

The Ethical Decoupling of Mars Hill Church

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Christian churches, when at their best provide a place for congregants to gather, to worship, to serve, to learn, and to grow in their faith. Christian churches, like many other organizations, are also at their best when they do not exist solely for themselves and their survival, but rather when they exist for a greater mission. This author, having spent the past 25 years working in a Christian church believes that churches should inspire its members to be engaged with the world, society, and culture. Churches should be involved, not only in their programs and ministries but also in service to the greater community and world. Because profits are not a consideration of success in churches, many people believe that churches should operate differently than other for-profit companies. People might assume that because churches are engaged in what they believe to be God's work, that power struggles, bullying, cover-ups, misappropriation of funds, and looking out for self-interests wouldn't exist within church organizations. We can say that these behaviors should not exist in organizations anywhere, and most certainly not in a Christian church; however, churches are not immune to ethical decoupling. Sometimes churches make decisions which are antithetical to their core values and morals (Johnson, 2016).

Mars Hill Church started by Mark Driscoll in 1996 with about 30 people in a bible study. The church held their first service in the spring of 1997 and quickly grew to be one of the most influential churches in Seattle. At its peak in 2013, Mars Hill had a weekly attendance of over 12,000 people in 15 locations. The church was also involved in music publishing, church planting, and provided free resources online for millions to use (Zalestra, 2017). On the outside, it appeared that Mars Hill was going to be a force of good in Seattle and the greater world for years to come, one whose influence would continue to grow and reach a wider and larger

number. This, however, was not the case. In October of 2014, 18 years after its first service, Mars Hill closed its doors for good.

Artifact of Ethical Engagement

Figure 1 is an image of Mark Driscoll's book "A Call to Resurgence" sitting in a dumpster behind the old Mars Hill Church building. The books were thrown away by the new church that bought the Ballard campus. This image represents the culmination a series of events where Mars Hill Church under Mark Driscoll's leadership ethically decoupled and acted outside of core values. Mars Hill first and foremost claimed to be all about Jesus. The church also valued truth, community, identity, and planting churches (Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.). The church and its leadership began acting in ways that were not in line with its mission or values, which lead up to its doors closing and subsequently Mark Driscoll's newest book finding its way into a dumpster.

There are three areas where Mars Hill acted in an ethically disengaged way. Those are 1). The centralization of leadership by changing the by-laws and creating a small executive leadership team of three who unilaterally made decisions (Turner, 2016), 2). Mark's behavior as a leader, which was characterized as aggressive, mean, angry, and threatening (Throckmorton, 2014), and 3). The lack of financial transparency and misappropriation of funds including the use of church funds to get Marks book on marriage to the New York Times bestseller list (Throckmorton, 2014) and the distributions of funds raised to support overseas church planting (Throckmorton, 2014).

In 2007, Mars Hill changed its bylaws and fired two pastors who challenged the change. This change in bylaws created a smaller—three men, one of whom was Mark Driscoll—more centralized leadership structure which gave the executive board the ability to make decisions

unilaterally (Turner, 2016). This decision was a lynchpin that allowed Mars Hill to make the unethical decisions that eventually lead to the closing of Mars Hill. This decision is an example of a formal cultural element that exists in an organization that allowed for the perpetration of unethical decisions (Johnson, 2016). The lack of accountability within this executive group discouraged moral actions and created informal components that kept other pastors from questioning the decisions of the executive board until 21 pastors filed a formal complaint in 2014 (Throckmorton, 2014).

Arnett, Fritz, and Bell (2008) state that, “No organization is ethically neutral; communicative practices announce daily a given understanding of what is good and what is not good in a given organizational structure” (p. 141). When Mark Driscoll refused to promote an overweight elder to a prominent role because “his fat ass is not the image we want for our church” (Throckmorton, 2014, para. 6), he effectively gave an understanding of what was the good for Mars Hill. Mark also was charged with being domineering, aggressive, and of bullying behavior (Throckmorton, 2014) which also communicated that Mark was not to be questioned, nor was he to be called into account for his words or actions (Throckmorton, 2014). Despite what Mars Hill publicly stated that its mission and values were, Mark’s actions behind the scenes created a community of memory for the organization. With each berating remark, and bullying action, Mark was creating a sense of what the organization deemed good, which was decoupled from what the organization publicly said was good (Arnett et al. 2008). Mark demanded obedience from his subordinates, which created what Johnson (2016) states, “The greater the demand for obedience, the higher the likelihood that employees will...keep silent about the ethical violations they observe” (p. 306).

The final aspect leading to the culmination of Mars Hill closing its doors and Mark's books ending up in the dumpster was the lack of financial transparency and apparent misappropriation of church funds. On October 11, 2013, a member of the Mars Hill executive team signed a contract with ResultSource Inc. (RSI) where Mars Hill would pay RSI twenty-five thousand dollars in a plan to get Mark's new book onto the New York Times bestseller list. This agreement used church finances to directly benefit Mark Driscoll (Throckmorton, 2014). Mars Hill church also raised millions of dollars for planting churches in Ethiopia and India and called the initiative Mars Hill Global (MHG). Members were encouraged to give to this fund outside of their regular general fund giving. In documents that were provided to blogger Warren Throckmorton, show that funds from the MHG fund were being used to fund church campus expansion in the US (Throckmorton, 2014). These documents also revealed that asking people to give to the MHG fund was a strategic way to get people to give more money to be used for initiatives both stateside and in Ethiopia and India. To this day, due to lawsuits, no one knows how much money was used for planting in Ethiopia or India (Throckmorton, 2014). Mars Hill would have benefitted from implementing and living by a code of ethics which included conflicts of interest, and financial transparency (Johnson, 2016).

Stakeholder impact

The ethical decisions of Mars Hill did not just impact Mark Driscoll. The decisions made had a tremendous impact on stakeholders in and out of the church. We are now living in a time when societal expectations of organizations have increased and where society now expects organizations to act responsibly (Johnson, 2016). The decisions of Mars Hill affected the other pastors and staff of the church. When the doors to Mars Hill closed, people employed by Mars Hill lost their jobs. Mars Hill was in growth and expansion mode when everything came toppling

down. There should have been no reason for everyone to lose their jobs due to decisions made by a few that affected many. I do not think that it is unreasonable to think that employee stakeholders of Mars Hill expected to keep their jobs. When considering internal stakeholders, we need to consider the members of Mars Hill, men, and women who gave their time and finances to support the life, staff, and ministry of the church. According to Johnson (2016), “Stakeholder groups have different interests, concerns, and demands” (p. 371). I do not believe that most of the members of Mars Hill were interested in constant expansion. I think most members wanted a church where they could find a sense of community, learn and grow in their faith, and perhaps serve. Members interests seemed to be lost in any of the decision makings that happened at a high level at Mars Hill. The decisions made seemed to key in on personal interests and the interests of a few (Throckmorton, 2014).

Internal stakeholders were not the only ones affected by the decisions or Mars Hill. There were also external stakeholders who were affected. The first external stakeholders affected were the people who used the content that Mars Hill provided. This might not seem like a huge deal, but Mars Hill sermons, podcasts, music, blogs, and other resources were read, watched, and downloaded by millions of people who were outside the congregation of Mars Hill (Zalestra, 2017). It is not unreasonable to think that most of those who benefitted from content produced by Mars Hill would be able to do so for the foreseeable future, but this was not the case. Another group of external stakeholders affected by Mars Hill is other churches. The unethical decision of Mars Hill tarnished how churches should act as organizational citizens. Other churches might have to bear some of the burden caused by Mars Hill not engaging in ethical decisions and not acting as a good organizational citizen in a way that improves not only the lives of those within but also those in society (Johnson, 2016).

Discussion

It seems clear that the decisions of Mars Hill and those making them were not able to recognize nor weigh the impact of those decisions. It does not appear that much thought about others and their welfare were considered. Even if we were to examine other notions of the good that stakeholders might have, I just do not see how Mars Hill's version of the good could have even considered other versions of the good held by different stakeholders. This appears to have been part of the cultural DNA of Mars Hill and Mark Driscoll's leadership. I also do not think that it is possible to defend the decisions made by Mars Hill, especially those involving finances. Even though the case was eventually dismissed, there was a civil case of racketeering brought against Mark Driscoll and another Pastor (Turner, 2016). I just don't see how the self-serving actions of Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill could be justified as a different understanding of the good. Mars Hill appears to have failed at being a good organizational citizen, both for its people and for the greater society. The mess caused by Mars Hill should serve as a warning—and case study—for other organizations who wish to forge a different path. Unchecked power, abusive leadership, and lack of transparency can cause an organization with momentum and size to shut down in a matter of months, creating chaos and a morass for those left in its wake.

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Figures



Figure 1. A Mark Driscoll books in a dumpster.