

# Rob Bell isn't first megachurch pastor to seek life beyond the pulpit

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#)

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(RNS) For pastors with ambitions to reach huge audiences, there's often no better platform than the megachurch, which has given rise to powerhouse media empires from T.D. Jakes to Max Lucado to Joel Osteen and many others.

But some high-profile pastors are opting to leave congregational ministry altogether to pursue publishing and other media ventures full time. And that, some observers say, carries its own risks and rewards.

On Thursday (Sept. 22), up-and-coming pastor Rob Bell announced he's leaving Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Mich. in December. Bell's best-selling book, "Love Wins," raised more than a few eyebrows with the premise that hell doesn't include eternal torment. Now he's moving on.

"Our founding pastor, Rob Bell, has decided to leave Mars Hill in order to devote his full energy to sharing the message of God's love with a broader audience," the church said in a statement.

Bell's resignation makes him the latest in a string a celebrity pastors who have said goodbye to weekly sermons, potluck dinners and other staples of church life. "A New Kind of Christianity" author Brian McLaren, "Crazy Love" author Francis Chan, "Deep Church" author Jim Belcher and the popular British Bible scholar N.T. Wright have all left their church leadership positions in recent years.

Having left high-profile pastoral roles, these big-name pastors have become prolific publishers. But not all evangelicals are convinced the gospel is well-served when pastors trade a local flock for a global one.

Within hours of the Mars Hill announcement, best-selling author and Saddleback Church Pastor Rick Warren was on Twitter, saying pastors who leave churches have less impact and no base for credibility.

"Speaking tours feed the ego = All applause & no responsibility," said one Thursday tweet from Warren. "It's an unreal world. A church gives accountability & validity."

It's not uncommon for megachurch pastor-authors to consider leaving church leadership, according to Rick Christian, president of Alive Communications, a Colorado Springs, Colo., literary agency that represents megachurch pastors. At a certain point, some feel more like a CEO than a shepherd, Christian said, and can be tempted to leave the headaches behind -- especially when they're making good money from royalties.

But he encourages them to go slow and remember that "there's something inherently great about the accountability that comes with" leading a congregation. Authors who leave that world incur new risks, he said.

"You can have somebody who leaves for the wrong reasons and becomes a lone ranger," Christian said. "They're just running and gunning for the Lord on planes, in hotels, zipping around at 30,000 feet. You can lose touch very quickly."

Others agree parish life keeps communicators grounded. Elaine Heath,

associate professor of evangelism at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, noted a long history of leaving the parish for wider outreach opportunities -- even Methodism founder John Wesley gave up a settled pulpit to be an itinerant preacher.

But in today's world, she said, book tours and online virtual relationships are not enough to sustain a pastor's moral authority.

"Sometimes God calls someone like Brian McLaren to a `global parish,'" Heath said. "What I need to know in order for such a person to remain credible, is that they are still part of a local faith community with whom they pray, worship, and serve in ministry. ... Nothing can take the place of flesh and blood community."

To be sure, many megachurch pastors still find value in sustaining congregational ties. Lucado, for instance, earns his living from various publishing ventures and the royalties on more than 80 million books sold, but he still serves without salary as minister of preaching at Oak Hills Church in San Antonio.

"From a business standpoint, I just think there is a grounding that happens in the local church," Christian said. "It's not for everybody. Seasons can change; callings can change. But if you're called in (to church ministry), make sure you're called out for all the right reasons."