God in the Suburbs and Beyond: The Emergence of an
Australian Megachurch and Denomination

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Thesis abstract

The Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical arms of Protestantism have provided some of the fastest growing segments of Christian religious activity in the United States, Australia and globally during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Much of this growth has been concentrated in a few very large megachurches (defined by scholars as churches with 2000 or more weekly attendees in one location) and new denominations formed as smaller churches became affiliated with them. Globally, the megachurch phenomenon is not exclusive to Pentecostalism. However, in Australia, almost all megachurch developments are Pentecostal, or charismatic and neo-Pentecostal offshoots. This dissertation examines the early life course biography of one of the first Australian megachurches, the Christian Outreach Centre (COC). It reviews events leading up to the founding of the COC in 1974 under a charismatic leader, and its growth and transition over its first 30 years and its development into a national and international denomination.

The thesis explores the COC’s development alongside other megachurches in Australia and specifically in Brisbane’s south east suburban ‘Bible belt’. It also investigates the COC’s capacity to establish itself in new locations within Australia and overseas. In addition, it examines the diversification of the COC as a provider of primary and secondary schools, tertiary education, counselling, political lobbying and social care activities.

The thesis proposes that the initial attraction of the COC megachurch and its affiliated churches reflected a market niche for a certain kind of religious experience, which was preserved through organizational development and response to social change in Australia during the late 20th century. It traces market opportunities for megachurch and denominational growth that arose because of increased tolerance of religious pluralism, suburbanization, generational change, inflexibility within traditional mainstream churches and acceptance of religious free market competition. The COC represents a local Australian expression of the global religious phenomena involving Pentecostalism and related late 20th century Christian revival movements and organisational
developments. This thesis examines the features of Pentecostalism exemplified in the COC and assesses the contribution of the COC to the mission of Christianity and to the life of participants from critical, theological and social perspectives.

**Statement of originality**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed

Date

Sam Hey

16 September 2010
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Key Terms:

Case study. A study of one particular case of the phenomenon (Yin 1994).

Church growth movement. A school of study in missiology at Fuller Seminary (Towns, Engle & McIntosh 2004).

Charismatic movement. The spreading of Pentecostal phenomena among traditional mainstream church members in the second half of the 20th century (Burgess & van der Maas 2002:477).

Church planting movement. An offshoot of the church growth movement that placed an emphasis on starting new churches (Towns, Engle & McIntosh 2004).

‘Classical’ or ‘Traditional’ Pentecostalism. Pentecostal denominations that developed in the first half of the 20th century (Burgess & van der Maas 2002:553).

Life course. The developmental pathway and stages through which an individual or organization will typically transition.

Mainstream or traditional churches. Church denominations that are many centuries old, have long European traditions, and emphasize liturgical practices. These include the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Uniting and Baptist churches (ABS 2002).

Megachurches. These are defined by Thumma and Travis (2007) as churches with 2,000 or more attendees meeting in one location each week. The growth of a large number of these very large evangelical churches is a phenomenon that only occurred after 1950.

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1 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2002, 1301.0 Religion) describes the traditional churches as those churches that were brought to Australia by European settlers in the 1800s.
Neo-Pentecostal, ‘neo-charismatic’ and ‘new independent charismatic’ churches. Churches and denominations that developed when charismatic movement Christians left traditional churches to establish new independent churches (Burgess & van der Maas 2002:928).

Pentecostalism. The branch of evangelicalism that emphasizes speaking in tongues (glossolalia) and supernatural gifts of divine healing, prophecy and words of knowledge as evidence of the Holy Spirit’s empowerment (Burgess & van der Maas 2002).
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### Abbreviations:

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Commission.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics.</td>
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<td>AFM</td>
<td>The Apostolic Faith Mission, started by Charles Parham, who promoted the notion of speaking in tongues as the sign of ‘Baptism in the Holy Spirit’ in 1900/1901.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFM–Az</td>
<td>The Apostolic Faith Mission at Azusa Street, started by William Seymour in 1906, he led a revival that added African American elements and promoted Pentecostalism globally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AOG</td>
<td>Assemblies of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A–AOG</td>
<td>Australian Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination in Australia. It developed out of the merger of the PCA with a pre-existing group of Australian AOG churches in 1937. It is independent of the American AOG, but draws its name from the American denomination. In April 2007, the AOG changed its name to the Australian Christian Churches (ACC). As the movement is still incorporated as Assemblies of God in Australia and is widely known by that name, and most of the thesis describes events prior to 2007, A-AOG is the predominant term for the ACC in this thesis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Am–AOG</td>
<td>The American Assemblies of God, formed in 1914 from a merging of earlier groups. It is the largest Pentecostal group in America.</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Christian Revival Crusade, a neo-Pentecostal megachurch started in Adelaide in 1957 that grew into an independent denomination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCC</td>
<td>Christian City Church, a neo-Pentecostal megachurch that started in Sydney in 1980 and has grown into an independent denomination with 200 churches in Australia and overseas in 2008.</td>
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<tr>
<td>COC</td>
<td>Christian Outreach Centre, a neo-Pentecostal megachurch started in Brisbane in 1974 that by 2008 had grown into a denomination of 160 Australian and over 800 overseas churches.</td>
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<tr>
<td>COG</td>
<td>The Church of God, a neo-Pentecostal church started in Brisbane in 1937</td>
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that grew into a small denomination before merging with the CRC.

**CLC–S** The Christian Life Centre in Sydney, a neo-Pentecostal megachurch, started in Sydney in 1977. It joined the AOG denomination in the 1980s.

**CLC–H** The Hillsong Christian Life Centre was started by Brian Houston, son of the CLC–S founder, in 1983. It merged with the CLC–S and joined the AOG. It has grown into Australia’s largest church with approximately 19,000 weekly attendees.

With the success of its Hillsong music the Hills Christian Life Centre changed its name to Hillsong Church in 1999.

**CLC–B** Christian Life Centre in Brisbane, a neo-Pentecostal megachurch started in Brisbane in 1972 as a breakaway from FGC. It has 27 churches in the CLC denomination in Australia and over 200 churches overseas.

**FGC** Full Gospel Church started in Brisbane in 1953 and grew to 600 attendees in the early 1970s. It was registered as a denomination with the Australian government in 1963. It has grown into a national and international denomination with over 160 churches.

**GNH** The Good News Hall, the first ‘Pentecostal’ church in Australia, started in 1909 by a Methodist woman, Sarah Jane Lancaster.

**NWL–M** The *New Way of Living* magazine of the COC.

**NWL–T** The *New Way of Living* television program started by the COC.

**PCA** The Pentecostal Church of Australia, started by Church of Christ leader Charles Greenwood in 1916, arising from the ‘Sunshine Revival’ at Sunshine near Melbourne, Victoria.
Acknowledgements

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