

The Politics of Preaching: A New Zealand Megachurch and the Place of Current Affairs in Religious Communication

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Abstract

This research detangles the place of current affairs within religious communication. Focusing on sermons, a phenomenon with limited research in a New Zealand context, it explores the role of preaching in defining social issues, locating sources of truth, and creating and reinforcing barriers to belonging. Using a case study of City Impact Church, a New Zealand-based megachurch, this research employs a mixed method approach. Quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis are applied to probe the sermons of a senior pastor over a two-and-a-half-year period, from January 2020 to July 2022. This era included a general election and was riddled with contention for those who opposed the New Zealand Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Three important findings are discovered.

Firstly, spikes in discourse regarding current affairs are linked to times when debate was rife in the public arena. The frequency and intensity of engagement between these issues suggest the pastor's desire to impose his worldview onto the congregation. When such topics are engaged in a manner that is persistent and dogmatic, it indicates that pastors are cultivating uniformity to create unity.

Secondly, the pastor positioned himself as the sole source of truth. Sermons were used to erode faith in trusted pillars of society, specifically, the mainstream media, government, and education. The pastor became a self-appointed journalist, evaluating fact from fiction on behalf of congregants. His opinions were styled as biblical truths by postulating himself as God's mouthpiece, positioning himself as a shepherd, and assuring people of his credibility, among other tactics.

Finally, the study explores barriers to belonging, which are unspoken beliefs and behaviours people must embrace to feel a sense of belonging in a group. City Impact Church's pastor used sermons to extend barriers to belonging to include one's opinions regarding current affairs, namely sharing views on Covid-19 vaccines, politics, and belief in the world's imminent end.

Ultimately, this study calls for pastoral reflection, critical evaluation of sermon content related to current affairs, and the analytical assessment of barriers to belonging within churches, to ensure healthy faith environments are fostered.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anshu", is written over a horizontal line.

1 July 2023

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Chapter 1: Introduction

History notes a plethora of lightning rod issues across 2020, 2021 and 2022, some of which were particularly divisive. New Zealand was fighting off a globally raging pandemic plus navigating a hotly contested general election.

Across this time some church leaders decided to tackle these political and social issues head-on, utilising the platform of sermons to air their opinions. This research takes a closer look at this particular point of time and examines the place of current affairs within religious communication and more specifically, sermons. The delivery and content of sermons is a largely untapped research area despite its open access nature, and significant influence upon the people who attend the faith community regularly. This thesis aims to explore engagement in political and social matters within sermons, and the implications such engagement may have using the methods of quantitative content analysis and thematic analysis.

This chapter encompasses an overview of the research's background, the research problem, research objectives and questions posed, before outlining the significance of the research.

Firstly, a background to the study.

Religion, and in particular Christianity, continues to have a global strong hold. Christianity is the largest religion in the world (Zurlo et al., 2023), and in New Zealand (Stats NZ, 2019). In 2018, though the proportion was diminishing, 37.31% of New Zealand's population - more than 1,800,000 people – still identified as Christian (Stats NZ, 2019). The next largest religion in New Zealand was Hinduism (121,644 people), Islam (57,276 people) and Sikhism (40,908 people) (Stats NZ, 2019). These statistics show that in New Zealand the number of people identifying as Christian towered over all other religions. From an international perspective every continent on earth is witnessing an increase in the number of people who identify as Christian (Zurlo et al., 2023). Globally there are around 2.6 billion people practicing Christianity, approximately 32% of the world's population (Zurlo et al., 2023). These statistics show Christianity continues to play an important part in the lives of a considerable number of people in New Zealand and around the world.

While Christianity still has a strong following in New Zealand, Walker (2010) wrote its influence in New Zealand was waning. She said during the first arrival of settlers, Christian missionaries were among the first to develop significant connections with Māori. Despite this strong early influence Walker questioned Christianity's power today, drawing on news stories such as when New Zealand's national museum refused to remove an artwork Christians found highly offensive. She drew on census data that showed the declining number of New Zealanders affiliating themselves as Christian. However, strong interest in news coverage on Christianity could indicate religion remains a topic of concern for New Zealanders. Therefore, Walker believed religion still had a perceived level of influence by the public.

Christianity is also influential. There are three main theoretical approaches to religion (McGivern, 2014). Theorists who adopt functionalism believed religion gives people purpose, fosters social harmony, exercises authority over people's conduct, encourages wellness and inspires positive societal evolution (Turner & Maryanski, 1979). Conflict theory believed religion stirs inequalities and violence (Collins & Sanderson, 2015). The symbolic interactionism theory believed people make religion sacred because of the meaning they attach to it (Carter & Fuller, 2016).

All three theories are connected by a shared view that religion is influential with the power to shape people's behaviour. Religion helps cultivate social unity (functionalism theory) or disunity (conflict theory) or allow people to dictate what is sacred (symbolic interaction theory). These theories believe religion's authority has the power to change people's actions, beliefs, and behaviours. Where they differ is whether those changes make society better or worse. While I believe on the whole religion is good for society I recognise there are some instances where it can be harmful. Therefore, it is imperative religions, and specifically Christianity as the world's largest religion, are studied to determine how its leaders communicate to its followers, how people's behaviour and beliefs are cultivated, and whether communications are used for its intended purpose.

Academics have found Christian pastors to be highly influential figures over the people within the church they lead. Churchgoers are likely to regard their pastor as a friend (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016)

and as a leading reason as to why they stay at a church (Yip and Hoon, 2016). Corcoran and Wellman (2016) found pastors can be perceived as God's "mouthpiece" (p. 320).

The megachurch religious model is thriving in the United States and continues to sweep around the world, including New Zealand (Goh, 2008). The base definition for a megachurch is a Protestant church with weekly attendance exceeding 2,000 people (Bird & Thumma, 2020). Other academics have expanded this definition to include unique characteristics including modern music, energetically magnetic preachers, and existing to convert the unchurched (Goh, 2008).

By nature of a growing concentration of people in attendance these pastors amass significant power and influence over the people in the congregation.

All types of churches have barriers to group entry, some spoken such as taking a course to become a member, others are unspoken like the dress code (Wellman et al., 2020). Pastors utilise socialisation, the illusion of social order, to cultivate these barriers, demanding through unspoken or overt beliefs or behaviours that people comply with or face tacit detachment from the group. More on socialisation and belonging is discussed in Chapters 2 and 7. Because belonging is one of the most powerful desires within the human experience (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister et al., 2007; Lambert et al., 2013), if this becomes threatened one may be more inclined to change their beliefs or behaviours preventing full group belonging as opposed to feeling left out of the group. This can lead to people adopting beliefs or behaviours they might have otherwise not have embraced to retain a sense of belonging. Academic study into the cultures of belonging within megachurches and churches in general is scarce globally, and rare in New Zealand. Research into belonging primarily focuses on adolescence, leaving a wide knowledge gap regarding belonging within faith communities.

Sermons play a large role in reinforcing a person's sense of belonging to a church. A sermon is a speech given in the middle of a church service, usually by one preacher. The length can vary from as short as 20 minutes, to being hours long. Sermons are a core component of the religious experience and serve as a teaching tool for instruction on how to live life. Some study has been conducted into how sermons can

change the lives of congregants however little has been done regarding what pastors proclaim from the pulpit.

In summary, the place of current affairs within religion is a largely untapped research area. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, study of these phenomena outside of the United States is scarce despite the size, scale, magnitude, and influence religion and more specifically, megachurches, have on many people's lives.

The absence of study in the delivery and content of sermons, belonging in the context of a religious community and the megachurch model, opens a gap for examination. Such research is vital due to the power and influence these elements of religion have. How authority is used and reinforced is important to understand to ensure it is not leveraged in a problematic way. It is also important for church leaders and attendees to understand how power dynamics are created and reinforced through sermons to equip them with the ability to identify the misuse of power and ensure internal accountability structures are operational to prevent pastors from using their position of authority in a way that does not foster healthy faith communities.

This study has three research objectives at its foundation. The first is to identify the role sermons play in defining social issues. The second is to recognise how faith leaders can use sermons to locate sources of truth. The final research objective is to examine how sermons create or reinforce barriers to belonging.

These research objectives drive the research questions this study is guided by:

1. What role do sermons play in defining social issues for a faith community?
2. How do faith leaders use sermons to locate sources of truth?
3. How do sermons create or reinforce barriers to belonging?

This research contributes to academic literature by examining how sermons can be used to present social issues, delegitimise other sources of social power and instead legitimise types of information that represent the pastor's values, and the requirements for belonging to the community. This helps address

the current shortage of study into megachurches, the content of sermons and belonging in the context of faith communities.

To answer these questions this research employs qualitative-quantitative case study analysis of the preaching of a single individual. Although the analysis of one single evangelical church is not sufficient to make wide claims it is representative of the moment in New Zealand. It should prompt pastors and churchgoers alike can reflect on the composition of their own place of worship and evaluate the nourishing ways current affairs, truth and belonging can be addressed in sermons. The case study selected to answer these questions is Pastor Peter Mortlock of City Impact Church from January 2021 to July 2022.

This study was conducted with consideration to ethical and moral standards. Vogt et al. (2012) believed private data was protected but data publicly available was “fair game” (p. 303). All data used within this research was publicly available and obtained from the internet, not through direct observation. There are no perceived ethical issues with this approach. Further details regarding the ethical considerations factored into this study can be found in Chapter 3, on page 52.

The intention of this project is not to call the church out but to call it up. I believe it can always be better. This study illuminates measures that can be implemented to foster healthier communities of faith. It exists to identify, explain, and analyse a set of practices occurring in some churches to trigger reflection on whether these happenings are occurring within other places of worship, and whether such practices are what Jesus intended for church.

In this chapter, the introduction, I outlined the context underpinning this research, its objectives and research questions, alongside the value this research brings to academia, churches, and churchgoers.

Chapter 2 takes a deeper dive into relevant existing literature to firmly contextualise where this research fits within the wider academic body of work around the world and in New Zealand regarding faith, megachurches, belonging and when religion entangles with current affairs.

In Chapter 3 the methodology espoused is outlined. The case study method alongside quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis used are justified.

The following chapter provides a background regarding the senior pastor and church selected as the case study.

The findings are then presented. Justification for discussing current affairs and politics within sermons while showing Pastor Peter Mortlock, whose sermons are investigated in this case study, has been taking agency to control the narrative of current affairs digested by the City Impact Church congregation is broached in Chapter 5. The dismantling of traditional sources of truth, such as the mainstream media, and construction of the senior pastor as a truth locus is explored in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 introduces the idea of barriers to belonging which are unspoken behaviours and beliefs people must embrace to feel a sense of belonging to a community. The chapter examines how sermons can extend barriers to belonging to include opinions regarding politics and current affairs.

This research's overall findings are then presented in Chapter 8 as well as recommendations for future research.

In summary, this research explores the intersection of religion and current affairs specifically within sermons delivered by church leaders. It aims to fill a gap in academic study regarding the place of current affairs in religious communication. The study acknowledges the significant influence of Christianity globally and in New Zealand as well as the consolidation of church movements resulting in many pastors amassing large followings and therefore significant influence. The research objectives include understanding the role of sermons in defining social issues, recognising how faith leaders locate sources of truth, and demonstrating how sermons can establish or reinforce barriers to belonging. By examining these aspects the research aims to contribute to academic literature and prompt reflection regarding how healthier faith communities can be promoted.

Prior to engaging in this research's findings it is important to understand the context which this study exists within. Therefore, prior academic study and literature will now be discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Academic literature into religious life within megachurches and the feeling of belonging to faith communities is scarce. The relevant work that does exist will now be unpacked.

This chapter starts with an academic overview of religion before detailing the notion of religious belonging. As this study focuses on a Christian church a brief description of essential elements of Christian faith is explained. After this the chapter explores megachurches, a specific branch of Christianity that has become wildly popular around the world. A history of megachurch models and context around how they operate is explored. I then traverse what sermons at megachurches aim to achieve, and how sermons are given authority through the power and respect the congregation extends to the senior pastor. Prior research into whether sermons can be used to influence the congregation's political and social behaviour is presented next before highlighting relevant academic literature within a New Zealand context. Finally, the chapter concludes by identifying knowledge gaps that demand further research.

Firstly, an explanation of religion's place in society.

Academic Overview of Religion

There are many schools of religious thought. Two important to highlight and distinguish are theology and religious studies.

Frame (2013) defined theology simply as the “work of human beings trying to understand scripture” (p. 3). Erickson's (1983) definition of theology was “the study or science of God” (p. 21). From a Christian perspective he defined theology as “discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life” (p. 21). Erickson (1983) said theology has five elements. Namely that “theology is biblical... systematic... relates to the issues of general culture and learning... contemporary... [and] practical” (p. 21 and 22).

Ogden (1978) argued that two aspects of theology absent in religious studies make the two schools of religious thought different. Theology “has to appeal to special criteria of truth for some if not all of its assertions” (p. 3), and secondly, that the “theologian has to be a believer who already holds these assertions to be true” (p.3).

Freiberger (2019) also differentiated between theology and religious studies. He stated, “for religious studies, the reference group is not a particular religious tradition or a community of scholars bound to this tradition but an academic community that is, as such, religiously uncommitted” (p. 9). In essence, scholars of religious studies examine the workings of the world’s religions while detaching themselves from the faith being studied. By contrast, theologians seek to understand the workings of their own God, and how He intersects with humanity and the world.

The research this study is undertaking is less interested in the workings of God, and more so in the workings of people operating in service to God. Theological explanations might be necessary at points where understanding a Christian worldview is imperative for grasping messages conveyed. However overall, this study is approached with a religious study framing.

Before focussing on Christianity’s specifics a definition of religion more broadly is required. Knepper (2022) believed most people in the Western world would colloquially define religion as “an individually chosen, privately held, system of beliefs pertaining to ‘God’” (p. 2). However, he argued that this definition was too narrow, and excluded religions of the past and overseas that do not have a God or that give more care to what “is done with the body than what is thought with the mind” (p. 2).

He proposed to define religion as “concern for ultimate problems and solutions, paths and destinations, realities and truths.” (Knepper, 2022, p. 60). ‘Concern’ encompassed religious practices and ‘ultimate realities’ encompassed human and non-human-like deities such as principles or values.

Wach (1947) believed all religions have three aspects: theology, worship, and sociology. Theology is the “intellectual expression” (Wach, 1947, p. 23) of a religion. It is what people who belong to that faith believe about themselves, their deity, and the world. Worship is the physical expression of one’s faith,

for example prayer and song. Finally, sociology is one's relationship with God and with others who believe in that same divinity. Wach noted that individualistic religions, where one can have a personal relationship with God and where individual worship can be received by God, have a steady liberation and separation from the society and culture it exists within. He explained the sustained "process of differentiation within the civilisation itself" such religions inevitably experience (p. 32). Sociologist Durkheim (1912/1995) provided a definition of religion similar to Wach (1947).

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (p. 44)

Most academic definitions of religion said faith in a deity involves having a set of ideas to believe, practices to outwork that faith, and the provision of life meaning and purpose (Durkheim, 1912/1995; Wach 1947).

Berger (1967) theorised that religion is attractive because it taps into one's deepest need for order. He argued that human's natural instincts are weak and not supremely influential over our choices. Instead, our minds are cultivated by the instruction of our parents. Berger believed a human's deepest desire is to be in balance. It is for sustained order so the reactions we make to our environment can be predicted and therefore easy to decide. Sustained order is created by society by repeatedly teaching us to make the same decisions. However often this order is an illusion. For example, the Western world insists on eating with cutlery rather than one's hands. Berger called this illusion of order 'objectivating'.

Berger (1967) also wrote about how society locks people into a particular role, such as being a child, teacher, or worker. Berger termed learning our specific place within society 'socialisation'. For socialisation to work society must twist our choices into commands. It must make this distortion of options appear as orders so strong we believe in not just conforming to our role, but to do otherwise would result in a feeling of doing something wrong.

The accumulation of those societal commands is what Berger (1967) called 'nomos'. We still remain aware of our ability to make decisions especially when we meet others who were brought up with different nomos. However, to maintain order society strengthens the nomos as much as possible.

Historically religion has assisted in solidifying nomos by arguing they are commands from God. Religion honours those who conform and threatens those who diverge or challenge with exclusion and condemnation. Religion meets what Berger stated to be our deepest need for order, place, and structure because it persuades its followers that life has purpose, and that the world is not haphazardly disordered.

This theory proclaims that religion provides a reason the nomos should be followed. While religious leaders must conform to the nomos followed by society, and by the members of the congregation they are leading to a degree they get to outline their own set of unique nomos for their congregations.

In essence, Berger (1967) claimed the purpose of religion was to assist in maintaining social order by providing instructions on how one is ought to live.

The honouring and excluding of those who do not conform to nomos creates communities for which people can feel a sense of belonging to. As will be discussed the feeling of belonging is a powerful leverage that can be used to enforce conformity to nomos regarding politics and current affairs.

Religious Belonging

A by-product of socialisation is that people move from feeling like group outsiders to insiders once the nomos are embraced. Through socialisation communities become exclusive to those who adopt the core aspects of the community. As such, barriers to belonging begin to appear.

At some churches barriers to belonging are structural. For example, requiring fresh congregants to take a class about the ministry before becoming a member, or attending educational seminars before being allowed to participate in communion.

This study focuses on megachurches. Wellman et al. (2020) noted that barriers to entry still exist in megachurches however for most, virtually no barriers to entry are structural in nature. Newcomers can participate in every aspect of the megachurch experience. Wellman et al. argued that barriers at megachurches still existed however instead of being explicit in nature they are indirectly communicated. Individuals at most megachurches only truly feel accepted after they meet three unverbaised criteria (Wellman et al., 2020). Some have more, but the three criteria most common in megachurches are

promising oneself to Jesus Christ, feeling close to the Holy Spirit and making monetary contributions to the church.

Research has found belonging to be one of the core human drivers, desires, and requirements to survival (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister et al., 2007; Lambert et al., 2013). Baumeister and Leary (1995) pioneered belonging research by popularising academic interest in the subject. They developed the 'need to belong' theory which insists that everyone needs a minimum number of human connections to survive. The academics proclaimed belongingness not to be a want but a fundamental, biological human need.

Block (2018) defined belonging to be when one "become[s] grounded and experience[s] the sense of safety that arises from a place where we are emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically a member" (p. 1 and 2). Allen et al. (2021) defined the term to be "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" (p. 87). What is important about this definition, is the word "subjective" (Allen, 2018, p. 87). It highlights that there is no formula to belong and no prescription that can guarantee whether one will feel a sense of belonging. The definition presented belonging in the eye of the person with potential to experience belonging. An action that may cause one to belong might not cause another.

What is universal are the feelings and physical responses from people who are rejected or whose belonging is threatened. Baumeister and Leary (1995) said that one's feeling of belonging effects the core facets of a person's life and wellbeing including their intelligence, emotional state and sense of self-worth. When a person's sense of belonging is threatened these factions enter turmoil. Those whose experience rejection are likely to experience negative repercussions including negative physical and mental effects (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Baumeister et al. (2007) found rejection to unlock a concoction of negative personal responses:

Theory and intuition associate social exclusion with emotional distress, but laboratory research finds instead that the first response is a reduced sensitivity to pain and an emotional insensitivity that hampers empathy and may contribute to a variety of interpersonal behaviors. Self-regulation and intelligent thought are also impaired as a direct result of being rejected. (p. 506)

Lambert et al. (2013) found that the stronger one's sense of belonging the stronger one feels meaning in life.

The fusion of these two factors means once individuals experience belonging they are strongly motivated to preserve it. This is driven by the desire to avoid the mix of distressing negative emotions associated with rejection as well as the life meaning and purpose obtained through a sense of belonging.

These studies highlight how powerful and strong a sense of belonging can be. In the context of an evolving church community it appears plausible that when barriers to entry evolve people are more likely to adjust their views than abandon the community they feel connected to so as not to rid their sense of belonging, life meaning, or face feelings associated with rejection.

Most research into belonging has occurred among adolescents. Few studies have been conducted regarding belonging in faith communities.

Researchers have established the acquisition of belonging within faith communities occurs through a variety of different avenues. Krause and Wulff (2005) found belonging to a church increased through the development of social ties, particularly during times of emotional crisis when people in the church provided social support. However, as will be discussed shortly many church attendees perceive the senior pastor as their friend (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016). The senior pastor is the leading reasons people stay within a faith community and set a church's strategic direction (Wellman et al. 2014). As Corcoran and Wellman (2016) explain megachurches are too large for genuine relationships to form between the senior pastor and congregants. Therefore, sermons are the primary tool used to create that connection. As such, sermons must have some role in establishing one's sense of belonging within a church.

Megachurches, as well as the role and influence of pastors and sermons, are discussed shortly. Prior to this it is useful to touch on the core beliefs held by most Christians.

Core Christian Beliefs

This research has a focus on the Christian church. Therefore, it is helpful to elucidate the religion's essential elements for readers that might be unfamiliar. Theologian Jonathan Hill has written extensively on Christianity's history including a thorough book entitled: *The History of Christianity*. Hill (2007) wrote Jesus of Nazareth was pivotal to the Christian faith. Jesus of Nazareth's life is documented within the Bible. Most scholars, with a few exceptions such as Doherty (2009), including non-Christian academics, agree that a preacher and teacher named Jesus of Nazareth existed and was executed during Roman emperor Tiberius's rule when Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea (Ehrman, 2012; Mykytiuk, 2015; Van Voorst, 2000). A tension lies in whether the claims Jesus made about His Godly status are true.

In the *History of Christianity*, Hill (2007) explained the story and significance of Jesus. Hill (2007) wrote that Jesus was known for conducting miracles and was gravely disliked by Jewish religious leaders despite being a Jew himself. Jewish religious leaders convinced the Romans to execute him around AD 30, for causing a disruption within the Jewish Temple during an important annual celebration called Passover. Christians believe three days after His killing Jesus raised back to life, appeared to many of His followers, then ascended to Heaven. Many of those who saw Jesus alive after his death were willing to be executed themselves for holding that belief.

The murder and resurrection of Jesus is the central point of the Christian faith. Christians believe that Jesus' resurrection corroborates His teachings and His claim that He was the Son of God (Hill, 2007).

Hill (2007) described how Jesus had 12 disciples who were responsible for spreading Christianity and the story of Jesus, firstly throughout the Middle East, and ultimately the rest of the world.

Christianity has grown to become the largest religion in the world, boasting around 2.6 billion followers, or 32% of the world's population (Zurlo et al., 2023). At the heart of the Christian faith is the story of Jesus. However, over the past 2,000 years Christians have become divided in other more minor matters

of belief. Disagreements have broken out around topics such as how active God is within a person's life, the appropriate way He should be worshiped, and whether certain actions are sinful or wrong.

These disagreements have caused Christianity to fracture into sections called denominations. Zurlo et al. (2023) compiled a report on the global status of Christianity. It was found the three largest denominations were Roman Catholics, Pentecostals/Charismatics, and Protestants, respectively. The fastest growing denominations were the Pentecostals/Charismatics and the Evangelicals (Zurlo et al., 2023).

The Megachurch

This study focuses on megachurches. Churches are places in which people come to worship God (Ammerman, 2005). While there is no agreed definition about what constitutes a megachurch academics like Corcoran and Wellman (2016) have accepted the general definition to be "Protestant churches with regular attendances pre-pandemic of 2,000 or more adults and children" (Bird & Thumma, 2020, p. 2). This model of Christianity can be found in countries around the world including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand (Goh, 2008). Goh (2008) wrote about some of the factors that make megachurches unique:

They are often distinguished and distinguish themselves, from older (including other large) churches by a number of characteristics: a contemporary worship style prominently featuring electronic musical instruments and media, dynamic and charismatic speakers, services geared towards "seekers" rather than mature believers, international links and networks, informality in dress and atmosphere. Megachurches are also commonly congregations dominated by relatively young and well-educated members. (p. 287)

Thumma and Travis (2007) claimed there were no defining factors that made a megachurch, a megachurch, other than its size. However, Wellman et al. (2020) described how megachurches often have six aspects: "Welcoming ethos, awe-inspiring worship, sermon providing reliable leadership, altar call inviting transformation, service projects, and small groups" (p. 154). During welcoming, people are embraced by greeters with warm smiles often holding signs that say things like 'Welcome Home'. There's coffee in the foyer and the atmosphere is light and happy. During worship, a time of singing lead by a band and team of vocalists, most megachurches will have a massive stage that operates state-

of-the-art technology with professional cameras and lighting equipment. The sermon is delivered by a pastor in the middle of the service and is the climax of the experience. After this an altar call, inviting people to dedicate their lives to Jesus is engaged, usually accompanied by a physical response that recognises the decision such as moving to the front or raising a hand. Service projects are opportunities for church members to volunteer their time to be part of a team that helps the church operate, for example looking after children during a church meeting. Finally, small groups are gatherings that occur in people's homes during the week with a handful of church members to discuss the sermon or engage in a bible study.

Megachurches first gained popularity and notoriety in the 1980s and are believed to have roots in the United States (Eagle, 2020). In the 1970s there were just 50 churches in America with more than 1,500 people; but by 2005 that number had ballooned to 1,200 (Thumma and Travis, 2007). In 2020 there were approximately 1,750 megachurches in the United States (Bird and Thumma, 2020).

After World War Two ended in 1945 post-war America's appetite for religion skyrocketed which empowered a slew of churches to open (Fitzgerald, 2017; Marsden, 1991; Roof and McKinney, 1987). A new attention was placed on Christianity with journalists misreading a surge in the number of churches with large congregations as something novel. Eager to appear transformative pastors of these large churches bolstered this perception (Eagle, 2020). Eagle (2020) argued that churches with large congregations have existed throughout history in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. It is the high quantity, density and abundance of megachurches that makes the phenomenon unique. Similar to today, historical megachurches were commonly constructed around the teachings of a well-liked pastor, utilised innovative technologies and adopted culturally modern methods to reach those who did not attend a church (Eagle, 2020).

Megachurches convey their attention is set on the main aspects of faith, namely salvation, character development, enhancing communities, marriages and families, and community service (Wellman et al. 2020).

The number of megachurches in America continues to increase with most of them continuing to see growth in the number of people attending their services (Bird and Thumma, 2020).

Wellman et al. (2020) described megachurches as small towns with “total environments” (p. 152). Megachurches cater to every age and stage of life and can become insular. It’s possible for someone’s emotional needs to be completely met within a megachurch. Some people can eventually stop having friends outside of their megachurch.

Most megachurches do not belong to a denomination. Many wear this autonomy as a badge of honour and marketing ploy to appeal to a greater number of people. Not belonging to a denomination also means they can act independently and autonomously with the senior pastor setting a strong strategic direction (Yip and Hoon, 2016).

Its size has also granted them influence over smaller churches even those not officially affiliated. Often churches with fewer people in its congregation look to megachurches for guidance in how to run operationally and what to teach spiritually (Bird and Thumma, 2020). This is important to consider because it shows that the impact and reach of megachurches extends even further than its immediate congregation of thousands, spilling to other pastors and churches in the area and around the world.

Everist (2002) argued that churches and congregations are places of learning and education. Cartledge (2020) reaffirmed this view with a specific focus on megachurches as “educational institutions” (p. 172). He suggested that the pivotal force behind that education is socialisation, the process in which congregants adopt attitudes that transform people into becoming group insiders.

Academic study into the aspects of socialisation that exist within megachurches, and churches in general, is scarce globally and rare in New Zealand.

Cartledge (2020) expressed that those beliefs and behaviours were passed on through every aspect of the church service and experience. This includes prayers, the songs chosen, church announcements and interactions with other members prior or succeeding the service. However, there was one part of the service that struck Cartledge as the most important: “the sermon probably stands out as the most

important teaching vehicle that the congregation has in the formation of its members in their Christian discipleship” (p. 176).

Hinton (2009) shared this view, writing congregations are cultivated through messaging and communications most obviously during sermons. He proclaimed churchgoers are influenced by what they are overtly told as well as what goes unsaid. The art and influence of sermons is explored next.

Sermons

A sermon is a speech given in the middle of a church service usually by one preacher. The length can vary from as short as 20 minutes to being hours long. The intention of a sermon is to move people to do something (Broadus, 2014) or to elicit life change or a shift in behaviour (Stanley & Jones, 2006). Sermons have also been labelled as a teaching vessel used to cultivate the members of the church into disciples of Jesus (Cartledge, 2020). Sermons have been the essential and pivotal spark that has invigorated and renewed Christian movements (Broadus, 2014).

A survey of Protestant church leaders found a key factor in church growth was the content of sermons (Marion, 2012).

This research shows the power sermons have to captivate someone’s attention into becoming part of a church community. It also shows the ability sermons have to completely change people’s lives. It speaks to how the content of sermons is an important factor in church health and church growth.

Stout (2011) described various methods pastors might use to engage with media during sermons. He said pastors might use media to explain something about religion. For example, a snippet from a movie that involves a kidnapping being used to reiterate the Christian value of treating people with kindness and respect. Other pastors might make references to media or pop culture to make a message more relatable. Media itself might also be directly criticised for various perceived inadequacies.

Despite these studies academic work into the content and delivery methods of preaching, especially sermons over an extended period, is scarce. One explanation for this could be technological limitations. It is now easier for academic study to occur due to advances in transcription innovation which enables

researchers to rapidly convert audio to text. Therefore, it is not until recently that in-depth studies that span across years of sermons delivered by one pastor have been possible to dissect.

Sermons continue to be highly influential over the lives of people, however it is often the pastor preaching the message that contributes to how much power the words have over the people listening.

Pastors

Pastors, and in particular senior pastors, are highly influential over the people in their church's congregation. Especially in megachurches.

Wellman et al. (2014) said the senior pastor is the second top reason people join a church and the leading reason people stay. Politicians and business leaders have recognised the influence and power of megachurch pastors with some being asked to endorse campaigns, movements, and merchandise (Thumma and Travis, 2007). Pastors can be viewed by people within their congregations as their leader when it comes to the religious and virtuous. Wellman et al. (2014) took it a step further describing pastors as the group's "sacred symbol" (p. 668).

The question then becomes how a pastor acquires that power.

Sociologist Wach (1947) wrote that authority within religion comes from different places including the collective group one is part of, as well as specific individuals within that group. Within religion authority usually falls onto people with "charisma" (Wach, 1947, p. 340), those with the ability to confidently distil and present what God wants the group to know during a religious experience in a way those listening understand and enjoy.

In addition to charisma Wach (1947) gave two more qualities people look for in a religious leader: intellectual and moral giftings (p. 340). With these attributes (charisma, intellect, and moral gifting) a person within a religious group is seen to have a greater connection to God. This causes people within the community to take advisement from this individual regarding how their lives should be lived. Wach wrote churchgoers want to know what God has told the religious leader but not told them. This implies that the pastor has a stronger connection to God, and that God speaks to them in clearer ways than he

does to the members of their church. This means if the pastor makes a suggestion it is more likely that people within the congregation will not interpret the statement as an opinion from the pastor but as words directly from God.

Other academics agreed with Wach (1947) around charisma being a defining factor in a pastor's authority and being a central element in a megachurch's congregational feelings towards their senior most leader. Dawson (2006) defined charisma as a process in which people ultimately recognise specific personal attributes as exceptional and deserving of power.

There are limitations on the power a pastor can amass. Most obviously, pastors cannot be viewed as Jesus or God themselves as this would expel the congregation from institutionalised religion. Pastors can, however, be styled as God's handpicked earthly spokesperson (Harding 2000; Lee 2007; Wellman 2012). Joosse (2012) suggested that ordinary conduct disassociates charisma from leaders, popping the illusion of their perceived extraordinariness. However, Corcoran and Wellman (2016) found that a major strength of influential megachurch senior pastors was their ability to appear ordinary to their congregation.

Corcoran and Wellman (2016) found 53.68% of megachurch congregants questioned, described their senior pastor in extraordinary terms. The interviewees intimately connected their senior pastor to God. They believed their pastor was God's "mouthpiece" or "messenger", among other terms (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016, p. 320). The researchers were "struck" by the number of times people overtly tried to portray the humanity or ordinariness of their senior pastor (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016, p. 322). They wrote that "approximately 36 percent of all senior pastor comments described him as human in some way without being prompted" (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016, p. 322).

Johnson (1979) claimed larger groups diminish a charismatic leader's ability to connect with an audience. However, Corcoran and Wellman's (2016) study shows that megachurch pastors can buck that assumption by using sermons to present themselves as personable humans. About 27% of comments spoke of an "emotional bond" interviewees felt with the senior pastor (p. 324). This study shows that

people view the senior pastor as their friend and place a huge amount of trust in what they say during sermons.

Corcoran and Wellman (2016) explained the tension for pastors comes in trying to balance appearing ordinary and extraordinary simultaneously. The religious leader needs to be elevated to the status of extraordinary but not to the point where they start to be viewed as a God themselves whilst also being seen as ordinary to remain relatable – but not so ordinary that their assumed extraordinary nature erodes.

In neo-Pentecostal churches, pastors do not earn religious authority through traditions or customs such as confessions. In fact, less than half of megachurch senior pastors in the United States (45%) have a Master of Divinity degree, the most popular degree attained by people wanting to become a pastor (Bird and Thumma, 2020). Instead their religious authority comes from a “personal calling and an endowment with special gifts from the Holy Spirit, which is described in the New Testament as charisma” (Klaver, 2015, p. 150). Klaver (2015) believed the key to a pastor’s leadership potential lay in their authenticity as perceived by the congregation. She wrote that pastors gain respect by repeatedly showcasing their authentic faith and unique connection with God on stage in front of their congregation. She suggested that because their religious authority was no longer granted through education or “denominational traditions, confessions and the ordination of clergy” it is required that the pastor’s leadership position be regularly reaffirmed from stage to people within the congregation by showcasing their distinctive connection with God (Klaver, 2015, p. 157).

It is clear these academics believe many megachurch senior pastors have acquired a deep trust and affection from people within their congregations. It is also apparent pastors can use sermons to significantly influence what people believe. The question arises around how a pastor’s influence and sermons are used, an area of study that is largely untapped particularly in New Zealand.

Religion and Current Affairs

Pastors are influential over the congregation they lead. Therefore, when topics such as controversial social issues or politics are discussed during sermons people within church will seriously consider what the pastor has to say.

Scheitle and Cornell (2015) wrote that a political protest will only capture the interest of those already passionate about the issue at hand. However, a sermon offers a unique opportunity for the pastor to expose the congregation to social and political issues churchgoers may otherwise not have been interested in.

That is what makes political and social talk within church sermons potentially problematic. Especially if theories such as the one offered by Cartledge (2020) are true, whereby congregants absorb the contents of a sermon without critically evaluating the legitimacy and validity of what has been presented to them.

Scholars have mixed views regarding how politically active churches are. Some strongly believe most churches actively avoid political or controversial social issues to keep the peace and avoid offending or putting people off their church (Davies, 2020; Vermeer, 2015), with others convinced Pentecostals refrain from involvement in political or social matters at all (Anderson 2012; Chong 2015; Davies 2020). Wellman et al. (2014) believed megachurches in particular are thought, by some, to avoid these types of topics to maintain mass appeal. Bird and Thumma (2020) found over the course of one year 14% of American megachurches gave out voter guides, 11% encouraged people to participate in an election, 7% discussed politics and three percent tried to lobby an elected official. Their survey of megachurches in the United States found 63% claimed to avoid discussing politics and 37 percent claimed they do or are neutral (16% and 21% respectively). Two thirds of American megachurches (66%) disagreed with the statement 'everyone in this congregation has the same political position'. Other studies that asked churches about how much they perpetuate political or social views onto their congregation have garnered similar results leading academics to proclaim things like: "politics is not an arena in which most congregations actively participate in" (Chaves, 2004, p. 95). No survey asking churches how often they talk about politics has occurred in New Zealand.

However other academics believed church to be a breeding ground for political action and persuasion. It is well recognised amongst social scientists that people who attend church can act as major instigators and coordinators of social and political participation (Killian, 1984; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1981; Tipton, 2007; Wuthnow & Evans, 1992). In the United States Christians are a valuable and reliable voter base for the right-wing Republican party (Layman 2001; Wilcox and Robinson 2011). The secularisation of America has been attributed to the increased politicisation of religion (Campbell and Putnam, 2012). In the 2016 American Presidential election, 80% of Evangelical Christians voted for the right-wing Republican nominee Donald Trump (Smith and Martinez, 2016). Lockerbie (2013) found white church attendees were more likely to swing right whereas African American churchgoers were more inclined to swing left. People who belonged to an evangelical church had a higher chance of being a right-wing election voter (Lockerbie, 2013). Other studies have uncovered strong links between evangelical or protestant Christians, and the adoption of right-wing political views (Smith & Walker, 2013).

There may be other explanations as to why churchgoers tend to vote right-wing such as the geographical location of the communities.

It seems contradictory for megachurches to tell Bird and Thumma (2020) little engagement occurs with political and social issues while other studies have found most Evangelical and Protestant churchgoers more likely to support right-wing policies. Scheitle and Cornell (2015) wondered if the measures being used in studies that survey churches were too “blunt” to fully grasp whether congregations were being politically influenced (p. 148). They believed it was possible for such research not to account for the implicit and implied techniques churchgoers might be swayed.

Wood (1994) agreed that often political messaging within sermons is more suggestive and thematic rather than overt. It is possible for churches to not believe it influences the way people vote or directly offer opinions in relation to social issues whilst subtly or inadvertently influencing the congregation in a general political direction.

Audette and Weaver (2016) found churches that engaged in political and social issues were more likely to grow. They concluded participation in politics and controversial social matters might have negative

consequences on Christianity as a whole through the reinforcement of stereotypes and unfavourable attention. However, political engagement may be beneficial for individual churches if it desires to grow the size of its congregation.

For churches that have engaged in political or social issues Frahm-Arp (2019) described that it is often through the lens of a 'theopolitical ideology'. Those who adopt the theopolitical ideology believe 'good Christians' need to engage politically and attain power to make sure good morals are upheld. Marshall (2009) described 'moral subjectification' where some Christians view themselves as the moral police to monitor government.

If churches were to subjugate their congregation to a subtle political influence the most effective way to do this would be through sermons.

New Zealand Based Academic Literature

Academic literature on religion in New Zealand exists. Most is historical in nature describing Christianity's impact on New Zealand's formation or how faith groups have gained prominence. To the best of my knowledge there are very few New Zealand studies that detail the content of church service sermons over an extended period or how preaching can be used to comment on current affairs.

New Zealand religious historian Professor Peter Lineham has extensive work focusing on historical depictions of religion in a New Zealand context. In 2013 he conducted a rigorous study into Bishop Brian Tamaki who is the leader of a large New Zealand-based Pentecostal megachurch named Destiny Church. Bishop Brian Tamaki had long received significant negative media attention for a variety of reasons including his flashy lifestyle and prosperity preaching.

Lineham's (2013) research was detailed and distributed as a novel. The study was based on interviews with Bishop Brian Tamaki and his family members, Destiny Church attendees, sermons, and other resources. The book gave a comprehensive and extremely broad deep dive into the faith movement and Bishop Brian Tamaki's life to give a more informed inspection concerning the values and principles fuelling the preacher and his church. Additionally, Lineham addressed the idea of 'apostleship' in which

people at Destiny Church believed Bishop Brian Tamaki to be God's mouthpiece and explored Bishop Brian Tamaki's preaching on the prosperity gospel. The work is now ten years old.

Lineham has also conducted studies in the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church colloquially known as the Exclusive Brethren. Most recently, Lineham (2021) explored the church's direct engagement in the 2005 general election when it distributed information disparaging all political parties other than the National Party allegedly with the National Party's knowledge. Lineham's paper described the situation rather than analyse sermons from the Exclusive Brethren.

Dr Ann Hardy, from the University of Waikato, has conducted research into spaces where media and film intersect with religion. On the whole most of Hardy's research that involves faith has primarily focused on the media's portrayal of religion rather than religion's portrayal of the media. For example, in 2012 Hardy conducted a study that found a shift in New Zealand film from portraying religion to conveying spirituality. In 2005, Hardy researched the mainstream media's portrayal of a 2004 protest organised by the same religious group Lineham studied in 2013, Destiny Church. The study included exploration into how Destiny Church perceived the mainstream media noting that although the religious movement had grounds to assert its message was misreported it continued to utilise mass media as an evangelism tool. Pastor Brian Tamaki, as he was known prior to his Bishop ordainment, criticised the mainstream media as "servants of a corrupt government" (Hardy, 2005, p. 54). The use of media including the church's state of the art website and use of televangelism were detailed.

In follow up literature that employed the Destiny Church protest as a case study, Hardy (2007) found New Zealand journalists were ill-equipped to report on religious issues. She argued it necessary for journalists to undergo training in religion to better inform the public and better portray the organisations being reported on.

Walker (2010) conducted a similar study focused on how the mainstream media presented Christians in current affairs using three examples of religious stories that were widely followed by the New Zealand public. Walker deemed the New Zealand mainstream media to be not entirely secular utilising Christian values within its reporting. Journalists did not cover the full extent of Christian issues within current

affairs possibly due to a lack of contextual understanding. Like Hardy (2007) this study observed the place of religion in current affairs not the place of current affairs in religion.

Some study has been conducted into Gloriavale, a secretive, exclusive, and isolated Christian community that exists on New Zealand's South Island (Baker & Kirkham, 2022). Crawford (2016) examined the experience of living within Gloriavale from the perspective of those inside or who left the community rather than an analysis of the words used by the community's leaders. He described his fascination with power structures established within churches, questioning, "How, given the voluntary nature of church life, do so few people maintain so much power over so many people?" (p. 40). Through the examination of television documentary interviews with past and present Gloriavale members Crawford described how they believed truth to be only sourced from within the community. Everything beyond Gloriavale permeated evil.

The members were convinced their leaders were God's earthly mouthpiece. Crawford (2016) said:

This is a key aspect of self-perpetuating systems of power—leaders have God-given power to teach what is true, and what is true is that they have God-given authority and access to the truth. Truth legitimises power, power defines what is true. (p. 41)

In summary, New Zealand based academic work on religion is mostly historical in nature or from the perspective of those within a faith community. Literature related to religion and current affairs has tended to angle from the place of religion in current affairs rather than the place of current affairs in religious communication. Research with a specific focus on a faith leader's sermons or what is discussed from the Sunday pulpit is rare despite international studies finding this function of religion to be a source of power and highly influential.

Summary

This systematic review of literature finds scholars agree sermons at megachurches to be highly impactful on those listening. It also finds megachurch pastors to be highly influential not just on the people in their congregation but also on other churches which look to them for operational and spiritual guidance.

Some of the reviewed literature suggested most megachurch pastors do not engage in discourse around political and social issues. However, some academics questioned whether churches were able to recognise when political or social issue guidance was given. The academics were concerned that if pastors were to engage in such issues they would conduct themselves in an indirect manner and utilise implied messaging instead of overt statements. The existence of implied messaging is difficult to conduct on large-scale studies due to the time-consuming aspect required for proper analysis.

Most research on megachurches is emerging from the United States despite megachurches being a global phenomenon. Studies conducted in a New Zealand context are scarce, dated and predominantly focus on historical depictions of religions impact on the country. Research into the how entangled religion and current affairs can be is rare, particularly in New Zealand.

Future research is needed internationally, especially in New Zealand, regarding what pastors preach and how sermons are used as a communication tool. There is a demand for exploration regarding the place of current affairs within sermons, whether a pastor's influence is used to isolate members into shifting trust from society to the pastor, and whether a religious leader's personal views regarding social and political issues can become essential beliefs for people wanting to enter a faith community.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The overarching research problem probed by this study regards the place of current affairs in religious communication.

Attending church is a major part of many New Zealander's lives. Most of what is heard from religious leaders during services is taken seriously by those listening. Therefore, it is important to understand what is said during these times and whether religious leaders use the power of the pulpit to impose their personal views, whether right or wrong, onto those within their congregation.

Using a case study of City Impact Church this thesis investigates the connection between political and social issues discussed in the social arena and in sermons. It also examines how pastors can disassemble and construct sources of truth and how a pastor can make opinions regarding political and social matters barriers to group entry. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What role do sermons play in defining social issues for a faith community?
2. How do faith leaders use sermons to locate sources of truth?
3. How do sermons create or reinforce barriers to belonging?

To answer these questions a mixed method approach was applied involving quantitative and qualitative analysis of sermons.

This chapter is split into three sections. The first section outlines how the case study was selected. Section two details quantitative content analysis which was used to answer the role sermons play in defining social issues. The third section discusses qualitative thematic analysis which was used to answer research questions two and three, specifically how faith leaders locate sources of truth and how sermons can create or reinforce barriers to belonging.

Selecting a Case Study

The first method this study employed was the case study approach. Crowe et al. (2011) defined the case study method as “a research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding

of a complex issue in its real-life context” (p. 1). Case studies are particularly useful in acquiring a highly detailed analysis of an issue in its innate condition (Crowe et al., 2011).

Stake (1995) wrote that “a case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case” (p. xi). It is a process of examination that magnifies a specific characteristic, or aspect of a larger body, to discover its nuance and individuality. Stake identified three types of case study research. The intrinsic case study is used to understand a distinctive phenomenon. Collective case studies involve the examination of several cases to acquire a wider understanding of an occurrence. Finally, the instrumental case study identifies a singular case that will broaden understanding of a phenomenon more generally. This research employs the instrumental case study approach.

In adopting the instrumental case study approach the case should be selected based on its ability to provide the researcher with material to study the phenomenon of interest (Crowe et al., 2011). The phenomenon this study is interested in investigating is the place of current affairs in religious communication. Therefore, a case with adequate engagement in these topics is required.

City Impact Church’s senior pastor, Peter Mortlock, was brought to light as a potential case from a sermon that circulated amongst Christians during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sermon obliquely dissuaded people from receiving the Covid-19 vaccine. In 2021 a smattering of news articles also indicated Pastor Peter Mortlock was using sermons to engage in current affairs (Farrier, 2021). Further listening to randomly selected sample of sermons confirmed that the pastor was engaging in political and social issues on a frequent basis.

City Impact Church’s size and scale and therefore its influence also made it a desirable case study. Chapter 4 provides a detailed inquiry of these factors. This influence showed that the discussion of current affairs within sermons in New Zealand was not limited to fringe faith groups. It was a phenomenon occurring within the services of one of the country’s largest church communities.

Practical reasons also crystalised the adequacy of Pastor Peter Mortlock as a case study. The church uploaded its sermons and weekly services across the reporting period publicly onto YouTube and

Vimeo. This made it visible in the public domain and allowed for the easy extraction of a large amount of content over a lengthy period without having to acquire the data in another more time-consuming manner such as attending services to record sermons in person.

However, having online services was something many churches have adopted. The implementation of a Sunday meeting's internet broadcast was accelerated during the online era of the Covid-19 pandemic which prevented in-person congregational gatherings (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020). The main reason for Pastor Peter Mortlock's selection was his outspoken language regarding current affairs, and the influence of the church he led.

Pastor Peter Mortlock's wife, Pastor Beverly Mortlock, shared the title of senior pastor. As such, the sermons she preached were considered for inclusion within this research. However, while Pastor Beverly Mortlock shared the senior pastor title the responsibilities of the role were not equally distributed between the couple. This unequal allocation of duties is exemplified in the number of times they each preached over the period. As per Figure 6 on page 62 while Pastor Peter Mortlock preached more than 119 times (44.91% of sermons) Pastor Beverly Mortlock was the seventh equal most frequent speaker, delivering five (1.89% of sermons) over the two-and-a-half-year period. Although women were essential figures in the early beginnings of the Pentecostal movement their role in the 20th century significantly diminished (Langford, 2017). In recent years women have gradually been entrusted with more leadership responsibility. Langford (2017) argued more is needed to stamp out gender inequality within religion.

Quantitative Content Analysis

This section details quantitative content analysis and the way it is used in the study.

Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p. 263).

Krippendorff (2019) mostly agreed with Berelson's (1952) definition of content analysis, interchanging the words 'objective' with 'replicable', and 'systematic' with 'valid'. However, Krippendorff argued

that Berelson (1952) was wrong to limit content analysis to quantitative studies. Krippendorff said qualitative research is scientifically sound, and that reading is qualitative in nature even if the result of a study is numerical. Quantitative data only accounts for what is overtly portrayed. Krippendorff believed it was possible for hidden meanings to exist within a text, in between the lines, in which only qualitative analysis could pick up.

McQuail (2000) described the quantitative and qualitative sides of content analysis. For researchers engaged in quantitative content analysis it is “assumed that the numerical balance of elements in the text (such as the number of words or space time allocated to a set of topics) is a reliable guide to the overall meaning” (McQuail, 2000, p. 325). Having the opposite approach requires an opposing supposition. It assumes the most important messages are what is hidden or omitted.

While Krippendorff's (2019) claims regarding qualitative content analysis are valid I believed it would be more objective and efficient to rank the data using Berelson's (1952) quantitative approach. The most important messages within Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermons might be inferred or found in between the lines. However, at this stage of the study it was not imperative to know what those hidden messages were or whether they existed. I simply need to know how often Pastor Peter Mortlock mentioned certain topics within his sermons so that I would know which sermons to engage a qualitative approach that would be able to discover those hidden messages and the author's intent.

Additionally, quantitative content analysis has a deductive approach whereas qualitative content analysis has an inductive approach (White and Marsh, 2006). This means that for quantitative content analysis researchers are searching to identify a pre-determined item from the data rather than searching within the data for what needs to be researched.

A preliminary listening to a randomly selected sample of Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermons in MP3 format combined with the discovery of news reports from New Zealand mainstream media outlets about Pastor Peter Mortlock and City Impact Church indicated a focus on three areas of social life: Covid-19, politics, and the mainstream media. Therefore, a deductive approach is required because the items for

which this research mined from the data were pre-determined. Consequently, quantitative content analysis was used.

I coded the frequency of explicit words within the data. Word counting is a method within quantitative content analysis that can be used to find patterns within data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020; Kondracki & Wellman, 2002; Morgan, 1993). Kleinheksel et al. (2020) wrote that counting the word frequency within a data set is “surface-level” (p. 128). This criticism is valid when word counting is used in isolation. However, for this study the word frequency is used in combination with dates and news stories to determine a connection between the frequency of words related to social issues and its discussion of those issues in the public arena.

McQuail (2000, p. 326) outlined Berelson’s (1952) five steps of quantitative content analysis. The first step is to decide the text to analyse. The second step is to choose categories that relate to the research question. The third step is to decide the ‘units of analysis’ which are the relevant texts within the data to be examined. The fourth step is to apply the category to the content by totalling the regularity of the words within the category for each unit of content. The last step is to present the results.

McQuail (2000) said the steps have two suppositions. Firstly, that references to codes within the texts are “reasonably clear and unambiguous” and secondly that the regularity of the reference accurately presents the “predominant ‘meaning’ of the text in an objective way” (p. 326).

Deciding the Text and Categories

As per step one I decided the text to analyse was sermons. For step two the categories I chose relating to the research questions were the mainstream media (in regards to sources of truth), politics (in regards to sources of truth and barriers to belonging) and Covid-19 (in regards to sources of truth and barriers to belonging).

Determining the Units of Analysis

The abundance of potential data sources required a method for narrowing the data to a size that balanced answering the research questions in a timely manner with accurate findings. City Impact Church and

Pastor Peter Mortlock had a prolific online presence. Between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022 City Impact Church's YouTube channel uploaded 478 videos, Pastor Peter Mortlock's personal Instagram account had approximately 174 posts and his public Facebook page had more than 600 posts.

The criteria ultimately chosen for establishing a unit of analysis, as per Berelson's (1952) third step for quantitative content analysis, was sermons delivered by Pastor Peter Mortlock at City Impact Church and uploaded to the church's YouTube or Vimeo channels between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022. An explanation follows as to the reasoning behind the three elements of the units of analysis. The three parts are that only sermons were selected, the location of the sermon's source, and the period chosen. This is followed by a general overview of how the data was mined, and a description of the data's make up.

Only Sermons Selected

Only sermons from Pastor Peter Mortlock are included in the data. This is because of Pastor Peter Mortlock's position as senior pastor and because of the abundance of sermons he preached across the period. Sermons delivered at City Impact Church by other pastors are excluded from the data.

The focus on sermons by Pastor Peter Mortlock meant other videos and media such as church advertisements and music videos uploaded within the research period are left out.

Other sources of data considered included Pastor Peter Mortlock's television show 'Impact for Life' which ran on Prime TV and Shine TV for 10 years. The programme was excluded because it focussed on stories of New Zealand Christians rather than sermons. The television show was not publicly available and it was difficult to determine whether the programme aired during the research period.

Comments from Peter Mortlock provided to media outlets such as the *New Zealand Herald* and *Stuff* were excluded. Press releases on the City Impact Church website were excluded. During one sermon Pastor Peter Mortlock referred to an additional information pack on the City Impact Church website. This document, and other information on the church's website, and Pastor Peter Mortlock's personal website were left out. Posts on City Impact Church's social media channels including its Facebook and Instagram pages as well as Pastor Peter Mortlock's public Facebook and Instagram pages were excluded.

The setting in which the sermons were delivered, namely during corporate church services, was a crucial factor in this research. Therefore, communications outside of this setting were left out. There was enough information within the sermons to answer the research questions with rigorous academic confidence.

Some sermons were uploaded to YouTube twice. One video included all elements of the church service and the other contained only the sermon. Some videos comprised of only the sermon were identical to the message preached in the video containing the whole service. Others contained the same speaking points but were not word-for-word identical. The slight change in delivery indicates some of the doubled-up videos belonged to a different service than the one uploaded in full.

To avoid double ups sermons that were word-for-word identical were put through a word counter. The video that contained the highest word count were included in the data. The reasoning for this was that videos with a smaller word count indicated that aspects of the sermon were cut.

Videos that had similar points but were not word-for-word identical were both included. This was because it was possible for Pastor Peter Mortlock to have gone on a non-scripted tangent in one of the sermons over the other therefore excluding one over the other may adversely affect the data.

Sermons not uploaded to YouTube were sourced from Vimeo.

Dates

The start date of 1 January 2020 was chosen because it coincided with around the same time Coronavirus was first officially identified on 7 January 2020 (CNN Editorial Research, 2022). The end date of 1 July 2022 was chosen because during July 2022 Pastor Peter Mortlock and his wife Pastor Beverly Mortlock transitioned from their roles as senior pastors of City Impact Church to founding pastors (City Impact Church, n.d.-n). Official leadership of City Impact Church was handed over to Pastors Joe and Racquel Manase. Since becoming founding pastors Pastors Peter and Beverly Mortlock have maintained a strong visibility across the church's website. Pastor Peter Mortlock continued to preach (City Impact Church, 2022k) though appeared to do so less frequently.

Data Location

The sermons are sourced from City Impact Church's YouTube and Vimeo channels. These sites are where the videos of full church services and sermons are uploaded. Some services were simulcast elsewhere such as on the church's Facebook pages. The services streamed on social media were identical to the ones uploaded to YouTube and Vimeo. To avoid downloading the same sermons twice it was only required for these to be downloaded from one source. YouTube and Vimeo were chosen for the ease in downloading MP3 and MP4 versions of the sermons from these sites.

The units of analysis (sermons) were downloaded in MP3 format from the 18 July 2022 to 27 July 2022. Downloading in MP3 format was chosen because this research focuses on the text and information communicated to the congregation and does not study the visual communications imparted using the pastor's body language. Despite the sermons being derived from YouTube and therefore containing a visual element only the sermon's audio was engaged with.

Between the 21 February 2023 and 27 February 2023, a process of cross referencing commenced to ensure all sermons within the research period were accounted for. The length of the downloaded videos was cross referenced against the length of the videos online to ensure the data was downloaded in full. During this process, MP4 versions of the sermons were downloaded in case the nature of the study changed to include examination of body language. A total of 479 videos were downloaded: 478 from YouTube and one from Vimeo.

Of these videos 310 (64.72%) contained a sermon. The remaining 169 videos were media assets such as music videos or adverts for seasonal services such as Christmas and Easter. Included in the latter number were videos part of the church's 'Legacy Project'. These videos were pre-recorded seminars about the Bible, most of which were delivered by Pastor Peter Mortlock from his office or home. These were not considered sermons because they did not have a physical audience present and were not conducted in the context of a service with an allocated time for people to attend. In August 2021 Pastor Peter Mortlock held a 'Special Meeting' for his congregation. This occurred on a Wednesday night. The Special Meeting was included as part of the data because it had the characteristics of a church service just

without occurring on a Sunday. People were able to tune into this special service online or attend in person. The preaching within the Special Meeting was uploaded amongst a plethora of sermons to City Impact Church's Vimeo channel called 'CIC Sunday Media'. The channel is in effect exclusively dedicated to sermons from the church.

Academically speaking it is worth highlighting that the online media assets were considered archival data. This is because as a researcher I did not create the data (Vogt et al. 2012). The data was created by City Impact Church prior to research commencing on 1 July 2022 without any input from me as the researcher. City Impact Church made the content publicly available on its YouTube and Vimeo channels. Vogt et al. (2012) stated that archival research was often called secondary data analysis. The archival data was fundamental to this research because without it this research would not have been able to be conducted.

There were 119 sermons that fit the criteria of the unit of analysis. The media ranged in length from 15 minutes, to one hour and 29 minutes.

Applying Codes to the Data

As per Berelson's (1952) five steps of quantitative content analysis the fourth step is to apply the category to the content by totalling the regularity of the words within the category, for each unit of analysis.

For this research this meant calculating the regularity of words relating to the codes within each sermon across the reporting period.

As outlined above the texts this study chose to analyse were Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermons delivered at City Impact Church delivered between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022. Krippendorff (2019) defined texts as an item that "means something to someone, it is produced by someone to have meanings for someone else, and these meanings therefore must not be ignored and must not violate why the text exists in the first place" (p. 25).

To conduct step four the sermons needed to be transcribed. To do this the units of analysis (sermons) were uploaded to the transcription software Otter (Otter, n.d.). The sermons were transcribed and then downloaded in Microsoft Word format. If the video contained additional elements of the service, such as singing, these elements were deleted from the Microsoft Word transcript. Only Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermon remained. The Microsoft Word files were then saved as PDF documents to eliminate the future possibility of inadvertent alterations to the transcription files. Only the PDF document versions of the file were opened from this point forward.

Next, the categories were chosen and a coding sheet developed. Neuendorf (2002) said categories must be "relevant" and "valid" (p. 31). She said relevant meant the categories support what one is attempting to discover, and validity referred to "the extent to which a measuring procedure represents the intended, and only the intended, concept" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 112). White and Marsh (2006) said:

A good coding scheme has categories or levels that are exhaustive, that is, all relevant aspects of the construct are represented, are mutually exclusive, and are measured at the highest possible scale of measurement based on the four scales of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio). The coding scheme should have clear definitions, easy-to-follow instructions, and unambiguous examples. (p. 32)

These aspects enhanced the dependability of the coding, and therefore increases the chances of each code being categorised in an identical way.

See Figure 1 for the coding sheet.

Figure 1*Coding Sheet*

Code definitions	
Covid-19	Words that relate to the description or acknowledgement of Covid-19 disease, as well as words that relate to the description of institutions or individual people's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
Politics	Words that relate to the description, praise, criticism or acknowledgement of countries, politicians, or political ideologies.
Mainstream media	Words that relate to the description or acknowledgement of the mainstream media.
Signifiers for each code	
Covid-19	Covid, Coronavirus, Covid-19, Pandemic, Plandemic, China, virus, Vaccine, mRNA, Jab, Injection, Doctor, Hospital, Lockdown, Mandate, Traffic, Alert, Level, Bubble, Restrictions, Mask, PPE, Epidemic, Outbreak, Self-isolation, Isolation, SARS-CoV-2, Social, Distancing, Quarantine, Case [Note: the word 'traffic' was used to represent the Government's Covid-19 protection framework called the traffic light system. The word 'alert level' was used to represent the Government's Covid-19 protection framework called the alert level system.]
Politics	Politics, Politician, Government, Minister, State, Party, Prime, Minister, Jacinda, Ardern, Grant, Robertson, Kelvin, Davis, Megan, Woods, Chris, Hipkins, President, Donald, Trump, Biden, Boris, Johnson, Scott, Morrison, Ministry, Justin, Trudeau, Labour, National, Act, Green, Conservative, Advance, Māori, Vision, TOP, Opportunities, Aotearoa, Legalise, Cannabis, Democracy, Freedoms, Heartland, Outdoors, Credit

[Note: these words represented synonyms for politics, the names of the New Zealand Government's top five cabinet ministers in 2020, the names of all the political parties registered in New Zealand and the names of some international leaders a spot search through the data identified as political people who were frequently mentioned.]

Mainstream Media, Mainstream, News, Mass, Newspaper, Radio, Television, TV, Journalist, media Reporter, 1News, Hub, Herald, Stuff, RNZ, Newstalk, ZB, Sky, Prime, Māori, Spinoff, Article

[Note: these words represented synonyms for mainstream media and the names of all mainstream media outlets in New Zealand over the reporting period]

Hypothetical examples

Covid-19 “...we need to be **alert**...”

This example would be excluded because it is not referring to Covid-19 and the alert level system, but instead being alert in general.

“...I've been following the **China** stuff; Taiwan is in trouble...”

This example would be excluded because it refers to China not in relation to Covid-19, but in relation to political tensions in the area.

Politics “...I have a **vision** for the church...”

This example would be excluded because it refers to a generalized vision for the church, rather than the political party, Vision NZ.

“...you may face some **opposition** in this life...”

This example would be excluded because it refers to opposition in general life rather than the opposition party in parliament.

Mainstream media “...I mean they even have a **Māori** Rugby team now...”

This example would be excluded because the statement has political undertones, towards whether New Zealand should have a Māori Rugby team, rather than the mainstream media outlet Māori television.

“...I never thought crocs would go **mainstream** again...”

This example would not be included because it refers to a shoe brand becoming popular, not the mainstream media.

Initially a code for religion was included with signifiers such as “God” and “Jesus” to determine the extent to which religion was being discussed within sermons. However, these terms were used so often that inclusion would have swamped the analysis. Additionally, such a code is not relevant to this study. This research focusses on current affairs and the religious rhetoric used to discuss and justify such topics rather than the study of religious rhetoric as a starting point. Therefore, a religious centric code has been excluded. As will be detailed in thematic analysis within Chapters 6 and 7 religious language is entwined within Pastor Peter Mortlock’s arguments related to current affairs.

The transcribed sermons in PDF document format were searched using the advanced search function in Adobe Acrobat. Each code was searched individually and the frequency of its appearance within the text was recorded in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

To enhance the reliability of the coding I developed the categories and checked their application in an ongoing conversation with the supervisor until full agreement was reached over the categories.

Stremmler (2001) outlined the importance of considering the context around the code signifiers to ensure the code signifier was only being included in the data if the word was being used in relation to the code.

The words around the code signifiers were considered to account for the context of the code, and not another meaning. The examples listed in Figure 1 provide hypothetical instances of code signifiers being excluded because of the context enveloping the word.

After the codes were applied to the texts step five of Berelson's (1952) steps of quantitative content analysis began.

Presenting the Results

Step five is where the data is presented. A graph showing the frequency of references to the codes per sermon over the reporting period was created. Peaks were identified within the data. The graph is displayed in Figure 7 on page 68. The findings from the graph and its peaks are explored in Chapter 5, which answers research question one.

To help interpret the results a search was conducted across newspaper archives. The headlines of every news article related to politics and Covid-19 uploaded to Radio New Zealand during each peak were listed in a Microsoft Word document, with dates. Key moments in current affairs were highlighted. The date of spikes in the frequency of codes used in sermons was cross-referenced with what was occurring in the news cycle in the seven days leading up to that sermon. News stories beyond this period were also evaluated to contextualise the significance of the events transpiring during spikes in social and political discourse during sermons. The thematic analysis, outlined in the next section of this chapter, also provided details regarding the news stories Pastor Peter Mortlock talked about within the sermons at the peak of the data.

These details tested the existence of a connection between current affairs and religious communication.

The method of thematic analysis will now be traversed.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to qualitatively analyse the content within sermons. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytical approach used to identify overarching trends and issues. It studies beyond the literal words and instead recognises and articulates the implied and literal meanings within a text (Guest et al., 2011). Braun and Clarke (2012) defined thematic analysis as “a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (p. 57). They wrote a key element of thematic analysis is looking across multiple pieces of data, and not just a

single text or item of analysis so the researcher can identify the similarities in meanings and communications across a range of data. This study adopted this view by including eight sermons within the analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2012) noted that just because a pattern is identified, such as the frequent use of a particular phrase, does not make the pattern important. The researcher should be focussed on the specific research questions and identifying the patterns that assist in answering the query which they are investigating.

For this research a focus is given to patterns related to how the pastor constructs and deconstructs sources of truth, and patterns that create or reinforce barriers to belonging.

It is also worth mentioning intertextuality. Intertextuality is where creators of a text use other texts (Fairclough, 1998, p. 145). Pastor Peter Mortlock employed other texts within his communications. Pastor Peter Mortlock referred to news media articles and video clips from newscasts, mainly from Sky News and Fox News, to supplement his points. Government materials, and websites from international bodies such as the World Economic Forum were also quoted. These additional texts were included in the analysis.

Thematic analysis has the option of embracing an inductive or deductive approach or a mix of the two (Terry et al., 2017). Both involve codes. A decision regarding which to adopt must be determined prior to the study's commencement. Adopting a deductive approach involves beginning with a set of codes created by the prevalence of a preceding hypothesis. Alternatively, researchers could discover the relevant codes by analysing the text thus adopting an inductive approach. Instead, the researcher could do a mix of both. This study has adopted the latter most option. While the codes of politics, Covid-19, and the mainstream media were identified the ultimate answers to the research questions cannot be found within a pre-existing theory. Therefore, a primarily inductive approach is applied to deduce relevant themes for the latter two research questions.

There were 119 sermons within the data set in which thematic analysis could be applied to. Thematic analysis is time-consuming. The abundance of sermons with potential to analyse required a method for selecting a representative sample that balanced punctiliously answering the research questions in a timely manner.

Grafström and Schelin (2014) defined a representative sample as “a scaled-down version of the entire population, where all different characteristics of the population are present” (p. 279). The academics insisted a sample does not have to be “randomly selected for it to be representative” (p. 278). This study’s representative sample consisted of two sermons from each peak identified from the quantitative content analysis. One sermon was the address that contained the highest number of references to Covid-19, politics, and media within the peak. The other was either the sermon with the second highest number of references to Covid-19, politics and media, or a sermon around a peak in which the entire sermon was based around Covid-19, politics, or media. Selecting two sermons from each of the four peaks meant the sermons were sourced from across the two-and-a-half-year period rather than a narrow, specific time where political and social discourse was particularly high.

There are six phases to thematic analysis which this study follows (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The six phases are for the researcher to:

1. Familiarise themselves with the data.
2. Generate initial codes.
3. Search for themes.
4. Review potential themes.
5. Define and name the themes.
6. Produce the report.

As per step one I familiarised myself with the data and relevant texts. To do this each of the sermons within the sample were read in their entirety. During this phase keywords, phrases, themes, and possible theme indicators were recognised and highlighted on the transcripts using the qualitative coding software Delve (Delve, n.d.). Delve allowed me to electronically note, comment and identify themes

across the transcripts of the sermons. In addition to Delve a detailed Microsoft Office Word document was created for each peak which noted the points made within each sermon in the sample along with commentary on whether these points spoke to a wider theme.

Next, the data was scoured for initial codes. Codes are the building blocks of themes. They identify quotes and observations about the data that ultimately point to overarching themes. Phrases, sentences, words, and quotes that may assist in answering the research questions were be highlighted.

After the initial codes were identified potential themes were searched for regarding each question. Quotes and notes regarding each of the questions were highlighted different colours and then copied to individual documents. Before quotes were copied over they were cross referenced with the original sermon recording, to ensure they were transcribed precisely.

When looking for themes Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasised the importance of looking for patterns. Braun and Clarke (2012) named the search for themes as an ‘active process’. By this they meant that the themes are not found but cultivated by the researcher. Once identified, the themes relevant to each research question were then reviewed, defined, and named. A report in the form of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have been produced.

Now that the two methods used within this research have been explored I will now discuss ethical considerations.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted with consideration to ethical and moral standards. The data used was publicly available and obtained from the internet. There was no need for informed consent and no opportunity for Pastor Peter Mortlock to feel manipulated, obligated or forced to participate in this study.

Vogt et al. (2012) believed private data was protected but data publicly available was “fair game” (p. 303). However, the writers also acknowledged that using data in a way that is different from an author’s original purpose might be considered unethical even if it is not deemed illegal to do so. It is highly unlikely that City Impact Church and Pastor Peter Mortlock believed the sermon’s original purpose

would be for academic research. However, for this study to be effective it is imperative that the sermons are analysed in the context of their original intention. The purpose of this study is to determine the author's ultimate original purpose and the communications conveyed through that. To accomplish this it is essential the sermons are critically examined through the lens of Pastor Peter Mortlock's original intentions and his original purpose not only fully understood but fairly and accurately represented.

Vogt et al. (2012) also acknowledged "documents, even public documents, can be used to injure" (p. 301). Therefore, ethical considerations for defamation were considered within this research. While some may view the outcomes of this research as portraying City Impact Church and Pastor Peter Mortlock in an unfavourable way the intention of this research is not to injure City Impact Church or Pastor Peter Mortlock. The intention is to instead examine and accurately represent the communications of social and political issues expressed through sermons.

Limitations

While due care was utilised to ensure the best research methods were employed limitations to this research exist. Understanding these limitations helps contextualise this study and prompts suggestion for further areas of potential research.

One limitation is that this is a case study of one pastor at one church. It is important to stress that the views of Pastor Peter Mortlock do not necessarily represent the view of people who identify as Christian generally or those who utilise the megachurch model or even Christian's within Pastor Peter Mortlock's denomination of Pentecostalism. Further study into other religious leaders is needed before any generalised claims about the collective opinions of people who identify as Christian are described.

The conversations Pastor Peter Mortlock had with people before or after church nor the conversations he had outside of the Church setting are included. This study also does not account for sermons that were not placed online or that were taken down prior to the data extraction date of 22 July 2022. City Impact Church has multiple services across Sunday but often only one is placed online. This means in some instances services not placed online were not able to be considered for this research. City Impact

Church also had meetings outside of regular Sunday services that were not uploaded to the internet. What was said at those meetings could not be considered.

This research does not consider the social conventions and structures at play within the community outside of the sermon such as discussions on the church property prior or after the services, during team meetings, gatherings at people's homes, and other times.

This study does not focus on how the communications were received by those who watched the messages. There is possibility for further survey and ethnography research into whether what pastors utter changes people's behaviours or opinions.

Pastor Peter Mortlock consistently posted videos, statements, and photos to social media (Mortlock, 2022). Research into how pastors use social media to communicate messages and interact with their congregation could be a useful area of future study.

This study focuses on a religious leader's communication. Further study could be conducted into the body language and presentation style of religious leaders.

Finally, Gee (2014) stated a limitation to any study that analyses discourse is "The Frame Problem" (p. 37). According to Gee (2014) context is ever infinite. There are always more nuances, information or social subtleties that could be considered that have the potential to further illuminate what the utterer intended to convey. In addition to changing the perceived intention additional context may also cause the researcher to realise that although their interpretations were true, their understanding of what the individual was aiming to portray was limited.

This research has taken due care to mitigate Gee's (2014) frame problem by gathering as much information about context as possible within the scope of resource and time available for this study. While new information about the context of what Pastor Peter Mortlock proclaimed during sermons may arise the evidence garnered has allowed for a clear picture of Pastor Peter Mortlock's persuasive intentions during his communications.

Summary

To summarise, this research utilises the case study approach to better understand the phenomenon of current affairs in religious settings. It applies quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis as methodological processes to uncover its findings.

Chapter 4: Background

Prior to examining the findings, it is helpful to discuss background information regarding the case study. Each of these matters provide essential details that assists in contextualising this research and its case study. A detailed explanation regarding why the case study was chosen is discussed in the methods chapter from page 36.

About City Impact Church

City Impact Church was founded in 1982 by husband-and-wife duo Peter and Beverly Mortlock alongside a small number of others (City Impact Church, n.d.-n). Since that inception City Impact Church has ballooned to become one of New Zealand's biggest religious ministries with attendance of around 10,000 people, and more overseas (Farrier, 2023).

It has connections to Pentecostalism (City Impact Church, n.d.-l). Globally, Pentecostalism has experienced “explosive growth” in recent years (Lende, 2023, p. 31). Evangelicals and Pentecostals/Charismatics were the fastest growing Christian denominations in the world (Zurlo et al., 2023). Since 2000 Evangelicals have increased by 136 million people equating to approximately 15,867 new Evangelicals per day or 111,067 a week. Meanwhile Pentecostals and Charismatics increased by 236 million people to 679,085,000 people in 2023. That was 27,547 new Pentecostals or Charismatics a day, and 192,835 a week.

City Impact Church's founding location on the North Shore is home to a 2,000-seater auditorium as well as two Childcare Centres and an Arts Academy (City Impact Church n.d.-n). The property is also home to the City Impact Church School which educated 266 students from Year 1 to Year 13 in 2022 (Education Counts, n.d.).

However, the church's influence extends well beyond that flagship campus, and across the length of New Zealand. In 2023 its website (City Impact Church, n.d.-m) reported nine locations across the country: five in the North Island, and four in the South Island. Most locations require multiple services a week to accommodate the copious number of people attending.

A shining example of City Impact Church's influence in New Zealand is the response to the movie it released in 2018, called 'Broken'. The film was about a gang rivalry and was aimed at a secular audience. Its trailer went viral the weekend it premiered with more than 850,000 views (NZ Herald, 2016). Pastor Peter Mortlock served as executive producer (Broken, n.d.). On opening day 'Broken' was the number one film at the New Zealand box office (Broken – the movie, 2018b) and more than 20,000 people follow the film on Facebook (Broken – the movie, n.d.-c). In addition, 'Broken' became available on all Air New Zealand flights for a time, further extending its reach (Broken – the movie, 2018a).

Beyond New Zealand's walls, City Impact Church has congregations in Canada, Tonga and Fiji. It also had four sites in Mexico, six sites in the Philippines and 38 locations in India (City Impact Church, n.d.-m).

The church has strong connections to other Christian faith communities around the world. Other megachurch pastors and celebrity preachers with hundreds of thousands of social media followers regularly fly to New Zealand from around the world to preach at City Impact Church, particularly at its conferences. Guest speakers include movie producer and television personality Reverend Samuel Rodriguez who also served as a personal advisor to three Presidents of the United States (City Impact Church, n.d.-p). British billionaire businessman Lord Bob Edmiston has also spoken at the church (City Impact Church, n.d.-q).

The church has enjoyed strong, steady growth over its history. While there is no publicly available data to show its number of attendees over time, documents on the New Zealand charities register reveal significant growth in the ministry's staff, volunteers and finances. The growth in these figures indicates steady expansion in the size, scale, and impact of City Impact Church.

Figure 2 shows City Impact Church has been able to significantly grow its number of full-time employees, while maintaining a steady number of part-time workers, over the past 14 years. Full-time staff almost doubled in seven years from 66 people in 2015 to 121 in 2022. The ministry would have needed significant extension in finance and growth in attendance for such a consistent uptick in staff levels to be sustainable.

Figure 2

Number of Employees at City Impact Church From 2008 to 2022

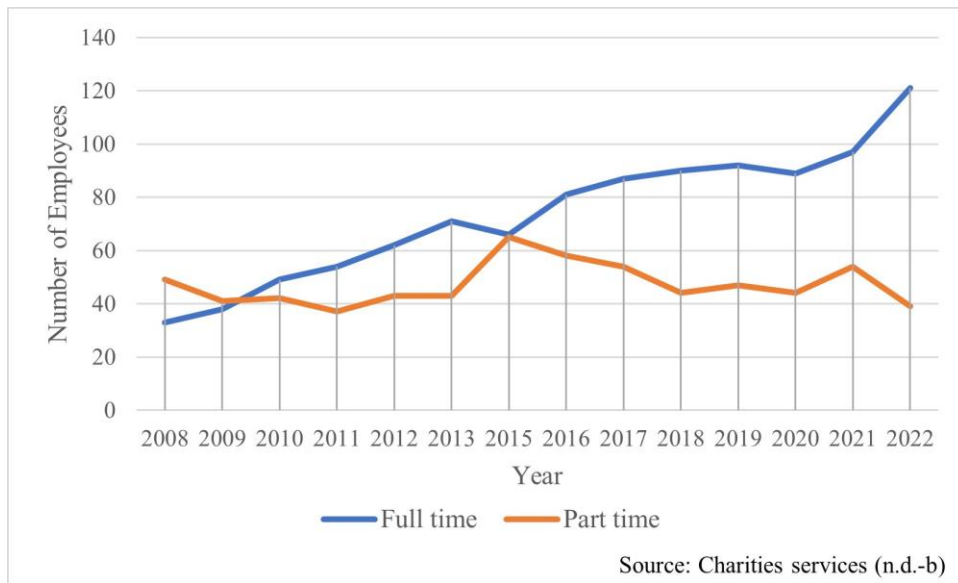
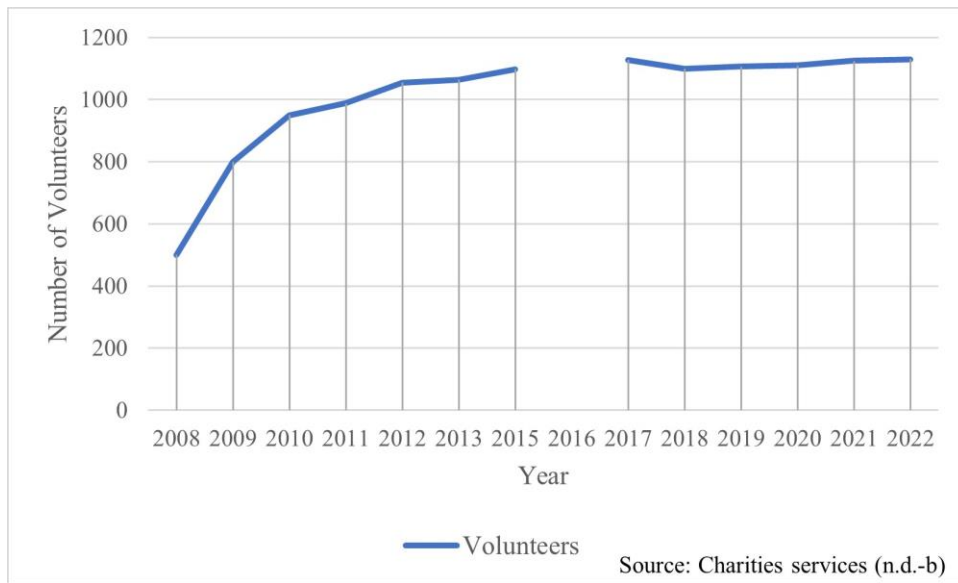


Figure 3 shows City Impact Church has also been able to grow and sustain its volunteer numbers. In 2022 City Impact Church had 1,130 volunteers, 121 full-time employees, and 39 part-time employees in New Zealand.

Figure 3

Number of Volunteers at City Impact Church From 2008 to 2022



Note. There is a gap in the data because the number of volunteers in 2016 was not reported.

Publicly available data on the Charities register show the church's steady growth in revenue as displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4

City Impact Church Revenue and Expenses From 2008 to 2022

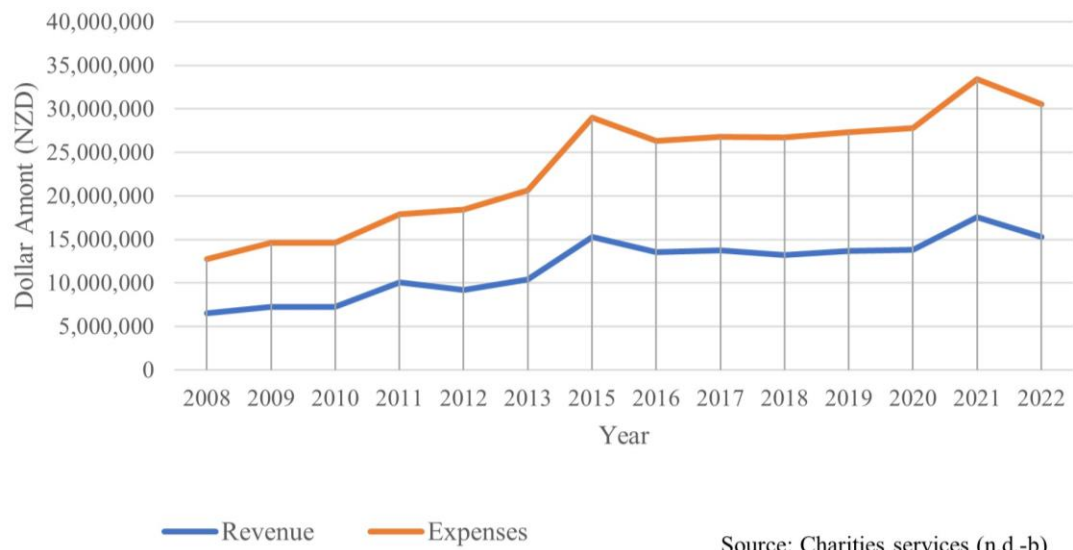
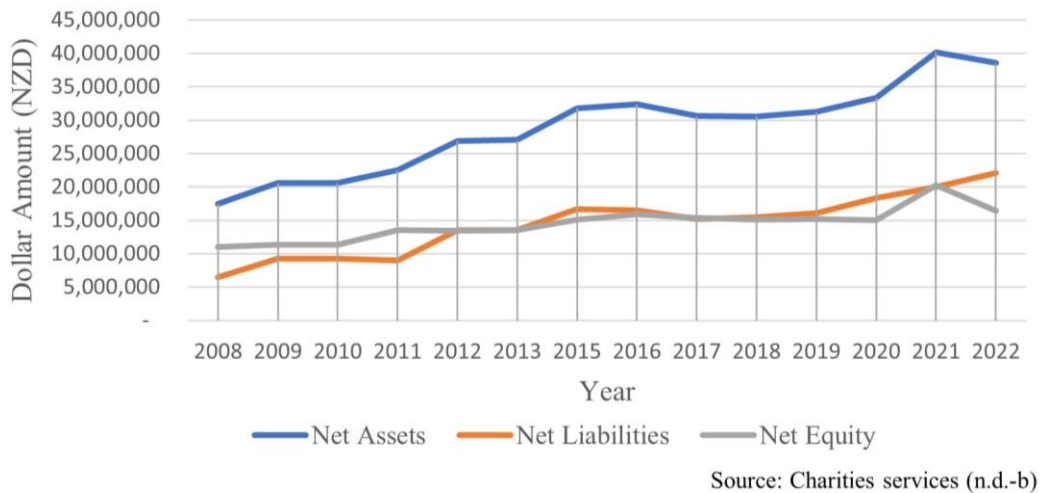


Figure 5 shows City Impact Church's strong financial health. While net equity has remained relatively constant over the 14 years, City Impact Church grew total assets from \$17,494,000 (NZD) in 2008 to \$38,551,933 (NZD) in 2022. In 2022 its revenue was \$15,292,636 (NZD) and expenses were \$15,246,586 (NZD). Net equity was \$16,440,623 (NZD).

Figure 5

City Impact Church's net Assets, net Liabilities, and net Equity From 2008 to 2022



The culmination of this data shows City Impact Church's substantial size. Its large network of congregations across New Zealand and the world shows the church has a significant footprint on Christianity on an international and local level. The ministry has many followers, a wide-reaching influence, is well financially resourced and has enjoyed steady, continual growth.

About Pastor Peter Mortlock

Pastor Peter Mortlock grew up in Stratford, a small town in Taranaki, New Zealand (City Impact Church, n.d.-o). He became a Christian as a 12-year-old. However, in his teenage years he did not follow through in living a life of Christian values. A minister's daughter, who would later become his wife, invited him to a church event as a young adult, and from that moment decided to live his life fully devoted to Jesus (Impact for Life, 2018).

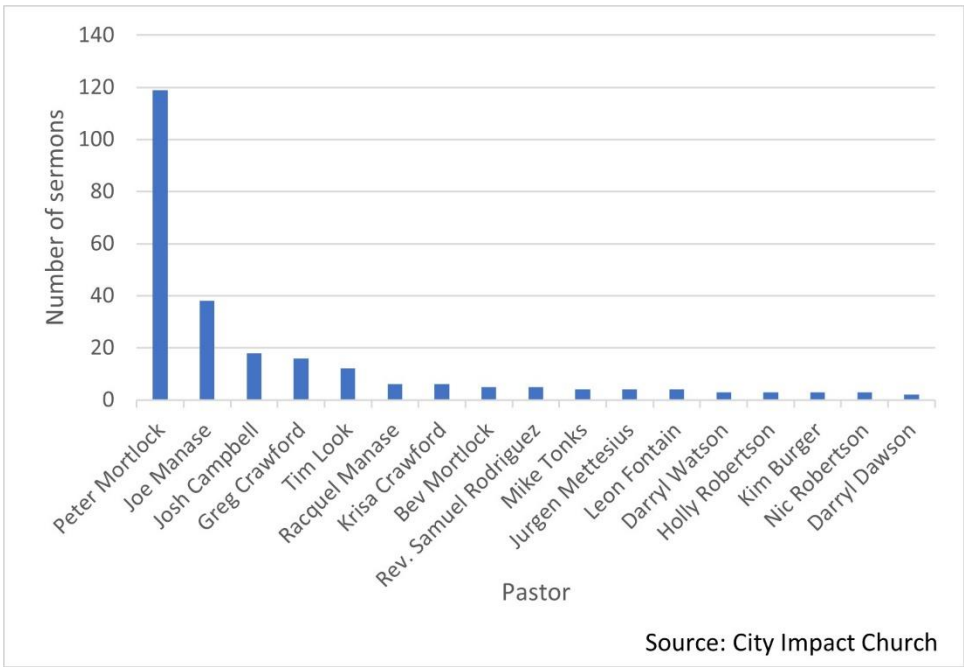
He worked as a real estate agent in the 1970's (Preston, 2023) before founding City Impact Church in 1982 alongside his wife, Pastor Beverly Mortlock (City Impact Church, n.d.-n). Since its inception Pastors Peter and Beverly Mortlock have "pioneered" all of City Impact Church's locations overseeing the pastors, volunteers, and attendees (City Impact Church, n.d.-n, para. 1).

As the top leader of a church (Clifton, 2009) the senior pastor provides pastoral support, teaching, and governance. They also set the strategic direction. Clifton (2009) described how senior pastors, particularly of megachurches, are the cultivators of “the message and culture of the church” (p. 5).

The senior pastor is usually a church’s primary preacher. Figure 6 and Table 1 shows how City Impact Church’s senior pastor, Peter Mortlock, preached a significantly higher quantity of sermons compared to other speakers during the period.

Figure 6

Number of Sermons Preached per Pastor Between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022



Note. Figure excludes an additional 13 preachers who delivered one sermon across the period.

Table 1

Top Five Pastors who Preached Most Often at City Impact Church Between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022 (source: City Impact Church)

	Pastor	Number of sermons preached	Percentage of sermons preached
1.	Peter Mortlock	119	44.91%
2.	Joe Manase	38	14.34%
3.	Josh Campbell	18	6.79%
4.	Greg Crawford	16	6.04%
5.	Tim Look	12	4.53%

In 2022 Pastor Peter Mortlock and Pastor Beverly Mortlock gave control to Pastors Joe and Racquel Manase (City Impact Church, n.d.-n). The Mortlocks transitioned from their role as senior pastors to founding pastors.

While Pastor Peter Mortlock no longer sets the strategic direction of City Impact Church he continues to preach and provide spiritual guidance. The City Impact Church website (n.d.-n) described how Pastors Peter and Beverly Mortlock have adopted an “apostolic and overseeing role” (para. 4).

The impact of the advice and influence Pastor Peter Mortlock has already given to churches globally was personified in two thank you videos created to celebrate his 40th year of church ministry (City Impact Church, 2022i; City Impact Church, 2022j). More than 35 pastors and preachers from Zealand and around the world sent personal recorded messages of encouragement about how much they loved the Mortlocks and how impactful Pastors Peter and Beverly Mortlock’s teachings and council had been over each of their respective ministries. The videos collectively created 40-minutes of back-to-back messages of gratitude.

There were local messages from leaders of New Zealand's largest churches, including Pastors Paul and Maree de Jong of LIFE church, Bishop Brian and Hannah Tamaki of Destiny Church, Pastors Rebecca and Steve Green from Elim Church, and Pastor Tak Bhana of Church Unlimited.

However, the bulk of the videos came from pastors in other countries, including Russia, Sweden, the United States, Fiji, Australia, the United Kingdom and France. A few big names worth highlighting include Pastors Jurgen and Leanne Matthesius of San Diego's Awaken Church. Their church infamously hosted Tucker Carlson when he was a prime-time Fox News presenter as a guest speaker and made headlines across the Covid-19 pandemic for refusing to obey restrictions (McWhinney, 2022). Pastor Jentezen Franklin, one of US President Donald Trump's former spiritual advisors (Associated Press, 2020), congratulated the couple. He considered it an "honour" to have spoken at City Impact Church and described the couple as "visionaries... anointed... [full of] so much wisdom" (City Impact Church, 2022i, 13.59; City Impact Church, 2022j, 14.17). Pastor Kong Hee from Singapore's City Harvest Church, who was jailed for seven years after fraudulently using \$35 million dollars (USD) of church funds to try kick start his wife's pop music career (Guardian, 2015), described the couple as an "inspiration" to his faith and said, "my wife Sun and I are... your biggest fans" (City Impact Church, 2022i, 18.13; City Impact Church, 2022i, 18.23). Other messages of gratitude included from Pastor Phil and Chris Pringle who founded the globally expansive C3 church movement, Bishop David A. Sobrepeña who pastors one of the largest megachurches in the Philippines and United Kingdom evangelist Jay John, among others.

The number, stature and calibre of people giving their well wishes highlighted Pastor Peter Mortlock's place in the global megachurch movement and provides great insight into how massive his sphere of influence is within the syndicate.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also hosts a television show called 'Impact for Life'. The programme was broadcast for more than 10 years on mainstream media channels and was "available in many nations" (City Impact Church, n.d.-n, para. 2).

Summary

City Impact Church is a large congregation that spans across New Zealand and the globe. The church is influential and the strong staffing and financial expansion over the past 14 years indicating a strong growth in attendance. In 2022 City Impact Church's leaders, Pastors Peter and Beverly Mortlock, transitioned from senior pastors to founding pastors. Pastor Peter Mortlock continues to preach at City Impact Church and retains a strong influence in megachurch movements in New Zealand and around the world.

Now that the foundations for which this research was built have been laid including a review of relevant academic literature, an in-depth discussion of the methodological practices employed, and a background to the case study, the findings from this study can be perused.

Chapter 5: Sermons Defining Social Issues

This chapter explores the role of sermons in defining social issues. It examines to what extent sermons are used as an opportunity to influence a congregation regarding social issues debated in the public arena. The relationship between these social issues and communications during sermons is analysed.

This chapter begins with an overview of trends across sermons that discuss social or political issues based on a quantitative analysis of the dataset, Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermons. There is an uptick in social and political discourse during times of intense social debate about issues of public concern. These trends demonstrate an entanglement of social and political issues, and sermons being used as an instrument to influence.

I discuss the findings in the context of academic scholarship to explore why political and social discourse in sermons is significant and potentially concerning.

Sermons and Social Discourse: An Overview

The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the entire dataset.

Exactly 119 sermons from the case study, Pastor Peter Mortlock of City Impact Church, have been included in this analysis. The sermons were delivered across a two-and-a-half-year period from 1 January 2020 to 1 July 2022. Of these sermons, 92 (77.3%) mentioned Covid-19 at least once, 79 (66.4%) mentioned the mainstream media at least once, and 64 (54%) mentioned politics at least once.

Before outlining the trends of the period it is useful to identify the average number of times the themes of Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics were mentioned in a sermon across the period. This helps clarify and identify surges in discourse around these themes.

As per Table 2 the mean number of times signifiers regarding Covid-19, the mainstream media, and politics were mentioned across the period was 17.29 times per sermon. The mean number of times the themes of Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics were mentioned in a sermon were 8.72, 4.17, and 4.40 times respectively.

Table 2

Average Number of Times Signifiers Used per Sermon Between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022

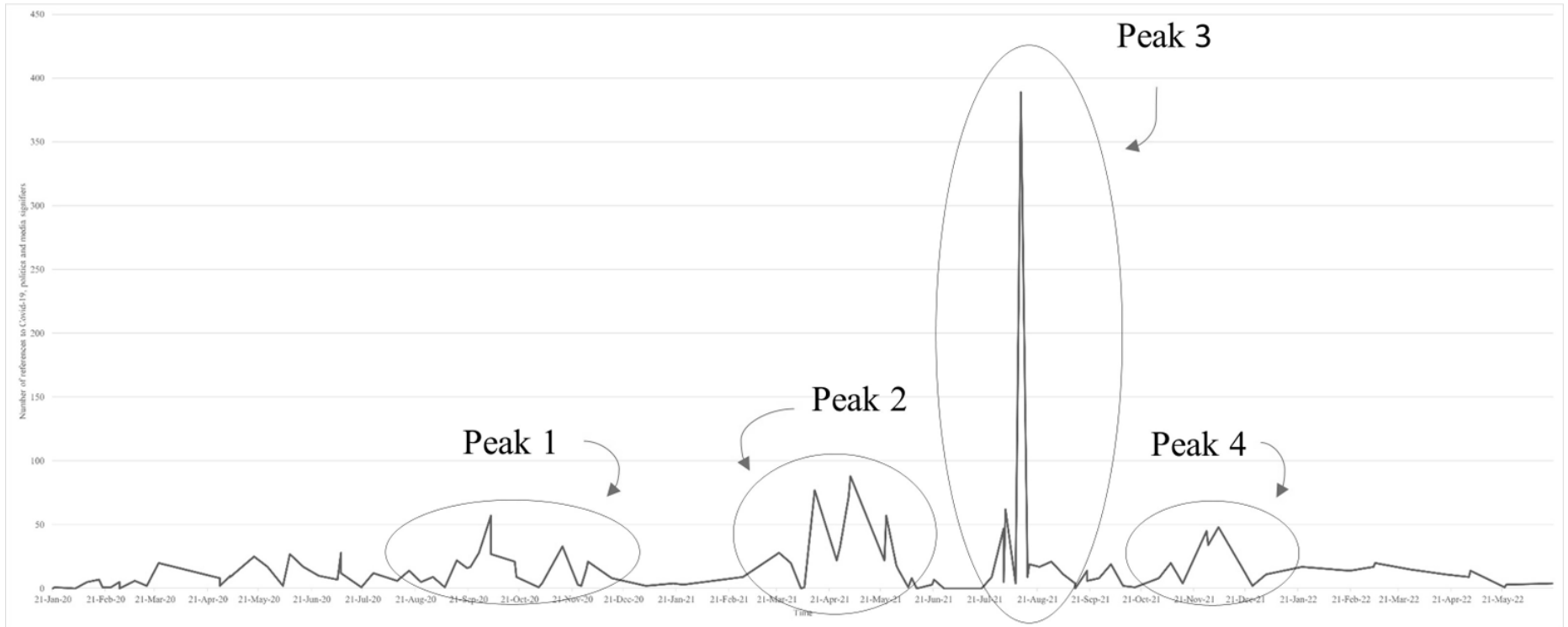
Signifier	Mean (times)	Mean without outlier (times)	Difference (times)
Covid-19	8.72	6.47	-2.25
Politics	4.17	3.65	-0.52
Media	4.40	3.91	-0.49
Total	17.29	14.03	-3.26

A sermon delivered on 11 August 2021 is an outlier in the data. The message included 389 references to Covid-19, the mainstream media, and politics which significantly exceeded even the sermon with the next highest number of references which contains 88 mentions. When this outlier is removed from the data the average across the period decreases by 18.85% from 17.29 times to 14.03 times per sermon. The mean number of times Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics are mentioned in a sermon also decreases from 8.72, 4.17, and 4.40 times, to 6.47, 3.65, and 3.91 times respectively.

Across the reporting period there were four instances in which Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics were talked about more often. These are highlighted in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Referred to Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, and Politics Signifiers From 1 January 2020 to 1 July 2022



The tip of each peak, displayed in Figure 7, had at least 45 references to Covid-19, the mainstream media, and politics per sermon, more than three times the mean number of mentions. The four lifts in discourse regarding Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics occurred between 7 September 2020 and 3 January 2021, 1 March 2021 and 8 June 2021, 25 July 2021 and 5 September 2021, and 31 October 2021 and 25 December 2021.

The four peaks across the reporting period will now be individually analysed.

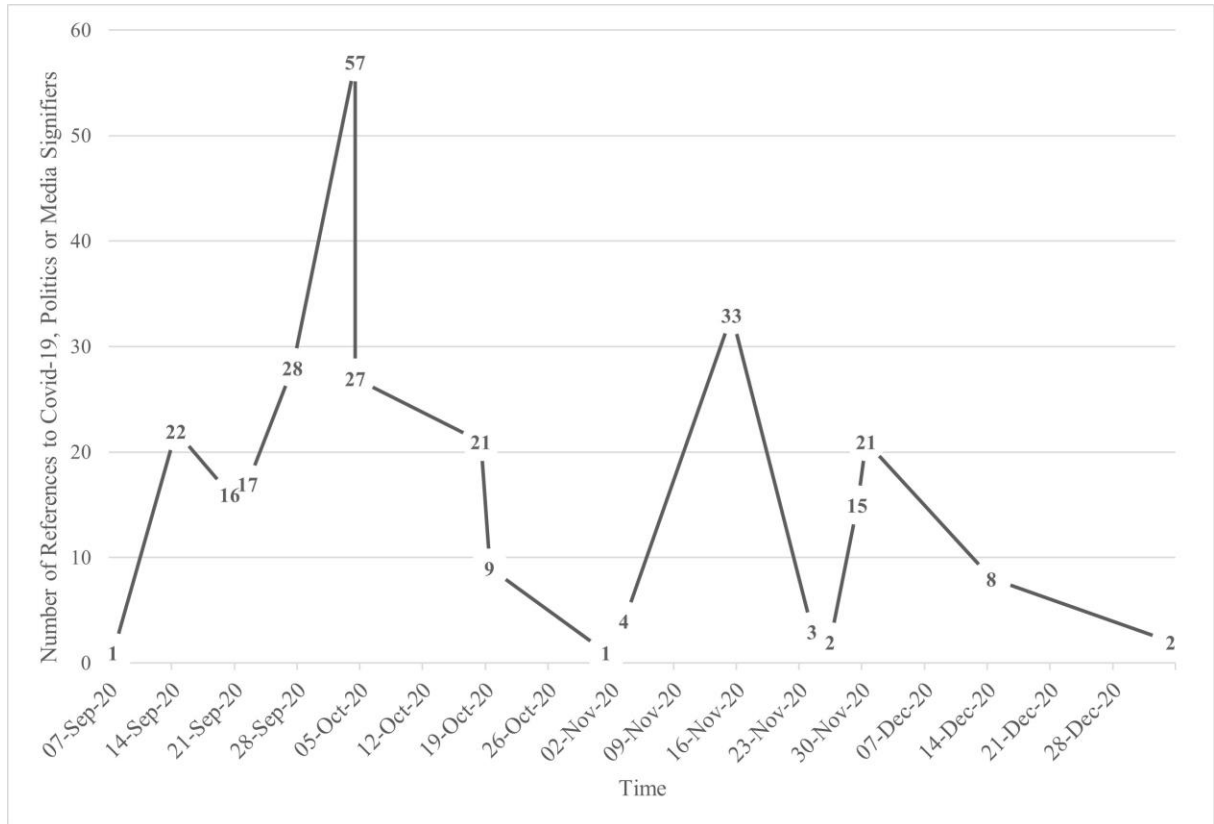
Peak 1: September 2020 – November 2020

The first rise in social and political discourse occurred in the lead-up to New Zealand's 2020 general election.

As shown in Figure 8 the first peak begins from a pit on 7 September 2020 in which Covid-19, the mainstream media or political signifiers are mentioned once. From there the number of times words relating to Covid-19, the mainstream media or politics jumps to the mid-twenties before peaking on 4 October 2020 with 57 references to Covid-19, the mainstream media, or politics. The next three sermons in the peak have 27, 21 and nine mentions respectively. There is a slight uptick on 15 November 2020. After this, the peak tapers.

Figure 8

Peak one: Total Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, or Politics From September 2020 to December 2020



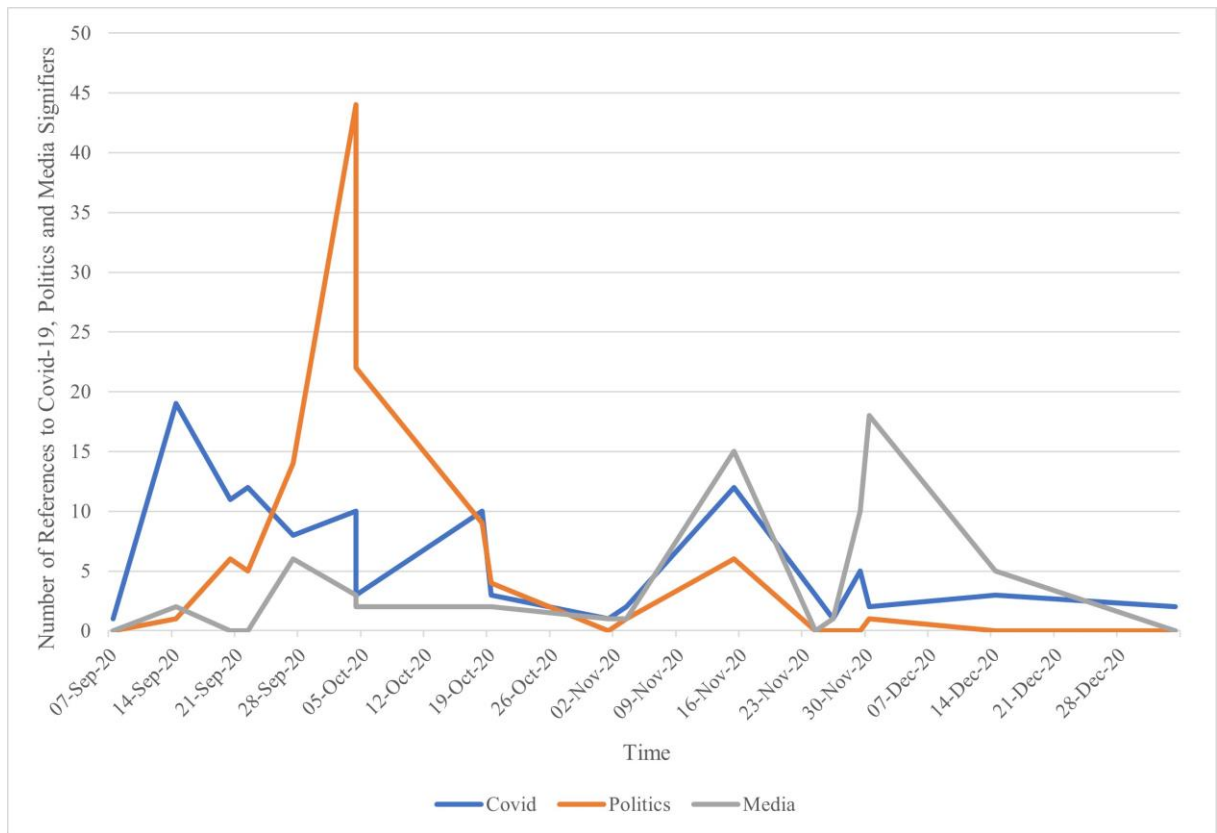
What triggered such a spike in discourse was the general election which occurred in the middle of the peak on 17 October 2020 (Cooke, 2020). This election allowed New Zealanders to vote for the next Parliament which would determine who would become Prime Minister and form a government. Alongside the general election were two referendums (Electoral Commission, n.d.). One referendum regarded the legalisation of recreational marijuana use, the other regarded the legalisation of euthanasia (Electoral Commission, n.d.).

If the peak is broken into how many times signifiers for Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics are individually mentioned we can observe that a dramatic increase in political discourse in the lead up

to the election, particularly on the 4 October 2020, the day after advanced voting opened on 3 October 2020. This is displayed in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Peak one: Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, and Politics From September 2020 to December 2020



Peak 2: March 2021 – June 2021

The second noticeable rise in social and political discourse occurs during the vaccination rollout and the start of vaccine mandates.

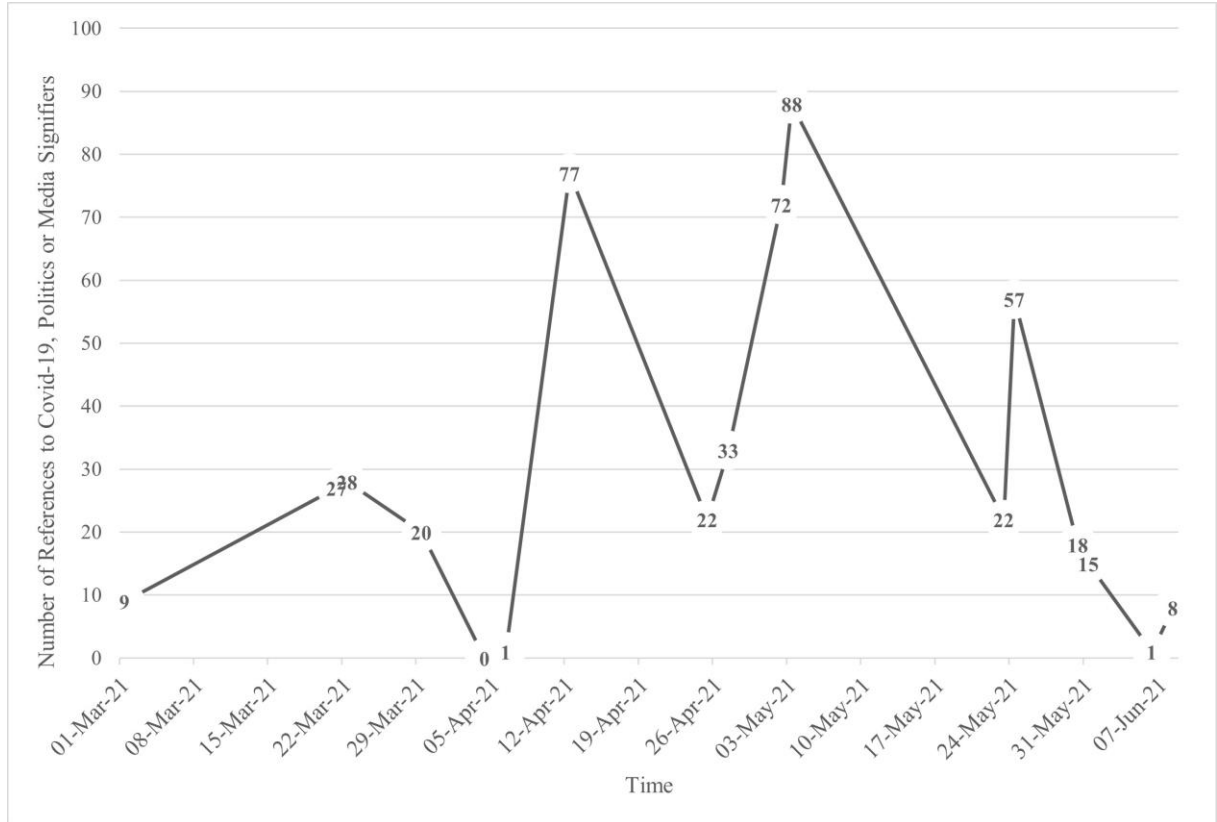
Figure 10 shows the second peak beginning from a pit on 25 January 2021 in which the signifiers for Covid-19, the mainstream media or politics are mentioned three times. No sermons delivered by Pastor Peter Mortlock were uploaded in the month of February 2021 indicating it is possible he did not speak that month. The next sermon he gave was on 1 March 2021 which has a slight uptick in signifiers, to nine references. This is still below the mean of 17.29/14.03 from across the entire reporting period.

From here there is a gradual increase in the number of signifiers used within the sermons before a sharp dip during the sermons delivered on the 4 and 6 April 2021. This dip occurs during the 2021 Easter weekend.

The second highest peak comes the week after Easter followed by a slight dip and then a steady climb to this section's highest point on 3 May 2021. Signifiers in this sermon are mentioned 88 times. From here the peak tapers.

Figure 10

Peak two: Total Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, or Politics From March 2021 to June 2021



The rise in social and political discourse is in response to the Government's vaccination programme. While it had not yet become available to the public a select batch of people deemed most critical in keeping Covid-19 out of the country were being immunised across the period (Russell, 2021). The first vaccine was administered in New Zealand just before the beginning of the peak on 19 February 2021 (Bond, 2021).

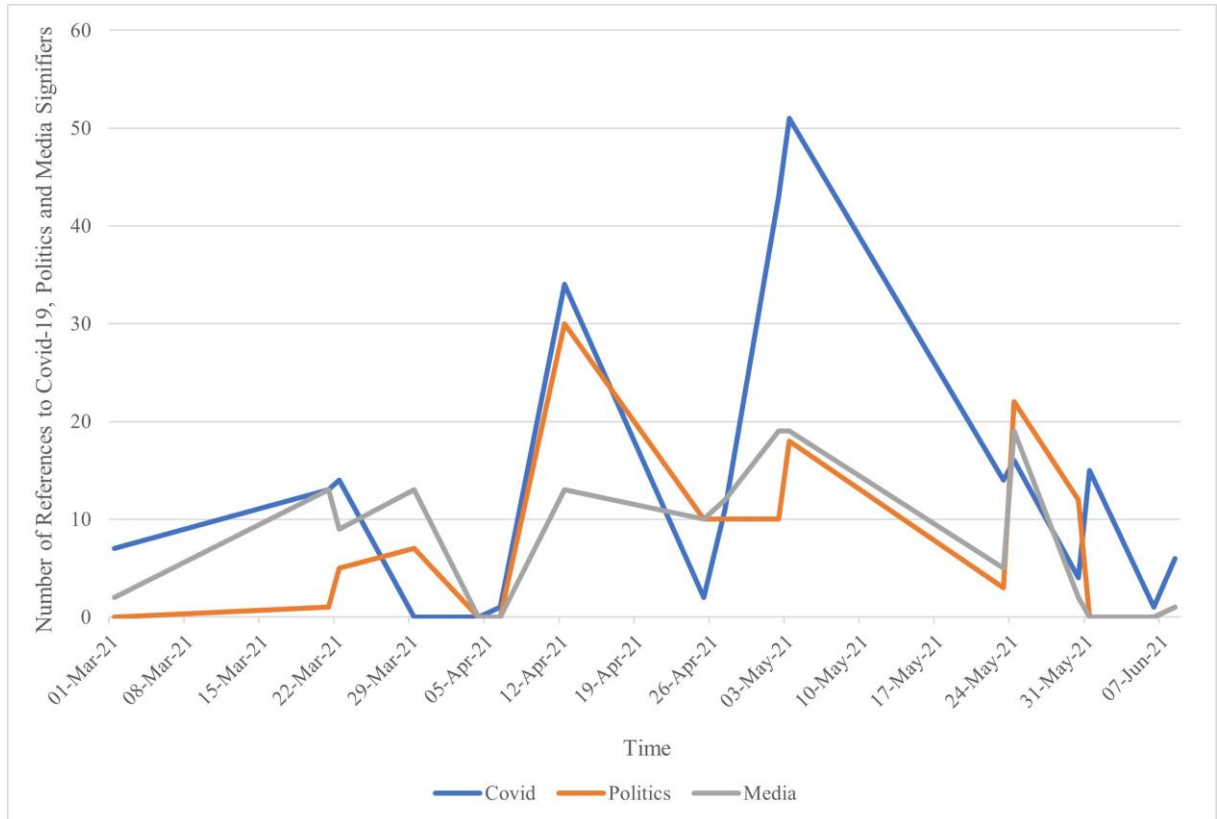
On 10 March 2021, when Pastor Peter Mortlock's rhetoric around Covid-19 and politics begins to climb, the Government outlined its proposal to get the rest of New Zealand's public vaccinated.

On 26 March 2021 the first vaccine mandate was announced (Patterson, 2021). Unvaccinated border workers were told they would need to get vaccinated against Covid-19 or else face losing their jobs. Workers were not immediately dismissed, and a deadline was not announced on this date. On 11 April 2021 border workers were told they had until the end of the month to get vaccinated (Young, 2021). The opposition party to the sitting Government called for unvaccinated border workers to be dismissed from their positions immediately (Young, 2021). On 2 May 2021, nine border workers were fired for not agreeing to take the vaccine (Radio New Zealand, 2021b). The next day Pastor Peter Mortlock delivered the sermon with the highest number of references to political and social issues in the peak. This sermon is also the second highest number of references to Covid-19, the mainstream media, and politics over the entire two-and-a-half-year period.

As displayed in Figure 11, discourse related to Covid-19 is significantly higher than politics or the mainstream media for that sermon at the height of the peak. Throughout the rest of this period signifiers for Covid-19, the mainstream media and politics trend together.

Figure 11

Peak two: Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, and Politics From March 2021 to June 2021



Peak 3: July 2021 – August 2021

The third lift in social and political discourse occurs during the beginning of the public vaccine roll out across New Zealand.

As per Figure 12 the third peak begins from a pit on 19 July 2021 in which the signifiers for Covid-19, the mainstream media or politics are not mentioned at all.

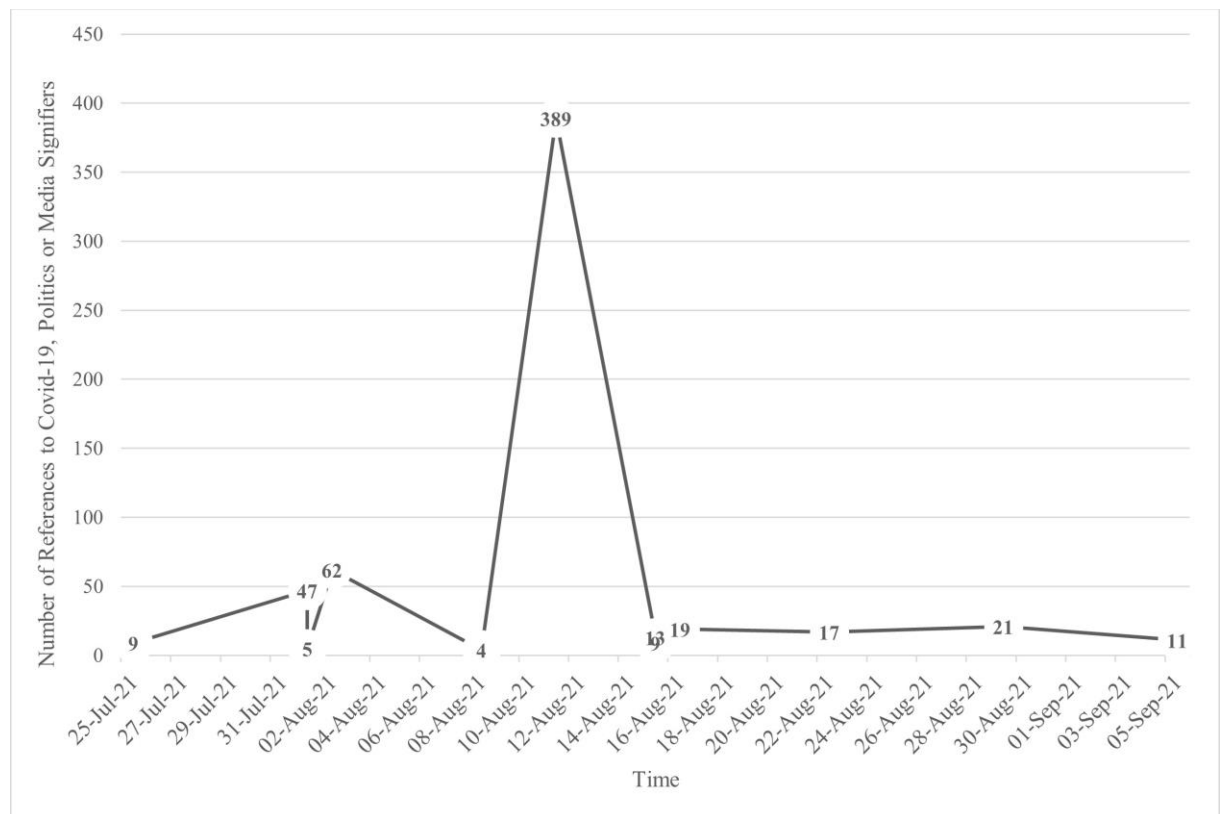
From here there is a sharp rise in the number of signifiers for Covid-19, the mainstream media, or politics within sermons. The third sermon within this peak, delivered on 1 August 2021, contains 47 signifiers, and on 2 August 2021 this increases further to 62 times. These sermons both had the same title, ‘Be Anxious for Nothing’, which indicates that they contain the same points. However, these sermons are

not identical in their delivery. The matching title, similar number of signifiers and close upload dates indicate they are the same sermon, delivered at two different services on the same Sunday.

Two sermons later, on 11 August 2021, the highest point occurs. This is not just the highest for this peak, but also for the entire two-and-a-half-year reporting period, with 389 Covid-19, the mainstream media or politics signifiers mentioned within the one sermon. Following this, the signifiers diminish back to normal levels. The peak then tapers off completely, going down to zero mentions on 12 September 2021.

Figure 12

Peak three: Total Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, or Politics From July 2021 to September 2021



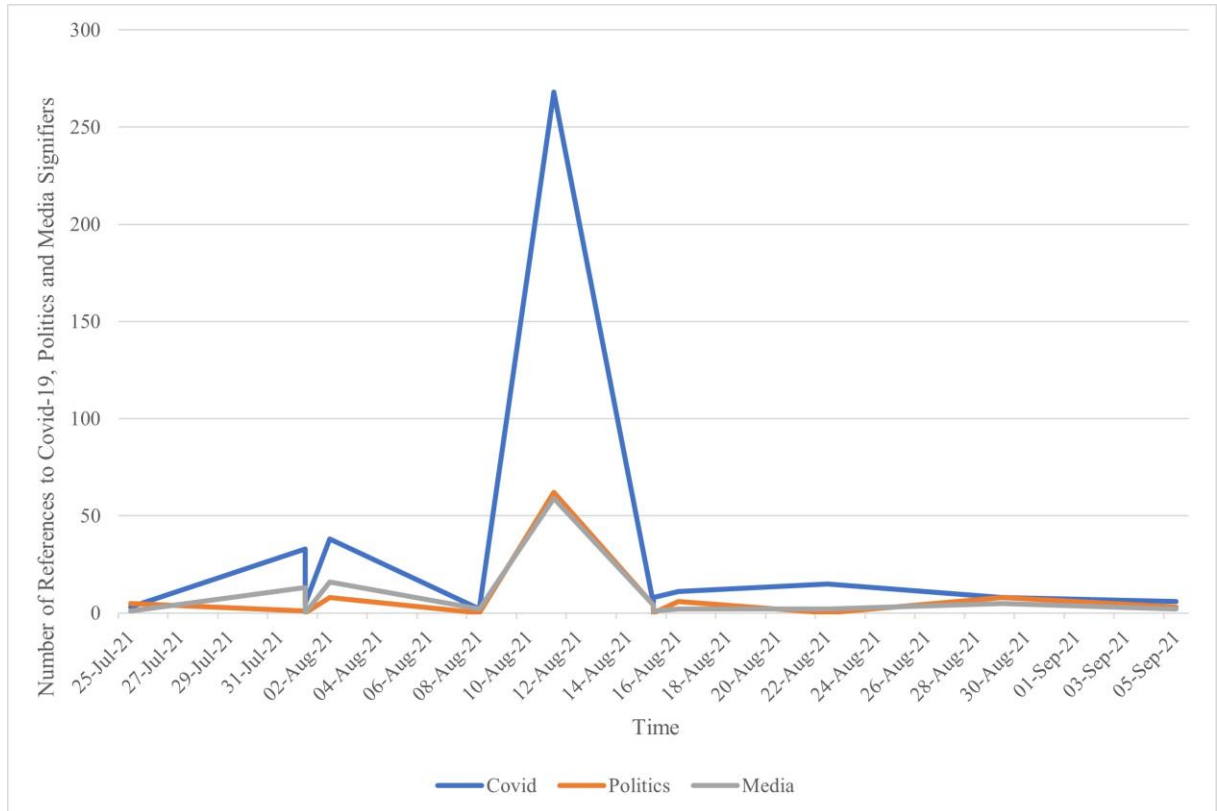
As this period started the Covid-19 vaccination rollout for the New Zealand public began. The vaccine gradually became available to the entire population, opening in descending age bands from 28 July 2021 (Wilson, 2021). Prior to this only a select assortment of New Zealanders most at risk and deemed most critical in keeping the country Covid-19 free were able to get vaccinated (Hunt, 2021).

On 30 July 2021 New Zealand's first mass vaccination event took place (Sommerville and Martin, 2021, 30 July), and on 17 August 2021 all of New Zealand moved to its second-ever level four lockdown which had the harshest restrictions the Government could impose (Cooke, 2021). By 27 August 2021 45% of New Zealand's eligible population had been vaccinated (Radio New Zealand, 2021c).

Figure 13 shows that discourse related to Covid-19 is significantly higher than utterances related to politics or the mainstream media particularly at the peak's highest point on 11 August 2021. While all three signifier categories increase significantly during this sermon the peak is primarily caused by a significant jump in the use of Covid-19 signifiers.

Figure 13

Peak three: Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, and Politics From July 2021 to September 2021



Peak 4: October 2021 – December 2021

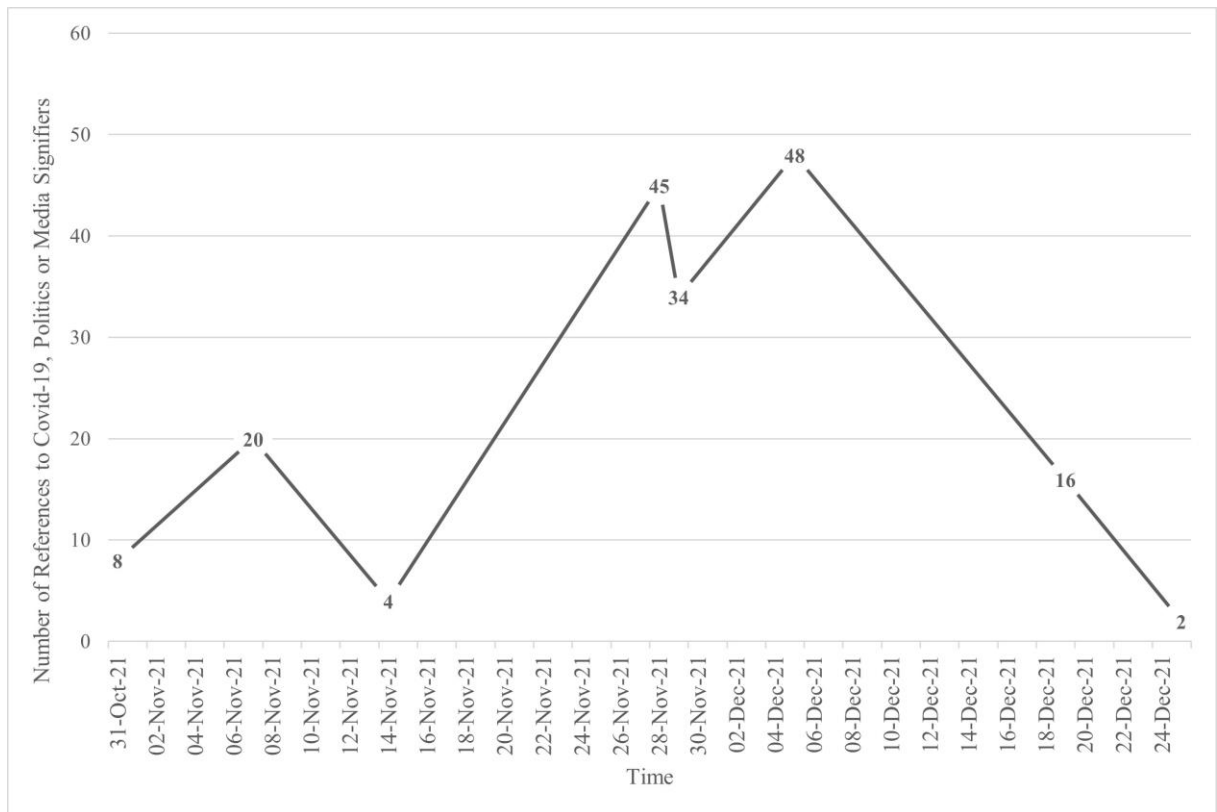
The fourth rise in social and political discourse occurs during New Zealand's transfer to a new Covid-19 protection framework that restricted the freedom of unvaccinated people.

As displayed in Figure 14 the fourth peak begins from a pit on 17 October 2021 in which the signifiers for Covid-19, the mainstream media, or politics are only mentioned once. From here the number of signifiers used increases to 20 times on 7 November. The references to Covid-19, the mainstream media or politics then jumps, and the number of times a signifier is used within a sermon increases to 45, 34, and 48 times on the 28 November 2021, 29 November 2021, and 5 December 2021 respectively.

Following this peak, from 19 December 2021, the number of signifier mentions dips to the mean level of references.

Figure 14

Peak four: Total Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, or Politics From October 2021 to December 2021



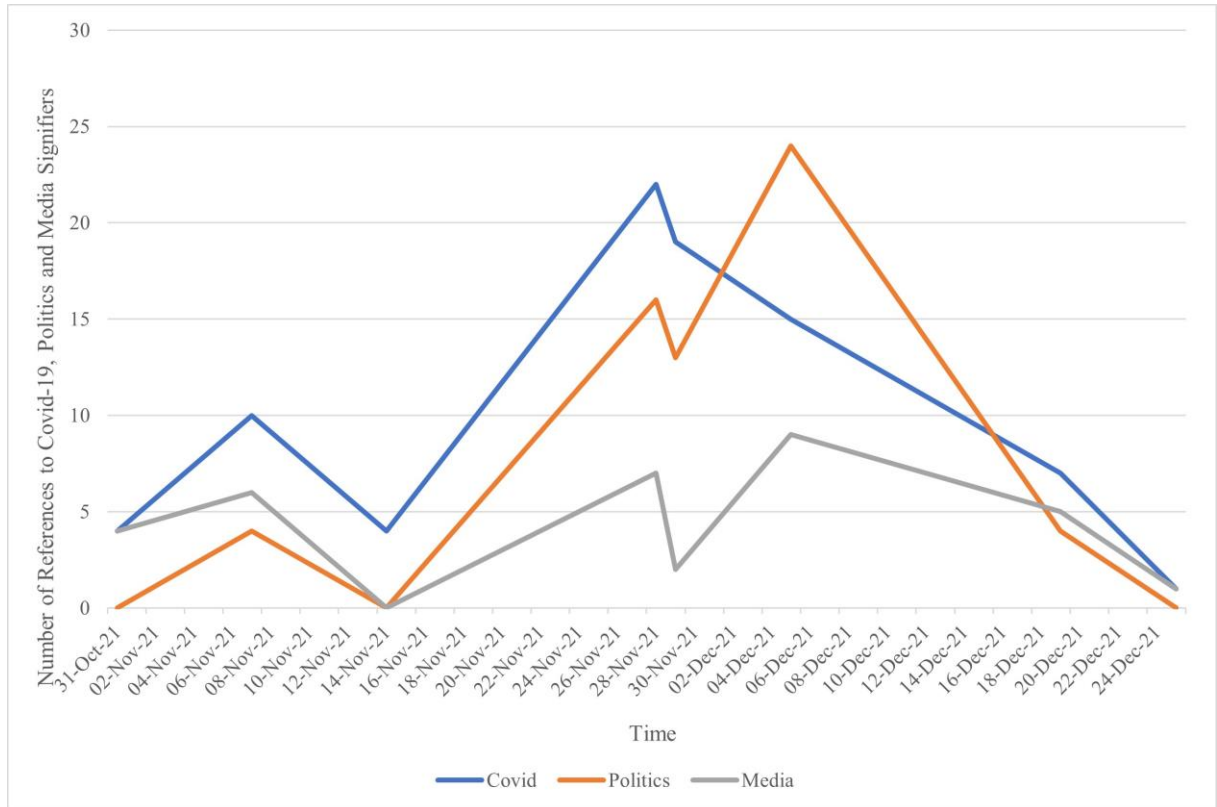
Sowman-Lund (2021) described how across the period Covid-19 lockdowns were gently eased with greater freedoms given to those who got vaccinated. On 3 December 2021 the Covid-19 Protection Framework, colloquially referred to as the traffic light system, kicked in. This transferred New Zealand's coronavirus strategy away from elimination. On this date Auckland opened after more than 100 days in lockdown.

A press release from the office of the Covid-19 response Minister, the Right Honourable Christopher Hipkins, (2021) detailed that under the traffic light system vaccination certificates were used. Many businesses and event-holders were able to choose whether they required people to be vaccinated upon entry. People were able to set up their vaccination certificates in preparation from 17 November 2021 for the traffic light system. The implementation of the certificate coincided with when this peak's social and political discourse drastically increase. Across the period vaccine mandates continued to be used and expanded in many workplaces.

As per Figure 15 sermons contained more discourse relating to Covid-19 in the lead up to the traffic light system being implemented. After it was rolled out political utterances surged. The peak's height is on 5 December 2021 two days after New Zealand transferred to the new traffic light system.

Figure 15

Peak four: Number of Times Pastor Peter Mortlock Mentions Signifiers for Covid-19, the Mainstream Media, and Politics From October 2021 to December 2021



Summary of the Peaks

As outlined each of the peaks were caused by a contentious issue that was being debated within the social arena. The first peak was triggered by New Zealand's general election the second peak was activated by the start of the Covid-19 vaccination roll out and vaccine mandates, the third peak was caused by the Covid-19 vaccination becoming available to the public and the final peak was due to the new Covid-19 protection framework that restricted the freedom of unvaccinated people.

The rise in language around times in which social debate was most rife, shows that sermons were being used as a tool to influence the congregation's beliefs and behaviour regarding those contentious social and political issues. Knowing that this was occurring, academic scholarship will now be discussed to explore why this is significant and potentially concerning.

Sermons as Social Action Instigators

This section of the chapter explores the effect of pastors talking at length about political and social issues at the same time those issues are being debated in the public arena. It asks if and in what context is justifiable for pastors to talk about political and social matters. The section is split into two parts, firstly focussing on whether such discourse fulfils the purpose of a sermon, and secondly analysis of a pastor's influence, and whether commenting on political or social matters is an overreaching use of this authority.

Purpose of a Sermon

Sermons have long been used to elicit change, and call people to action. Alcántara (2019) wrote “preaching really does have the power to change people’s lives and, dare I say, to change the world” (p. 8). However, the action sermons call people towards are usually not political. Alcántara (2019) believed sermons served as an important tool to help people understand the Bible and the message of Jesus. Normally, the action sermons call people towards are some sort of life change that results in self-improvement. It is an action or thought process the listener can apply to their lives that betters their connection with God and with others.

If the purpose of sermons is to elicit change it begs the question: what action, behaviour or belief system is a pastor attempting to change when talking about politics and social issues during sermons?

Stoorvogel et al. (2019) conducted a study into what aspects of sermons elicit behaviour or life change in congregants receiving sermons. The study involved “in-depth, semi-structured” interviews with 15 participants (p. 15). The respondents were long-time, regular church attendees who were also representative of gender, age and a cross-section of denominations. The researchers found every person part of the study experienced “decisive change through a sermon at least once” across three areas: spiritual, behaviour or self (p. 30). Regarding behaviour change, respondents experienced a desire to engage in social justice. This study shows that sermons can have a profound and transformative impact on the thinking of those listening. A pastor talking about political and social issues within sermons can have a profound and transformative impact on the way people listening think about those issues.

The high frequency of political and social discourse across the two-and-a-half year reporting period coincided with peaks at times when those issues are being debated in the public arena demonstrates that the pastor was attempting to elicit some sort of influence over the congregation into aligning their worldview and belief systems with that of the pastor.

The most pressing example of this is when political discourse dramatically increased less than two weeks prior to New Zealand's 2020 general election. Such timing strongly indicates that the behaviour change Pastor Peter Mortlock was hoping to elicit in the congregation, was how to vote in the election.

Through the application of qualitative thematic analysis to a sample of sermons from each peak it became apparent how Pastor Peter Mortlock justified talking about current affairs and politics during sermons.

Many justifications were given. The five main ones were:

1. Traditional sources of truth are not informing you.
2. God told him to talk about the topics.
3. He cared about the congregation making wise decisions and holding intelligent opinions.
4. Moral debate requires pastoral commentary.
5. It is impossible to avoid politics and current affairs.

The first two justifications are related to sources of truth which are discussed in Chapter 6. Here I'll give a short expansion of the third, fourth and fifth justifications.

The third justification, and the most common regarding political discourse was because pastors care about the congregation. Pastor Peter Mortlock wanted to help people make good decisions in every area of their life including how they voted and how they interpreted and perceived the world. He cared that they would be fully informed about what he thought was happening in the world so that they could prepare themselves for when things imploded. He often talked about how his "heart" was for the Church and its wellbeing (City Impact Church, 2021g, 15.21). He believed that if everyone adopted his

perspective and line of thinking the world would be a brilliant place. Therefore, he needed to do all he could to convince everyone to believe in that worldview.

Let me just mention something because I want to. I do love you and I want the best for you. And I don't want you ignorant, I know that some of you have bought into it. And I understand that. But in the world, worldwide, and you know this, what I'm saying, but I want to reiterate it. Because if you don't know the truth, then you get caught up in all this fear. (City Impact Church, 2021f, 10.02)

It is interesting to highlight within this quote that he mentioned his opinion “because I want to”. This suggests Pastor Peter Mortlock had full reign to disclose virtually any opinions during sermons with little accountability.

The fourth justification Pastor Peter Mortlock used to engage in discourse around political and current affairs was that moral issues require the opinion and commentary of religious leaders. He felt the Government had begun to make laws about issues of morality which he claimed affected the church. Therefore, according to Pastor Peter Mortlock, responses and remarks from the church were warranted.

Obviously we are facing some things I've never, ever seen an election where we've got two major referendums that are social referendums that affect the morality of the country, and so therefore affect the church. It's amazing how they don't want church involved in politics, but politics wants to get involved in the work of the church, and that is the morality of our nation. (City Impact Church, 2020b, 40.11)

This is a direct example of ‘moral subjectification’ where some Christians view themselves as the moral police to monitor government (Marshal, 2009). Pastor Peter Mortlock justified political discourse through a belief that it was important for Christian morals to be upheld in New Zealand, and that the way for this to occur was by policing political moral activity.

The fifth justification given for why pastors could engage in political discourse within sermons by the case study was that everything has become political. In one sermon, as he attacked the Government’s Covid-19 pandemic policies, Pastor Peter Mortlock suggested that he had no choice but to attack the restrictions. He made it seem as if he was being forced into providing this political commentary. He said, “I heard a saying which I thought was quite good. As pastors we were talking about things this week, and he said, I did not engage politics. Politics has engaged me. Because everything's so political today. It's crazy” (City Impact Church, 2021h, 11.03).

If a pastor uses a sermon to elicit behaviour change in a congregation around political or social issues, how likely is the congregation to be swayed by these persuasions?

A Pastor's Influence and Use of Power

This study has not probed the congregation but other researchers have. What they found serves as an indicator of the impact sermons can have, and how important its power is aptly used. Corcoran and Wellman (2016) found senior pastors formed a charismatic bond between themselves and people in the church, established and reinforced by the pastor simultaneously appearing ordinary and extraordinary (p. 309). Prior to this research most studies regarding the relationship between pastors and the congregants of their church had focused on extreme or new religious leaders rather than established institutions. Corcoran and Wellman's (2016) study focused on mainline megachurches.

A cross section of 12 megachurches from around the United States were selected by researchers Thumma and Bird who had been studying megachurches in the United States since 1992. These churches were selected to be representative of megachurches across the United States with characteristics such as dominant race, number of members and location being factored into the decision regarding which churches to include in the study. In 2008 church wide surveys were distributed across the congregation, and 282 people participated in focus groups. At the focus groups, which lasted about an hour and a half, the churchgoers responded to questions about their faith such as how they started attending that church. Importantly the questions were not related to the church's senior pastor. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by Corcoran and Wellman. They found that around 35% of respondents, without prompting, described the senior pastor as "special, unique, extraordinary, or different from and better than other people" (p. 320). Most comments that referred to the senior pastor's extraordinariness came from long time church attendees. Many people described their pastor as being "led", "sent" or "chosen" by God to serve that specific church (p. 320). The research also found that approximately 27% of all comments were related to the charismatic bond they shared with their senior pastor (p. 324). Corcoran and Wellman (2016) stated that "megachurch attendees generally described their senior pastor as their

leader, hero, and exemplar and emphasized his extraordinary qualities and abilities...attendees felt their senior pastor was "just like them" and yet so much more" (p. 327).

Other academic work supports these findings. While a pastor is not viewed as a deity themselves they are often viewed as a spokesperson or mouthpiece for God and the truth (Harding 2000; Lee 2007; Wellman 2012). The power of the pulpit to influence and impart into people's lives was emphasised by the thinking of Alcántara (2019) who believed it to be better to preach nothing than the wrong thing. Alcántara wrote, "if we do not exercise care and caution when we preach, we will damage the people to whom we preach even if that's not our intent" (p. 22).

The quantitative data from Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermons reaffirms Corcoran and Wellman's (2016) findings but uses a different means to do so. This research also provides insight into the dynamic between a senior pastor and their congregation in a New Zealand context.

The high frequency and timing of the political and social discourse is a form of admission and a recognition of the pastor's influence over the congregation. The pastor feels a need to take agency, to inform and educate the congregation about what was occurring in the world, and what his opinion was about it. One could argue if he did not believe talking about such issues would influence the congregation in some way he would have refrained from using precious sermon time to delve into those topics at such great length and frequency.

The question then becomes whether it is justifiable for a pastor to use that influence in the settings of sermons, to talk to the congregation about political and social matters.

Firstly, Corcoran and Wellman's study (2016) shows that people viewed senior pastors as God's mouthpiece. This means that when the senior pastor gives people advice some in the congregation do not just view this as the opinion of a person but as a word from God. Especially if the pastor propounds and supports the manufacture of this thinking people in the congregation might be more likely to adopt views they otherwise would not have considered or accepted simply because their senior pastor, God's earthly spokesperson, told them which way to think.

However, Corcoran and Wellman's study (2016) also revealed the source of a pastor's power. Pastors are granted and retain their position as pastors because of their spiritual knowledge and wisdom. As such it is expected that pastors use the medium of sermons to communicate to their congregation about spiritual matters.

In this study of City Impact Church there was no evidence that suggested the pastor had any qualifications or professional experience in politics, economics, or how to deal with a health crisis. Yet, the sermons reflected the pastor's belief of being an expert in these areas as well.

Even if such issues were within a pastor's expertise the question could be raised if it is justifiable for such issues to be discussed during sermons. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, wrote a 2018 essay in the Huffington Post. The headline on his personal website read: "The Church gets involved in politics because that's what Jesus did". He described Jesus as "highly political" (para. 6) and argued that "God cares for those in need and expects those who claim to act in his name to do the same. That means action - and words" (para. 7). Welby (2018) described how Jesus is not "party political" (para. 5), meaning he would not be conservative or liberal but he did engage in social and political matters.

One does not have to look far to discover Biblical accounts of Jesus speaking about the poor (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, Luke 6:20; Luke 14:12; Mark 12:41), money (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, Matt. 6:24; Matt. 19:21; Luke 12:33; Luke 21:1), and the abuse of power (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, Matt. 5:21; Matt. 20:25). These subjects relate to political and social issues. Without engagement in political and social matters Christianity would become highly individualistic without a call to care for those in need or those in one's community.

Welby (2018) gave examples of prominent Christians who had helpfully engaged in political issues by advocating for a more just society that cares for the poor.

Van Reken (1999) writes that it is essential for Christian's to speak out about political and social issues. He wrote, "each Christian should take his or her beliefs and values into the public arena and apply them to the important social issues of the day. This is a significant part of kingdom work" (Van Reken, 1999,

p. 199). However, when it comes to the church as an institution speaking out about political and social issues Van Reken (1999) argued that this should only be done on the rare occasion in which severe violations of morality are occurring. He stated that the “vast majority” of political and social issues do not require debate or commentary from the church (p. 201). Van Reken also believed that the church was not privy to special information regarding those issues therefore making it unjustifiable for pastors to claim God told them how to vote, or what people should think.

There are also plenty of examples in history where the Christian church’s engagement in political and social issues has been applauded. The African American church’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement in the United States of America of the 1960s (Calhoun-Brown, 2000), and the Quaker’s synonymity with pacifism (Weddle, 2001) are examples of Christian-led social and political activism that have been widely praised and respected by both the religious and the secular.

Therefore, I suggest that it is not the mere mention of political or social issues that is problematic, but the manner and frequency in which those issues are mentioned. One could argue preachers have a responsibility to address political and social issues in a way that respects different points of view and elevates the discourse to larger issues that honour God, individuals, and society. However, it cannot be done in a manner that is dogmatic. Following the Bible, principles of equality, and respect for diversity in thought, sermons must hold space for challenge and discussion. People without the same viewpoint need to be able to retain a sense of belonging within the community despite having a different worldview or opinion.

Summary

Discussing political and social issues within sermons at a high frequency, and as those issues are being discussed in the public arena shows that the pastor desires some sort of behaviour change within the people of his congregation regarding these matters. It supports previous research that shows the influence of pastors as it is an admission of the pastor’s influence in wanting to take agency.

This influence means that great care needs to be taken when social and political issues are engaged with during sermons to retain respect for all views and allow for debate and dialogue.

Pastor Peter Mortlock engaged with political and social issues in a high frequency across the period. Such frequency means that most political and social issues were not avoided but engaged with head-on.

This chapter has explored the role sermons play in defining political and social issues, in a general sense. Chapters 6 and 7 will look at how Pastor Peter Mortlock used sermons to locate sources of truth, and imposed barriers to belonging related to current affairs.

Before discussing how Pastor Peter Mortlock engaged in such issues it is important to understand how sermons were used to simultaneously disestablish traditional sources of truth and reinforce himself as the ultimate authority on issues. This set the foundation for a dogmatic educational environment which pressured congregants to align their opinions with that of the senior pastor.

Chapter 6: Sources of Truth

Being enlightened with truth is one of the deepest desires humans have (Kelly, 2006). Throughout history religious leaders have fulfilled this desire by explaining the reasons for unusual happenings like natural disasters (Kelly, 2006; Silk 1995). Recent times have given rise to new sources of truth that have overpowered the ability of religious leaders to control the truth people are told. The mainstream media, science, and education have delineated current affairs and replaced a core function religious leaders used to fulfil.

Throughout the entire reporting period Pastor Peter Mortlock tried to reclaim power as the ultimate spring of verity. He dismantled traditional sources of truth and elevated himself as a locus of authentic candour placing himself as a credible authority on moral, political, social, and health matters. To solidify his commanding position he engaged sermons to initiate a comprehensive dismantling of three pillars that have served democratic nations as trusted sources of information: the mainstream media, government, and the educational system.

This chapter is split into two parts, firstly discussing how sources of truth were deconstructed, and secondly exploring how the pastor established himself as a truth locus. It argues that faith leaders can conform churches into silos of truth and information vacuums.

This chapter sets the foundation for how Pastor Peter Mortlock was able to frequently broach controversial social and political issues during sermons at length, and how attendees' opinions regarding these issues can become barriers to belonging.

A prime example of City Impact Church's unique truth structure creation can be observed in a message Pastor Peter Mortlock claimed to receive from God in 2021. He claimed God had whispered a base Bible verse for that year which offered insights into what Christians needed to do to remain in the Lord's bosom. The scripture was frequently mentioned in sermons throughout the year, and almost became the church's 2021 slogan or motto. The verse read: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains" (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, Rev. 3:2).

Selecting this piece of scripture sent two important messages to the congregation. Firstly, the verse was from the book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible. Among other things, Revelation documents prophecies and offers illustrations for how the world will end. This origin conveys that the end of the world is something Christians need to be thinking about and something that is near, a core message Pastor Peter Mortlock reiterated throughout the year. More on this in Chapter 7.

Secondly, the passage contains the words “wake up”, a common phrase used by conspiracy theorists, those against vaccinations and who question the authenticity of societal power structures (Baker, 2022; Wood, 2017). Researchers have identified this phrase as a microcosm for people needing to open their eyes to the abuse of power, corruption, immorality and evil occurring within institutions that claim to protect and better society. Such an awakening usually requires a dismantling of what one thought was a reliable source of truth.

Deconstruction of Traditional Sources of Truth and Knowledge

The first part of this chapter denotes Pastor Peter Mortlock’s ability to deconstruct traditional sources of truth and knowledge. Applying thematic analysis the theme of truth is explored. Pastor Peter Mortlock created a hierarchy of those who can and cannot distinguish what is truth. He stated, “for the average person, I think it’s hard to find the truth. There’s just so much information... So the average person doesn’t really know what to believe” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 03.57).

This implied that most people in the congregation were incapable of discerning facts for themselves and begs for someone with a superior understanding of the world to do the fact finding for them. As is discussed in part two of this chapter that superior individual is Pastor Peter Mortlock himself.

Pastor Peter Mortlock often asserted in general terms about how difficult it was for people in his congregation and in wider society to determine fact from fiction, for example, “a lie repeated often enough, will eventually gain traction. And so it's so hard to find the truth today” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 30:31).

This statement begs the listener to wonder where they will be able to find a source of truth and who it is they can trust. The implication is that most things cannot be trusted. The statement is given as an assertion. Comments throughout many sermons across the period denounced almost every traditional source of truth within society as duplicitous, unreliable, and infected with evil. Everything from the Government to government institutions, the media, friends, family, experts, and the education system were called into question. Even science, research, and fact itself had doubt cast upon them. This part of the chapter looks at how Pastor Peter Mortlock used sermons to dismantle trust in each of these items.

One of the core justifications for talking about politics and current affairs within sermons was that people were not adequately informed through traditional sources of truth. Pastor Peter Mortlock believed God wanted people to be strong and that strength could only arise when people were not disillusioned by lies or a worldview that misaligned with Pastor Peter Mortlock. It was claimed that wisdom was the root of strength, “wisdom and knowledge and understanding, bring strength” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 00.53).

Pastor Peter Mortlock felt an imperative to take agency in what people should believe regarding politics and current affairs, so they could be “fully informed” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 25.42). He felt if he stayed silent there would be nowhere else in which congregants would discover the truth. He feared people would believe the lies presented by the mainstream media and government thus preventing people from being strong.

As such Pastor Peter Mortlock positioned himself as the decision-maker on moral, political, social and health issues. The first step to achieving this was to dismantle core sources of truth society has trusted for decades. The application of thematic analysis reveals those sources as being the mainstream media, the Government and education.

Deconstruction of Trust in the Mainstream Media

The first theme identified in regard to the dismantling of truth was the mainstream media as per thematic analysis. Pastor Peter Mortlock referred to news articles in his sermons. Sometimes several minutes’

worth of news clips were played for the congregation to watch. In Stout's (2011) book on the overlap between media and religion he stated that it's common for pastors to use media of all types to complement sermons. However, the situations he spoke of involved instances where pastors used media to further religious points rather than comment on social or political matters.

Despite admitting to being a high consumer of news Pastor Peter Mortlock strongly discouraged his congregation from absorbing information from the mainstream media. He said, "I wouldn't encourage you to watch the news or depress anybody" (City Impact Church, 2021f, 31.23).

He claimed the mainstream media was untrustworthy, stating, "you cannot believe everything you read in the newspaper. I keep telling people this, but of course, people do. People believe it hook line and sinker" (City Impact Church, 2021h, 02.34; 04.08).

The discouragement to consume news media was because Pastor Peter Mortlock believed people might not be well equipped to filter fact from fiction within the news. Only special people equipped with distinctive skills were presented as being able to strain the information in the news. The messaging was for those unequipped with that ability to avoid the news entirely and take direction from those who can.

Some people I understand are not strong enough to watch the news to find out what's going on because it will overwhelm you. I watch a lot of news. Some people might say I watch too much but I need to know what's going on and I know what's going on. (City Impact Church, 2021f, 04.46)

The statement "I know what's going on" is important to highlight (City Impact Church, 2021f, 04.46).

This assertion positioned Pastor Peter Mortlock as a distiller of fact and truth. He is telling the congregation that they do not need to watch the news, especially if they feel they are in a vulnerable state of mind, and that he can be the authoritative source of fact, truth, and knowledge, not just regarding the Bible and God, but also regarding current affairs. I discuss more on how Pastor Peter Mortlock positions himself as the source of truth in part two.

Stout (2011) noted that when a church leader criticises the media, it forces the congregation to evaluate their loyalties. Do they continue to trust the newspaper? Or do they trust their pastor and stop believing what they read in the news?

According to Pastor Peter Mortlock discernment for news consumption was needed for several reasons. Firstly, he believed the news intentionally produced inaccurate information to purposefully lead people away from the truth and foist control. He said, “I’m sceptical of half of what I see in the media” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 04.50).

Across multiple sermons he stated, “I do also believe that people need to be fully informed. And unfortunately, I do not think we are getting the full truth from either the Government or the mainstream media” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 25.39).

The mainstream media were not framed as a medium for conveying essential information. Instead, Pastor Peter Mortlock did things such as label the media as distributors of “propaganda” for labelling Covid-19 vaccines as “safe and effective” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 17.53).

This study does not engage with the perception or effects the sermons have on those who listen; however, the audience’s response is occasionally audible during some sermons. At the end of the above statement the congregation applauded in a sign of agreement.

Pastor Peter Mortlock talked about how the mainstream media has made people “fearful of all the wrong things” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 01.58). He listed the things people were wrongly fearful of which included the economy, Covid-19, climate change and the vaccine. This fear was the source of the mainstream media’s ability to exert control. He said, “I believe the scare mongering the inflammatory wording is a little bit beyond belief... Why drive fear into the masses? Is that so that they can be easily controlled? And of course, some people would think so” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 10.22).

Pastor Peter Mortlock used framing the media as the organisers of fear to position it as directly opposed to God. Pastor Peter Mortlock implored that God desires for people to be strong, and that strength is undermined by fear. This sentiment eroded trust in media because it implies incorrect news consumption will cripple one of people’s deepest desires to feel secure. He stated, “the truth is, we can never be strong if we're fearful. We can never be strong if we're anxious” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 03.21).

Later he said, “fear is one of the biggest tools of the Devil... most fear, you've heard me say before, is false evidence appearing real, F.E.A.R., because most things don't happen that people are anxious about” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 03.39).

Moreover, this plays on people’s spiritual desire to please God. If the mainstream media are spreading fear, and fear is the “biggest tool of the Devil”, the indirect message communicated was that the mainstream media was being used by Satan (City Impact Church, 2021f, 03.39). It is plausible for people within the congregation to think that God might get upset with them for engaging in something being used by Satan. This reinforces the need for people to be extra vigilant when consuming the news or to avoid it entirely and leave the discernment of facts to people like Pastor Peter Mortlock.

The belief that the mainstream media had an anti-Christian sentiment was also expressed during a sermon in which Pastor Peter Mortlock claimed the new National Party leader getting “bullied” by the news for being a Christian (City Impact Church, 2021h, 17.38).

Pastor Peter Mortlock repeated that the Bible was a “great antidote for the news” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 05.39). This implies the news is something that causes people personal harm that needs to be remedied.

He also referred to the news as being worldly (City Impact Church, 2021f, 05.42). For many Christians “the world” is a term given to people who have values and life objectives that are different from that of Christians. Referring to the mainstream media as worldly exhibits it as being in misalignment with Christianity and God.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also uses the crass imagery that people are being “fed” information (City Impact Church, 2021f, 05.41). Such a depiction presents the population as mindlessly swallowing information, not thinking critically, and just following what is viewed as the right thing to do rather than the actual right thing to do. The crass imagery also implies that the information being offered is incorrect thus undermining trust in the mainstream media.

This affirms Stout (2011), who wrote that church leaders can invoke an ‘indirect censorship’ over their congregation. Congregants at City Impact Church were not chastised or punished for consuming news media content. However, the constant undermining of its validity and trust would create pressure for people to avoid having confidence in the content the mainstream media produced.

To sum up, Pastor Peter Mortlock deconstructed trust in the mainstream media by overtly discouraging churchgoers from consuming news. He exclaimed that the mainstream media intentionally lied and spread mistruths. These lies could only be identified by people with a special skill to do so, a special skill Pastor Peter Mortlock claimed to have. He insisted that the mainstream media used fear to obtain control over people and suggested that this meant the mainstream media were anti-Christian, and even demonic because fear comes from the Devil.

Deconstruction of Trust in the Government

The second theme observed in relation to the dismantling of truth was in regard to the undermining of trust in the Government and government institutions.

Pastor Peter Mortlock called the Covid-19 pandemic a “plandemic” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 32:16). Such rhetoric conveys that the virus was intentionally released by people in power to grant them the ability to exercise control over people. He purported that this was not speculation but fact. He said, “what people say, of course, well, that's just conspiracy, a little bit like the Great Reset. It's not a conspiracy” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 33.06).

For context, the Great Reset conspiracy theory was described as the workings of international bodies such as the United Nations actively capitalising on the Covid-19 pandemic as a cover for dismantling society and rebuilding it back without God. Regarding the ‘plandemic’ conspiracy theory Pastor Peter Mortlock believed a video of influential people meeting prior to the Covid-19 pandemic to discuss the plan for a global disease outbreak was proof that they anticipated Covid-19 would occur. He said he did not buy it but also that it was not a conspiracy.

Who really knows what's going on in higher places. You'd be surprised is what happens in government in high places. And, you know, and all that. The longer you live, the more suspicious you become of those in power. But as I said, all I'm saying is that they did have that meeting, and whether you think it was leaked on purpose or not, that's your call. I'm not saying anything about it. (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 34.58)

Both 'plandemic' and the 'Great Reset' meet the academic definitions of a conspiracy theory as a suspected scheme between two or more nefarious people which is used to explain major historical events usually that have had negative impacts (Keeley, 1999; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Douglas et al. (2019) stated that "conspiracies typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe upon established agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions" (p. 4).

By claiming these items were not conspiracy theories Pastor Peter Mortlock claimed these items to not be a theory but factually occurring acts of conspiratorial deception. This discourse undermines trust in the Government. The 'plandemic' conspiracy theory presents those with political authority as power-hungry people who are willing to sacrifice the welfare and lives of their own citizens by intentionally releasing a contagious and deadly disease. The 'Great Reset' presents large body corporations as infected with Satan and as active persecutors and execrators of the Christian faith. Both ideas put the church in direct opposition with the people at the centre of those institutions therefore making those people not only untrustworthy, but also the perpetrators of great evil.

If one believes those conspiracies to be true it would be extremely difficult for any scientific output or arguments made by the Government to be taken seriously or honestly out of fear another conspiracy was occurring.

Pastor Peter Mortlock talked about how the battle for the discovery of truth was not against people, but against "demonic forces" inhabiting places where truth originates.

Our battle isn't against flesh and blood. It's not against [New Zealand's Prime Minister] Jacinda. It's not against the politicians that are down there that are making all these immoral laws. Our battle is against the demonic forces in high places. (City Impact Church, 2021f, 07.54)

This quote makes it apparent that Pastor Peter Mortlock believed demons were occupying places of power including the Government.

Pastor Peter Mortlock said that the Government was “making it up as they go along, I think we all know that” (City Impact Church, 2021h, 09.14) which insinuates that the pandemic response was being negligently manufactured rather than basing its decisions on science, fact, and reality.

Pastor Peter Mortlock joked that the Government was hiding facts. He declared, “I do joke. With all respect, how long has it been since you can believe a politician? All the broken promises, but more seriously is like where is the truth today?” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 25.48)

When he told the same joke in another sermon he said, “it’s a joke, but it’s true” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 17.34). He believed the Government was so untrustworthy that the only way people would be able to know what was really occurring within parliament would be for him to become Prime Minister of New Zealand.

The only reason people were “buying” into the messages around Covid-19 restrictions outputted by the Government was because they desperately wanted things to go back to normal (City Impact Church, 2021f, 18.30).

To sum up, beyond overtly stating that politicians and the Government cannot be trusted Pastor Peter Mortlock deconstructed trust in government through sermons by conveying that the Covid-19 pandemic was a “plandemic”, an intentionally crafted and planned epidemic orchestrated by people in power (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 32:16). He also explained ‘The Great Reset’, and how international bodies were wanting to use the Covid-19 pandemic as a cover for dismantling society and rebuilding it back without God. These conspiracy theories presented the Government as a place full of power-hungry people who desire ultimate control even if that is at the expense of people’s health, lives, livelihoods. Pastor Peter Mortlock further undermined trust in the Government by claiming that it makes things up as it goes and that demonic forces were at work in Parliament. These elements inextricably deconstruct trust in the Government.

Deconstruction of Trust in Education

As well as undermining trust in the mainstream media and the Government, the third theme observed within sermons was to undermine trust in education.

Pastor Peter Mortlock implored congregants not to keep children in state schools, fearing youth were being indoctrinated with curriculum that went against values important to Pastor Peter Mortlock, specifically around gender. For example, he warned parents about the public school system, stating “if I was a parent, I get my kids out of public school as soon as possible into a Christian school or home school in one of the two” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 34.26).

He would make fun of science, including the theory of evolution across multiple sermons. People were also told to trust the way Pastor Peter Mortlock interpreted the Bible over their friends or family, and over research. For example, “it’s not what your friends are saying. It’s not what the research is saying is what the Good Book says” (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.21.15).

The context of this quote was that Pastor Peter Mortlock was using sermons to convince people to vote against legalising euthanasia in an upcoming election referendum. The phrasing of this statement asserts that the “Good Book”, or the Bible, is clear on its stance on euthanasia, which is not true. Euthanasia is not mentioned in the Bible and there were some Christians who were in support of this legislation (Martin, 2020). What this implied is that people listening need to interpret the Bible the same way Pastor Peter Mortlock does. Most importantly, it called people to adopt Pastor Peter Mortlock’s worldview, even if people found compelling scientific evidence in opposition with that or had friends or family members that disagreed. It is a call to follow even if you do not understand, which one could argue is a call to follow blindly.

Reflection of Literature Considering the Institutions Pastor Peter Mortlock

Eroded Trust in

The deconstruction of these sources of truth enhances Wellman et al. (2020) description of some megachurches becoming ‘total environments’. Wellman et al. (2020) used in-depth focus groups

conducted by long time megachurch researchers Thumma and Bird in 2008 at 12 megachurches that were representative of megachurches across America. Wellman et al. (2020) personally attended at least one service at each church, and analysed materials placed on each of the church's websites.

They described a model of megachurch that has become increasingly successful in America and around the world that creates a 'total environment'. The six core factors they identified that contribute to church's becoming total environments. These were: "welcoming ethos, awe-inspiring worship, sermon providing reliable leadership, altar call inviting transformation, service projects, and small groups" (Wellman et al., p. 154). The researchers found that this type of megachurch became like a drug which gave people an emotional hit at services and a supplementary hit at small groups during the week.

Wellman et al. (2020) said that total environments occurred because that style of megachurch met the "material and emotional" needs of people at every stage of life (p. 152). They talked about how megachurches swaddle attendees with adequate "ministries, resources, and social ties such that attendees generally do not need to seek secular sources to have their fundamental emotional needs met" (p.152).

This study finds that the total environment can extend beyond one's fundamental emotional and physical needs they might need at a particular stage in life and beyond the emotional hit a service or small group might provide through the six core elements identified earlier. This case study offers evidence that megachurches can also become total environments through the establishment of distrust in outside sources of knowledge, fact, and truth. Sermons were used to actively discourage people from seeking secular sources of education and truth. Wellman et al. (2020) found that megachurches that had become total environments, pulled people away from society. Encouraging people to abandon most outside sources of truth, naturally pulls people away from the outside world and deeper into the megachurch.

This tug inwards engages a shift in power. Frahm-Arp (2019) studied the political engagement of six pastors in South Africa in the six months prior to the country's 2019 presidential election. She found some pastors were highly critical of the Government with sermons and outspoken opinion pieces that featured in newspapers. Frahm-Arp said, "messages like these were intended to shift power from political parties toward himself, a church leader, as the political voice of reason and authority" (p. 324).

As found in the data of this case study the deconstruction of truth in the mainstream media, the Government and in education serve a wider purpose for the senior pastor to style himself as trustworthy, knowledgeable and the source of truth.

Construction of a Truth Locus

The second section of this chapter denotes how Pastor Peter Mortlock constructed himself as the locus of truth and knowledge. Across the period, Pastor Peter Mortlock continually elevated his status as the leader of City Impact Church on moral, political, and social issues. Through the application of thematic analysis six themes have been identified to be employed by Pastor Peter Mortlock to construct himself as the source of truth. These were to prime the congregation into absorbing his opinions styling himself as a brave hero, implying his opinions were that of God's, using the Bible to reinforce rather than inform his opinions and beliefs, asserting himself as the congregation's "shepherd", propounding impartiality and attacks as proof of his credibility, and finally, demanding loyalty (City Impact Church, 2021g, 34.48). Each of these themes will be discussed, accompanied by a few examples.

Priming the Congregation

The first theme Pastor Peter Mortlock employed to construct himself as a truth locus was to prime the congregation to absorb what he had to say even if it went against what they believed. This was frequently done at the beginning of his preaching. In some sermons he would prime the audience for the first half of the address. The audience would be left in suspense, first being told to be open minded, and to value what he was about to say a significant amount of time before the topic was even introduced.

He would often contradict himself by saying, "I certainly don't need controversy at my age" while also frequently admitting that the subjects he was talking about were controversial (City Impact Church, 2021e, 04.04).

The congregation were encouraged to set aside their own opinions and thoughts while listening to him. Prior to mentioning the sermon's topic Pastor Peter Mortlock said, "I want all of us to have open minds today. You know, it's been said that the mind is like a parachute, it only works when it's open" (City Impact Church, 2021e, 02.56).

The metaphor illustrated purports that the only people with functioning brains are the ones with open minds. To not be open minded is to not have a proper working mind at all. Such statements were targeted at people who disagreed with him and revealed his hope to draw people in, to at least consider the way he sees and interprets the world.

Asserting Bravery

The next theme Pastor Peter Mortlock used to construct himself as a locus of truth was to frequently describe himself as "brave" (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 17.35; 00.34; City Impact Church, 2021e, 04.08). For example, he said, "So many people are saying, you're pretty brave Peter to get up here and talk about this. And I don't mean to be brave, I just want the best for the church... I'm quite brave going here..." (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 17.35; 00.34).

He regularly implied that other pastors agreed with what he was saying but were not bold enough to talk about such issues. He stated, "some of the pastors, with all due respect, they're just not prepared to talk about some of the subjects that I've approached of late" (City Impact Church, 2021e, 05.23). This gave his sermons enhanced credibility because it implied other God-following Christian leaders agreed with what he was saying but were not willing to take the unspoken risks associated with saying it.

Asserting bravery framed him as a martyr, willing to put his neck on the line for what he claimed to be the truth, thus elevating his authority. It structures himself as heroic for standing up to powers acting sinisterly.

Asserting Words From God

Another noticeable theme Pastor Peter used to construct himself as a truth locus was referring to the words he spoke as not originating from him, but from God. He pre-positioned the points he had to make

with assertions that included: “I’m sure many of you will be, I believe, blessed to have heard what I’ve got to share today” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 02.59).

The wording of the opening line of his prayer to God about the message he was about to deliver is interesting, “Father, I just pray your blessing over Your word today” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 07.34).

By calling the sermon he was about to deliver “Your word”, he implied that the words he was about to speak came directly from God. This was significant because it brought additional weight to the points that he was about to make. The statement implied that the words about to be spoken were not just what Pastor Peter Mortlock believed, but what God knows.

Crossover between Pastor Peter Mortlock’s opinion being the opinion of God creates a sense that the pastor has a divine and special connection with God. Other academic work has found this sense of a special connection is what can grant pastors authority.

Klaver (2015) studied a megachurch Pentecostal pastor in the Netherlands. She found that “religious leadership is no longer legitimised and guaranteed by denominational traditions, confessions and the ordination of clergy but needs to be continuously performed, renewed and authenticated” (Klaver, 2015, p. 157).

The continual need for pastors to authenticate their leadership towards their followers means that there is a continual need for pastors particularly of Pentecostal megachurches to affirm their unique giftings and connection to the Lord towards the congregation. This can become problematic because those unique giftings imply that the pastor is a mouthpiece for God. It gives the pastor an elevated status above others in the congregation and increases their power.

Corcoran and Wellman (2016) conducted a study regarding the influence senior pastors have over their congregations. They found megachurch congregants described their pastor as better than other people. The researchers noted that churchgoers used “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" (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016, p. 320).

In describing his sermons as the words of God Pastor Peter Mortlock fed into these notions, that megachurch congregants are likely to view their most senior religious leader as supreme under God.

Positioning of the Bible

Confusing Pastor Peter Mortlock's statements with statements of God was especially questionable when the sermon's structure and the way scripture from the Bible was quoted is taken into consideration. This is the fourth theme Pastor Peter Mortlock applied to assert himself as a truth locus. While Pastor Peter Mortlock often began sermons with a series of scriptures from the Bible it became clear that those verses were being used to back up his own thoughts and opinions. The Bible was a means by which Pastor Peter Mortlock explained and justified his views rather than something that informed them. Sometimes it was difficult to make out what the main point of a sermon was, and how it related back to the Bible verse he had shared. Often claims were made that were not backed up by scripture. It was evident that the driving force behind his sermons was his own thinking.

The Bible is relatively unclear on many of the issues he broached including vaccines, whether lockdowns were ethical, whether marijuana should be legalised, and which political party to vote for. Yet, Pastor Peter Mortlock gave strong one-sided views on such issues, and asserted the Bible was clear on the matters. If the Bible transparently divulged these issues, there would not be Christians on the other side of these debates.

This structure gave Pastor Peter Mortlock free reign to use sermons to talk about almost anything. It also elevated the status of his opinions, as well as himself, because it was his thinking, rather than the content of the Bible, at the heartbeat of most sermons.

Asserting Direct Shepherdship

As per thematic analysis the fifth theme Pastor Peter Mortlock utilised to assert himself as the locus of truth was to position himself as a shepherd. This is a metaphor proposed in the Bible.

Jesus described Himself as a shepherd to Christians, an analogy that suggests He guides, cares, and leads them in how to live their best life (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, John 10:11). The Bible talks about this responsibility extending to pastors, who are shepherds that Jesus entrusts with a ‘flock of sheep’ or a congregation, to look after until His return (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, 1 Pet. 5:2-12). Pastor Peter Mortlock takes the idea of a shepherd to position himself as someone with ultimate authority over the people in City Impact Church.

Pastor Peter Mortlock’s elevation of himself as a shepherd occurred most overtly during a sermon on 28 November 2021 about the importance of people at the church listening to him. The Government had just outlined New Zealand’s new framework to combat Covid-19 that placed more restrictions on people who were unvaccinated.

Pastor Peter Mortlock expressed that the message’s purpose was around unity. However, this was framed behind a backdrop in which he simultaneously positioned and elevated himself as a person of ultimate authority, and that anyone who opposed him was being influenced by the Devil. He talked about how when there is unity God commands a blessing. He said that division comes from the Devil and stressed how important it was for the church to be unified.

While it appears the unity Pastor Peter Mortlock is calling for in this sermon is around operational decisions regarding how the church will run under the traffic light system, the elevation of himself as a person of conclusive power shows that instead he desired uniformity around his opinions and his worldview. The cry for unity extended to consensus and acceptance of Pastor Peter Mortlock’s personal views.

Pastor Peter Mortlock created a need for uniformity by consistently referring to himself as the shepherd of the City Impact Church flock. He equates himself to Jesus, by reading out a Bible passage about Jesus having authority over people (*New King James Version Bible*, 1979/1983, John 17:9).

He said that same authority Jesus has over people belongs to him as the senior pastor. The words underlined is when Pastor Peter Mortlock is quoting scripture from the Bible:

Of course, I'm a pastor, I'm here to shepherd the flock. And verse nine says, Jesus says, I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given me, for they are Yours. I mean, think about that. That is such an interesting verse, particularly from an evangelistic perspective. And all Mine are Yours and Yours are Mine, and I'm glorified. So there's a time to reach out to the world. But there's a time to care for the flock. And today, I believe, is one of those times. Now I'm no longer in the world, and these are in the world I came to You, I come to You. Holy Father, keep them through Your name, those whom You've given me, that they may be one, they may be one, can I say that again, they may be one as We are. While I was with him in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me, I've kept them. None of them, none of them is lost. (City Impact Church, 2021g, 02.53)

Comparing himself to Jesus reinforces his ultimate authority as a senior pastor. Corcoran and Wellman (2016) suggest most pastors are in a fight against such a comparison. They do not want congregants to think of them as a form of a deity as this would push them outside of Christianity. Pastors wish to remain relatable, appear normal and portray that they are just like people in the congregation. While Pastor Peter Mortlock does not directly claim to be God, the comparison to Jesus elevates his status to be more than that of a normal person. Here, Pastor Peter Mortlock does not resist such a direct comparison other pastors might consciously object. Instead, he consciously embraces it.

Pastor Peter Mortlock asserted how much people within his congregation love him and his wife:

I'm here to shepherd you. I'm here as your pastor to try to help us journey together and be one people over this time. I also know and let me just say, I also know that you love me and Bev, otherwise you wouldn't be here. Right? So I want to thank you for that. (City Impact Church, 2021g, 11.55)

Pastor Peter Mortlock made an ambiguous statement in which he called people to follow the shepherd, which was himself. He said, "what we've got to do is we got to follow, I believe, the shepherd. And the greatest shepherd of all is Jesus" (City Impact Church, 2021g, 16.31).

What is significant about this statement is that he exalts Jesus as the best leader directly after telling people to follow him. This again places an indirect comparison between himself and Jesus. Although he is not directly calling himself Jesus he is drawing a comparison between himself and Christianity's central figurehead by labelling both of himself and Jesus as shepherds. Such a statement equates himself with Jesus, the person Christian's believed to be the son of God, and the only perfect person to have lived.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also created a sense of intimacy between himself and his congregation. He did this by getting vulnerable on stage and crying before the congregation on multiple occasions (City Impact Church, 2021h, 39.20; CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 00.44). This sense of a deep connection and affinity existing between Pastor Peter Mortlock and people watching is later reinforced by his regular reference to them as his friend.

This sense of closeness is reinforced despite the imaginary social relationship that is likely to exist between himself and most people watching. Alcorn (1996), a leading Christian commentator, authored an article about the powers pastors have over people. The author claimed when a church increases in size the senior pastor comes to know more people but in a more superficial capacity. The same can be observed as true for City Impact Church. It is hard to imagine that a true friend-like relationship exists between the senior pastor, and the thousands of people attending, spanning across many parts of New Zealand and the world simply due to the practicality of maintaining such a relationship. Alcorn (1996) wrote that the result of this superficial relationship is that members often feel they cannot challenge the decisions the pastor is making. This causes accountability around what pastors can say during sermons and do in their personal lives to decline.

The word “my” was used in reference to his congregation, implying his ownership over people.

My heart is breaking. I want to look people in the eye. I want to look my congregation in the eye, my flock in the eye and as your shepherd I love you...This is huge to try to journey people through a camera lens. It's like crazy. (City Impact Church, 2021g, 34.42)

The view of Pastor Peter Mortlock as a shepherd with authority over his life was revealed in another sermon. He insisted that he must address whether people should get vaccinated amongst a slew of other issues because he had been inundated with emails and questions from people in the congregation asking him: “what’s my views?” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 25.01). He professed he had received so many emails and people asking that it would just be easier to answer through a sermon. While this study does not examine how the sermons of Pastor Peter Mortlock are digested by the congregation the action of many people actively asking him for his views shows they looked to him as a shepherd, and as a voice of reason and influence over their lives.

The view that he was a shepherd was reinforced in other more covert ways. In one sermon about how the world was about to end people in the congregation were also told to be excited and attend Church more often.

I haven't said all this to, to put fear into your heart, but to put faith into your heart, that Hallelujah. The Church is the ark, the place of safety, the Bible speaks about it. And so be found in the house of the Lord. (City Impact Church, 2021d, 58.03)

The “house of the Lord” is used in Christian circles as another word to describe Church. It appears Pastor Peter Mortlock is using the fear of the world ending to get people attending church more frequently. Pastor Peter Mortlock immediately then described City Impact Church as “the place of safety”. Church was not ‘a’ place, but ‘the’ place, suggesting there was nowhere else people in his congregation could be sheltered, shielded or secure while the world around them imploded during the end times. This statement is also framed as an instruction, not asking but telling people to “be” in Church. Framing in this way makes the command given come across as highly important and mandatory if people want to secure their spot on the favourable side of Jesus. Such rhetoric exhibits Pastor Peter Mortlock as the source of truth because it simultaneously presents the outside world as deadly and dangerous, and the church as the only place one can be safe.

Asserting shepherdship over City Impact Church reinforced Wellman et al. (2016) findings that as the spiritual and moral leader the senior pastor becomes a sacred symbol for the group, helping to promote group cohesion and to increase feelings of belonging. They found congregants at megachurches described their senior pastor as a “visionary” (p. 320).

Wach (1947) identified the three characteristics essential to religious leadership as charisma, intelligence, and morality. He believed a person with charisma had the ability to present and distil what God wants the group to know in an engaging manner. In asserting himself as the shepherd Pastor Peter Mortlock affirmed himself as that God ordained group leader. It reminded the church his authority includes his ability to influence them not because what he was saying was his opinions but were items of knowledge God desired the entire group to know.

Issues arise when this God-ordained authority is used beyond items in which God entrusted a pastor to educate the congregation, including what political party to vote for.

Asserting Credibility and Impartiality

The next theme Pastor Peter Mortlock used to assert himself as a locus of truth was by perpetuating himself as a credible source. He did this by presenting himself as impartial, and framing attacks to his credibility as evidence he can be trusted.

Firstly, on impartiality. Pastor Peter Mortlock mentioned that he had “read both sides of the story”, which conveys impartiality (City Impact Church, 2021e, 15.59). It signals to the congregation he had taken time to evaluate the facts, and so the side he falls upon is correct. Converged with sentiment around truth being hard to decipher, this statement implies that Pastor Peter Mortlock can be a trusted source of truth, over the media or expert advice.

He claimed he was politically neutral.

For those who know me in many things, I don't feel that I'm either left or right. I've endeavoured in life to walk a middle path, not extreme on many issues, trying to keep as it were, a balanced perspective on all things. Not always succeeding, of course. (City Impact Church, 2021g, 17.30)

Despite claiming political neutrality, on another occasion Pastor Peter Mortlock announced to City Impact Church he would be voting for the New Conservatives political party in the 2020 general election. After that election he declared his distaste for the Labour Party by saying, “we just had an election. To be honest, I was praying for another government. I know some of you were too” (City Impact Church, 2020c, 02.33).

In another instance he took the idea of political neutrality a step further to claim that he was neutral on all issues. He said, “endeavouring not to take sides, but endeavouring to support all people and walking what I would consider a middle road. And I know when you're in the middle, you get shot at from both sides, right” (City Impact Church, 2021g, 19.40).

However, any claims of impartiality or neutrality were utterly false. For example, when persuading people to not get vaccinated against Covid-19 he disclosed his own status as an unvaccinated person.

While criticising a new government initiative that limited unvaccinated people's freedoms Pastor Peter Mortlock stated people in the congregation who had been immunised against Covid-19 would have to do retail shopping on his behalf. He stated, "I'm just so glad that a certain number of people in the church have had it. And so they're going to look after me. I know" (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 39.15).

If Pastor Peter Mortlock was immunised there would be no bars holding him back from being able to shop, and virtually no restrictions to his freedoms.

Not only did Pastor Peter Mortlock claim to be neutral and have evaluated both sides he also claimed to be presenting both sides equally. This was also a false assertion. One example of when an argument was unequally presented was when he directed people to an information pack on the City Impact Church website that had information regarding the Covid-19 vaccine from various "respectable, knowledgeable" doctors (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 01.22.48). He discouraged people who were already vaccinated from looking at the content or looking up the doctors because he did not want them to feel fear and regret their decision. He exclaimed, "if you've already had the shot, you probably don't want to look at these and that's fine. I understand. Please, I don't want to put any fear or anxiety into anybody" (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 01.24.37).

Discouraging those who were already vaccinated from reading the resources so they would not become scared indicates that the resources Pastor Peter Mortlock was supplying did not present both sides equally, a contradiction to claims in other sermons that he did fairly exhibit both sides. Furthermore, Pastor Peter Mortlock's advice for vaccinated people to avoid it suggests he knew the resources would be persuasive, one-sided and did not showcase both facets of the issue equally.

At times he would present an alternative argument and cite it as proof he sympathised with people on both sides. However, on the rare occasions where alternative arguments were presented these were often followed by a deconstruction of these points.

He claimed that he respected people's views and acknowledged people's autonomy to make their own conclusions, stating "there are people, as I said, here who've had the vaccine, there are people who won't

and I respect all views, right? I'm not telling you what to do, you got to make a decision” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 20.53).

In Pastor Peter Mortlock’s defence he told people that he was not instructing them in how to think or act, and that they needed to do their own research. He said, “I want you to do your due diligence” and “I’m not giving you my necessary opinion today, I’m just giving you something to think about” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 01.20.50; City Impact Church, 2021e, 19.28).

However, these statements were misleading. The strong evidence he supplied in favour, or against social issues while making these comments clearly revealed his opinions on the issues. As is discussed in Chapter 5 he firmly strived to persuade the congregation into drawing the same conclusions and adopting the same opinions, as him.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also asserted himself as credible by framing challenges to the validity of his claims as evidence that they were true. When talking about how society is straying from truth, he shifted the view of people challenging or questioning his authority and facts from actions of accountability to proof that he was correct.

The more society moves away from the truth, the more society hate the people who speak it. So one way is not to be so fearful is to know the truth, because the truth can set you free... But in the world, worldwide, and you know this, what I'm saying, but I want to reiterate it. Because if you don't know the truth, then you get caught up in all this fear. (City Impact Church, 2021f, 09.51)

Pastor Peter Mortlock spoke about the “truth setting you free” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 09.51). This is a reference to a Bible verse in which Jesus says knowing the truth about His life sets people free from sin and hell. Pastor Peter Mortlock broadened this to include all truth but the implied message within this is that it is the truth as Pastor Peter Mortlock sees it: his opinions, his views.

Demanding Loyalty

Utilising thematic analysis the final theme Pastor Peter Mortlock employed to assert his authority as the source of truth was to use sermons to demand loyalty by scolding those who undermined his authority.

During one sermon he publicly chastised a member of the congregation for complaining to the Government that City Impact Church's Sunday services were not complying with Covid-19 restrictions.

He negatively framed the person as ratting out the church, and rebuked them for going to an external body rather than going to him directly. The person was ousted from the church community by saying that "I think it was a visitor obviously" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 44.20). This sent a clear message that someone who is part of City Impact Church, would never undermine his authority.

He then directly told the person that they were not welcome and should find another church: "I said in the earlier service that if people are going to ring up and dob us in, I'd rather they go to Destiny or LIFE or something" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 45.04).

Ironically, the person was correct in that some health and safety rules were being broken. City Impact Church had to refrain from serving coffee at their services following the complaint.

In other sermons people who opposed Pastor Peter Mortlock's point of view were called names such as "foolish", and "blind" (City Impact Church, 2021e, 10.50; City Impact Church, 2020a, 8.58).

At the heart of this issue is the question of accountability. Cornelio (2008) noted how megachurches kickstarted a 'post-denominational' era, in which it is now common for religious institutions to not belong to a denomination, to attain greater mass appeal. Yip and Hoon (2016) argued that lack of bondage to a denomination gave the megachurch they were researching greater freedom to create their own brand.

Billings (2020) orchestrated an accountability study into megachurch governance structures with a focus on three churches that had its senior pastor fall from grace. He stated that megachurches were distinctive, multiplex institutions, but there were similarities. He also noted how there were many that were nondenominational. Additionally, many did not report regularly to an external source of accountability. Independent megachurches had the power to choose the makeup of their model for accountability.

Through the mocking and public shaming of the individual who engaged an external source of accountability Pastor Peter Mortlock reinforced the power structure within City Impact Church. People

with questions or issues need to bring these directly to him. It reveals his desire to be accountable to himself and his repulsion for external forces correcting his decisions.

This helped to construct him as a locus of truth because it reinforces a power vacuum in which the senior pastor cannot be questioned. It implies that he is always right, and the intimidation encourages people to refrain from challenging his decisions or leave the church completely.

Summary

Each of the six themes employed by the case study constructed himself as the source of truth is now summarised. Pastor Peter Mortlock used sermons to prime the congregation into absorbing his opinions, styled himself as a brave hero, implied his opinions were that of God's, used the Bible to reinforce rather than inform his opinions and beliefs, asserted himself as the congregation's shepherd, propounded impartiality and attacks to claims he made as proof of his credibility, and finally, intimidated people from challenging his authority.

In affirming himself as a source of truth Pastor Peter Mortlock fulfilled the three methods Baker (2022) identified in health influencers spreading misinformation conspiracy theories about Covid-19. Baker (2022) studied four health influencers for a one-year period from the beginning of the health crisis from 11 March 2020. She found that the health influencers spreading Covid-19 misinformation bolstered their status and credibility and developed trust between their online followers using three core methods. These were to leverage their micro-celebrity status, and portray themselves "persecuted heroes upholding Truth, Freedom and Justice" who have been unfairly "censored" (p. 20). Finally, the influencers "mobilise followers willing to defend these principles through a ludic journey of self-discovery, self-actualisation and spiritual awakening to give the illusion of agency and collaboration in the fight against evil and corruption" (p. 21).

Pastor Peter Mortlock did these three things as well. He leveraged his micro-celebrity status as a pastor of influence by asserting himself as the shepherd of the flock, well researched, and therefore someone worthy of being a source of truth above the mainstream media, the Government, and education. His

repeated referral to how brave he was for speaking about conspiratorial subjects elicited the self-portrayal of heroism in the name of truth and protecting people's freedoms from lockdowns, vaccine mandates and immunisation passports. He also gave the illusion of agency by encouraging people to make up their own minds whilst simultaneously giving a strongly one-sided view and publicly intimidating those who challenged his authority, and lambasting people who opposed him.

This research does not note the effect these themes, where he secured himself as the locus of truth, have on the congregation. It is possible that such persuasions of trust fell on deaf ears, however given existing research into the power pastors can amass this seems unlikely. Rather than resisting the accumulation of authority and power Pastor Peter Mortlock feeds this.

This chapter used the case study of Pastor Peter Mortlock to explore how faith leaders use sermons to locate sources of truth. It explains how the senior pastor of a New Zealand megachurch dismantled trust in traditional sources of truth, namely the mainstream media, the Government, and education.

This chapter reinforces Wellman et al. (2020) idea that megachurches can become total environments and "small towns" (p. 168) that cater to people's every need. While Wellman et al. (2020) listed items such as educational facilities, day care programmes and hair salons, this study would add to the list sources of truth and what to believe. In a way, the sermons conducted by the case study became a version of the news. Pastor Peter Mortlock became the journalistic truth seeker filtering stories and facts from the mainstream media based on his own research. These facts and stories were then interpreted and presented to the congregation.

Seven themes were highlighted as tactics Pastor Peter Mortlock used to assert himself as the locus of truth. Firstly, Pastor Peter Mortlock primed the congregation to accept his viewpoints even if they contradicted their own beliefs. He encouraged open-mindedness and set the stage for controversial topics, indicating his desire to shape the congregation's perspectives.

Next, he established his bravery by suggesting that other pastors shared his views but lacked the courage to address contentious subjects. Positioning himself as brave styled himself as a martyr willing to stand up for the truth.

Thirdly, Pastor Peter Mortlock asserted that his words came directly from God, emphasising that he was a conduit for heavenly wisdom. This strategy enhanced his authority as it implied that his sermon content was not merely his opinion but carried the weight of divine endorsement.

Then, the positioning of the Bible blurred the line between Pastor Peter Mortlock's own thoughts and biblical scripture. While Bible verses were incorporated into sermons Pastor Peter Mortlock's opinions drove the subject matter rather than biblical teachings. This approach granted him flexibility to discuss whatever he wanted and elevated his personal opinions as a central message.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also asserted himself as having ultimate authority over City Impact Church by positioning himself as a shepherd. He compared himself to Jesus and used possessive language over the congregation thus elevating his status as an authoritative source of truth.

He presented himself as impartial, framing challenges to his credibility as proof of trustworthiness. Finally, Pastor Peter Mortlock demanded loyalty intimidating to frighten churchgoers from publicly opposing his position of authority.

The collection of these tactics positioned himself as the ultimate sovereign under God over people at City Impact Church and the only credible source of truth. The next chapter analyses how Pastor Peter Mortlock capitalised on his position as a truth locus to create barriers to belonging at City Impact Church relating to Covid-19, politics and the world's supposed imminent doom.

Chapter 7: Sermons Creating Barriers to Belonging

All communities, including faith communities, have barriers to belonging. At megachurches while anyone can hypothetically enter the building and participate in all aspects of a service there is a clear group of insiders and outsiders among those in attendance. Spoken rules, beliefs, or actions preventing ultimate inclusion are ‘barriers to entry’. Unspoken rules, beliefs, or actions preventing ultimate inclusion are ‘barriers to belonging’. People shift from group outsiders to insiders once they espouse and comply with both barriers to entry and barriers to belonging.

This chapter first elucidates barriers to belonging and then explores how Pastor Peter Mortlock used sermons to introduce three barriers to belonging related to politics and current affairs across the period. I then summarise this chapter's findings.

A Deeper Look at Barriers to Belonging

Starting with a detailed discussion of barriers to belonging is important to contextualise the barriers Pastor Peter Mortlock implements across the period. While the ideas behind the terms ‘barriers to entry’ and ‘barriers to belong’ may not be new the use of the terms in relation to belonging is original. The concept and prior research into belonging was discussed in Chapter 2. I first came across the idea of church and barriers in the works of Wellman et al. (2014, 2020). Within two pieces of literature not related to belonging the authors presented megachurches as a place that fulfils all of one’s spiritual and physical needs thus becoming an all-encompassing habitat that nullifies the need for interaction with the secular. Within this the writers examined how one can become part of that enclosed community which included barriers to belonging.

Wellman et al. (2014, 2020) built upon the work of Collins (2004) who presented the theory of ‘interaction ritual chains’ which notes that community rituals facilitate a core in-group feel. Wellman et al. (2014, 2020) believed the megachurch experience had four elements or rituals that made it a ‘total environment’ one of which was barriers excluding outsiders.

The researchers noted that at some churches barriers are explicit. For example a lock on a door or needing to graduate a course or attend a seminar before participating in communion. Such barriers are what I term ‘barriers to entry’. These are structural barriers that a church has outlined and formally agreed must be complied with before someone is able to belong officially and formally.

The distinction between barriers to entry and barriers to belonging is important because at megachurches barriers to entry are virtually non-existent (Wellman et al., 2020). Anyone can take part in any aspect of the service and do things such as dress in whatever makes them feel comfortable. However, suggestion that anyone can belong is an illusion. There are unspoken clauses people must comply with. Anyone can belong – but only if those covertly communicated rules and behaviours are embraced. Instead of barriers to entry megachurches have what I term, ‘barriers to belonging’.

What is interesting about barriers to belonging is that megachurches are unlikely to admit that there are any. Pastor Peter Mortlock frequently emphasised that City Impact Church was a place anyone could belong to. While this is true in a sense that there were no barriers to entry explicitly preventing people from integrating in an official capacity there were barriers to belonging that prevented people from feeling they fully had a place within the community. Three examples of these are discussed in the second part of this chapter from page 120.

Without using the term barriers to belong Wellman et al. (2020) described how most megachurches have barriers that exist in place of barriers to entry. These inferred barriers included promising oneself to Jesus Christ, feeling close to the Holy Spirit and making monetary contributions to the church. Wellman et al. (2020) explained how some megachurches made heterosexual relationships a barrier to belonging through the direct disapproval of homosexuality. It would become strenuous for a member of the LGBTQI+ community to feel a sense of belonging and fully integrate themselves into megachurch life without rejecting engagement in homosexual relationships.

Both types of barriers are created and reinforced through the process of socialisation. Cartledge (2020) described the process in which people are educated in church as socialisation. Socialisation is the process in which people adopt the thinking, principles and customs of a community that transfer them from

outsiders to insiders within the group (Fulcher & Scott 2003). Cartledge (2020) described how socialisation is not unique to religion. It is also something everyone endures as people exist within society especially when growing up. The process teaches us how to act and what our role is in the world. In this regard socialisation is not necessarily a negative thing.

Cartledge (2020) described how from a religious perspective no one would be able to become Christian without a process of socialisation. Socialisation moves someone from their old life with unbeliever-like behaviours into a new life that contains actions in accordance with the life Jesus desires Christians to live. That socialisation occurs through activities such as listening to sermons, discussions with Christian peers, or reading the Bible. As someone explores faith and decides to become part of a faith community they ultimately begin to act in similar ways and have similar core beliefs to their Christian peers. Cartledge (2020) said the weekly act of collective worship, which includes a sermon, is an essential element of the process of socialisation.

The by-product of socialisation is that people move from feeling like they are outside the community to feeling like they are inside the group as they adopt the items being socialised. This means people will not feel like they belong to the community until they align with what is being educated or what is being socialised. Therefore, the primary method in which barriers to entry and barriers to belonging are implemented is socialisation through sermons. Pastor Peter Mortlock, as the person who delivered the most sermons at City Impact Church over the period, and as the person who set the strategic direction of the church as the senior pastor, would have had the primary directive regarding what barriers to belonging were implemented.

While both barriers to entry and barriers to belonging are dictated by a church's leadership, where the two terms differ is in their regulation. Barriers to entry are regulated by people within the community, for example a pastor refusing to give someone communion. In contrast barriers to belonging are mostly regulated by the individual, in part because the feeling of belonging is personal. What makes one person feel belonging might not be enough for another to have that same sense of security within the group (Allen et al., 2021). Barriers to belonging do not involve people being explicitly told they do not belong

or having overt restrictions on how much one can engage. However, one may not feel part of the in-group and experience a true sense of belonging until their beliefs and behaviours align with the barriers to belonging implicitly communicated through various avenues within the community, including sermons. In other words, both barriers are set by the leaders of the community. The difference comes in that barriers to entry are regulated by people within the community, and barriers to belonging are regulated by the individual seeking affiliation.

Another difference between the two terms is that barriers to entry are explicitly agreed upon because of their structural nature of needing to be implemented. By contrast, barriers to belonging can gradually drift through a community with the potential for some group insiders to be unaware that a barrier to belonging has come to exist. This is because of their implicit nature.

Pastor Peter Mortlock frequently denied any barriers of belonging existed at City Impact Church. He believed anyone could find belonging regardless of their views on politics or current affairs. As is discussed in the second section of this chapter from page 120 this was untrue. Barriers to belonging did exist regarding one's views on politics and current affairs. This denial shows how even the person perpetrating the barrier to belonging can be oblivious to the barrier clasping a stronghold within the community.

The gradual and implicit nature of barriers to belonging mean that they can begin to occupy communities without a process of evaluation to determine whether such a barrier is beneficial or healthy for the group.

It is important to stress that both types of barriers are not inherently wrong. I would argue that some barriers are necessary to sustain a healthy faith community. For example, it is understandable for someone not to feel like they truly belong to a faith community until they adopt a belief in that faith system. It would be odd for a Muslim to feel a total sense of belonging in a Christian church, and odd for a Christian to feel a total sense of belonging at a mosque. This is not inherently negative; it is just that sense of belonging comes with the specifics of religious denomination.

Therefore, a barrier to belonging's mere existence does not make it negative. Instead, it is the form that barrier takes which can deem it problematic. I argue that barriers to belonging become awkward when they extend beyond core aspects of faith to include views on things such as politics and current affairs. In Chapter 5's findings I suggested the form of discussion social and political issues take within sermons makes the matter justifiable rather than the mere existence of such engagement.

Creating new barriers to belonging is powerful and potentially troublesome. Not only do pastors hold authority to influence the opinions of people within their congregation but they also help facilitate one of people's deepest desires – a community one belongs to (Block, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006). When new barriers to belonging are implemented people who were once group insiders may find themselves suddenly exposed on the outside of the group for questioning or not accepting the new barriers. To maintain the security of belonging within the community it is possible for people to find adhering to the new barrier to belonging more attractive than feeling outside the community.

Therefore, new barriers to belonging not relating to church or religion might seem unfair, or even unethical, to introduce because people may embrace beliefs or behaviours they may otherwise refrain from adopting to retain belonging to the group.

I object to the imposing of personal views from a position of power. For this reason, I suggest an example of an ill-suited barrier to belonging within a faith community includes church leaders' personal views on political issues and current affairs. The remainder of this chapter documents and discusses how Pastor Peter Mortlock uses sermons to expand barriers of belonging to include his personal views on political and social matters.

Implementing Barriers to Belonging

While some academics have claimed that megachurches and Pentecostal churches typically refrain from engaging in controversial social issues to maintain a mass appeal (Vermeer, 2015) Pastor Peter Mortlock embraced the discussion of politics and current affairs, as was uncovered in Chapter 5. The current chapter argues that over the reporting period Pastor Peter Mortlock extended barriers to belonging at

City Impact Church to include views regarding politics and current affairs. This section describes how these additional barriers to belonging were introduced through sermons. It is split into three parts, which each represent three barriers to belonging introduced during the period, derived from the data through thematic analysis. The barriers to belonging were to:

1. Getting vaccinated against Covid-19.
2. Holding views that misaligned with Pastor Peter Mortlock's political views.
3. Not being motivated by belief the world is in its last days and that Christ will soon return.

As this chapter will discuss, congregants who accepted these statements would have found it challenging to experience a sense of belonging at City Impact Church.

Before delving into the first barrier to belonging, it is important to highlight that across all three was the theme that division comes from the Devil. For example, Pastor Peter Mortlock said, "Covid is not our enemy. Division is our enemy. Division is our enemy. And we know where division comes from right? The one who comes to rob, kill and destroy" (City Impact Church, 2021g, 10.48).

The latter part of this statement refers to a Bible verse in which the Devil is claimed to "steal and kill and destroy" (*New International Version Bible*, 1973/2011, John 10:10).

As touched on in Chapter 6 on page 105 such statements shut down debate. Saying that division is from the Devil while strongly portraying a personal view around politics or current affairs indicates that anyone who opposes the pastor's view is causing a division and therefore is being influenced by Satan. This instantly creates a barrier to belonging in regard to the topic because it means that those who do not agree become forced to remain silent, and their views unwelcome.

First Barrier to Belonging: Getting Vaccinated Against Covid-19

The first barrier to belonging was introduced through sermons during the reporting period was against people attending City Impact Church who received a Covid-19 vaccine.

Pastor Peter Mortlock did not explicitly discourage people from getting vaccinated. Often, he encouraged people to "do your due diligence" (City Impact Church, 2021e, 21.16) and frequently

asserted to be “not anti-vax” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 21.44). He said he was neither for nor against vaccines, but pro-choice.

However, the message was utterly one-sided against getting vaccinated. Implied messaging was riddled throughout sermons, and church members were tasked with decoding that ultimate message of vaccination refrain.

It is important to question why Pastor Peter Mortlock chose to employ the method of indirect communication instead of overtly telling people to resist the vaccine. Tannen (1994) described the importance of indirect communication saying it was a “fundamental element of human communication” (p. 79). She said people are constantly deploying and decoding indirect communication messages in everyday language.

Holdcroft (1976) said at the heart of indirect communication is a deliberate step to refrain from saying something “in the simplest or most direct way possible” (p. 147). He proposed reasons one might opt for an indirect communication approach to convey a message. Holdcroft (1976) suggested sometimes words are avoided to prevent offense, other times it might be more “prudent or tactful” to convey something covertly (p. 147).

So how did getting vaccinated become a barrier to belong?

Firstly, Pastor Peter Mortlock had to appeal to his congregation’s intellectual sensibilities, to make vaccination an appetising view to adopt. Providing these arguments simultaneously made getting vaccinated a barrier to belong. It would have become untenable for a person who believed in the value of getting vaccinated to attend City Impact Church over the period, and endure the frequent, intense, and emotive arguments telling them they were wrong whilst maintaining a sense of belonging within the community.

Here are some of the reasons Pastor Peter Mortlock gave against getting vaccinated.

First, Covid-19's danger was presented as being overhyped by the mainstream media, government, and health experts. With Covid-19 being not that bad, vaccination became an unnecessary risk.

Pastor Peter Mortlock extensively quoted statistics during sermons, citing Covid-19's mortality rate as lower than other historical pandemics such as the Black Plague, and modern causes of death. He also claimed Covid-19's actual mortality rate to be even lower because of botched reporting standards. Pastor Peter Mortlock believed the restrictions and need to get vaccinated were unnecessary for most, as “90%” of people dying from Covid-19 at the time were elderly (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 1.11.19).

He questioned how transmissible the disease was between people: “They talk about it being highly contagious. And I'm not saying it's not contagious. But the thing is, none of their family members quartered or none of their work colleagues got it” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 15.30).

One statement Pastor Peter Mortlock repeated was that it would be okay if people in his Church died from Covid-19, because Christians believe in Heaven. He said that “as believers, listen to me please, as believers even death itself should not worry us” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 14.52) and encouraged the congregation to “look at the bigger picture” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 15.25). Such statements force one to question how willing they are to stand by their beliefs.

He referred to the vaccine as “experimental”, eliminating any sense that the vaccine had undergone rigorous scientific testing prior to rolling it out across the population even arguing that the medical profession were referring to it in such a way: “Even doctors and experts would say not obviously all would call this vaccine experimental, which is a legitimate term, only because it's only it is only approved under emergency use and not fully approved” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 50.16; 50.11).

In this statement, Pastor Peter Mortlock quoted medical “experts” and “doctors”, which implied the information following could be trusted (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 50.11). Instead, the information following was false. The statement was made six months after MedSafe had independently approved the Pfizer vaccine for roll out in New Zealand on 2 February 2021 (Radio New Zealand, 2021a).

In addition to downplaying Covid-19's deadliness Pastor Peter Mortlock was concerned about the efficacy and danger of the Covid-19 vaccine. He said, “this is not 100% safe for everybody, and maybe not 100% effective either for everybody” (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 58.43).

He implied a large percentage of the medical field were worried about how safe the vaccines were despite less than 0.55% of general practitioners in New Zealand being against the vaccine (Allott, 2022). He created a sense of in-group by falsely positioning himself as on the same team as much of the medical profession regarding vaccine mandates: “I think most doctors would think the same way as I do” (City Impact Church, 2021h, 15.29). Pastor Peter Mortlock asserted that most doctors agreed with him about the vaccine’s safety but were too afraid of the consequences that might follow if they spoke out.

The companies creating and distributing the vaccines were accused of being corrupt.

One's Covid-19 vaccination status was downplayed and treated like a nonchalant issue. Pastor Peter Mortlock frequently referred to one’s vaccination decision as an “opinion” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 57.44). In one sermon he said, “hey, we don’t all like the same colour jacket, right?” (City Impact Church, 2021h, 4.57).

Comparing someone’s decision to get vaccinated to a fashion choice trivialises the pandemic and the decision to get vaccinated. The potential consequences between the two items he compared differ massively. Wearing a jacket people might not like does not have the potential of causing death unlike one’s decision to get vaccinated.

According to Pastor Peter Mortlock the vaccine’s biggest unknown were the health risks. He talked about how the vaccine has caused some people to die, have blood clots and heart inflammations. Vaccinated people attending City Impact Church were held up as examples of the adverse reactions the vaccine caused:

I've spoken to about 10 people in the church here that I got, have taken the vaccine. Eight out of 10 that I spoke to, got ill on the day to various degrees... So when you hear side effects are rare, you'd have to wonder if that's the truth. (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 17.40)

Highly emotive reasons were given against getting vaccinated including that it could kill unborn babies:

There have been 548 reports...of woman suffering miscarriages after Covid-19 vaccination, this was out of 2224 reports from pregnant woman who received the vaccine that's about 25%... If you're a pregnant woman, why, why not wait till you have the baby? Why would you take the risk? (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 1.00.56)

Another emotionally intense argument Pastor Peter Mortlock proposed was that the vaccine could affect a woman's fertility:

I will say that being involved with every day with pastoring and journeying, heartbroken couples who are trying to conceive a baby. So one of my genuine pastoral concerns is all the research. And all my research is that the medical world they just do not know if this vaccine will affect the young woman's fertility or not. (CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 49.17)

Such statements play on people's deepest desires, and fears of not being able to have children. It also means that getting vaccinated does not just affect the person getting immunised but also one's partner and potential child.

Pastor Peter Mortlock used Christian-centric arguments against Covid-19 vaccines. He suggested that some of the vaccines were made from the cells of aborted babies while portraying those who held an anti-abortion stance as being anti-Christian. For a time he suggested that the vaccine could be the mark of the beast. Some Christians believe the mark of the beast permanently signals you are owned by the Devil, and therefore bars people from entry into Heaven (Lucey, 2022; Gleeson & Gilbert, 2021).

Insinuating the vaccine could be the mark of the beast was powerful because it could cause some Christians to ignore scientific evidence of its benefits out of fear of injecting something that could cause them to be owned by the Devil and barred from eternity in Heaven.

Later in the reporting period Pastor Peter Mortlock confirmed he did not believe the Covid-19 vaccines were the mark of the beast.

Stout (2011) wrote when a pastor the media during sermons, it forces people to evaluate where their loyalty resides. The same is true when a pastor criticises other things such as the Covid-19 vaccine. All the criticisms presented above appeared in such a frequency, intensity, and level of conviction that it forced people to evaluate their loyalties. Does one go against their trusted pastor and 'source of truth', as per Chapter 6, and get vaccinated anyways? If someone decided to get vaccinated, they would have to sit through sermons in the weeks and months to come littered with side comments and arguments against their decision. Entire sermons were dedicated to convincing people not to get vaccinated. Such a frequency of arguments would be a constant reminder that you disagree with the senior pastor, your

spiritual leader, on an issue so important to him it was making him cry (City Impact Church, 2021h, 39.20; CIC Sunday Media, 2021, 00.44) and taking up a huge amount of valuable sermon time.

As discussed in Chapter 6, Pastor Peter Mortlock created an environment where it was inappropriate for people to challenge, question, or disagree with the views offered. To disagree and go against the tide of what other church-going peers were likely to believe at the time would have been a tough thing to do whilst maintaining a sense of belonging.

Beyond the frequency and intensity of the arguments, getting vaccinated was also presented as a barrier to belonging by creating a sense of in-group intimacy for those who agreed with Pastor Peter Mortlock's vaccine views.

Sermons were used not just to sympathise with the unvaccinated but for Pastor Peter Mortlock to convey that he was strongly on their team. He said, "you're not the only one fearful of this vaccine" (City Impact Church, 2021f, 32.43).

Unvaccinated people had a special place in Pastor Peter Mortlock's heart.

I felt God speak to me about them. They're like the lost sheep that Jesus left the 99 to go and get the one... There's also part of the flock, they were part of the flock. And so, it's so important that Jesus wants to include all. 99 and the one. And I think the 99 will be okay. (City Impact Church, 2021h, 35.01)

The group intimacy between Pastor Peter Mortlock and unvaccinated people was furthered when he hinted at his own unvaccinated status, which is discussed in Chapter 6 on page 110. Such a disclosure strongly conveyed to unvaccinated people that he was in their group and on their team.

Those who chose to get vaccinated were emotionally alienated. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, while no one was blocked entry from attending City Impact Church if they did get vaccinated it would have become increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of belonging to City Impact Church if one were to get immunised.

People who believed in getting vaccinated were overtly and covertly ostracised and made fun of for holding their belief. More than once Pastor Peter Mortlock joked: “What’s the answer? Is the answer the Saviour of the vaccine? And here we go again” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 17.29).

Jesus is often referred to in the Bible as the ‘Saviour of the world’. It would be peculiar for the senior pastor of a Christian church to genuinely believe that a Covid-19 vaccine is comparable to Jesus. Therefore, this statement is a sarcastic hyperbole indicating that some people believe the vaccine saves all one’s problems.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also used language that indicated unvaccinated people were the in-group at City Impact Church. He would often pre-empt controversial statements with ‘we can all agree...’ despite the information following being something not everyone would agree with. For example, he asserted that “we can all agree on this, that there's a lot of unknowns about the vaccines” when attempting to persuade the congregation vaccines were unsafe and ineffective (City Impact Church, 2021e, 20.28).

Pastor Peter Mortlock also subtly threatened and warned people who went against his advice. He told people not to be afraid of the virus, and instead be afraid of what might happen if the world acted outside God’s will, something he was perceived as deducing with greater accuracy because of his title and position as senior pastor (Corcoran & Wellman, 2016). He said, “You don’t want to fear the virus my friend, you want to fear God” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 53.08).

In summary, the first barrier to belonging introduced through sermons by Pastor Peter Mortlock was the vaccination against Covid-19. Pastor Peter Mortlock used indirect communication techniques to convey his anti-vaccine stance, creating a one-sided narrative against vaccination. He downplayed the dangers of the virus, questioned the vaccine's safety and efficacy, and made emotionally charged arguments against vaccination. Those who chose to get vaccinated were emotionally alienated, while the unvaccinated were portrayed as the in-group. This divisive environment made it difficult for individuals with different views on vaccination to feel accepted and included within the church community.

Being unvaccinated was not the only barrier to belonging that existed at City Impact Church over the reporting period. Pastor Peter Mortlock also used sermons to convey his political values.

Second Barrier to Belonging: Holding Views that Misaligned with Pastor Peter Mortlock's Political Values

Scheitle and Cornell (2015) wrote that a political protest usually captures the interest of those already passionate about the issue at hand. However, a sermon offers a unique opportunity for the pastor to expose the congregation to social and political issues churchgoers may otherwise not have been interested in. Those in the congregation attend and at the very least listen to what the pastor has to say.

During the reporting period New Zealand hosted a general election which dictated who would make up New Zealand's parliament for the next three years. New Zealanders were also able to vote on two referendums (Electoral Commission, n.d.). The first was whether to legalise recreational marijuana use and the second was whether to legalise euthanasia (Electoral Commission, n.d.).

Pastor Peter Mortlock used sermons to create barriers to belonging that depended on how people voted. He used sermons to emphasise the importance of those attending City Impact Church holding an anti-Labour Government view and voting no for both referendums.

Holding an Anti-Labour Government View

Pastor Peter Mortlock's sermons were used to communicate that congregants needed to have an anti-Labour Government view to feel a sense of belonging at City Impact Church during the reporting period. Pastor Peter Mortlock's distaste for New Zealand's centre left governing political party was strongly influenced by his conservative views.

During sermons Pastor Peter Mortlock supported United States President Donald Trump, comparing him to Jesus. He celebrated conservatives gaining prominence or power and endorsed the conservative lobby group Family First (Baraae, 2020).

Pastor Peter Mortlock dedicated an entire sermon to instructing people on how to vote in the general election and referendums. This sermon was delivered on 4 October 2020, two weeks before New Zealand's general election and one day after early voting opened (Electoral Commission, n.d.).

Pastor Peter Mortlock was aware of the timing in which the sermon was delivered, saying “now we have an election in two weeks' time, under two weeks now” (City Impact Church, 2020b, 56.57).

This sermon, in conjunction with smaller tangents and jibes in other sermons, created a barrier to belonging for those who were not against the Labour Government. Pastor Peter Mortlock framed the Labour Government's policies in such a negative way it would have been impossible to offer one's support without being perceived as despicable.

People who supported the Labour Government were positioned enablers of “segregation” comparable to apartheid in South Africa and the creation of a “two-tier society” restricting the freedoms granted to unvaccinated people (City Impact Church, 2021h, 32.23; 16.31).

Pastor Peter Mortlock also implied the governing party was inhabited by demons.

Now battle isn't against flesh and blood. It's not against [New Zealand's Prime Minister] Jacinda. It's not against the politicians that are down there that are making all these immoral laws. Our battle is against the demonic forces in high places. (City Impact Church, 2021f, 7.54)

In another sermon Pastor Peter Mortlock uttered that governments around the world and the leaders of international institutions were acting out the will of Satan, stating, “the Devil uses people for his for his plans” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 57.56).

Pastor Peter Mortlock directly criticised the Labour Government and New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, across the reporting period, particularly around its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this example Pastor Peter Mortlock refers to Leighton Smith, a New Zealand broadcaster who hosts a podcast in association with Newstalk ZB.

I just heard on Leighton Smith, a great letter, read by Dr. Muriel Newman, and it's worth reading. And it was entitled, why we don't love you Jacinda anymore. And please, just if you're a Labour supporter, just bear with me. But she was talking about the situation. It was a very well written letter and I commend her for it, and I'd encourage you to, to read that. But I hope and I hope and pray that you see, and I think you do, your freedoms are being stripped away. And that should be a concern to all of us. (City Impact Church, 2021g, 18.29)

Here Pastor Peter Mortlock is endorsing and encouraging his congregation to read a letter that openly says we “don't love” New Zealand's sitting Prime Minister.

Another example of his general distaste for the Labour Government was when he described it and Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's Prime Minister, as finding enjoyment in causing people emotional pain:

Now we're seeing a two-tier society that our Government, our Prime Minister, gleefully said that she was going to introduce, and so to turn people against people, to pit people against people, and families and so forth. I just, I'm sad by that. (City Impact Church, 2021h, 16.31)

The Labour Government was censured as power hungry and duplicitous. Pastor Peter Mortlock talked about “things going on behind the scenes” which implied the Labour Government were duplicitously acting differently in public than in private (City Impact Church, 2021h, 23.43). He believed “governments are wanting to control” (City Impact Church, 2021f, 33.31) which presented government as was working towards a deceitful goal without the public realising what was going on. Those who supported Labour supported these power hungry, duplicitous people.

Stout (2011) wrote that when a pastor criticises the media it causes them to evaluate their loyalties. I believe the same to be true when pastors criticise other things such as government policy. The criticisms divide the congregation and create a fork in the road. Does one align with their pastor or with the Government? Such a question creates two sides and others those who do not agree with the criticisms volleyed from the pulpit.

The Labour Government was also framed as being anti-Christian and intentionally causing churches to suffer by not allowing faith communities to meet in person under the Covid-19 restrictions. Labour Government supporters sanctioned legislation Pastor Peter Mortlock deemed to be antithetical to one's Christian faith like the conversion therapy ban, hate speech laws and expansion of abortion rights for

women. Pastor Peter Mortlock also believed the Labour Government was targeting churches by not allowing faith communities to gather during lockdowns.

It was told these policies, and the Labour party's ignoring of Christian values, was causing New Zealand to become a less 'Christian' nation. This turning from God was what Pastor Peter Mortlock used to explain the increased frequency of natural disasters.

He mentioned how the leaders of Labour were living immoral lives, stating, "we've got a prime minister, she needs to get married", a reference to Jacinda Ardern having a child outside of wedlock, "And we got a gay deputy prime minister" (City Impact Church, 2021e, 47.10).

A sense of fear was crafted about the future if New Zealand did not turn back to God, who Peter Mortlock claimed was withdrawing His hand of protection. To Pastor Peter Mortlock, while it was important for people within his Church to live Godly lives if the New Zealand society did not also obey God's laws, Christian's would suffer too. He warned, "God will bless your life, but you still got to live in the land" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 53.46). In another sermon Pastor Peter Mortlock stated:

I can remember back in the 50's, most people were kind of like God fearing, you know, they believed in God. But today, those fundamentals are being swept away. We're living in a day where good is called evil and evil is called good. (City Impact Church, 2020a, 18.09)

The way to get people to turn back to God was by voting out ungodly leaders like that of the Labour Government. Such a statement means those who support the Labour Government are supporting the de-Christianification of New Zealand and in part causing the destruction and death caused by an increase in natural disasters.

Frahm-Arp (2019) conducted a study into the political activism of six Pentecostal Charismatic Evangelical church leaders in the lead up to South Africa's 2019 election. She found that some faith leaders place a high value and high importance of Christians attaining political power. Frahm-Arp (2019) used the term 'theopolitical ideology' which believes 'good Christians' need to engage politically and attain power to ensure good morals are upheld (p. 325). It is evident Pastor Peter Mortlock adopted

a theopolitical ideology as he placed a politician's Christian faith as the most important factor in deciding whether someone is worthy of people's vote.

To sum up so far, Labour supporters were framed as people who enabled segregation and supported an anti-Christian party that was inhabited by demons. Labour party policies were directly criticised as anti-Christian and the cause of more frequent natural disasters. Therefore, supporters of the party were framed as being partially responsible for the natural disasters causing destruction and loss of life. Such a framing meant a person attending City Impact Church supporting Labour was not just going against the will of Pastor Peter Mortlock, but one's Christian faith. The culmination of these factors would have made it problematic for Labour supporters to attend City Impact Church at this time and feel a sense of deep belonging. Therefore, the beginnings of a barrier to belonging was being established.

Pastor Peter Mortlock deepened this barrier to belonging by name calling people those who supported the Labour Party. Those who could not see the situation the same way as Pastor Peter Mortlock were called "foolish" among other names (City Impact Church, 2021e, 10.51). For example he said, "there is just so much going on in the world, I would be blind, and I'd be ignorant not to see it" (City Impact Church, 2021e, 13.06).

This name calling is likely to make members of the congregation who disagree with his views feel uncomfortable, not respected, and silly for seeing the world differently. It builds an in group and an out group within the church. Such statements poke at a person's sense of belonging within the Church if they have opposing views to Pastor Peter Mortlock.

When talking about who people should vote for in the election Pastor Peter Mortlock mentioned that dictators like Kim Jong Un in North Korea and Hitler in Germany only gain power because "evil rises when good people say nothing" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 48.22). It implied that New Zealand's Prime Minister was a dictator and that one was not a 'good person' if they did not believe the same thing as Pastor Peter Mortlock.

Pastor Peter Mortlock also generally negatively framed the Labour Government. For example, “hopefully we’ll get a choice. But the rhetoric that’s coming down the tube and you gotta listen to the rhetoric, and it’s heading in the wrong direction” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 22.56).

The use of the word “tube” in reference to the Government’s communications is derogatory and indirectly communicates his dislike for New Zealand’s state leaders.

Shortly after new Covid-19 regulations were introduced Pastor Peter Mortlock presented the options he considered for how City Impact Church would operate. One that he spent considerable time exploring during a sermon was to “flout the law” (City Impact Church, 2021h, 18.25). Contemplating direct defiance and illegal activity as a viable option shows the lack of respect and distaste for the Labour Government he had.

After New Zealand’s 2020 general election Pastor Peter Mortlock expressed his disappointment for the Labour party retaining governing power by a landslide and also mentioned the “one or two” people at City Impact Church who may have voted for them:

You know, we just had an election. To be honest, I was praying for another government. I know some of you were too. Maybe one or two here had their prayers answered. I don’t know. But I was praying that neither of those referendums would go through. Did I get all my prayers answered? No. Am I going to walk out on God? No. Hallelujah. (City Impact Church, 2020c, 2.35)

This creates a barrier to belonging because it messages that people at City Impact Church do not vote for the Labour Party. Out of the 10,000 people who attend City Impact Church Pastor Peter Mortlock accounted for “one or two” who might have voted for the Labour Party. This is despite the party receiving a record number of votes, more than any other party in New Zealand’s history (Roy & Graham-McLay, 2020). This implied that people who voted for the Labour Party were in the very small minority at City Impact Church, creating an in group and hinted that people who attended shared Pastor Peter Mortlock’s distaste for the Labour Party.

Pastor Peter Mortlock gave direct instructions about how City Impact Church congregants should vote. He started by directing churchgoers to vote exclusively for “righteous people” who upheld Christian

values (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.11.59). He asserted that doing so would help make New Zealand be in good standing with God and secure the Lord's hand of protection over the nation.

Pastor Peter Mortlock listed some of New Zealand's largest political parties and gave reasons why he could not vote for them. He said the Green Party have an environmental agenda to "kill the babies and save the whales" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.00.11). He said he can't vote for the Act Party "because they're pushing euthanasia" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.18.09). About the current governing party, the Labour Party, he said "they pushed through the abortion thing. They'll push through the hate speech thing and so forth. I can't vote for that. No, no" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.21.55).

Regarding New Zealand's other major political party, the National Party, he claimed its leader Judith Collins was "no better" than the Labour Party (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.22.16).

He then stated the New Conservatives Party were "probably who I will vote for because I don't see an alternative" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.24.09). He described how its "morals and values align with me" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.24.04).

At the end of the sermon, with the tinkering of an emotional piano ballad playing in the background, Pastor Peter Mortlock tried to claim, "I'm not telling you who to vote for" (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.32.13). Technically, this is correct because he did not explicitly instruct his congregation to vote for a particular political party. However, Wood (1999) argued that political messaging is suggestive and thematic, rather than overt. Pastor Peter Mortlock employed thematic and covert communication tactics to ensure his persuasions and messages were clear, but not explicit.

Pastor Peter Mortlock's personal views were abundantly clear and it was made to seem that the wrath of God would fall upon people if they voted any differently. Pastor Peter Mortlock created pressure for people within the congregation to vote for righteous people and righteous political parties before explaining the only righteous political party is the New Conservatives. The sermon concluded with a prayer in which Pastor Peter Mortlock prayed for the New Conservatives to get into parliament. Eyes closed, he spoke with the Lord, saying, "we do pray for all the Christian parties that are standing... Oh

God for the New Conservative Party. We pray, Father, for the leaders and we pray that oh god, you'd raise some of them into parliament” (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.28.37).

Voting no in the Referendums

The next political barrier to belonging created was against people who voted yes in the referendums.

Despite admitting to smoking marijuana as a teenager prior to becoming a Christian Pastor Peter Mortlock implored the congregation to vote against legalising the drug for recreational use. He said, “obviously I'll be voting no and I hope and pray you will as well” (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.17.01).

He claimed legalising marijuana’s recreation use would increase its uptake resulting in disastrous consequences. Marijuana was hailed to cause mental health issues, suicides, family breakdowns and lead to more severe drugs. Pastor Peter Mortlock also projected that marijuana was demonic. No points in favour of legalising the drug were given.

At the end of a sermon Pastor Peter Mortlock dedicated to telling people how to vote in the election he included this in the closing prayer: “We pray that these referendums would not go through. We pray against the Devil that wants to rob, kill and destroy, renounce his works. We pray righteousness to prevail in our nation” (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.28.59).

Pastor Peter Mortlock prayed against Satan who he claimed was trying to pass the referendums. This creates a barrier to belonging as it means people who vote in favour of the referendums were working against God, against the church and against Christians everywhere. They are engaging in an act of the Devil.

After persuading the congregation to vote against legalising marijuana he moved onto the legalisation of euthanasia. He claimed people who voted yes were murderers, going against their Christian faith and threatened one's chance of getting into Heaven:

Now they're killing the unborn and they want to kill the elderly... So if you vote yes, and I want you to think about those things, because you think well, people should have a choice. But just like those politicians, and I called them out who voted for the abortion bill, they've got innocent blood on their hands. And if you vote yes, you're on the same boat, right? I'm just trying to help you because you and I got to stand before the Lord. And it's not what your friends are saying. It's not what the research is saying is what the good book says. (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.20.40)

Within this segment, Pastor Peter Mortlock shouted through the microphone that people who vote in favour of euthanasia will have “innocent blood on their hands” (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.21.05).

This is a powerful statement to make and forces congregants to consider whether voting in favour of euthanasia will make them a murderer. He then talks about how everyone must give an account before God. This is a reference to the moment after we die but just before God decides whether we go to Heaven or hell in which many Christians believe everyone must tell God what use we made of our lives. By mentioning the account Pastor Peter Mortlock is implying that people in the congregation will have to justify their decision before God and that God will take people's voting decision into account when determining their eligibility to enter Heaven or be banished to hell. At the core of the threat of an eternity in hell is the questioning of one's true allegiance to God. Pastor Peter Mortlock believed only Christians enter Heaven. Therefore, this statement creates a barrier to belonging because it calls into question one's status as a Christian if they vote in favour of euthanasia's legalisation as doing so may bar entry to Heaven.

He asserted that congregants need to ignore science and “research” and focus only on advice from the “good book”, a reference to the Bible (City Impact Church, 2020b, 1.21.19). The phrasing of this statement asserts that the Bible is clear on its stance on euthanasia, which is not true. Euthanasia is not mentioned in the Bible and there were Christians in support of this legislation (Martin, 2020). What this implies is that people need to interpret the Bible the same way Pastor Peter Mortlock does. This claim reinforces voting against euthanasia as something central to the Christian faith, strengthening it as a barrier to belonging.

Before summarising this chapter I would like to highlight my concern for some of the language used in the sermon which Pastor Peter Mortlock dedicated to advising people in how to vote. Under New

Zealand law charities are allowed to “express support for a particular policy of a political party that is important to their charitable purpose...However, a charity must not support or oppose a political party or candidate” (Charities Services, n.d.-a, para. 5 & 6).

As a charity it could be argued that support or opposition to the referendums as specific issues could be justified. However, the overt opposition to all political parties, other than the New Conservatives, goes against the rules outlined by the Charities Services (n.d.-a).

In summary, Pastor Peter Mortlock created barriers to belonging based on political views. He strongly opposed the Labour Government and used his sermons to criticise its policies and leaders, framing them as anti-Christian and even implying they were influenced by demonic forces. Pastor Peter Mortlock urged his congregation to vote against the Labour Government in the general election and to vote against the legalization of recreational marijuana and euthanasia in referendums. He presented these views as the only righteous ones and criticised those who held different opinions, using derogatory terms, and questioning their intelligence. He also expressed disappointment when the Labour Party won the election and indicated that only a few people in his church may have voted for them, implying that most attendees shared his distaste for the party. Pastor Peter Mortlock's messages created division and an in-group/out-group dynamic at City Impact Church, making it difficult for Labour supporters or those who voted differently in the referendums to feel a deep sense of belonging.

Third Barrier to Belonging: Not Being Motivated by Belief the World is in its Last Days and That Christ Will Soon Return

The application of thematic analysis supplied the third barrier to belonging Pastor Peter Mortlock created across the period through sermons was not being motivated by the belief that the world is in its last days and that Christ would soon return. Historically, pandemics have often coincided with or triggered proclamations of the world's end by religious folk (Dein, 2021). Therefore, Pastor Peter Mortlock's rhetoric and fears were not completely unexpected. What makes these views research worthy was the frequency and intensity of the arguments presented which ultimately manufactured belief in the world's calamity a barrier to belonging.

Christians believe life as we know it will cease to exist either when we die or upon the return of Jesus, which could happen at any moment (Dein, 2021). The Bible reveals a set of events that will occur in the lead up to Jesus returning and therefore the world ending. Pastor Peter Mortlock believed the events unfolding across the reporting period aligned with the prophecies within the Bible and therefore convinced him the world was about to be over. This claim was framed as fact and ingeminated with such frequency and intensity it became a barrier to belonging.

Pastor Peter Mortlock did not view the world ending as an opinion but as a statement of fact. For example, “these are latter days” and “if this is not the beginning of the end days, I’d hate to see the world when it is” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 52.26; City Impact Church, 2021e, 13:10).

This presents the world ending not as an opinion to be debated but as a fact unable to be challenged. To disagree that the world was ending was not just disagreeing with Pastor Peter Mortlock, a source of truth as discussed in Chapter 6, but disagreeing with truth itself. It would become difficult to still see oneself as a valued spiritual member of City Impact Church while simultaneously refusing to believe something the senior pastor presented as spiritually obvious.

In closing prayers Pastor Peter Mortlock reiterated the world was ending, instructing people to “wake up”. He said, “I pray O God, that Father, Lord, the church right throughout the earth would wake up, and Lord understand the day in which we live, for the days, I believe, are short” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 58.41).

Claims such as these make belief that the world was ending a barrier to belonging because it implies people who do not agree are brain-dead or asleep. It forces those with opposing points of view to be dismissed as people who do not fully grasp the situation at hand and who are not spiritually tuned into what God is doing. Within the quotation Pastor Peter Mortlock is praying to the Lord. The prayer does not query whether the world is ending but instructs God to illuminate the world’s impending doom to other Christians. This statement also presents the world ending as an unquestionable fact with the point of tension being around how other Christians can come into alignment with this belief.

Pastor Peter Mortlock suggested events relating to the Covid-19 pandemic served as evidence the world was close to ending. For example, he propounded that the happenings were more “unprecedented” than the Holocaust.

You can go down through the generations and even to Hitler when he marked people with a mark, with a tattoo, you know, the Jewish people. And, of course, he was an Antichrist as well. But let's be honest today, even as the world would say, it's unprecedented. Things that are happening in the world today have never happened before. And as Pastor Michael Pence said once, one generation is going to be alive when Jesus comes back. (City Impact Church, 2021d, 56.30)

This comparison brings massive weight to the situations of the day and implies the congregation should be more concerned about the world's ending than people alive during World War Two.

Pastor Peter Mortlock talked about “things that are happening in the world today had never happened before” which signalled to the congregation that Biblical prophecies were beginning to be fulfilled regarding the return of Jesus and thus the world's end (City Impact Church, 2021d, 56.46). Despite the seemingly bleak prognosis Pastor Peter Mortlock did not see the situation as worrying or scary. He said, “my heart is to prepare the church, possibly for the latter days. I don't know how much more can go on. But if Jesus is coming back in this generation, we need to be ready” (City Impact Church, 2021e, 49.33).

He told people to get ready for the return of Jesus, reiterating a phrase he mentioned often during sermons, namely, “prophecy, church listen to me, is not written to scare us, as Christians it's written to prepare us” (City Impact Church, 2021d, 52.04).

A barrier to belonging is created here because it calls people to not just believe the world is ending but get ready for it. To not believe the world is ending could mean you are unprepared when Jesus returns, and thus face the consequences. He talks about what people should do “as Christians” which implies that belief the world was ending was not an opinion but something inherent to Christian faith. It suggests that true Christians believe the world is about to be over and need to be at work getting ready for Jesus' return.

People in the congregation were also told to be excited about the world ending and to attend Church more often.

I haven't said all this to, to put fear into your heart, but to put faith into your heart, that Hallelujah. The Church is the ark, the place of safety, the Bible speaks about it. And so be found in the house of the Lord. (City Impact Church, 2021d, 58.04)

The “house of the Lord” is used in Christian circles as another word to describe Church. It appears Pastor Peter Mortlock is using the fear of the world ending to get people attending church more frequently.

Describing church as “the place of safety” implies that the outside world is dangerous. It also presents the church as a place where those who believe in the world’s close demise gather, subtly othering those who want to be within the church who also disagree with that evaluation. It calls people to lean further into City Impact Church for the purpose of spiritual and physical safety.

Across the period Pastor Peter Mortlock presented the world as being close to ending. He did so in a manner that was frequent, direct, and presented as a statement of fact rather than a conjecturable opinion. The world ending was such a core message at the church that there was even a 14-part series about the end times entitled ‘The Return’, a reference to the homecoming of Jesus. That meant 14 weeks of preaching from May 2021 to September 2021, almost consecutively, in which the entire sermon was dedicated to convincing the congregation that the world was about to end. Such frequency provides little room for disagreement, discussion, or question whether the world was about to end. Instead, the question centred around how best to prepare for when the world soon imploded. It was implied that those who disagreed were not as spiritually tuned into what God was outworking.

In summary, Pastor Peter Mortlock's belief in the world’s imminent end created a strong barrier to belonging at City Impact Church. He presented this belief as an undeniable fact, leaving no room for differing perspectives. The frequent and intense messaging, fear-inducing tactics, and exclusion of dissenting individuals would have been likely to make it challenging for people to feel valued and accepted unless they fully embraced belief in the world's impending doom. The constant repetition of Pastor Peter Mortlock's arguments solidified the belief as a defining characteristic of belonging to the Church leaving little room for discussion or questioning. Belief in the world’s impending doom shifted from a point of view to a perspective that needed to be held if one were to feel spiritually valuable to City Impact Church. The culmination of these factors pushed individuals to conform and prioritise

preparation for the perceived impending apocalypse to achieve a sense of belonging to the faith community.

Summary

To summarise the entire chapter, barriers to belonging implemented by Pastor Peter Mortlock at City Impact Church focused on three specific areas: vaccines, political views, and belief in the world's imminent end. The findings reveal that the pastor utilised sermons to enforce these barriers and cultivate a sense of division within the Church community.

The first barrier to belonging was getting vaccinated against Covid-19. Pastor Peter Mortlock employed indirect communication techniques to discourage vaccination against Covid-19. By downplaying the dangers of the virus, questioning the vaccine's safety and efficacy, and emotionally alienating those who chose to get vaccinated, Pastor Peter Mortlock created an in-group/out-group dynamic that hindered acceptance and inclusion for individuals with differing views on vaccination.

The second barrier to belonging pertained to political views, as Pastor Peter Mortlock strongly opposed the Labour Government and used his sermons to criticise its policies and leaders. By framing the Government as anti-Christian and influenced by Satan he positioned his own political views as the only righteous ones, leading to the marginalisation and derogatory treatment of those with differing opinions. This created a divisive atmosphere within the Church and would have made it challenging for individuals who held alternative political beliefs to experience a deep sense of belonging.

Lastly, Pastor Peter Mortlock's belief in the world's imminent end created a significant barrier to belonging at City Impact Church. By presenting this belief as an undeniable fact and employing fear-inducing tactics, dissenting perspectives were excluded, and individuals were compelled to fully embrace the impending doom narrative to feel valued and accepted within the church. The rigidity in belief left little room for discussion or questioning further exacerbating the sense of conformity necessary for belonging.

These barriers to belonging within City Impact Church underscore the potential problems associated with unspoken rules and behaviours in megachurches. The chapter emphasises the need for critical examination of the impact of sermons and the ways in which they can inadvertently foster division and exclusivity. It is important for churches to consider what barriers to belonging may have gradually been implemented in their own communities, and whether such barriers foster a healthy place of worship. By understanding and addressing these barriers, religious leaders and communities can strive to create environments that promote inclusivity, acceptance, and a genuine sense of belonging for all members.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The thesis aimed to explore the place of current affairs in religious communication in a New Zealand context. It studied the phenomenon using a case study approach, selecting a nationwide megachurch and its senior pastor, Peter Mortlock. The study adopted a mixed method approach, employing quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis to assemble an argument regarding how sermons were used in relation to politics and current affairs over a two-and-a-half-year period between 1 January 2020 and 1 July 2022. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What role do sermons play in defining social issues for a faith community?
2. How do faith leaders use sermons to locate sources of truth?
3. How do sermons create or reinforce barriers to belonging?

While the case study may be a unique example of a pastor engaging with current affairs, the findings provide valuable insights into the potential influence of pastors, the implications of their sermon content, and the potential effects on the faith community.

Findings

The role of sermons in defining social issues, explored in Chapter 5, is an underexplored area of study. In this research I looked at the frequency social and political matters were discussed within sermons and the implications. Through the employment of quantitative content analysis the study revealed a New Zealand megachurch pastor directly engaging in politics and current affairs within sermons across an extended period. Spikes in the discourse around politics and current affairs could be linked to times when debate was rife in the public arena. This relationship suggested Pastor Peter Mortlock saw a need to take agency over what the congregation at City Impact Church believed about political and social issues.

The importance of careful navigation when addressing political issues and current affairs is highlighted within this chapter. It is unrealistic to expect pastors to refrain from engagement in such matters completely, namely because Jesus, who they follow, was politically active Himself. There are positive

historical examples of the Christian church immobilising people to become politically active in social issues. Current affairs can also serve as quality source material for pastors to keep sermons engaging and relevant. Therefore, the problematic aspect lies in the manner these discussions manifest rather than their mere existence. When political and social issues are discussed in sermons it should be done in a way that respects diverse views and encourages open debate and dialogue over a dogmatisation that hails the senior pastor's view as the only viable perspective.

Pastors should consider the manner political and social issues are discussed within sermons. Ultimately, pastors who are highly engaged in politics and current affairs do so to take agency and influence people into amalgamating the congregation's worldview to their own. When such topics are engaged in a manner that is frequent and dogmatic, or presents alternative views as invalid, the root cause might be that the pastor is imposing uniformity as a means to attain unity.

When differences are recognised but amicably respected, unity is fostered. In contrast, uniformity involves people abandoning differing points of view and conforming to the solo narrative directed by the group leader, in this case, the senior pastor. Ultimately, the drive for uniformity points to a wider question around the value of diversity in thought.

Pastors and churchgoers should consider how much the church they attend values diversity of thought and whether the present state nurtures an enriching faith environment.

Churches should also consider whether there is any policy and accountability around what pastors project from the pulpit regarding social issues and political matters. To be effective the policies need to outline what settings and in what manner such discourse is justifiable and beneficial for the congregation.

Study into where pastors locate truth is rare. Using thematic analysis Chapter 6 magnified how Pastor Peter Mortlock dismantled trust in traditional sources of truth, specifically the mainstream media, the Government, and education. Sermons became a form of news for the congregation with Pastor Peter Mortlock acting as a self-appointed journalist. He styled himself as the only trustworthy truth seeker and

interpreter. Pastor Peter Mortlock employed various strategies to assert this position including declaring himself as the shepherd and using possessive language over the congregation, comparing himself to Jesus, postulating himself as God's mouthpiece, arguing his credibility, and publicly intimidating those who challenged his authority. He established power as the locus of truth, equating his personal opinions to biblical teachings and asserting his dominance over City Impact Church.

These findings should cause pastors contemplate the influence inherent to their position and how this influence is being used. Pastors and church leaders must consider the Kingdom value of churches becoming the only source of reputable information, how this framing can elevate individual church leaders, and how it can draw congregants from their communities. Internal accountability structures within churches regarding the extent of power pastors can attempt to amass should be considered.

Church attendees must be aware of how pastors might use their position of power within a church setting. People inside a church must constantly evaluate whether what is said within sermons is accurate and justifiable.

Barriers to belonging were an evident element at City Impact Church across the period, as noted in Chapter 7. Belonging is a reasonably well documented field in regard to adolescence but little literature exists examining how the feeling outworks within religious settings. Barriers to entry are structural rules explicitly communicated that bar entry to church rituals or even to the community itself. In contrast, barriers to belonging are the implicit beliefs and behaviours people within the community people must embrace to feel a sense of belonging. What is key is that barriers to belonging are covertly introduced and can be implemented without validation from the wider community. This means barriers to belonging skip evaluation regarding whether they are beneficial and healthy for the group to adopt and people inside the community might be unaware barriers to belonging have come to exist.

Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of three barriers to belonging that were introduced through the sermons. These were related to Covid-19 vaccines, political views, and the belief in the world's imminent end. Indirect communication techniques discouraged vaccination against Covid-19, fostering the alienation of those who held differing views. Sermons were used to make supporting the

Labour Government and voting in favour of New Zealand's 2020 general election referendums barriers to belonging. Additionally, Pastor Peter Mortlock's belief in the world's near end created a significant barrier to belonging, leaving little room for dissenting perspectives and further reinforcing conformity within the congregation.

These findings underscore the potential problems associated with unspoken rules and behaviours within churches. Critical examination of sermon content for potential barriers to belonging is required alongside the evaluation of its impact on the faith community. Religious leaders and communities should carefully consider barriers that might be inadvertently operating.

Regular evaluation of barriers to belonging that might exist within faith communities is required by pastors and churchgoers alike. Are these barriers overreaching? Does our church inadvertently exclude people for holding views that are not fundamental to the Christian faith? What can be done to ensure barriers to belonging do not gradually cement themselves in our church culture? These are some of the questions religious leaders must ask to foster a healthy and inclusive faith environment.

Research into sermons remains scarce and more study is needed to gain a more holistic understanding of how religious communication outworks. Further research is also necessary to deepen our understanding of the influence of sermons on social and political issues, the implications of locating sources of truth within faith communities, and the effects of barriers to belonging. By continuing to explore these areas, scholars, religious leaders, and communities can work towards promoting open dialogue, respectful engagement, and an environment where individuals feel valued and included in religious settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations to propose regarding future research based on these findings.

Study into megachurches in New Zealand remains scarce despite their significant influence and presence in the lives of many New Zealanders. Supplementary analysis into the power pastors have within faith communities in New Zealand is warranted. Broader studies into the role sermons play in defining social

issues, sourcing truth and crafting barriers to belonging across multiple churches is needed before generalised claims regarding the prevalence of such items can be made.

This study had a focus on discussion within sermons without exploring the impact the discourse had on congregants. Further research could be conducted into people who attend church to see what impact the discussion of politics and current affairs has, whether sources of truth are congregationally established and the effects of barriers to belonging.

Regarding church's engagement on social and political issues, Scheite and Cornell (2015) criticised studies into the political engagement, concerned that the measures were too blunt because of how political issues are mostly engaged indirectly.

Rather than asking about whether a pastor is engaged in politics it might be more beneficial to ask instead how important unity around political beliefs is, or how much a pastor values diversity of thought. Most language regarding politics and current affairs used by Pastor Peter Mortlock was covert and implied. Instead of telling people what to do, obvious hints were provided that suggested it was important people adopt the same opinion. A strong percentage of pastors willing congregations to have the same view or a lack of appreciation for think diversity would indicate that those pastors were engaging in political indoctrination.

In conclusion, this exploration into the place current affairs in religious communication, in the context of one New Zealand megachurch, documented the role of sermons in defining social issues, the sourcing of truth within faith communities, and the creation of barriers to belonging. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of these issues and promote healthy faith environments.

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