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# 'An Unstoppable Force for Good'?: How Neoliberal Governance Facilitated the Growth of Australian Suburban-Based Pentecostal Megachurches

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**Abstract:** Hillsong Church has received significant scholarly attention, which has observed the church's rapid local and global growth. Several other Australian-based Pentecostal churches demonstrate a similar growth trajectory to Hillsong Church, namely: C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Planetshakers, and Influencers Church. To further scholarly understanding of aspects of this rapid growth, this paper discusses the emergence of economic rationalist policies which led to the neoliberal governance context in Australia. The paper argues that the emergence of this policy context, which emphasises marketization and privatisation, provided opportunities for suburban-based Pentecostal churches to expand activities beyond conducting worship services. The paper analyses materials produced by Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Planetshakers, and Influencers Church and associated educational, charity, and financial organisations. Through this analysis, the paper finds that the emergence of a neoliberal governance context in Australia provided opportunities for these churches to expand activities beyond traditional worship ceremonies to include additional activities such as running schools, Bible colleges, community care organisations, charity ventures, and financial institutions. The paper shows how economic rationalism and neoliberalism assisted in providing a context within which Australian-based suburban Pentecostal churches were able to take opportunities to grow aspects of church organisation, which helped to develop a global megachurch status. In this way, these churches took up opportunities that changes in political circumstances in Australia provided, developing a theology of growth actualised in expanding church-branded activities around the globe.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism; economic rationalism; growth theology; Hillsong Church; material religion

## 1. Introduction

Hillsong Church has received international scholarly attention, in which the church's rapid local and global growth has been observed (Connell 2005; Jennings 2008; Goh 2008; Riches 2010; Riches and Wagner 2012, 2017; Maddox 2012, 2013; Wade and Hynes 2013; Wade 2015; Miller 2015; Martí 2017). The interest in Hillsong Church has been significant for religious studies scholars and a variety of methods have been used to analyse aspects of the church's activities, including, style of worship services and liturgy (Connell 2005; Jennings 2008; Goh 2008); music production (Riches 2010; Riches and Wagner 2012; Wagner 2014); theology (Maddox 2012, 2013); institutional arrangements (Wade and Hynes 2013; Wade 2015); abilities for global expansion (Martí 2017; Riches and Wagner 2017). Miller (2015) drew on historical, archival, and participant observational research to argue that Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Influencers, and Planetshakers have developed a distinctly modern and influential form of Pentecostal Christianity. These studies offer critical insight into aspects of the workings and theology of Australian Pentecostal churches. In this paper, I draw attention to

lesser-studied churches, specifically C3 Church, COC/inc's Citipointe Church<sup>1</sup>, Influencers Church, and Planetshakers. Scholars have not yet analysed the ways in which Hillsong Church, and other similar churches based in Australia have taken opportunities to achieve goals of global growth provided by political context in Australia. Through this study, I contribute to emerging scholarly understandings of suburban-based Pentecostal Australian megachurches, specifically how organisational arrangements reflect the growth theology<sup>2</sup> espoused by leaders of these churches.

This paper examines the expansion of suburban-based Pentecostal church activities within the context of changing political circumstances in Australia. The post-World War II period shifted political dynamics in Australia and introduced economic rationalist policies and neoliberal governance strategies. [Beeson and Firth \(1998\)](#) observed that within neoliberal and economic rationalist thinking:

Promotion of an image of the economy as a self-regulating system is associated with the belief that the dynamism of self-interest is a more efficient mechanism for optimising national wealth than governmental initiatives, particularly those which rely upon a conception of the common good.

The project of dismantling the welfare state in Australia provided opportunities for Pentecostal Church leaders to expand church-branded activities to include educational, not-for-profit community care, and financial ventures. While the emergence of a neoliberal policy context benefitted many Australian religious organisations ([Melville and McDonald 2006](#)), these opportunities assisted newly established suburban-based Pentecostal churches in realising a remarkably rapid growth trajectory to global megachurch. The analysis discusses the links between local Australian political circumstances and the rapid increase in local and, eventually, global, reach and engagement by Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Planetshakers and Influencers Church. The paper argues that for the church leaders, their theology that legitimises church growth as a sign of God's blessing assisted in developing opportunities for establishing organisational foundations in a range of activities which would eventually assist in achieving church growth on a global scale. Thus, this paper demonstrates the actualisation of the growth theology first identified by Maddox in Hillsong Church ([Maddox 2012, 2013, 2014b](#)) in a range of other similar Australian churches and links this to organisational foundations established in a local Australian policy context.

Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Influencers Church and Planetshakers Church share a similar growth trajectory and theological features. These churches, all based in Australia and initially established in suburban contexts, have developed an organisational base that supports a global presence and have achieved megachurch status, typically defined as a Protestant church with over 2000 regular attendees ([Thumma 2001](#)). As well as an orientation to growth, the leaders of these churches espouse a version of prosperity theology that emphasises the global growth of their churches as evidence of God's blessing ([Shanahan 2019](#)). The paper asks: what link might there be between the neoliberal policy context that emerged in Australia around the same as these churches began to grow, and these churches' abilities for global expansion? To answer this question, the paper analyses materials produced by suburban Australian Pentecostal churches and associated educational, charity, community and financial organisations. These activities produce a variety of artefacts, the analysis of which shows how the implementation of economic rationalism and neoliberalism presented opportunities for Australian-based suburban Pentecostal churches to establish church-branded bible colleges, schools, non-profit ventures, and financial institutions. This analysis allows links to be drawn between neoliberal contexts and the growth theology that underpins the rapid global expansion evident

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<sup>1</sup> COC/inc is used throughout the paper to refer to Australia's Christian Outreach Centre denomination that recently rebranded to the lower case 'inc', an acronym for 'International Network of Churches.' This denomination's church is called Citipointe Church.

<sup>2</sup> [Maddox \(2013\)](#)'s analysis of Hillsong Church and C3 Church identified growth-oriented theology as a key organisational characteristic of the modern global megachurch. [Maddox \(2013\)](#) related growth theology to prosperity theology and these links are discussed further in the second section of this paper.

in the churches. The materials analysed in the paper include books produced by church leaders, sermon recordings, promotional materials for conferences, television programmes, promotional websites, governance documents, annual reports, and financial reports. These artefacts were found using online search strategies, which allows the collection of materials that the churches produce and disseminate online with the purpose of representing and promoting church activities and associated organisations. The time-period in which these materials were produced ranges from the 1970s, in which these churches were first holding meetings, to digital artefacts such as social media accounts and websites. The paper applies theories of characteristics of economic rationalism and neoliberalism to the materials produced by the churches and associated organisations. Analysing this data through an application of specific features of economic rationalism as it emerged in Australia allows me to discern how suburban-based Australian Pentecostal church leaders responded to changing political circumstances, taking opportunities to actualise their goals of global expansion and reach for their churches and operationalising their belief in growth theology.

## 2. The Growth Theology of Pentecostal Suburban-Based Australian Churches

Growth theology is the belief that God will bless the church with increasing members and finances, and opportunities for expansion and growth are seen as evidence of this blessing. In the 1950s, Pentecostal preachers in the United States began to articulate the theological foundations of prosperity gospel through their teachings on the nature of faith. Bowler (2013) identified prosperity gospel as ranging from soft prosperity rhetoric of cultivating psychological health to hard prosperity doctrine of guaranteeing financial success through Biblically mandated formulas for generating wealth. Bowler (2013) argued that in the United States, the prosperity gospel bridged the gap that Pentecostals had classically kept between themselves and 'the world' by 'convincing the sanctified that modernity would not diminish their faith'. The Word of Faith theology popularised by the Pentecostal preachers of the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s and legitimised the belief that through specific actions of faith, such as prayer and giving to the church in the form of tithes, Christians could access economic success and material abundance. Australian Pentecostalism did not originate directly from the United States (Hutchinson 2010). However, the churches under discussion became gradually involved with Pentecostal churches and movements from the United States. Furthermore, while there is some variation in specific prosperity theology elements the leaders of the churches preach, Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Citipointe, Influencers Church and Planetshakers share a commitment to growth.

Maddox (2012) linked prosperity gospel to the growth orientation demonstrated by megachurches. Maddox (2012) argues that this growth orientation 'is not mere incidental appropriation of the surrounding culture, but a conscious and consistent effort to align the churches' activities and message not with any national culture but with the culture of global capitalism.' This growth theology sees opportunities for church expansion and achievement of global growth as evidence of God's blessing. In his research on Hillsong Church, Goh (2008, p. 288) argued that churches seeking increasingly larger congregations express a growth orientation that conditions the structure and liturgy of the church. Goh (2008, p. 288) observed that global churches 'must be seen as institutions whose practices signify and rehearse a material "greatness" ... as a seemingly tangible and concrete "body" of Christ'. Liturgical features of Australian neo-Pentecostalism—the emphasis on the large size of the congregation, the set-up of the church worship area as a performance space (usually in the centre of a major city), the growth theology justifying the inherent sense of 'bigness' throughout church services and events—are geared to emphasise the global nature of the church (Goh 2008). Maddox (2012, 2013) has linked Hillsong Church's ability to attract large congregations to growth theology and a vision of the entire world population as ripe for conversion and global growth. Maddox (2013) argued that this theology features in the COC/inc denomination. However, growth theology is also present in C3 Church, Planetshakers and Influencers Church: prosperity, abundance, and growth as proof of God's favour are central theological tenets for these Pentecostals. Barker (2007, p. 407) argued that Pentecostals foster 'norms and behaviours that harmonize with neoliberal economic restructuring ...

[(and) embed the self-regulated aspects of neoliberal capitalism.’ The ability of Pentecostal churches to grow their congregant numbers within capitalist structures is well-documented (Barker 2007; Burity 2013; Ellingson 2013). Burity (2013, p. 21) illuminated the entrepreneurial spirituality present in globalised Pentecostal forms, particularly when dynamics of globalisation reinforce neoliberal regimes, and Ellingson (2013, p. 73) showed that the emphasis on growth, abundance, and success in Pentecostal growth theology provides a theological explanation for seeking increasingly large congregations.

The leaders of Hillsong Church, C3 Church, COC/inc, Planetshakers and Influencers Church incorporated Pentecostal growth theology into their founding visions for their churches. In 1974, Clark Taylor held the first meeting for what would become the Brisbane-based Christian Outreach Centre (COC), the denomination that would rebrand several of its churches under the ‘Citipointe’ name in the 2000s. Brian Houston’s Hills Christian Life Centre, founded in 1980 under his father Frank’s Christian Life Centre network of churches, was renamed Hillsong Church in 1997. Phil Pringle and his wife Chris moved from New Zealand and founded Christian City Church, which would become C3 Church, in 1980 at the North Sydney suburb of Oxford Falls. Andrew Evans’s two sons, Ashley and Russell—who would each follow their father to establish their own careers in Christian ministry running Influencers Church and Planetshakers—were raised in Australian AOG (Assemblies of God) culture as their father pastored the Paradise Community Church for thirty years from 1970 to 2000 and served as the Australian AOG General Superintendent between 1977 and 1997. During this time, Evans demonstrated the growth potential for an Australian church; his Adelaide church congregation grew to one of the largest in the country and the number of churches associated with the AOG also grew substantially under his leadership (Austin 2017, p. 143). These first- and second-generation Australian-based pastors shared similar visions for their churches from the outset and growth theology can be discerned within these. The pastors wanted to create large religious movements that would remain relevant and contemporary with a focus on teaching positive faith confessions and aspirational living with congregations that would grow rapidly.

From the inception of the COC movement, the founders envisaged church growth and global outreach. After travelling as an itinerant pastor throughout Australia, Fiji, and America, Clarke Taylor returned to Brisbane and founded COC in 1974, attracting hundreds of attendees within a few months of holding meetings (Taylor 2013). Taylor was instrumental in realising the growth potential of a ‘full-service’ church, developing the foundations for COC-branded organisations that would cater to multiple areas of life while incorporating aspects of contemporary society and culture in church structure, such as building church headquarters that resembled a shopping mall with convenient parking, a café, crèche facilities and a bible college. Taylor resigned the leadership of COC in 1990, facing allegations of sexual misconduct (Hey 2010, p. 130). After Taylor left, COC planted churches around the world during the 1990s opening ‘thirteen centres in New Zealand, twelve in Papua New Guinea, twenty-two in the Pacific Islands, two in Malaysia, four in England, and seven in Chile’ (Hey 2006, p. 8). COC continued to expand its operations beyond that of ministry and conducting worship services. Under new COC leadership throughout the 1990s, COC-branded schools were established at several locations around Australia, the Bible college expanded to encompass a range of undergraduate and post-graduate programs, a local community care program was established, and an overseas ‘global care’ program founded that provides aid, medical assistance, orphanages, and schools (Hey 2006). COC started an intentional student chaplaincy program, Christian leadership training program, business courses, and a private equity fund called inc Invest (Maddox 2015, p. 1). Clark Taylor’s initial vision for COC—a church with influence in multiple aspects of life on both a local and global scale—was successfully realised through the incorporation of growth theology, in which access to material wealth is seen as proof of God’s blessing.

In 1977, Brian and Roberta ‘Bobbie’ Houston followed Brian’s father Frank from New Zealand to Australia. After assisting Frank Houston in pastoring Christian Life Centres, the couple started their own Christian Life Centre in the north-western Sydney suburb of Baulkham Hills in 1983. In an interview with the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, Brian Houston said that he chose Baulkham Hills:

Partly because of a hugely successful car dealer out there who ‘used to be on the TV and sell Holdens. And I thought to myself, ‘If you could build the largest Holden dealership in Australia there, surely it must be somewhere where you could build a church’. (Snow 2015)

Brian Houston establishes links between suburban commerce and church growth in his original vision for what would become Hillsong Church. As of 2019, Hillsong Church claims to have one hundred thousand Sunday service attendees each week at Hillsong-branded locations around the world, including Sydney, London, Los Angeles, New York, Kiev, Cape Town, Tel Aviv, Sao Paulo and Rio De Janeiro (Hillsong 2019). C3 Church was started in 1980 by Phil and Chris Pringle when they moved from New Zealand to Sydney’s Northern beaches. Christian City Church grew from a small household gathering to attracting five hundred attendees within four years (C3 Global 2017) and the Pringles purchased land at Oxford Falls in North Sydney which would become the central campus for C3 Church. Christian City Churches was rebranded as C3 Church in the late 2000s and, according to the C3 Global (2017) website ‘With over 450 churches in 64 countries, we are rapidly moving towards the 2020 Vision of 1000 Locations planted by the year 2020’. The emphasis on growth is central to the way that C3 Church explains the success of their church planting. C3 Church’s growth narrative is a key part of C3’s brand development and the smallness of the movement’s beginnings is emphasised at every opportunity

Similarly to COC/inc, Hillsong, and C3 Church, the influence of Pentecostal growth theology was present in the founding of Influencers Church and Planetshakers. In 2000, Andrew Evans passed on the leadership of his successful Pentecostal Paradise Community Church to his son Ashley and daughter-in-law Jane. Ashley and Jane Evans built on Andrew Evans’ achievements to develop a Pentecostal church that caters to multiple aspects of people’s lives. Influencers Church displays growth theology in its vision and goals. The vision statement for the church says:

We believe that to reach this generation, you need to speak their language. The language of this generation is media and so we are committed to engage with media to communicate to & capture the vision and hearts of the generation that will take the baton from us and run further and faster than we ever will. (Influencers 2017)

This outlines Ashley and Jane’s desire to grow their church rapidly using modern communication tools and strategies. In 1997, Ashley Evans’ brother Russell and his wife Samantha received donations and offerings from Paradise Community Church to develop the Planetshakers youth conference. Under the couple’s leadership, the Planetshakers conference held in Adelaide grew rapidly from three hundred attendees in 1997 to sixteen thousand in 2002 and a praise and worship band formed under the same name as the conference (Austin 2017, p. 145; Daystar Television 2017). In 2004, Russell and Sam Evans capitalised on the success of the Planetshakers conference and band and founded a Planetshakers-branded church in Melbourne (Austin 2017, p. 145; Daystar Television 2017). From this base, Russell and Sam planted four more Planetshakers churches in Melbourne and expanded internationally, planting churches in Singapore, South Africa, Geneva, and the city of Austin in the US state of Texas (Planetshakers 2017). Growth theology has been present in Hillsong Church, COC/inc’s Citipointe Church, C3 Church, Influencers Church and Planetshakers since establishment. The emergence of the neoliberal policy environment assisted in realising opportunities for expansion into non-church activities, such as education, charity ventures and financial institutions.

### 3. Emerging Economic Rationalism and Pentecostal Suburban-Based Megachurches in Australia

Economic rationalism and Pentecostal suburban-based megachurches emerged in Australia at similar times, during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In Australia, the post-World War II period saw increased prosperity and economic opportunities. Keynesian welfare state principles—in which the state was responsible for implementing and delivering a range of services supporting these opportunities—worked in the context of the protectionist economic policies in Australia (Webster 1995). The Australian macroeconomic structure changed with the introduction and implementation of

economic rationalist and neoliberal policies as a response to the effects of stagflation and the oil crisis in the 1970s (Webster 1995; Stokes 2014, p. 194). The transition started with the reform of the public service under the Whitlam government in the 1970s (Quiggin 1997; Stokes 2014, p. 197). In the 1980s, the Hawke government implemented economic rationalist policies that laid the foundations for Australia's transition to neoliberalism. These included integrating the Australian economy into the global market, 'embracing the notions of free trade and the removal of constraints on capital flows through bilateral trading agreements, and other international alliances' (Chester 2010, p. 315). Keynesian economic management was dismantled through a range of policy changes: floating the Australian dollar on international markets, delegating monetary policy responsibility to the Reserve Bank, downgrading industry policy, cutting trade tariffs, privatising publicly owned sectors of the economy, and introducing marketisation and privatising as instruments of government service delivery (Spies-Butcher 2008, p. 270). Beginning with the Whitlam government in the 1970s, successive Australian governments undertook changes in policy approach that resulted in neoliberal policy focus on privatisation, marketisation, and supporting free global trading markets.

While these approaches came to be known as neoliberalism, in Australia, this type of macroeconomic management was called economic rationalism, in which policy-makers provide regulations to ensure that markets are un-inhibited under the assumption that markets best distribute both social and economic resources (Quiggin 1997; Stokes 2014, p. 195).

Escobar (2005) argued that economic structures are central to power arrangements and the organisation of material conditions in modernity. In this, the economy becomes the site for governance and policy application and the creation of markets is assumed to be the most efficient policy mechanism for distributing social goods. In this policy environment, Beeson and Firth (1998, p. 6) located the image of the market as 'the ideal to which schooling, education, health services, welfare and the agencies of the state which provide these services are encouraged to conform in order to ensure national economic survival.' Economic rationalist and neoliberal policy aims means that the state's assumed role is to support the creation of market-like mechanisms to deliver services. The implementation of economic rationalism facilitated the expansion of the economic justifications into social policy decisions. This version of neoliberal ideology assumes that privatisation, marketisation, and corporatisation of government services are the most efficient methods to deliver those social services that were previously managed by the state under Keynesian macroeconomic structures (Quiggin 1997). Neoliberal policy shifts the state's role in service delivery, from direct implementation of services to encouraging competitive, market-like processes in the delivery of those services. In Australia, this policy shift allowed religious organisations to take over the provision of community services such as education, health, and welfare delivery, as private markets were developed in these areas. Neoliberal economic policy facilitated the entry and expansion of Australian Pentecostal church-branded organisations into the areas of education, community care, and for COC/inc and C3 Church, financial services including superannuation and investment services.

#### 4. Australian Suburban-Based Pentecostal Church Entry into the Education Sector

Due to the economic rationalist policy environment, Australian suburban-based Pentecostal churches were able to expand church-branded activities in the education sector, capitalising on the opportunity for development through the government emphasis on privatisation. The provision of federal funding structures for independent schools was instrumental in creating the appearance of a competitive education market in Australia. The initial policy structures for deregulating education and creating a two-tiered education market were implemented in the early 1980s (Trimmer 2013). This process redefined the purpose of education in Australia as a tool 'for individual advancement' (Morsy et al. 2014, p. 447), positioning parents as having a choice between 'private' schools—funded mostly through fees and Federal government money—and mostly State government-funded schools. Hey (2010, p. 214) observes that federal government policy in the early 1970s saw the Whitlam government establish government assistance schemes for new Christian schools, while encouraging

these schools to participate in networks of curriculum accountability. Funding structures for non-government schools provided federal resources to independent religious schools on a nation-wide scale. COC/inc established their church-branded school in 1978 and C3 Church started Oxford Falls Christian College in 1984. The federal policy environment valued marketisation as the key process in the creation of the appearance of a competitive education sector and the development of a private education market in Australia, and this provided opportunities for COC/inc and C3 Church to expand into educational ventures. Hillsong Church, Planetshakers and Influencers Church established bible colleges due to similar government funding arrangements in tertiary education.

COC founded their school in inner-city Brisbane in 1978, catering for years one to ten (Hey 2010). The Australian federal arrangement of the government system means that responsibility for accrediting and regulating educational institutions lies with the states. Maddox (2014a) noted that the school's founding principal Ian Feeny attended COC and was a qualified and experienced educator. He was also a close friend of the Queensland government's education minister, Lin Powell, who assisted the school in gaining accreditation status (Maddox 2014a). C3 Church established Oxford Falls Grammar School in 1984 on the same campus as the C3 Church and C3 Bible College (Oxford Falls Grammar School 2015). Throughout the late 1970s, COC churches across Queensland capitalised on parental concerns about state schools' 'emphasis on scientific world views, the big bang theory of origins, evolution and a materialist, rationalist world view that seemed to exclude the roles of God, divine revelation and divine providence' (Hey 2010, p. 221). Parents were particularly interested in sending their children to low-fee Christian schools that offered smaller class sizes and strong parent–teacher relationships (Hey 2010, p. 220). Enrolments at the schools increased and COC opened three more locations in south-east Queensland, while six COC churches along the Eastern Australian coast started schools between 1979 and 1982 (Hey 2010, p. 220). Hey (2010, p. 222) observes that the independent Christian schooling market in Australia aimed to create schools that were infused with Christian ethos and world view to combat the changes in public schools that increasingly emphasised vocational and recreational subjects, sexual and drug education, and relaxation of corporal punishment. COC/inc originally used an American curriculum called Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), 'specifically designed for classrooms where students may not have constant access to a fully qualified teacher: indeed, initially ACE schools had to be linked with a local church' (Maddox 2014a).

By 1982, COC's schools had adopted the Queensland state government's accredited curriculum (with the exception of Gympie-based Victory College, which continued to use ACE until 1995), as the Queensland government gave Christian schools of this type some license to teach according to associated church beliefs: in particular, whose statements of faith 'proclaim the superiority of divine law and the schools' right to operate independently of 'subjection.'<sup>3</sup> New South Wales, where C3 Church's Oxford Grammar School is located, has a similar arrangement (Maddox 2014a). Both COC/inc and C3 Churches' schools seek to provide education based in a Christian worldview that emphasises empowering students to influence their wider community. The Citipointe Christian College (2017) prospectus states:

In our quest for excellence we integrate faith and learning holistically, to empower students with the values and foundations that will allow them to flourish and serve God and the wider community.

Oxford Falls Grammar School (2016, p. 2) outlines a similar vision in its mission to teach students about

Proclaiming the Gospel message and lifestyle through Christ-centred educational excellence, encompassing the spiritual, physical, emotional and academic development of each student.

The type of Christian education marketed by COC/inc and C3 Church assists in actualising the churches' goals of equipping their congregants with abilities to influence from their interpretations

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive history of religious schools, regulation and government funding in Australia, see (Maddox 2014a).

of a 'Christian-centred' perspective and be successful in the wider community to demonstrate the appeal of being educated within these Pentecostal church environments, encouraging the growth of Pentecostal churches.

Financial support from State and Federal government sources assisted C3 Church and COC/inc to successfully continue their ventures into the Australian education market. In the late 1990s, the Howard government formalised the federal funding structures for religious schools, consolidating the two-tiered education system to provide long-term recurrent funding from the federal and State governments to independent 'private' schools (Maddox 2014a). In contrast to the United States, where it is prohibited for public money to be spent on religious schools, the Australian federal government awards high subsidies to private schools and little is demanded of these schools in terms of accountability (Maddox 2014a). By 2000, the smaller COC churches along the coast had closed their schools and as at 2019, COC/inc runs Citipointe Christian College in Brisbane, Victory College at Gympie, Suncoast College Nambour, and Christian Outreach College Toowoomba (International Network of Churches 2019). Hey (2010, p. 230) noted that increased government funding assisted in the establishment, expansion, and continued success for COC/inc ventures into the schooling sector. According to Myschool figures, a government website that compiles financial and socio-economic data on Australian schools, in 2015 Federal and State government funding provided fifty percent of Citipointe Christian College's income, eighty percent of Victory College's, sixty percent of Suncoast Christian College's, and sixty-three percent for Christian Outreach College Toowoomba (Myschool 2017). Oxford Falls Grammar School received thirty-six percent of its funding from federal and State government sources (Myschool 2017). Reporting to Myschool and complying with requirements for national standardised testing provide some accountability mechanisms for schools of this type in Australia (Maddox 2014a). COC's Christian Outreach College promises the Australian Curriculum and Report Authority to 'develop the student as a Christian disciple, and to develop the student for life in its various dimensions, within the framework of a Biblical worldview' (Maddox 2014a). Through the funding structures designed to facilitate a two-tiered education market in Australia and state governments who looked favourably on independent Christian schools, C3 Church and COC/inc continue to maintain successful ventures into the school sector. In Australia, this arrangement means that 'schools receive government support, often at substantial levels, but also maintain a careful independence from government involvement in their curriculum' (Maddox 2014a).

The Australian tertiary education industry also underwent significant changes during the emergence of neoliberal policy and Australian suburban-based Pentecostal churches established bible colleges. The development of the technical and further education system—vocational education and training institutions funded at the State level—formalised the accreditation process for trades and skills not taught at universities (Harman 1988, p. 258). Accreditation for a range of post-secondary school skills was centralised to state-level institutions and this split the Australian higher education system into three sectors: universities, colleges of advanced education, and technical and further education institutions (Harman 1988, p. 253). The Australian higher education sector expanded throughout the 1990s due to favourable government funding and growth in the Australian economy (Hey 2010, p. 235). In this policy context, Pentecostal churches established private colleges offering certificate, diploma, advanced diploma, bachelor and masters qualifications in ministry training, church planting techniques, Biblical interpretation, worship service development, missionary training, and pastoral community care. Contextual factors, other than seeking financial incentives, motivated Pentecostal church entry into the education sector. At the time, Pentecostals tended to be excluded from mainline denominational theological colleges. There was also a demand for ministry courses that had practical elements (Hey 2010). While this explains aspects of motivation for establishing higher education institutions, the government funding and attraction of international students provided favourable conditions in which the newly established Pentecostal suburban-based churches could quickly develop and expand organisational foundations within the education sector.

COC/inc established Christian Heritage College, a teacher-training college modelled on North American evangelical Christian universities that, initially, used mostly US-produced educational resources (Hey 2010, p. 233). Christian Heritage College received accreditation status in 1988, and in 1992 successfully lobbied the federal government to grant Commonwealth-funded financial assistance to students to better enable the college's ability to expand (Hey 2010, p. 234). Christian Heritage College offers bachelor's degrees in teaching and social science, and an Associate Diploma of Ministry, Bachelor of Ministry and post-graduate Diploma of Ministry (Hey 2010, pp. 234–35). C3 College, founded in the early 1980s, is marketed as a training institute offering government-accredited courses for Christian ministry, creative arts and performance, and social services such as counselling, chaplaincy, and community development (C3 College 2016). Students at C3 College can study on the main campus at Oxford Falls Sydney, online, or at a number of campuses across Australia (C3 College 2016). The Influencers Leadership School—taught through Australian Christian Churches<sup>4</sup>-affiliated Alphacrucis College—, Planetshakers College, and Hillsong College, founded in the 1980s and 1990s, offer similar ministry, worship and community services training accreditation with voluntary service at the churches, a requirement of qualification completion.)

The brand of Christian education offered through Australian suburban-based Pentecostal colleges actualises the church goals of maintaining relevance and influence, which assists in achieving goals of growth. The church colleges market courses that are designed to empower students to be Christian leaders in all areas of life. According to the website, Hillsong College offers students:

A proven mix of classroom learning, hands-on ministry experience and a vibrant College community, you really will be set up for a life of purpose and impact. All around the world our graduates are making a difference in ministry, worship and creativity. (Hillsong College 2016)

Influencers Leadership School outlines its vision in its website to provide students with higher education for furthering the church's influence and growth goals, stating:

From family to business to politics and the arts, the Influencers vision is to alter the perceptions of God and the church, leave a mark on the world and make it a better place. We see people whose influence is so attractive it cannot be ignored, so authentic it isn't rejected, so compelling it is listened to, so loving it is embraced and so powerful it becomes an unstoppable force for good. (Influencers Leadership School 2016)

The expansion of the private market in the higher education sector in Australia throughout the 1980s facilitated the involvement of Pentecostal suburban churches in the tertiary training and higher education sector. This meant that the churches developed church-branded tertiary institutions that market their version of Christianity in higher education contexts. The entry of the churches into the education sectors assisted in establishing institutional foundations from which the leaders could expand activities into the not-for-profit sector as it too was marketised by the government. The success of these activities in the education sector demonstrates the church leaders' ability to adapt to a neoliberal policy environment that encouraged the private schooling and higher education market in Australia. These organisational foundations established by the churches though these educational activities assisted in facilitating the eventual achievement of global reach and engagement, seen by the churches as a 'blessing', as per growth theology.

## 5. Australian Pentecostal Suburban-Based Churches Enter the Not-for-Profit and Charity Sector

Marketised methods of contracting welfare and community care services instituted in the emergence of neoliberal governance strategies meant that Australian churches had the opportunity

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<sup>4</sup> Under the leadership of Brian Houston, the Australian AOG changed association names to Australian Christian Churches (ACC) in 2000. ACC is the organising body for Hillsong Church, Planetshakers and Influencers Church.

to expand charity work (Melville and McDonald 2006). Anglican, Catholic, Salvation Army, and Church of Christ organisations took more responsibility for welfare and community care services as the government implemented market-based solutions to creating accountability in the welfare and community care sector. In this policy environment, community health and counselling services are outsourced to private enterprise and non-profit organisations through contract tendering processes and grant applications, in which organisations compete for grants and funding. The government holds an organisation to account through a range of bureaucratic accountability mechanisms, including stringent contract renewal procedures (Melville and McDonald 2006). Through this, organisations associated with churches have increased responsibility for a range of community care and health services, such as managing health and aged care facilities, running counselling services, facilitating work-for-the-dole programs, managing second-hand goods shops, delivering employment services, and providing rehabilitation programs in the community. Religious organisations receive much of their funding through donations and use volunteer labour to perform many services. The 2010 Productivity Commission Report (Productivity Commission 2010, p. 53) into the charity and not-for-profit sector in Australia found that the industry is worth \$43 billion with five million volunteers contributing \$14.6 billion in unpaid work to the sector. The government provides funding for the not-for-profit industry, exceeding \$25 billion through donation, purchasing, and investing in charity organisations and work, including many religious organisations (Productivity Commission 2010, p. 275). Outsourcing community and social services to not-for-profit religious organisations benefitted suburban-based Pentecostal churches and enhanced their ability to perform pastoral care and community services.

Hillsong, C3 Church, COC/inc, and Planetshakers each have ministries that perform community care, providing crisis housing, food, assisting homeless people, and counselling services for vulnerable peoples. To assist their contribution, the churches partner with other Christian charity organisations, including child sponsorship groups Compassion Australia and World Vision, social care organisation Mission Australia, youth-focussed anti-alcohol and drug organisation Red Frogs, anti-sex trafficking groups SHE Rescue Home and A21 Campaign, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-focused charity Bounce, and Christmas donation charities such as Operation Christmas Child. COC/inc founded Red Frogs in 1997 to combat what they saw as a youth culture dominated by alcohol and substance intake, attempting to model 'alternative' methods for partying (Red Frogs Australia 2017). Leigh Ramsey, senior pastor of COC/inc's Citipointe Church, founded SHE Rescue Home in Cambodia to help young female victims of rape, prostitution, and sex-trafficking (SHE Rescue Home 2017). Hillsong Citycare, the charity arm of Hillsong Church, says they provide counselling services for youth, school-based sexuality education programs, crisis care, including counselling services and emergency financial assistance, transitional housing for domestic violence survivors, inmate support through chaplaincy and chapel programs in prisons, and leadership development (Hillsong Annual Report 2016). Hillsong Citycare states their purpose as:

We have been serving in schools, prisons, nursing homes, hospitals, shelters, detention centres, and in our local neighbourhoods over the past 20 years. The heart behind everything we do, is to see lives of individuals changed so they can lead and impact in every sphere of life. (Hillsong Citycare 2017)

Planetshakers Empower provides volunteers with activities for community care with a focus on community engagement, particularly with refugees and asylum seekers. Planetshakers Empower has partnerships with Foodbank Victoria, Prison Network Ministries, Prison Fellowship, and the Salvation Army, and the mission statement says:

Individuals and families in Planetshakers Church are encouraged to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of people in our neighbourhoods. Initiatives might include befriending a newly arrived refugee family, offering social support for a frail elderly neighbour, mowing the lawns for a solo parent, or helping at a backyard blitz for a local community group. (Planetshakers Empower 2017)

The entry of religious organisations into a range of community services allowed suburban-based Pentecostal churches to formalise their community care work arrangements and forge partnerships with other religious organisations. These outsourcing and funding processes afforded the churches the opportunity to establish charity services accountable to the government while simultaneously developing church-branded community care organisations. C3 Church's partnership with anti-poverty initiative Christians Against Poverty emphasises the evangelism potential of charity work stating that 2016 was:

Another busy and successful year with almost 100 families being helped through our 3 campuses. On average there is a new salvation every week. Since opening the Centres we have assisted 490 families and seen 130 decisions for Christ. ([Vision Builders 2013](#))

The increase in the Australian not-for-profit sector allowed Pentecostal suburban-based churches to identify and respond to opportunities in the charities sector while at the same time build awareness of their church brands within local and international communities. This assisted the church leaders in actualising their goals of achieving growth, as the charity work creates an environment in which people can be encouraged to attend a local version of the church, or even result in conversions. The success of the churches in establishing charity ventures demonstrates an ability to adapt to a neoliberal policy environment, which encourages the outsourcing of welfare and community care activities to not-for-profit organisations. This, in turn, assists Pentecostal suburban-based churches in establishing strong organisational foundations from which a global engagement can be actualised and global reach can be realised.

## 6. Superannuation in Australia and the Establishment of Pentecostal Megachurch-Branded Financial Institutions

The implementation of superannuation designed to supplement the state-funded pension in Australia meant that suburban-based Pentecostal churches had opportunities to involve themselves in developing interests in financial institutions. Emphasis on individual responsibility and concerns about increasing government spending on welfare prompted the Keating government to implement a guaranteed national superannuation policy in the early 1990s ([Drew and Stanford 2003](#)). [Drew and Stanford \(2003\)](#) observe that the Department of Finance and Administration stated:

The key objectives of compulsory superannuation when introduced in 1992–3 were greater private sector provision for retirement and to assist lower income workers to live better in retirement through a combination of the age pension supplemented with tax assisted superannuation.

The government introduced tax incentives to encourage self-governance and management in the financial services, allowing people to choose their superannuation services and manage their own investment portfolios. The neoliberal policy environment incentivised individual responsibility for arranging retirement funds through superannuation management services, contributing to creating a robust financial services market in Australia ([Pearson 2006](#)). The deregulation and development of the superannuation industries and investment services provided opportunities for suburban-based Pentecostal churches to expand activities in the financial sector.

In 1984, Christian Schools Superannuation Fund was established by Christian Community Schools, the group that oversaw the accreditation of parent-controlled schools affiliated with churches ([Christian Super 2014](#)), such as those run by COC and C3 Church. In 2000, Christian Community Schools changed its name to Christian Super and began to seek investment strategies based on the organisation's interpretations of Biblical principles and ethics ([Christian Super 2014](#)). COC/inc joined forces with other state-based and national AOG and Pentecostal school associations, and in 2001, formed Christian Schools Australia to provide school development, professional development, and assist in lobbying for government funding ([Hey 2010](#), pp. 229–30). Christian Super's board is made up

of representatives from Christian Schools Australia and ACC, the organisational body for the Australian AOG, along with Christian Education National, the Baptist Union of Australia, and Churches of Christ in Australia (Christian Super 2016, p. 10). C3 Church's Oxford Falls Grammar Schools is a member of Christian Schools Australia (2017) and COC/inc's Suncoast Christian College is represented by the Australian Association of Christian Schools (2015), which is a member association of Christian Education National (Australian Association of Christian Schools, Christian Education National 2017). In 2015, Christian Super merged with the Australian Christian Superannuation, the superannuation provider for Australian Christian Churches (ACC), the organising body for Hillsong, Planetshakers, and Influencers Church. Christian Super's 2015 Annual Report states that the organisation provides 'a uniquely Christian superannuation product to a membership of more than 26,000 members with funds under management in excess of \$940 million' (Christian Super 2015).

Thus, Christian Super represents the superannuation interests of several Australian suburban-based Pentecostal churches and associated schools, and their brand of investment strategy is based on ethical values 'firmly grounded in Biblical principles' (Christian Super 2015). The company outlines a list of 'Topical Positions' (Christian Super 2017) that guide the ethics of investment decisions explaining that Christian Super will not invest in: abortifacient or abortifacient-like contraceptives, companies that derive more than five percent revenue from alcohol production, products tested on animals, companies proven to be involved in bribery or using corrupt practices, companies using child labour in their supply chain, negative contributions to climate change and use fossil fuels, predatory lending practices, companies profiting from human rights abuses, improper marketing, or companies involved in the fast food, gambling, tobacco, sex, and weapons industries. Christian Super (2017) states: 'In arriving at these positions we strived to take into account the fullness of scriptural revelation as well as varying views within the Christian community'. Through the establishment of Christian Super, organisations linked to Australian Pentecostal churches can access a superannuation company that aligns with a particular brand of Christian worldview.

Established in 2004 as COC Investment Services, inc Invest manages COC/inc's finances including building funds, church planting support, and a variety of personal and business investment fund strategies and accounts (inc Invest 2014a). The inc Invest (2014b) products and services booklets states:

We believe in the mobilisation of individual and corporate finances to empower the local church and its charitable objectives. Whether you're a local church member, a business owner or managing a church or college ministry, we offer a range of products and services designed to meet your financial needs and your desire to help resource the growing church, charity and educational activities of the INC movement.

Customers are encouraged to arrange 'direct giving' from their inc Invest account to make tithing to their COC/inc-affiliated church more convenient. Inc Invest offers customers targeted donation pools which fund church planting, church property development, hardship and crisis loans, and missionary work through Christian Heritage College's School of Business (inc Invest 2014b). Inc Invest allows COC/inc to consolidate their financial interests into one organisation that offers a full range of banking services, including personal and business finance accounts for managing donations, tithes, loans, and funds for church activities. The deregulation of the financial services sector and the establishment of compulsory superannuation policy allowed suburban-based Pentecostal churches to link church-branded activities to the financial industry, capitalising on their organisational skills, business connections, and wealth management strategies. The success of these activities demonstrates an ability to adapt to a neoliberal policy environment that encouraged organisational self-responsibility for finances through privatisation of financial services such as superannuation and banking.

## **7. Conclusions: How Economic Rationalism in Australia Provided Opportunities for Pentecostal Suburban-Based Churches to Actualise Growth Goals**

The implementation of economic rationalist policies which lead to the neoliberal governance context in Australia afforded opportunities for churches to build activities in the education, community

care, and financial sectors. Churches from other Australian denominations, including Baptist and Churches of Christ, share organisational developments with the churches discussed in this paper during this era. However, Baptist and Church of Christ congregations maintain a smaller size and more democratic ecclesial structure than Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Influencers Church, and Planetshakers. While the expansion of the not-for-profit sector benefitted many Australian religious organisations, the specific advantage that these changes offered the newly established Pentecostal churches were opportunities to actualise goals of global growth by providing an organisational foundation from which to expand overseas. Offering a version of Christian education in schooling and higher education allowed to establish themselves in the education sector. Uptake of charity work and partnerships with successful not-for-profit organisations provides opportunities for neo-Pentecostal churches to develop pastoral experience and encourage ‘decisions for Christ’ in realising growth potential through the charity sector. The deregulation of the financial market assisted in establishing links with Christian finance companies, allowing them to actualise business and monetary policy ethics based on their interpretation of Biblical principles and expanding their capacity for growth through contemporary finance management practices. From these organisational bases, Hillsong Church, C3 Church, Citipointe Church, Planetshakers and Influencers Church have gone on to establish an international presence: running church-branded conferences in cities worldwide, promoting church-branded worship music bands with international touring schedules, and planting churches or holding church-branded services in locations all over the globe.

Marketisation and privatisation afforded Australian suburban-based Pentecostal churches opportunities to build and expand activities, actualising growth theology and goals of global reach. This is significant for understanding how religious forms can adapt to political context. For Pentecostal suburban-based churches in Australia, linking these contexts to actualising growth theology and global megachurch status means the churches become, in the words of *Influencers* (2019), ‘An unstoppable force for good.’ The ‘good’, in this context, is access to ever-increasing congregation sizes, establishing the organisational foundations for building church assets for becoming a global megachurch. The emergence of neoliberalism in Australia provided opportunities for the development of foundations of future megachurches, an operationalisation of Pentecostal theological and organisational orientation to global growth.

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