



A Study Guide for

The Christians

"A church is a place where people go to see something that is very difficult to see. A place where the invisible is — at least for a moment — made visible.

The theater can be that too."

– Lucas Hnath
Playwrights Horizons

What Is a Megachurch?

Pastor Paul's church is what would be described as a megachurch. The modern megachurch is defined by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research as a very large, Protestant congregation that shares many or most of these distinctive characteristics:

- at least 2,000 persons in attendance at weekly worship, counting adults and children at all worship locations;
- a charismatic, authoritative senior minister;
- a very active seven-day-a-week congregational community;
- a multitude of diverse social and outreach ministries;
- an intentional small group system or other structures of intimacy and accountability;
- an innovative and often contemporary worship format; and
- a complex differentiated organizational structure.

The majority of megachurches operate independently from denominational structures. Unlike mainstream Protestant churches (e.g., Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist) where core doctrine and belief are standardized at an institutional level, megachurch leaders have broad latitude to set and change doctrine. How such decisions about changes in core doctrine are made within megachurches varies widely, though the final decision typically lies with the senior minister.

Though usually not a part of a specific denomination, most megachurches could accurately be described as evangelical. The National Association of Evangelicals describes itself as "a vibrant and diverse group, including believers found in many churches, denominations and nations. Our core theological convictions provide unity in the midst of our diversity... These theological convictions define us — not political, social or cultural trends." These core tenets include belief in the ultimate authority of the Bible, the importance of persuading others to convert, and the necessity of certain beliefs to receive salvation. As evangelicals, most megachurches are thus defined by these core beliefs.

Because of their independence, megachurches and their leaders can be more directly impacted when they make changes. In 2011, Rob Bell, a popular author and the founder and pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church, a megachurch in Michigan, published *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. The book's publication was met with heated controversy within the wider evangelical community and within his own congregation. As the book achieved more mainstream success, it continued to divide the Mars Hill congregation. Six months after the publication of *Love Wins*, Bell announced that, to avoid further division among the congregation, he would leave the church. In an article in *The New Yorker* titled "The Hell-Raiser," Bell's wife Kristen said, "There was a cost. And part of the cost was, we couldn't keep doing what we were doing at Mars Hill." Following his departure, Rob Bell went on to work on numerous media projects and continues to be a popular speaker and author.

A Brief Historical Overview of Megachurches in Richmond

We might think of megachurches as a modern innovation, particularly if the term “megachurch” brings to mind the use of media and technology to reach a large number of congregants. But by the standard definition — an average weekly attendance of at least 2,000 congregants — at least one megachurch existed in Richmond during the antebellum period.



Former First African Baptist Church, Richmond, VA. Photo by Morgan Riley.

First African Baptist Church was established at 14th and Broad Streets in 1841 when the white members of what was then First Baptist Church, desiring to segregate, moved to a new church two blocks west. Before the split, the integrated First Baptist Church had over 2,000 members; the separation resulted in about 400 white members leaving First Baptist, with about 1,600 African Americans — consisting of both enslaved and free individuals — remaining in what became the First African Baptist Church. By

1861, the congregation of the First African Baptist Church had grown to more than 3,000 members, a quarter of Richmond’s free and enslaved African-American population. The building was a popular meeting place and was often rented out for concerts and performances.

First African Baptist was initially led by Dr. Robert Ryland, the white president of Richmond College and a slave-owner. At the time, as was common throughout the South, white Baptists supervised every aspect of black Baptist churches’ activities, including appointing their pastors, who were required to be white. Ryland served in that role until 1866, when, as he wrote, he “offered his resignation” in the postwar period to make way for an African American pastor. Dr. James H. Holmes became the church’s first black pastor in 1867 and oversaw an increase over the next two years to over 4,500 members. Holmes served as pastor of First African Baptist for 32 years. The church is currently located in the Northside.

Today, a number of additional area churches, based on their membership, can be considered megachurches, including Hope, Faith Landmark Ministries, and West End Assembly of God. As with similar churches of their size, many of Richmond’s megachurches started in small spaces with only a small number of congregants but today offer bookstores, coffee shops, television ministries, day care centers, and other services for a population comparable in size to a small town.



Brandon Carter as The Associate and Bostin Christopher as The Pastor in The Christians. Photo by Jason Collins Photography.

The size and structure of the area's megachurches make them particularly sensitive to the state of the economy. Institutions looking to expand their physical and spiritual footprints must occasionally absorb higher overhead costs and increased debt loads, including personnel costs, and the area churches are no exception. As *Style Weekly* reported at the time, the economic downturn in 2009 affected area churches as much as other enterprises, resulting in cost cutting and layoffs. Local churches reported that offerings were down, even as attendance increased, requiring budget-tightening. The New Deliverance Evangelist Church in Chesterfield County, for example, made the decision to drop televised sermons, which had cost the church about \$100,000 a year. Richmond Christian Center, founded in 1983 and considered an early megachurch on the East Coast, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2013 after continued financial struggles and plummeting membership numbers. As the economy has improved, however, so have the economic foundations of at least some of the area's megachurches. Hope, for example, has been seeking an additional location in Scott's Addition rather expanding its current campus in Goochland, where the church hosts about 2,500 adults and several hundred children each Sunday.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think about an organization to which you feel committed, whether a faith-based organization or otherwise. What is it about the organization that gives you a sense of belonging and commitment? What would have to change for you to feel disengaged? How much can you disagree with an organization's leadership and still be committed to the organization?
2. What is an issue or concept that is as fundamental to your organization as the concept of Hell was for Pastor Paul's congregation? How would you describe the importance of this concept to someone who isn't a member of your organization?
3. Pastor Paul conveyed his change in thinking — in essence, what he says his church now believes — to his congregation in a particular way. Could he have done it more effectively? If so, how? How can leaders of organizations introduce change in a way that builds consensus? Why didn't Pastor Paul use such a technique?
4. What is the difference between how Pastor Paul attempts to communicate throughout the play and how the other characters (Jenny, Elder, Brother Joshua, etc.) choose to communicate with him? What character do you think Hnath has painted as the most effective communicator within the play and what is their message?
5. Pastor Paul, in telling the story of meeting his wife on a plane, recounts that he said, "I have a powerful urge to communicate with you, but I find the distance between us insurmountable." He then uses this concept later in his sermon. What do you think he meant by this? How can one bridge distances between people to enable effective communication?
6. If you had been in Jenny's (the congregant's) shoes and had felt empowered to speak bluntly to Pastor Paul, what would you have said, feeling as Jenny did? What were Jenny's concerns? What was she hoping to hear from Pastor Paul?
7. Does *The Christians* have anything to tell us about the leadership of nonreligious organizations, such as political parties or corporations?
8. Based on his prior beliefs and teachings, Pastor Paul found obvious success, but does his new path lend itself to future success? If not, do you think Pastor Paul will change his platform at all? What do you predict to be the outcome of Pastor Paul's newfound theories and beliefs on his new congregation and on his personal life?
9. What are the stakes that Pastor Paul's wife faces in either a) speaking up and defending her husband's platform or b) leaving her husband? When Paul asks his wife to consider "the role women play in our church," he suggests that women "keep the family on track in all things spiritual." How do you think Pastor Paul views the role women play in the church and in the family versus how his wife views her role?
10. What do you think of the structure of the play? What do you think Lucas Hnath intended by giving his audience the full "church experience"? Did the 'church experience' make you feel less connected to the characters or more so?

Terms

A **megachurch** is a Christian, predominantly Protestant, worshipping body of average weekly attendance of 2,000 individuals or more. Described by the Elder as a “massive corporation,” the church in Hnath’s *Christians* is notably a united community of individuals believing in evangelical, fundamentalist concepts including the existence of Hell, Satan, and the possibility of salvation through belief in a resurrected Christ.

The term **nondenominational** indicates a church group holding to traditionally Christian beliefs but free from denominational categorization. This may give more fluidity to the institution in terms of theological belief systems. Nondenominational religious groups can adopt any mix of Christian teachings or beliefs without submitting to an overarching umbrella of doctrinal authority or historical context.

Fundamentalism is a term utilized in reference to a church group depending on an “authoritative text” for the basis of worship or study. In *The Christians*, Hnath’s Bible-centric worship community defines their beliefs based on the assumption that the Bible is “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). The argument between Pastor Paul and Brother Joshua is a clear indication of this dependence. Within this theological debate, every point these individuals make is substantiated by various Biblical texts. The term “fundamentalism” can also pertain to extreme or anti-modern (in this case) Christian rhetoric and beliefs often imposed by literally followed Bible-infused doctrines and teachings.

An **Evangelical** is not restricted to any denomination necessarily, but tends to fall under the umbrella of traditional Christianity, including the idea that faith and a dependence on Scripture leads to salvation.

An **elder** is an individual given responsibility in the oversight and management of church affairs. Often an elder is an older male and operates within the church in a leadership and spiritual mentoring capacity.

A **congregant** is a member of the church. Church members can be very involved in church life through financial contributions, weekly church attendance, and volunteering in various church activities.

A **congregation** is a large group of individuals who meet on a regular basis to worship and contribute to their church community.

A **testimony** is a publicly shared (sometimes written) statement of faith or personal story.

“**One Body**” refers to the idea that Christians are unified and brought together through shared beliefs.

“**Unequally yoked**” is a Biblical phrase used to refer to a union or relationship that is unbalanced because beliefs are different. Pastor Paul compares church leadership relationships to that of a marriage in his argument that leaders must share beliefs to effectively work together.

Quotes from the Author



Lucas Hnath. Photo provided by Playwrights Horizons.

Lucas Hnath is an award-winning American playwright who studied dramatic writing at the prestigious Tisch School of the Arts. His plays have won numerous awards, including the Obie Award and the Whiting Award, as well as an Outer Critics Circle Award for Best New Play. His works include *The Red Speedo*, *Isaac's Eye*, and *Hilary and Clinton*. Perhaps the best way to introduce you to Lucas Hnath is through his own words. Below we have included selected quotes from *Playwrights Horizons*, words from Hnath about his connection to the church, his beliefs, and how he created the play.

Who is Lucas Hnath and what is his connection to the church?

"When I was younger, I was supposed to be a preacher, but I decided it would be too much responsibility. I didn't want to worry about other peoples' souls. I switched to pre-med. I didn't want to worry about other peoples' bodies. And so, I switched to playwriting."

"The expectation that I become a preacher did not come out of nowhere. I grew up in churches. My mother went to seminary when I was in middle school. During the summer months I'd sit next to her during her classes. I learned some Greek, some Hebrew. I read books on stuff like hermeneutics. Some of it I understood. Some of it I pretended to understand."

What does Lucas Hnath believe?

"I can feel that rush to understand when people ask me, with respect to *The Christians*, what I personally believe. I refuse to answer the question."

How did Lucas Hnath create *The Christians*?

"The first 30 pages or so of the play were built in a workshop I did at New Dramatists. The request that I made is that I wanted 5 actors and 3 microphones. I had some material written, but not too much. I actually spent the first day of the workshop showing the actors videos of various preachers, some better known like Benny Hinn and Kathryn Kuhlman and some that are a little more obscure, and I had the actors take notes and I asked them to write down everything that they saw that was exactly what they would have expected to see from a preacher, and then everything that upended expectations. And we made lists on the board, and I was interested in both. I would sort of plot out: "Okay, so I want to have a certain amount of the expected. And then I will strategically put in moments where something that you wouldn't quite expect happens."

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