

“People Forget He’s Human”: Charismatic Leadership in Institutionalized Religion

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Most work on religious charismatic leadership is concentrated in the study of new religious movements to the neglect of more institutional forms. Whether findings from those extreme religious cases apply in the context of institutionalized religion is an empirical question. Drawing on charismatic leadership research in organizational studies, we propose that in institutionalized religion there is less conflict between the extraordinary and ordinary qualities of the charismatic leader and that, in fact, both can attract followers and solidify the charismatic bond. Allowing followers to see their human side makes charismatic leaders more relatable, authentic, and trustworthy. We explore these propositions in the context of American megachurches using interviews and a large-N survey of attendees in 12 megachurches. We show how the senior pastors of these churches are able to establish a charismatic bond with attendees based on perceptions of their extraordinary and ordinary qualities.

Key words: charisma; protestant Christianity; theory; megachurches; qualitative methods.

“He’s no different than you and I. That’s what we love about him”

—Description of a megachurch senior pastor by a megachurch attendee.

Sociological research on charisma underscores how charisma is a social, dynamic, interactive process by which individuals come to perceive certain qualities of a person as extraordinary and worthy of authority (Dawson 2006). Because charisma rests in the social relationship, its attribution can be undermined by behaviors that deviate from the perceived extraordinary qualities of the leader, which may lead to charismatic disenchantment, that is, the withdrawal of charismatic

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attribution (Balch 1995; Jacobs 1989; Jooisse 2012). More recently, Jooisse (2012) proposed that ordinary behaviors, not just moral deviance, can lead to charismatic disenchantment as they can damage perceptions of the leader's extraordinariness.

While much work on charismatic leadership is in the area of religion, it focuses on new religious movements (NRMs) (Dawson 2002; Johnson 1992; Jooisse 2012; Robbins and Anthony 2004) to the neglect of less extreme, more institutional forms of religion (i.e., religious groups that are in lower tension with society). However, charismatic leadership can, and does, emerge in institutionalized settings (Eisenstadt 1968). In fact, there is a large volume of work on charisma in organizations and businesses (Khurana 2004), yet, with few exceptions (see Harding 2000; Lee 2007; Marti 2005; Wellman 2012), sociology of religion research has not followed suit. Given the preponderance of charisma studies using extreme religious cases, it is an empirical question whether past findings on charismatic religious leadership apply in the context of institutionalized religion.

Drawing on charismatic leadership research in organizational studies, we propose that in institutionalized religion there is less conflict between the extraordinary and ordinary qualities of the charismatic leader and followers can be attracted to both: "he's no different than you and I. That's what we love about him." Charismatic leaders in institutionalized religions do not have to worry about backstage encounters with followers or discussing their ordinary life, because being ordinary can be a part of their charisma.

We explore this proposition in the context of American megachurches—churches with an average weekly attendance of 2,000 or more people—using interviews and a large-N survey of megachurch attendees. Although 50 percent of all American churchgoers attend the largest 10 percent of churches in America (Thumma and Travis 2007), little is known about why they join and stay (Ellingson 2010:264). In this article, we propose that extraordinary and ordinary qualities can contribute to the establishment of a charismatic bond between megachurch senior pastors and attendees. This charismatic bond serves as a primary motivation for joining and remaining at a megachurch.

CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

Charismatic authority has been defined in numerous ways. Max Weber (1978) classically defines charisma as

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a "leader" (241).

Weber's (1978) definition of charisma brings together psychological and sociological characteristics; it identifies particular extraordinary qualities of the individual's personality, while at the same time highlighting that charisma must be

attributed to a leader by followers. Some research has emphasized the former and defined charisma in terms of particular personality traits, qualities, or behaviors of the leader (House and Aditya 1997; Shamir et al. 1998). More recent sociological research focuses on the latter and emphasizes the importance of the charismatic bond between the charismatic leader and her followers (Dawson 2006; Immergut and Kosut 2014; Joosse 2012; Ketola 2008; Madsen and Snow 1991; Wignall 2016). In these studies, charisma is thought to be necessarily social, derived from followers *believing* their leader has extraordinary qualities (Dawson 2006).

NRM studies typically draw on Dawson's (2006) definition of charisma, which has three features: (1) it is grounded in the perceived display of exceptional or extraordinary abilities by a person; (2) "in its historically most prevalent form, these abilities are thought to be divinely (or supernaturally) granted or inspired"; and (3) it is "highly personal in nature, even in instances where there is little direct contact between a leader and his or her followers. It rests on a relationship of great emotional intensity, which typically leads followers to place an extraordinary measure of trust and faith in their leader" (9–10; see also Wasielewski 1985). Based on this definition, leaders are not charismatic unless their followers attribute charisma to them (Dawson 2006; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Lindholm 1990). This attribution is typically rooted in a deep identification with the leader (Dawson 2002; Jacobs 1989; Kets de Vries 1988; Lindholm 1990; Madsen and Snow 1991; Oakes 1997), which often depends on his perceived verbal talent and emotional intelligence (Madsen and Snow 1991:5–22; see also Wellman 2012). Charismatic leaders therefore tend to be perceived as more "emotionally expressive" and rhetorically savvy (Dawson 2002:82–83; Wilner 1984).

The success of their rhetoric depends on the leaders extending established, abstract cultural myths and transforming them into reality (Dawson 2002; Kets de Vries 1988; Wilner 1984). In studies of NRMs, Dawson (2002) notes that "the leaders and their most loyal followers are Moses, Jesus, or the Buddha reincarnated" (84). Examples of this abound: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh was considered by his followers "a locus of the sacred" and given "the title of divinity" (Palmer and Bird 1992:S72); Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church was believed to occupy "the role of Christ" (Wallis 2004:42); Moses David (David Berg), the leader of the Children of God/The Family, was perceived to be "the voice of God" (Wallis 1982:37), and de Ruiter is considered to be a "divine being" by his followers (Joosse 2012:11) to name only a few. Perceiving the NRM leader as divine or supernatural herself distinguishes the leader as different and separate from ordinary people. This creates a conflict between followers' perceptions of the leader as God, the embodiment of truth, and so on, and her ordinary human qualities and behaviors. If individuals interact with the leader often, his "human frailties may show through", which "undermines the element of mastery and exaggeration essential to sustaining the tales of wonder, compassion, and extraordinary accomplishment commonly used to establish the aura of special authority around these leaders" (Dawson 1998:143). Thus the legitimacy underlying charismatic leadership must be maintained through impression management.

A Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective helps illuminate this process (Conger and Kanungo 1987; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Goffman 1959; Harvey 2001; Joesse 2012; Schuurman 2016). In this model, individuals in social life are conceptualized as “actors” in a “theater” giving “performances” of different “roles” in various “settings” for specific “audiences” that help define the situation. The meaning of social interactions is therefore produced through these performances and the actors influence how individuals perceive the situation. The “front stage” is where these performances take place and individuals behave as expected in order to manage and influence their audience’s impression. This is where charismatic leaders shine; where they use their emotionally expressive rhetorical savvy to influence the perceptions of their audience (Bass 1985; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Joesse 2012; Wasielewski 1985). Thus, in the front stage even physical impairments or experiences of suffering can be used “to establish a measure of charismatic authority over others” through perceptions of “overcoming [. . . that which] would limit a ‘normal’ person” (Hofmann 2015:718).

While charismatic leaders easily craft their front stage performances to support their extraordinary qualities (see Glassman 1975; Joesse 2012), it is in their “backstage” where they are able to “step out of character” and behave in ways that contradict their front stage performance (Goffman 1959:112). Because “discrepant roles” can develop, impression management requires the separation of the front and backstages (Goffman 1959:113, 239). For charismatic leaders, the backstage entails ordinary behaviors (Joesse 2012), but can include moral deviance as well (Balch 1995; Dawson 2002; Jacobs 1989; Oakes 1997). Followers observing a NRM leader’s backstage may experience cognitive dissonance between their perception of the leader as divine and their observation of her as an ordinary person (Joesse 2012:186). Joesse (2012:185) provides an example of this in which an NRM member’s image of the leader is altered by an encounter with him at a movie theater: “But then when I sit next to him in a movie theatre, he looked like he was like trying to avoid looking at me because he didn’t have his [power].” Joesse highlights how coming into contact with a leader’s backstage can lead to charismatic disenchantment by undermining charismatic plausibility at least for the general membership.

This is not necessarily the case for those in the “inner circle” (Joesse 2012:188) or the “charismatic aristocracy” (Weber 1978:1119) (i.e., those who have routine access to the leader), who may come to perceive their leader’s ordinary qualities as extraordinary. Joesse (2012:188) provides an example of an inner circle member of an NRM, Oksana, who describes her leader in ways that are both ordinary and extraordinary: “What is awesome is that he’s managing to be human, make his human mistakes and be totally OK that that’s exactly what’s happening. That’s what’s different from him and everyone else on this earth plane.” The leader is described as a “human” who makes “human mistakes” but is also “different from [. . .] everyone else on this earth plane.” However, Joesse (2012:188) makes it clear that Oksana’s understanding “differed greatly from the perceptions of the average lay devotee.” The reconciliation of the leader as both ordinary and

extraordinary occurred only among the inner circle and not the lay followers. We argue that in more institutionalized religious contexts, this reconciliation takes place broadly across members of all types thereby decreasing the risk of charismatic disenchantment upon observing one's charismatic leader behaving or speaking ordinarily.

The majority of research on religious charismatic leaders has been in the context of NRMs, which are typically known for their leaders. While this research has investigated how charisma becomes routinized and institutionalized, including in the context of NRMs (Ketola 2008; Sharot 1980; Simmons 1991; Wallis 1982), there is considerably less work on charismatic leaders in less extreme, institutionalized religious contexts. Weber (1978) theoretically distinguishes between pure charismatic authority in which the exercise of power is rooted in the person and her perceived exceptional abilities, and routinized charisma, where charismatic rule is depersonalized and attributed to the office or position and not the person. However, he also notes that empirically types of authority can be mixed. Charismatic leadership in its pure form can emerge and remain in institutionalized settings (Eisenstadt 1968). For example, political or business leaders in large bureaucratic organizations who are charismatic due to their attributed exceptional abilities (e.g., Conger and Kanungo 1987; Gardner and Avolio 1998; Harvey 2001). This also occurs in the realm of institutionalized religion (Berger 1963). Yet, we propose that some of the charismatic leadership dynamics described in the context of NRMs are inapplicable to religious institutions.

The perception that the exceptional qualities of the leader emanate from divinity or the supernatural is a characteristic of charismatic authority typically shared by NRMs and religious institutions alike. However, in the latter, the leader is not perceived to be god or divine herself, which would typically push the group outside the realm of institutionalized religion, but instead, is often viewed as divinely inspired or chosen, as a messenger or spokesperson for God, the truth, or the supernatural (Harding 2000; Lee 2007; Wellman 2012). This means that while the charismatic leader is perceived to have extraordinary, divinely inspired abilities, he is still, by definition, human. It is thus implied that she will exhibit both extraordinary *and* ordinary qualities. Since these charismatic leaders are expected to have ordinary lives, their identities are less threatened by contact with lay followers in their "backstage" or even the perceived discussion of their backstage as these do not intrinsically create cognitive dissonance for their followers. Observing these leaders at a movie theater does not, on its own, violate perceptions of extraordinariness, that is, there are no intrinsic role discrepancies between the extraordinary front stage and ordinary backstage (Goffman 1959). For these charismatic leaders the tension then is not between being extraordinary versus ordinary. Rather, the tension arises from the need to balance the two: they must be extraordinary without becoming perceived as a deity, while at the same time, be ordinary but not so ordinary as to engage in deviant behaviors that undermine their perceived extraordinary abilities.

Because they can be perceived as extraordinary and ordinary, these charismatic leaders can draw on different rhetorical strategies to create and sustain the charismatic bond. Successful charismatic leaders need to align themselves with their followers, while also distinguishing themselves as people who should be granted authority (Harvey 2001; Shamir et al. 1994). In doing so, they often must choose between being authentic, managing their identity, or some “strategic combination” (Jones and Pittman 1982:237). Managing a godlike persona, such as is often the case in NRMs, can make it difficult for charismatic leaders to empathize with their followers and present themselves as vulnerable, since this would conflict with their extraordinary identity (Oakes 1997:37). On the other hand, charismatic leaders in institutionalized religious settings are able to empathize with their followers, lay and inner circle alike, and express vulnerability, because being human *can* be a part of their charismatic identity. They can use their humanity, even their frailties, to connect and bond with their followers. In this way, they can strategically show, or at least be *perceived* by their followers to show, certain components of their “backstage” life in their front stage performance, making them seem more “real” or authentic. That is, they can discuss what followers perceive to be elements of their backstage life in their frontstage performance without worrying that this will lead to divine disenchantment. Rhetorical strategies emphasizing shared human experiences should heighten the followers’ identification with the leader and strengthen the charismatic bond. We explore these predictions in one type of institutionalized religious context—American megachurches.

AMERICAN MEGACHURCHES

Megachurches are increasingly becoming a dominant organizational form in American religion (Thumma and Travis 2007). Yet most past research on megachurches is descriptive, rather than theoretical (Ellingson 2010). Megachurches are known for eschewing formal liturgies and traditions, incorporating contemporary music into their services, and having dynamic senior pastors that run against the grain, all of which are thought to appeal to the artistic and cultural tastes of people (Ellingson 2010; Wellman 2012). However, much of this work uses key informant data from pastors and church leaders, rather than the members themselves (see Thumma 1996 for an exception). Thus, in a recent review of the megachurch literature, Ellingson (2010:264) calls for data on megachurch attendees to determine “if and how megachurch programs resonate with the interests of audiences.” Since charisma “is only evident in interaction with those who are affected by it” (Lindholm 1990:6), it cannot be understood solely through the leader’s actions and words, but rather, “in connection with and through the followers’ perceptions of them” (Ketola 2008:43). Due to this, we address the limitations of past megachurch research by exploring the megachurch attendees’ perceptions of their senior pastor. We propose that megachurch senior pastors are a primary draw of megachurches due to the charismatic bond they form with the attendees.

DATA AND METHODS

Since 1992, [Thumma and Bird \(2011\)](#) have tracked the known population of all American megachurches providing a rough census of them. In 2007, there were a total of 1,250 such congregations. From this 2007 census, [Thumma and Bird \(2011\)](#) 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 under-represents the western region and is slightly larger than the average megachurch. [Appendix Table A1](#) provides descriptive statistics comparing the 12 megachurch sample to American megachurches in 2008. In 2008, at each church, [Thumma and Bird \(2011\)](#) conducted focus groups and adult megachurch attendees participated in an all-congregation survey. The average response rate for the survey was 58 percent (minimum 27 percent and maximum 98 percent). The focus group interviews were transcribed and the surveys coded into a dataset. Leadership Network, a non-profit consultancy and research group, funded and collected this data and it is being used with permission.

Focus groups allow individual participants to not only 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 the charismatic bond is not just between an individual and the leader but also between the leader and the entire group with the group reinforcing (or undermining) it, focus groups may be particularly useful for capturing this dynamic. However, focus groups also have limitations, for instance, participants may avoid discussing deviant or embarrassing topics. 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.

While, most past research on religious charismatic leadership selects groups known to have charismatic leaders and then directly asks followers questions about their leaders, we take a different approach. First, the megachurches in our sample were not chosen because they had charismatic leaders, that is, we did not select on the dependent variable; rather, the megachurches included in this study were selected to be representative of the American megachurch population. Second, we do not assume that charismatic leadership exists and thus the respondents were *not directly asked questions about their senior pastor*, except in rare cases as a follow-up question to a comment already made. Although, to the authors' knowledge, this is not a methodology that has been used in prior studies of charisma, we argue that it is an effective strategy for identifying charismatic leadership. In a charismatic community the group revolves around the leader. The members have a duty to give their "complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality [charisma]" ([Weber 1978:242](#)). We also see similar arguments from a micro-sociological perspective in which the charismatic leader becomes the "sacred object" of the group,

that is, “the object upon which attention of the group is focused and which becomes a symbolic repository for the group’s emotional energies” (Collins 2004:124). The leader is the glue that binds a charismatic community together, and thus, in essence, the leader is the group. Based on this, we expect that when asked any question about the group or themselves, the members of charismatic communities will be more likely to respond with a comment about their leader.

During the focus groups, respondents answered questions about how they came to the church; how they became involved in their church, and in what ways they had, or had not, experienced spiritual growth at the church. Because responses may vary by type of attendee, in each church, three separate focus groups were conducted with newcomers (i.e., have been attending the megachurch for 3 years or less), longtimers (i.e., have been attending the megachurch for 4 years or more), and lay leaders (i.e., perform some form of leadership role in the church). The focus group interviews lasted approximately one hour and a half. Our two-person research team read, discussed, and coded transcriptions of the interviews. We coded 282 interviews (150 females, 132 males): 81 newcomers (NCs), 91 longtimers (LTs), and 110 layleaders (LLs). Although the interview questions did not specifically ask about the senior pastor (who was in all cases male), we identified 270 comments regarding his qualities/characteristics, sermons, and/or how the respondents felt about him or how they perceived he felt about them.

To code these references, we began with general coding categories derived from the literature on charismatic leadership and our theoretical model: (1) the senior pastor as having extraordinary abilities; (2) the senior pastor as human; and (3) the emotional or affective relationship between the senior pastor and attendees. We separately read through the interviews with these categories. We then compared our work, discussed themes that emerged from the data, and refined our coding scheme accordingly. Next, we read through the interviews again, guided by the following refined categories. First, *the senior pastor as extraordinary*: (1a) described as being inspired, led, or called by God, as being a spiritual exemplar, or as being in some way connected to heightened spirituality; (1b) described as being special, unique, or different from other people and/or pastors but without reference to supernatural or spiritual qualities; (1c) preaching described as being supernaturally inspired. Second, *the senior pastor as human*: (2a) perceived to have qualities that are human, ordinary, and just like everyone else; (2b) understandable preaching, where the senior pastor is perceived to speak and joke like a normal, average person; (2c) relatable preaching through the incorporation of the ordinary and human experiences of the senior pastor (e.g., discussing his personal life, moral struggles, and everyday human experiences). Third, *the emotional or affective relationship between the senior pastor and attendees*: (3a) the trustworthiness of the senior pastor; (3b) the emotions the attendees feel from the senior pastor; (3c) the emotions and emotional experiences the senior pastor evokes from attendees. To illustrate the prevalence of these categories, we provide the percentage of comments that we coded into each of the categories or subcategories. The categories are not mutually exclusive, and many comments fall under more than one category. To

TABLE 1 Qualitative Coding

Coding categories	Prevalence of comments		Extensiveness of comments by focus group type			
	Percent of total comments (Freq) ^a	Percent of comments within a category (Freq)	LLs percent of comments (Freq)	LTs percent of comments (Freq)	NCs percent of comments (Freq)	Extensiveness total percent ^b (Freq)
1. <i>Senior pastor as extraordinary</i>	35.19 (95)		44.21 (42)	28.42 (27)	27.37 (26)	100.00 (95)
a. Inspired/led/called by God		53.68 (51)	47.06 (24)	35.29 (18)	17.65 (9)	100.00 (51)
b. Unique without reference to God		43.16 (41)	41.46 (17)	24.39 (10)	34.15 (14)	100.00 (41)
c. Preaching inspired by God		22.11 (21)	47.62 (10)	28.57 (6)	23.81 (5)	100.00 (21)
2. <i>Senior pastor as human</i>	35.56 (96)		29.17 (28)	28.13 (27)	42.71 (41)	100.01 (96)
a. Human/ordinary qualities		31.25 (30)	30 (9)	43.33 (13)	26.67 (8)	100.00 (30)
b. Understandable preaching		39.58 (38)	23.68 (9)	18.42 (7)	57.9 (22)	100.00 (38)
c. Relatable preaching (shows human side)		47.92 (46)	28.26 (13)	19.57 (9)	52.17 (24)	100.00 (46)
3. <i>Emotional bond</i>	27.41 (74)		35.14 (26)	29.73 (22)	35.14 (26)	100.01 (74)

Continued

TABLE 1 Continued

	Prevalence of comments	Extensiveness of comments by focus group type			
a. Senior Pastor is trustworthy	32.43 (24)	50.00 (12)	20.83 (5)	29.17 (7)	100.00 (24)
b. Emotions felt from senior pastor	29.73 (22)	45.46 (10)	31.82 (7)	22.73 (5)	100.01 (22)
c. Senior pastor evokes emotion	50.00 (37)	27.03 (10)	27.03 (10)	45.95 (17)	100.01 (37)

Notes: Categories are not mutually exclusive; some comments are coded as more than one category and/or subcategory.

^a*N* = 270.

^bRow totals for extensiveness of comments only. Percentages over 100 due to rounding error.

TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics for Megachurch Attendee Characteristics (N = 18,238)

Socio-demographic		Influence of Senior Pastor	
<i>Gender</i>	Percent	<i>For initial megachurch attendance</i>	Percent
Female	59.40	Not at all (1)	25.10
Male	40.60	2	7.52
		Some (3)	12.69
<i>Marital status</i>		4	13.55
Not married	44.87	A lot (5)	41.14
Married	55.13		
<i>Race</i>		<i>For remaining at the megachurch</i>	
White	72.41	Not at all (1)	4.80
African American	19.40	2	2.37
Latino	3.08	Some (3)	8.21
Asian/Pac. Islander	3.55	4	18.12
Native American	0.33	A lot (5)	66.50
Other	1.22		
<i>Education</i>			
Less than HS	2.69		
HS	41.01		
College	56.30		
<i>Household income</i>			
Under \$25,000	15.17		
\$25,000–49,999	20.43		
\$50,000–74,999	20.13		
\$75,000–\$99,999	15.19		
\$100,000–149,999	15.81		
\$150,000 or more	12.53		
<i>Age (years)</i>			
18–29	29.21		
30–39	22.24		
40–49	22.98		
50–59	16.33		
60 and older	9.23		

demonstrate the extensiveness of the categories (Krueger 1997), we provide percentages for their prevalence across focus group types (i.e., LL, LT, and NC). We present the results in Table 1. Had the attendees been directly asked about the senior pastor, percentages for the various categories would presumably be higher; however, the fact that participants, without explicit prompting, brought up the same categories across focus groups and churches is perhaps more indicative of the

existence of a charismatic leader, than if the respondents had been directly questioned about their senior pastor thereby drawing their attention to the topic.

As mentioned above, the megachurches were not chosen because they had charismatic leaders, but to be representative. As such, there is variation in the number of senior pastor references in total and within categories across the megachurches, which suggests variation in the degree of charismatic leadership. However, for each category, the majority of churches had at least one comment, usually more, falling under it. The mean number of comments per church is 22.5 with a standard deviation of 15.45, a minimum of 5, and a maximum of 50. In Appendix Table B1, we provide the mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values for the frequency of comments in each coding category across the 12 megachurches as additional evidence for the extensiveness of the categories.

We use the focus groups as our primary source of data; however, the large-N survey ($N = 18,238$) is useful because it provides socio-demographic data regarding the overall attendee population in these megachurches and data on the senior pastor as a motivator for initial attendance and remaining in the megachurch. Attendees were asked two questions regarding their senior pastor: (1) how influential the senior pastor was for bringing them to the megachurch (1 = not at all to 5 = a lot) and (2) how influential the senior pastor is for keeping them at the megachurch (1 = not at all to 5 = a lot). From the survey, we provide descriptive statistics of the megachurch attendees in Table 2.

FINDINGS

The Senior Pastor as Extraordinary

The megachurch senior pastor is perceived by attendees to have extraordinary qualities. Roughly 35 percent of the senior pastor references described him as being special, unique, extraordinary, or different from and better than other people. Some described him as a “visionary” or a “gifted man.” An LT expressed a similar sentiment, describing his senior pastor as “not your norm of a pastor at all”, which he believes is why his “church is so different.” An LL also 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.”

Of the references to the senior pastor’s extraordinary characteristics, 53.68 percent connected these qualities to God. The majority of these comments were made by LLs (47.06 percent) and LTs (35.29 percent) with a smaller quantity being made by NCs (17.65 percent). Attendees used many different terms or titles to refer to their senior pastor including God’s “mouthpiece”, “messenger”, and “vessel.” Respondents consistently described their senior pastor as “led”, “sent”, or “chosen” by God to/for their church. For example, an NC said: “Like to me he had this special anointing over him which has created this special anointing over the church. So I just said I had to be a part of it.” One LT described the senior pastor

coming to her church as “divine appointment” that was “more than just regular business.”

The special qualities of their senior pastor were often identified as reflections of his emulating God. One LL's comments exemplify this: “[The senior pastor is] a walking reincarnation of Christ. Just, he'd walk up to you and just shook your hand and put his arm around you, not knowing him and all of a sudden, Jesus was just like overflowing out of this guy's pores. You don't get that in any other church.” An LT made an analogy between his senior pastor and the energizer bunny, stating that he is on top of whatever God asks of him: “[Senior pastor's name] is totally led by the Holy Spirit. If God is telling him this is what we need to do, then he's all on it. He's like that bunny, that bunny that goes like that.” An NC also described her senior pastor as constantly working and wondered how as a person, he could do everything he does without being drained: “I'm thinking when do you [the senior pastor] sleep? [. . .] I'm drained on Sundays [. . .] and I can imagine if it's draining for me what it is for him, he's doing it [the sermon] three times.” She then answered these questions: “when a person is anointed and appointed by God, the Holy Ghost is going to take over. You know you are not going to be operating [on] your own strength and your own endurance. [. . .] You know you're not ordinary you're extraordinary.” She suggests that the senior pastor's ability to do what seems superhuman is through supernatural intervention, which gives him the strength and endurance he otherwise would not have. This fits [Weber's \(1978:241\)](#) classic definition of charismatic individuals “as considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural” qualities that are “regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary.”

Respondents also described the senior pastor's preaching as exceptional. Roughly 52 percent of all the senior pastor comments praised his preaching (results not shown). One NC mentioned that his senior pastor is “the best preacher I've ever heard and I've been listening to preaching for 65 years.” Another NC similarly exclaimed the senior pastor's gifted preaching: “He's always been very relevant and he's always been very biblical, and good at articulating anything he's trying to say. [. . .] And not too many people are gifted like that.” Approximately 22 percent of the comments regarding the senior pastor as extraordinary described his preaching as supernaturally inspired or driven. For example, an LL said: “[The senior pastor's sermons are] just straight out of the bible but in a way you don't hear most people say it. You knew the Holy Spirit was speaking through him every time he got up on that stage.” Here the LL is highlighting how his senior pastor's biblical sermons are not the same as what “most people say”, because he believes God is speaking through his pastor. Others described the senior pastor's “gift of wisdom” as expressed in his sermons as supernatural or as providing a “divine look into the world.” The senior pastor's preaching ability is one of his most valued extraordinary, and, for some, divinely inspired abilities. This is consistent with past research's emphasis on charismatic leaders generally having superior rhetorical skills ([Dawson 2002:82–83](#); [Wellman 2012](#); [Wilner 1984](#)).

While the descriptions of the senior pastor were permeated by perceptions of his extraordinary, divinely given qualities, he was also described in more ordinary, human terms. These descriptions provide a different side to the charismatic bond.

The Senior Pastor as Human

Approximately 36 percent of all senior pastor comments described him as human in some way without being prompted. We were struck by the number of comments that *explicitly* attempted to convey the humanity of the senior pastor (31.25 percent of the comments regarding the senior pastor as human). This is illustrated by a line of conversation in one LT focus group. One respondent noted “people forget he’s human. He’s human, he’s just like you and I.” Another continued “He’s no different than you and I. That’s what we love about him” and still another confirmed “Yea. Absolutely, love that about him.” Some respondents described their senior pastor’s human characteristics, such as being “shy,” “introverted,” “sensitive,” and “stingy.” Several respondents noted that although their senior pastor is in a position of authority, he is just like everyone else and treats others as his equal. One LL noted how the senior pastor never “preaches down” to them and brings his “real life” stories into his sermons, which communicates that he is “no different from us.” An NC also mentioned how the senior pastor incorporates his average, human activities into his sermons:

The average person, Christian or however you want to put it, we watch movies, we listen to music, we read our Bibles [. . .]. A lot of people have a balance and [senior pastor’s name] shows to have that balance because he can just incorporate it into the service. But you don’t hear other pastors talking about [how] they watched a certain movie or they listen to certain music [. . .].

Similarly, another NC identified that the senior pastor is a “normal person” and that his use of everyday human activities teaches “you that you can be a human being [. . .] enjoy life and be saved.” In fact, the senior pastor’s ability to talk to the attendees as equals and provide relatable stories and illustrations were two of the main qualities respondents praised about their pastor’s sermons.

Roughly 40 percent of all references to the senior pastor’s human side extolled his ability to speak to them on their level, like average human beings, without talking down to them. This was particularly expressed by NCs who provided 57.9 percent of these comments. Several respondents noted that whereas other pastors “use big words” that not everyone understands, their senior pastor “doesn’t try to use big words or stuff.” He doesn’t try to “tell you how intelligent he is over you,” but he keeps “it simple so everybody can understand it.” For instance, an NC described how the senior pastor’s sermon sounds like “you are having a regular conversation. It’s not like oh thou art, it’s more like I’m trying to make my point, [. . .] because he has this way of like taking movies and associating it [sic] in a Christian way.” 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. One interviewee recalled an interaction with an older member of the congregation illustrating this: “But when she heard

him [the pastor], she was 97 at that time, she said, 'if I'm 97, and [my] great-great-grandchild was sitting there, he's 3, and here's my daughter, and she's in her 30's, [and] we all can understand what he's saying, then that is the man you all need.'" An LT noted that if the senior pastor did use a big word, he defined it and then would "joke [about it] and say this is to let y'all know I done had [sic] some education." The senior pastor's ability to talk to the audience as a normal human being with accessible, easy-to-understand everyday examples and humor appealed to the attendees and helped them identify with him and his sermon.

Approximately 48 percent of all references to the senior pastor as human emphasized how the senior pastor was relatable and his messages were relevant to their lives. Again, this seems to have been especially important for NCs who provided 52.17 percent of these references. An NC mentioned that the senior pastor "breaks it down. He gives it examples. He just pulls in everything, sports, [and] media." Another NC identified how the sermons touch on situations in which people are able to relate: "no matter where you are, there's probably a scenario for everything you can think." Twenty-six percent of these references felt the senior pastor was speaking *directly* to them. For example, an LL said: "It just really applied to my life. And it was kind of one of those feelings like is [the senior pastor] talking to me. Does he know my story? [. . .] And it's like whoa he really got to my heart. [. . .] I've just been to eight other churches and none have been able to speak to me in that way." Many respondents were amazed by how the sermons were directly applicable to them as though the senior pastor knew what was going on in their lives and wrote the sermon with them in mind. These senior pastors are experts at transforming "a historical or mythical ideal from a remote abstraction into an immediate psychological reality," which helps create a connection between them and the attendees (Kets de Vries 1988:240–241; see also Dawson 2002; Wilner 1984).

Another way in which the senior pastors made themselves relatable was by identifying their own flaws—sometimes in sermons and other times in informal interactions with lay leaders and staff. For example, an LL said: "because he's human, an edge'll stick out sometimes [i.e., he will behave in ways he should not], [and] he steps back and submits to the Lord. And that just really garners a lot of respect from us. [. . .] he's very self-aware of how he's wired and [his] limitations." She also noted that he'll even ask people to "pray with him about certain things" that "he's working through." Another LL described how the senior pastor would admit to committing sins and being imperfect:

I mean [senior pastor's name] from the pulpit will say I cheated on an exam and I got caught and my fiancé found out and confronted [me], I mean he's not hiding, he's not trying to be like I'm the perfect pastor. And if you're like me, you can go to Heaven. He's just saying you know what; I messed up this week or whatever.

Another LL focus group also discussed the expression of imperfections as a positive attribute that makes "him human you know": "[Senior pastor's name] will be the first one to stand up and say where he's wrong from the pulpit. I mean that's

always impressed me with [Senior pastor's name]. You know when he's preaching, if he can identify with an area, he'll use an instance like something that may have happened between him and his son." Another participant in this focus group concurred and said "right, he is like us, human and makes mistakes." Rather than undermining their charismatic authority as has been suggested in NRM research (Dawson 2002), identifying their own human frailties, whether it is a performance or not, supports the senior pastor's charisma. This contributes to enhancing the charismatic bond.

Emotion and the Charismatic Bond

The third defining characteristic of charismatic authority is an intense emotional bond between the leader and her followers. Roughly 27 percent of all comments were in regards to this emotional bond. Being open about themselves and their lives and being relatable was a primary reason 32.43 percent of these comments described the senior pastor as trustworthy, authentic, or real. LLs were particularly inclined to provide this type of comment with 50 percent of the references being from them. One NC mentioned that whereas other pastors come with a "façade," by incorporating everyday life experiences into his sermons, the senior pastor "keeps it real," which makes it "easy to just go ahead and accept the message." Remembering his first visit to the church, an LL recalled that what "struck" him unlike anything he'd experienced in any other church before was the "authenticity in what he [the senior pastor] was saying." Respondents in different churches repeatedly used the word "authentic" to describe their senior pastor. One NC said: "I can trust him [the senior pastor]. [. . .] You can feel him. You know he's real. And even though this place is a little big, you can't physically touch him but you can feel like you can touch him because you know enough about him." This quote illustrates how the senior pastor opening up about himself and allowing his congregants to feel as though they know him, strengthens the charismatic bond. Whereas large group size is often thought to decrease charismatic leaders' ability to form relationships with their followers (Johnson 1979), through expressing themselves as relatable human beings, megachurch pastors foster identification with their attendees and elicit trust from them. One LL even said that he trusts the senior pastor more than any other person alive: "I trust him best I know of any man alive and that comes from just having—observing this giving spirit of his, you know, up close and all [. . .] he's the real deal." The trust they experience is just one expressive component of the charismatic bond.

Another component is that the attendees feel emotions expressed by the senior pastor. As Dawson (2002:82) notes charismatic leaders are often deemed "more emotionally expressive" (see also Wasielewski 1985). The respondents identified feeling emotionally and spiritually connected to the senior pastor and his message. One interviewee exemplifies this sentiment:

[Pastor's name] is so open to the Holy Spirit speaking through him that it always touches, I mean everybody gets something right here from the message. And so that, God is love, the Holy Spirit is love. And so when you feel that connection, you just feel loved.

An LL recalled a time when she yelled “I love you” to the senior pastor as he walked by and he responded, “I love you more.” She further noted how although he “can’t get around to everybody, you know that he loves everybody in this church.” Johnson (1979:317) identifies how followers may become less “emotionally dependent on the leader” as the group becomes larger and they have less interaction with her. Thus, it is notable, that even in several thousand person congregations where there is little direct contact with the attendees, roughly 30 percent of references to the emotional bond mentioned feeling loved or encouraged by the senior pastor in spite of the size of the group. This was particularly the case among LLs and LTs who provided the majority of these references (45.46 percent and 31.82 percent respectively). For example, an LL describes how the senior pastor

tells us all the time how much he loves us. And he’s made the statement so many times, ‘Hey, I may not know all of you the way that I want to know you, but we have a whole eternity to get to know each other.’ [. . .] And that’s something great to look forward to.

The ability to make attendees feel loved without regular direct contact seems to be a by-product of the pastor’s highly relatable sermons. One LL notes “feeling loved on through osmosis, [. . .] because the scripture is communicated well [. . . and in] everyday terms.”

The senior pastor and his sermons also evoke emotional responses in the attendees. Fifty percent of the emotional bond comments described experiencing some type of emotional response to him or his sermons, such as love, laughter, excitement, and awe. Most of these comments were from NCs (45.95 percent). For example, one LT said, “He blesses me to no end and I love that in him. [. . .] He’s such a courageous speaker; [. . .] When you hear his voice, you feel relieved. He’s just that good. He’s good. He’s good and I love everything that he does.” Attendees were emotionally affected by the words and behaviors of their senior pastor:

When [the senior pastor] stands up there and tells us we pray to God to send us the people that no one else wants. [. . .] How can that not affect you? 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. (LL)

Here we can see that the emotional connection is bidirectional; the attendees feel love *from* their senior pastor and they in turn feel love *towards* him. One respondent emphatically declared his positive sentiments toward the senior pastor: “He’s on fire. [. . .] He’s the shepherd.” Others shared similar feelings; an LL mentioned how the senior pastor has “got a regiment that will follow him off the cliff” and an NC said that the senior pastor is “revered because he knows his flock [. . . and] connects with people.”

The strength of the charismatic bond is further demonstrated by the survey data (see Table 2). When asked how influential their senior pastor was for (1) why they initially started attending the church and for (2) their continued attendance, roughly 41.14 and 66.50 percent of respondents gave the highest value “a lot”, respectively. Another 13.55 and 18.12 percent of respondents responded to these two questions with the next highest value (4 out of 5). One NC’s statement illustrates this as she pondered what she would do if the senior pastor left: “I don’t know what I’d do because he is, he was the main reason I came here and then the fellowship was just a bonus.” Another respondent noted that it is hard “to even want to go visit other churches, because you’re like, I don’t want to miss the message [. . .] and I don’t know if I’m going to get the message that God intends for me to get if I go someplace else.” To further determine if the responses from the qualitative data were generally consistent with the responses from the large-N survey, we estimated the correlation between the number of senior pastor comments made per church and the mean church response for how influential the senior pastor was for joining and remaining at the megachurch. For both questions, the mean church values are moderately correlated with the number of senior pastor comments made per church (Pearson’s correlation coefficients: 0.443 for joining and 0.577 for remaining). Senior pastors that attracted and kept attendees were more likely to have been brought up in the focus groups, which lends support to the qualitative data being indicative of broader attendee opinions regarding their senior pastor and the charismatic bond.

While this charismatic bond is not jeopardized by the ordinary qualities of the leader for the lay members as in the case of NRMs (Joosse 2012), there is still a tension between the extraordinary and ordinary sides of the leader. One NC chastised other new members for idolizing their senior pastor saying, “I love [pastor’s name], [. . .] but if we as Christ followers put him on a pedestal and idolize him, God isn’t going to be too happy.” One LT’s comments further exemplify this tension: “We’ve heard from folks, [. . .] we don’t want to put him [the pastor] on a pedestal, you know, he’s real, he’s human, and at the same time, something more than human and he’s something, you know, that we put on a pedestal.” Another participant in the focus group agreed and another still “it’s a tension that’s kind of constant.” One participant followed up with a question “How can you not though [i.e., put him on a pedestal]?” To which another responded, “That’s exactly right.” The same question was repeated and another responded, “It’s a real tension.” Maintaining a balance between these two sides of charisma—extraordinary and ordinary—is important for the megachurch charismatic leaders in this study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Most charisma research on religious leaders focuses on NRMs, rather than institutionalized, less extreme religious contexts. Following Weber (1978), this literature tends to stress “pure charisma,” arising outside of institutionalized structures

and resting in the ascribed personal qualities of the leader. This study explores charismatic leadership in an institutionalized religious setting—American megachurches—and demonstrates that charisma based on the attributed personal qualities of the leader can exist in bureaucratic religious settings. Megachurch attendees generally described their senior pastor as their leader, hero, and exemplar and emphasized his extraordinary qualities and abilities.

Unlike in NRMs in which lay followers may be disenchanted by observing their leader's ordinary qualities (Joosse 2012), in this study, the ordinary side of their leader was perceived by attendees to be a part of his charisma. Although in Joosse's (2012) study members of the "inner circle" had similar experiences, megachurch lay leaders and nonleaders alike expressed this sentiment. A couple of attendees even mentioned running into their senior pastor at restaurants and other "everyday" locations and described it as almost a privilege, rather than an event generating cognitive dissonance. Attendees felt their senior pastor was "just like them" and yet so much more. They praised their senior pastor's use of personal stories, especially one's that conveyed flaws, as demonstrating their pastor's human side and making him more trustworthy. This is inconsistent with NRM research, which purports the need for charismatic leaders to hide human frailties and not express vulnerability in order to maintain their authority (Dawson 1998:143; Oakes 1997:37). For megachurch senior pastors, sermons were a platform to establish and reinforce the charismatic bond by communicating that the pastor is extraordinary, yet relatable and human. These sermons allowed the pastor to connect with large audiences, making them feel as though they had an emotional relationship. Still, senior pastors must make sure not to diverge too much on either side—they cannot become too extraordinary, which risks sacrilege in the eyes of their followers, but also cannot become so ordinary as to no longer elicit extraordinary attribution from attendees. Additional research should examine the impression management tactics that megachurch senior pastors use as well as how attendees balance the extraordinary and ordinary perceptions of their senior pastors.

The manner in which attendees described their senior pastor's humanness clearly reflects his charismatic, rather than traditional, authority. Traditional authority rests on "the sanctity of age-old rules and powers" and "on personal loyalty which results from common upbringing" (Weber 1978:226–227). Traditional authority does not rest on an emotional bond between the leader and followers or on the personal qualities of the leader, outside of those ascribed by the tradition. This is distinct from charismatic authority that requires devotion to a leader based on his/her perceived qualities and entails an emotional bond. The statements of attendees regarding their senior pastor as human do not invoke tradition; they entail claims about the human qualities of their leader. They further indicate that seeing the human side of their senior pastor makes him more real and authentic, which generates trust—a key feature of charismatic authority (Dawson 2002:82). In traditional or rational-legal authority contexts, people are not "loved" for being ordinary and there is no need to identify their ordinariness. For the attendees, their

senior pastor's ordinariness was a positive quality that they recognized and described in emotional terms, which clearly supports a charismatic interpretation.

While each of the coding categories cuts across the three focus group types, some types emphasized particular categories more than others. NCs made many comments in reference to their senior pastor's human side, particularly praising his relatable preaching. On the other hand, LLs emphasized the senior pastor as extraordinary, whereas LTs made similar frequencies of comments in each category. One explanation for these findings is that NCs may not be actively involved in other aspects of the church, such that their knowledge of the senior pastor comes mostly from his sermons, whereas LTs have been around long enough to observe more facets of their senior pastor. LLs, by being actively involved in the church outside of Sunday services, have more of an opportunity to learn about their senior pastor. While it is outside the scope of this article and data to make conclusions regarding this, these findings suggest the need to study the charismatic bond at different stages—how it attracts new members, keeps members over time, and encourages members to donate their time and money to the group.

This study focused on charisma within institutionalized religious contexts through the particular case of America megachurches. While past megachurch research was mostly descriptive and typically used data from key church informants, this article contributes to this literature by theorizing the megachurch senior pastor as a charismatic leader and using data from attendees to identify the senior pastor's vital role in their experience. Within the institutionalized context of religion, megachurches are a force of change, eschewing tradition and developing new organizational forms (Ellingson 2010). It is not surprising then that we see the emergence of charismatic leaders within them as charismatic authority generally entails revolutionary qualities (Eisenstadt 1968; Weber 1978). This prompts the question: what happens to megachurches when their senior pastor leaves or dies? Like NRMs, megachurches may also face problems of succession and understanding this phenomenon is an important area for future research.

It is likely not a coincidence that there has been a rise in charismatically led megachurches at the same time that there has been a surge in charismatic leadership in the business sector. [Khurana \(2004\)](#) identifies a rise in hiring CEOs based on their charisma, not their skills, out of a desire to have a person who can inspire trust and through their charisma push their employees toward higher performance. A preference for having leaders one can develop an emotional connection with may be a consequence of "the late modern context" in which people want their "emotional demands" met ([Riis and Woodhead 2010:203](#)). [Riis and Woodhead \(2010:186\)](#) describe the emotional climate of late modern society as one that requires "a high level of emotional self-awareness" and entails "high expectations for emotional fulfilment" along with "strict parameters about how, where, and by whom emotion can be expressed and acted upon" (199). In this climate, expressions of strong emotions are discouraged in most public places and are regulated to a limited number of domains such as sporting events. This regulation of emotion

that occurs in everyday life creates a demand for the ability to express one's emotions and to have them affirmed (Riis and Woodhead 2010:199).

A need for charisma in institutionalized settings may thus stem from the restrictions institutionalized life often places on emotional expression. Individuals embedded within institutional settings may seek an outlet to express their emotions and have them validated *within* institutional settings. They may desire a charismatic leader who is both extraordinary, and thus deserving of their emotion, but also ordinary, someone who can relate to them and affirm their emotions without being encumbered by hierarchical emotional prescriptions common in institutionalized settings. This may contribute to explaining the popularity of megachurches—as they provide settings that encourage the free expression of strong emotions but are still institutional/conventional (Riis and Woodhead 2010: 202). In a modern context where individuals desire to have their emotions confirmed, the relatability and ordinariness of the megachurch senior pastors may do just that. We might then expect fewer charismatic leaders in mainline Protestant congregations in which the liturgy may facilitate a more constrained emotional regime that is less conducive to the spontaneous expression of strong emotions. While we can only speculate regarding these matters, future research would benefit from further exploring how the current historical and cultural context may facilitate an increased demand for charismatic leaders within institutionalized contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Steven Pfaff for his valuable feedback on earlier drafts. The data used in this article were generously funded and collected by Leadership Network, Dallas, Texas (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) for making the data available to us. This research was funded in part through a grant from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. The first author also benefited from research support from the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University.

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APPENDIX TABLE A1. Descriptive Statistics Comparing U.S. Megachurches to the 12 Megachurch Sample^a

	Percent of U.S. megachurches ^b	Percent in 12 megachurch sample (no.)
<i>Region</i>		
Northeast	6	8 (1)
South	48	42 (5)
North central	21	33 (4)
West	25	17 (2)
<i>Avg weekly service</i>		
Attendance		
2000–2999	43	33 (4)
3000–4999	38	50 (6)
5000 or more	19	17 (2)
<i>Denomination</i>		
Non-denom.	35	33 (4)
Baptist	26	25 (3)
Pente./Charis.	8	8 (1)
Mainline	10	33 (4)
<i>Dominant race</i>		
White	50	50 (6)
Black	15	17 (2)
Multiracial (15 percent or more)	35	33 (4)
<i>Church founding</i>		
Before 1946	26	25 (3)
1946–1980	39	33 (4)
1981–1990	16	8 (1)
1991 to present	19	33 (4)

^aTable adapted from [Thumma and Bird \(2009\)](#).

^bData come from the Survey of North America's Largest Churches (see [Thumma and Bird 2008](#)).

APPENDIX TABLE B1. Extensiveness of Coding Categories across Megachurches (N = 12)

	<i>No. of comments across megachurches</i>			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Overall	22.5	15.45	5	50
<i>Qualitative coding categories</i>				
1. Senior pastor as extraordinary	7.92	6.5	0	20
a. Inspired/led/called by God	4.25	3.57	0	11
b. Unique without reference to God	3.42	3.78	0	11
c. Preaching inspired by God	1.75	1.60	0	7
2. Senior pastor as human	8	7.32	1	23
a. Human/ordinary qualities	2.5	2.24	0	7
b. Understandable preaching	3.17	5.39	0	19
c. Relatable preaching (shows human side)	3.83	4.00	0	13
3. Emotional bond	6.17	4.95	0	15
a. Senior Pastor is trustworthy	2	2.37	0	7
b. Emotions felt from senior pastor	1.75	2.60	0	7
c. Senior pastor evokes emotion	2.833	2.95	0	7