engagement relative to smaller churches. Importantly, though, the study finds that volunteers at these megachurches are more sensitive and cautious about explicitly evangelizing the recipients of their altruism than many social policy makers might fear.

Often public discourse around faith focuses on "values" – which are good but should not be imposed on others – but this study emphasizes that to Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians faith is principally about relationship with God and connection with God's empowering Spirit. A gentle invitation to share in this relationship can be a way to shift power *towards* the recipient, not away from them. The authors make several helpful recommendations for public policy, including to abandon the problematic term "proselytizing" but instead simply to require that government-funded activities do not carry a *condition* of faith involvement. They also ask policy makers to recognize that much of the altruistic work of religious people is overlooked because of a presumption that any work that is not explicitly religious is based on secular motives.

Despite these many strengths, the analysis section has one significant weakness: a strong tendency towards generalization at the expense of the different characteristics of each case. This may be a useful simplification for policy makers, but it weakens the explanatory power of the research. The analysis considers all three Pentecostal churches together, so there is no probing of why, for example, the two largest of these churches differ so extremely in how much attention they devote to social engagement. Both churches have elaborate programmes for turning attendees into volunteers – but in the case of Kingsway International Christian Centre, this seems to deliberately divert their attention towards inward-looking ministries, whereas Jesus House for All Nations has a clear vision for social justice.

In a book that claims to present a public theology, it seems ironic that the authors pay little attention to the public theologies of these five churches as expressed in sermons, courses, and so on. They quote Moltmann and Tillich, but these are surely not the theologians most referenced by megachurch preachers. In particular, the authors have no interest in the Conservative Evangelicalism of All Souls, Langham Place, which to them has the sole characteristic of not being Charismatic. Given what sociologists in the past have had to say about the Reformed tradition and the world of work, one might suspect it would also be fruitful to consider it in relation to the world of volunteering.

The case studies themselves make up less than two fifths of the book, while one of the three discussion chapters (on globalization) reads like a digression. That being said, this book is still a big step forward for this field of study and a great demonstration of what can be achieved with a large pot of funding.

The future for megachurches might seem questionable after a global pandemic which has made us nervous about large gatherings. On the other hand, our increased dependence on digital communication means that megachurches can reach ever more people with content that is high in quality and novelty. How could small, local churches possibly compete? The authors propose that smaller churches might join together in networks where one church acts as a "hub" for social engagement. Whether such a model ever works in practice might be a useful area for future research.