

# **The Case of Toxic Leadership on Mars Hill: Conflict Framing and Image Restoration Strategy in the Devolution and Dissolution of a Megachurch**

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*Large-scale, highly publicized organizational conflicts constitute organizational crises by threatening the normalcy and vitality of organizing. This study examines the case of toxic leadership within a megachurch, whose pastor and other leaders were over or founders of multiple organizations. Integrating 1) issue development within organizational conflict framing literature and 2) image restoration strategies within crisis communication literature, this study examines how issues were named, blamed, and claimed in public organizational texts during the outing of toxic leadership. Conclusions highlight the value of multiple and complimentary frameworks to analyze crisis communication and leadership.*

*Keywords: abusive and coercive organizations, toxic leadership, conflict framing, crisis communication, image restoration, faith-based organizations*

## **INTRODUCTION**

On October 14, 2014 a single letter reverberated through religious media in the United States. Seattle megachurch, multi-site pastor Mark Driscoll officially resigned as pastor of Mars Hill (Lesley, 2014). While scrutiny of Driscoll's preaching style and content were commonplace, the resignation came on the heels of escalating conflicts with Driscoll at the epicenter of abuse and coercion. Prior to his resignation, a website created by former Mars Hill employees detailed the anger, aggressive, and unethical behavior of Driscoll, calling for his resignation and his removal from a church-planting organization that he co-founded. Due to the influence of the megachurch, the church-planting organization, and additional organizations founded by or connected to Driscoll, the intraorganizational conflict escalated to a complex, highly publicized interorganizational crisis. The backstage conflicts regarding how Driscoll treated Mars Hill employees in meetings and how the organization managed internal issues spilled over into frontstage conflicts on the pages and screens of local to national news (Goffman, 1959; Friedman, 1994; Stevenson, Bartunek and Borgatti, 2003). Garner and Peterson's (2018) study using interview data sheds light on the backstage behaviors of Mars Hill and its leadership, demonstrating how members experienced the tensions of involuntary exiting, involuntary staying, spiritual rationality, and uncoupled identification. The study simultaneously explains members' experience of identification and disidentification, while the crisis rippled out of control. Consequently, anger and aggression devolved the organization's purpose of compassion into practices of abuse and coercion.

An external consultant hired to bring restoration commented, “this is without a doubt the most abusive, coercive ministry culture I’ve ever been involved with.” Abuse and coercion in the halls of spaces of compassion is all too common in our society, ranging from sexual abuse to verbal abuse and from hidden coercion to public coercion. Whether members, leaders, or lay leaders, anyone can become a victim, and, in many cases, there are no mechanisms for managing the crises. For one, if the leadership of the organization is unhealthy and/or the cause of the crisis, any mechanism that does exist may be used deceptively or not used at all, increasing ambiguity in the crisis. Additionally, toxic leaders and bullies are often rewarded for the outward appearance of success without considering the internal health of the organization. Milosevic, Maric and Loncar (2019) sum up the nature of toxic leadership is to

“maintain the position of control via upward influence attempts (i.e., toward superiors), such as ingratiation and selective information sharing, as well as via downward influence attempts (i.e., toward subordinates), such as limiting interaction and micromanagement of followers. These activities are toxic because they create a state of ambiguity where employees (both the subordinates and the superiors) have difficulty evaluating the competence of the toxic leader. As a consequence, these leaders stay in position longer, further increasing the toxicity of the context via political behavior and bullying (Baillien & DeWitte, 2009; Griffin, & O’Leary-Kelly, 2004)” (p. 2).

In the case of Mars Hill, more than one leader was toxic, further exacerbating the abusive and coercive culture of the organization.

As more information became public, the conflict implicated numerous stakeholders in addition to Driscoll: 1) Mars Hill leadership and employees, 2) ministry organizations affiliated with Driscoll and Mars Hill, and other 3) Christian leaders affiliated with the pastor and his church. Ultimately, this very public conflict’s impact reached well beyond the organization’s founder to the dismantling of the megachurch’s multi-site campus and closing of numerous churches. In other words, the scaling up of abusive and coercive organizational practices escalated into a major crisis with rippling effects that had massive ramifications from the closure of the organization to the public relations nightmares for associated organizations to individual lives experiencing distress from bullying and other forms of violent behaviors. In sum, large-scale, highly publicized organizational conflicts are crises that threaten the normalcy and vitality of organizing. This study uses issues development 1) to examine conflict framing in the public discourse of the devolution and dissolution of Mars Hill and 2) to demonstrate how image restoration was used to manipulate information about abuse and coercion. To unpack the rhetorical strategies of key stakeholders in the Mars Hill leadership crisis, this case study draws on two complimentary perspectives for analyzing organizational conflict and crisis communication. Integrating 1) issue development within conflict framing (Putnam and Holmer, 1992) and 2) image restoration strategies in crisis communication (Benoit, 1997), we examine how issues were named, blamed, and claimed in publicly circulated organizational documents during the crisis.

The structure of the study is as follows. To begin, we examine literature on abusive and coercive organizations, including toxic leadership, and the examination of how such practices become concretized in the culture of the organization. Then, we review the two complimentary frameworks that are used to unpack the rhetorical strategies employed by Driscoll and other stakeholders – conflict framing and image restoration. Next, we detail how data was collected, coded, and analyzed. Finally, implications are addressed for how toxic leaders use conflict framing and public image restoration strategies to apologize, distance themselves and/or seek restoration after constructing abusive and coercive organizations.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Toxic Leadership in Abusive and Coercive Organizations**

Abusive and coercive organizations are bred by and breed toxic, abusive leadership. Often like bullies, toxic leaders manipulate followers and other leaders to receive or maintain control while leaving a wake of

harm and destruction behind that has serious consequences for the organization (Webster, Brough, & Daly, 2014). Some scholars argue these actions are unintentional and due to a lack of competence (Milosevic, Maric & Loncar, 2019; Reed, 2004). Conversely, others scholars argue that toxic leaders are intentional, calculated, in their pursuit of control in order to charm, deceive, manipulate, and leave followers worse off than when they found them (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; 2006). Webster, Brough, and Daly (2016) highlight toxic leader's "behaviors include, but are not limited to, intimidating, bullying, manipulating (Machiavellianism), micromanaging, arrogance (narcissism) and engaging in abusive or unethical behavior (p. 346). In sum, we use the following definition of toxic leaders "*individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviors and their dysfunctional personal qualities or characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on the individuals, groups, organizations, communities and even the nations that they lead*" (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, p. 2, emphasis added).

Additionally, followers of toxic leaders often experience psychological stress, emotional harm, and physical health problems (Webster et al., 2016). Yet, according to Lipman-Blumen (2006; 2011), followers are somehow entranced or allured by toxic leaders. The organization's culture through norms, rituals, and artifacts shape followers' acceptance of toxic leaders. Simply, the beast is often fed by its own sheep. The organization's own formal and informal structures construct and maintain a culture that breeds toxic leadership practices, so followers are often unaware, perceive they are incapable of overcoming, or scared that they will face discipline for attempting to overcome the taken for granted ways of abusive and coercive leading embedded in the culture of the organization. Followers, according to Lipman-Blumen, accept "control myths" and/or rationalize that toxic leaders and the accompanying abusive and coercive organizations meet the needs of followers, whether factual or perceived. Organizations are embodied institutions, made up of human actors, that enact processes that construct and maintain organizational functions and structures that meet psychological, existential, and social needs. Thus, Lipman-Blumen (2006; 2011) argues that organizational cultures, the embodiment of human actors, are pervasive enough to enable followers to be convinced by their own doing that the toxic leader is necessary.

Organizational communication scholars provide insight into the study of toxic cultures. Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) demonstrate that toxic behaviors like bullying are often reified by the organization. Whether by active accomplices (additional aggressors), passive accomplices (non-aggressors who either support the bully by action or inaction such as organizational administrators, HR, and the bully's peers), and the target's peers, who can enable the stronghold of the bully by dismissing the extent of the acts or call for the target to be more resilient. Furthermore, Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008), using the four flows perspective (McPhee & Zaug, 2002), found in their case study of a women's center that employees experienced abusive behavior from the director, who entered the organization after some years of success and had very little experience in administration. Following previous traditions, the director met exclusively with the board and overtime developed policies that enabled her to fire employees whenever they voiced concern. With disciplinary training and probationary periods enacted by the board, the director only grew more abusive, arguing that new hires needed to be more resilient, thick-skinned. Essentially, the training was adding to the director's arsenal of abuse. She used the knowledge against employees and board members to maintain control. The women's center case demonstrates how organizations embody human actors whose activity constitute cultures that produce and reproduce informal and formal structures through rituals and myths, among others cultural artifacts and practices, that cannot completely disentangle the complex relationship between leaders and followers. More specifically, toxic, abusive leaders are often empowered by the abusive and coercive cultures found with organizations. Even with the foundational literature on the communicative constitution of organization and complexity of toxic leaders and organizational cultures, it may be challenging to unpack how the backstage unfolding of toxicity, abuse, and coercion becomes frontstage in the devolution of interorganizational conflict and organizational dissolution. That is where conflict framing enters stage right and image restoration enters stage left.

### **Conflict Framing and Image Restoration**

As Benoit (2018) surmises, four perspectives pervade organizational communication crisis – apologia (Ware and Linkugel, 1973; Hearit, 1994; 1995), situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007),

renewal (Seeger and Ulmer, 2002), and image restoration (Benoit, 1997). Within crisis communication literatures much is still being advanced regarding each of these perspectives. This study, particularly, focuses on advancing the understanding and practice of the rhetorical approach to image restoration by demonstrating how communication in crisis events can appropriate approaches to manage conflict and manipulate. To do so, a complimentary framework of conflict framing is introduced as a means to further explore the nuances of both issues development and image restoration in crisis situations where toxic leaders have been public outed. In order to clarify the approach to this case study, both conflict framing and image restoration are disentangled within the literature review and re-entangled through the formation of research questions guiding the case study analysis.

### **Conflict Framing**

In a general sense, framing refers to message sets embedded in a social context that provide meaning from a particular perspective (Bateson, 1972; Putnam & Holmer, 1992), and conflict framing refers to a cluster of methods used to study how message sets assert certain meanings over others in conflict interactions and in the representation of those interactions (Putnam & Holmer, 1992). We draw on the development of conflict framing in ways that complement image repair to help understand how certain meanings regarding conflict responsibility were framed in and through image restoration strategies. To do so, we further narrowed the type of conflict framing relevant to our inquiry from the three major approaches to conflict framing in organizations – cognitive schema, frame categories, and issue development.

Brummans et al. (2008) explain that different approaches to conflict framing may emphasize a stagnate set of messages (e.g. cognitive schema) or a dynamic process of meaning construction (e.g. issue development), we argue that the latter is more indicative of a communication perspective on conflict framing and consistent with studies examining how issues (de)evolve in an organizational conflict. Based in an interactive communication perspective (Putnam & Holmer, 1992), issue development considers how argumentation by the parties in a conflict transform the dispute as issues emerge and change over the social interaction (Lewicki, Saunders & Barry, 2006; Donohue & Drake, 1996). While traditionally used in the analysis of negotiations, issue development can be applied to conflicts represented in media and the texts used to enact the dispute.

The first stage of issue development is naming, in which stakeholders communicate issues under dispute. Putnam and Geist (1985) consider how communicators provide support for their claims in the negotiation process and “the way these claims cluster into issues and sub-issues that shape outcomes” (p. 226). As issues emerge, multiple stakeholders may frame them similarly or differently or possibly escalate the conflict through their language, but the second stage in issue development is when image restoration strategies become particularly germane. Secondly, named issues are blamed by attributing responsibility for the issue to an individual or organizational stakeholder in the dispute. We argue that as blame is attributed, there is a perceived threat to image, which, in turn, generates a need for an image restoration strategy. The final stage in issue development is claiming, evidenced in the emergence of blame salience. Claiming results in a conflict resolution regarding which parties are to blame for which issues. We surmise that claiming is likely to include image restoration strategies in order to affect post-conflict perceptions of stakeholders. In sum, conflicts can be analyzed from a rhetorical perspective by “examining the types of claims and reasoning processes that characterize [the] interaction on different sub-issues of a proposal” and can be analyzed over a period of time to understand the how naming, blaming and claiming affect the evolution of those issues (Putnam & Geist, 1985, p. 227).

### **Image Restoration**

“The predominant focus of the crisis communication research involves reputation management efforts” (Coombs et al., 2010, p. 338). Image restoration strategies are organizational rhetoric used in the crisis and post-crisis stages to address reputation and, more specifically, crisis-related issues, attribution of crisis responsibility, and stakeholder relationships (Spradley, 20<sup>17</sup>). Tracing the roots and development of image restoration, Coombs and colleagues (2010) identify principal works by Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1988), Hearit (1995) and Benoit (1995). For the purpose of this research, we zero in on the work by Dionisopolous

and Vibbert (1998) and Benoit (1995) that classify ways that organizations confront image threats. Dionisopolous and Vibbert (1998) explain that organizations can defend their character or reputation through denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence. Furthering these strategies for image repair, Benoit's extensive research has added to and differentiated within the strategies previously introduced by Dionisopolous and Vibbert.

Benoit's (2018) work with image restoration assumes that "communication is a goal-orientated activity" and "a fundamental goal of communication is maintaining a positive reputation" (p.13). Benoit (2000) distinguishes between the two terms image 1) restoration and 2) repair, in favor for the nuances of the latter term. Restoration connotes the ability to use communication strategies to return to a previous state; whereas, repair is viewed as a more flexible term that could imply patches to image or failure. We use both terms, but in the analysis section, we favor the term restoration given the aim of the organization and its leadership to restore their images, even if it was a failed aim. To restore or repair organizational reputation during or after a crisis, Benoit offers these strategies: 1) simple denial, 2) shift blame, 3) provocation, 4) defeasibility, 5) accident, 6) good intentions, 7) bolstering, 8) minimization, 9) differentiation, 10) transcendence, 11) attack accuser, 12) corrective action, 13) mortification. Each of these strategies is defined in Table 2: Image Restoration Strategies in the Mars Hill Leadership Crisis with the addition of humor. Over the past several decades, case study research has illustrated how organizations and their representatives engage in these image restoration strategies. Case studies range but have covered diverse crises including athlete wrongdoing (Fortunato, 2008; Meng & Pan, 2013), corporate response to customers/employees (Benoit, 2018), national reputation (Zhang & Benoit, 2004), man-made disasters (Muralidharan, Dillstone, & Shin, 2011), and more.

For clarification, a number of scholars have utilized Benoit's work with image restoration to analyze individuals' responses to reputational threats, and while these lines of inquiry may not be as applicable to organizational crisis research, we find one such line of inquiry of interest in relation to the toxic leadership on Mars Hill. Dewberry and Fox (2012) pose another strategy for image restoration – humor. In their study of US Presidential Candidate Rick Perry's apology for a mistake in the Republican primary debates, Dewberry and Fox (2012) conclude that self-deprecating humor was used in subsequent media interviews and debate to repair his image. As Lynch (2002) critiques, humor research within communication needs to be explored, and Dewberry and Fox (2012) address this gap in research with their case study of Rick Perry and their proposition that humor, specifically self-deprecation, can be used strategically in reputational management. Whether or not humor would be an effective reputational management tool in organizational crisis communication remains questionable considering the serious nature of crises (e.g. ecological fallout of a nuclear reactor meltdown, property damage after severe flooding, public safety with contaminated food). However, in the complexity of crises, especially conflicts involving a plurality of stakeholders, there may be a mix of individual and organizational messages aimed at reputational management, and not all issues emerging in the crisis may have the same perceived degree of public outrage. Remaining open-minded toward image repair messages, this study integrates humor with Benoit's strategies as seen in Table 2.

Image restoration case study research has advanced the understanding of available rhetorical strategies to organizations during and following crises, but it has not necessarily fully addressed how to determine their effectiveness. How do you know which strategies have been most influential in crisis and influencing stakeholders regarding reputations? The literature on image restoration indicates several possible ways to determine strategy effectiveness. First, opinion polling illuminates public perceptions of the organization. In the study of Saudi Arabia's image restoration campaign after 9/11, Zhang and Benoit (2004) drew on results of polls by Opinion Dynamics and the *Washington Post* to help form conclusions that Saudi Arabia's strategies were partially effective. Second, audience response and messaging can be indicative of the public's perception of the organization, how it managed the crisis, and its reputation. Muralidharan, Dillstone, and Shin (2011) conducted content analysis of social media comments regarding the British Petroleum's Gulf Coast oil rig disaster. Coding for emotion, the research concluded that a high number of negative emotions was indicative of a failed image restoration strategy of corrective action. Third, anecdotal evidence of the individual's career or organization's renewal may function as support for or against the

effectiveness of the image repair strategies (Meng & Pan, 2013). Fourth, determining effectiveness may be a non-essential issue to the central research question or research agenda. For example, Fortunato (2008) acknowledges the challenges of determining effectiveness and suggests possible indicators over time. However, effectiveness is not as prominent as Fortunato's concerns about how media gatekeepers impact the public messages related to a crisis. Despite a lack of consensus on either if or how to determine effectiveness, case study research points to long-term organizational viability and growth as well as stakeholder and public perceptions of the organization as indicators of the plausible effectiveness of reputational management strategies. Therefore, we argue that the dissolution of an organization and removal of an organizational leader is at least partial evidence of the ineffectiveness of the organization's and leader's image repair strategy.

Overall, while it may be challenging to evaluate the effectiveness of an image restoration strategy, the theory has been prolific with regard to analyzing crises and prescribing crisis rhetoric. As we approached the case of toxic leadership on Mars Hill, image restoration strategies became a prominent line of inquiry to determine how stakeholders publicly engaged in reputational rhetoric. However, we also gravitated toward a line of inquiry that would help us to unpack the complex issues involved in the organizational crisis, how organizational rhetoric was used to name and assert responsibility for those issues, and how stakeholders used reputational messages to frame the conflict. Therefore, this case study poses the following research questions to be addressed by the layered perspectives of issue development (Putnam and Holmer, 1992) and image restoration (Benoit, 1997) to study a toxic leader of a toxic organizational culture:

**RQ 1:** *What issues are named, blamed, and claimed by different stakeholders in the Mars Hill crisis?*

**RQ 2:** *How do the leaders use image restoration strategies to respond to naming, blaming, and claiming?*

**RQ 3:** *What does the use of conflict framing and image restoration say about abusive and coercive organizations?*

**RQ 4:** *How does humor function in image repair and conflict framing?*

## **CRISIS CASE STUDY: TOXIC LEADERSHIP ON MARS HILL**

Before delving into the specific Mars Hill toxic leadership crisis, we deemed it helpful to build in context about the megachurch and its founding, preaching pastor. Founded by Mark Driscoll in his living room in 1996, Mars Hill Church was a 15 location multi-site megachurch, and Pastor Driscoll's weekly sermons were downloaded by millions across the globe (Welch, 2014). At its helm, Pastor Driscoll, his wife Grace, and their 5 kids, often referenced in sermons, appeared with him increasingly toward the end of his tenure with Mars Hill in the promotion of the co-written book, *Real Marriage*. Driscoll preached weekly in casual clothing – jeans, hoodies, and Chuck Taylor converse – and was active in evangelical organizations co-founding the Acts 29 Church Planting Network (A29) (Zylstra, 2017); co-founding Churches Helping Churches to provide disaster relief; founding the Resurgence organization to equip church leaders globally (*Resurgence: A Ministry of Mars Hill Church*); and co-founding and speaking at the national conference for Together for the Gospel (Carson, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Driscoll wrote or co-wrote numerous books including titles like *Vintage Jesus*, *Vintage Church*, *Doctrine*, and *Real Marriage*. With appearances on CNN, FOX & Friends, Nightline, the View, and Love Line (Driscoll, 2018), Driscoll was a widely known figure in Christian evangelicalism and either applauded or criticized for his distinctive speaking style.

In the building controversies leading to the October 24, 2014 resignation of Driscoll, the November 21, 2013 radio interview with Janet Mefferd is a turning point. In the interview Mefferd confronts Driscoll with substantiated claims of plagiarism. After which, Driscoll's public persona is wrought with much criticism by Christian media, former and current Mars Hill employees, and organizations and their leadership affiliated with Driscoll. These public criticisms did not necessarily begin or end with claims of

plagiarism. Instead, criticisms focus on Driscoll’s leadership behaviors described as angry, coercive, abusive, and toxic. Criticisms result in both voluntary and forced removal of Driscoll with other evangelical organizations, most notably the A29 network, and an internal investigation conducted by an oversight and accountability group within the Board of Elders at Mars Hill Church (Bailey, 2014; Menzie, 2014). To develop the specific case study of the toxic leadership on Mars Hill, four primary texts emerge as central to the framing of the conflict and use of image restoration: 1) removal announcement from the A29 church planting network co-founded by Pastor Driscoll, 2) resignation request letter from a group of 9 Mars Hill pastors addressed to both Pastor Driscoll and the Mars Hill elders, 3) Pastor Driscoll’s open apology posted on the Mars Hill social network to Mars Hill Church, and 4) Pastor Driscoll’s resignation letter to Mars Hill. With a focus on the public rhetorical strategies of organizational conflict and image restoration, these four texts form the basis of the analysis. In as much as we needed additional data to fill in gaps and build context, secondary media sources were consulted including the local newspaper for Mars Hill Church the *Seattle Times* and national publications for evangelical news such as *Christianity Today*, *Relevant*, and *the Christian Post*. The four primary texts were analyzed with segment-by-segment coding 1) issue development stages – naming, blaming, and claiming – and 2) image restoration strategies. Coding was individually conducted on the four primary texts by each author. Then, we convened to discuss coding of issue development stages and image repair strategies. While some codes were adjusted based on the discussion, the analysis reflects our joint assessment. The results of which are explored in the subsequent analysis section of this paper and in Tables 1 and 2.

## ANALYSIS

To address the first three research questions and represent the coding of the data, we would like to draw attention to Table 1: Conflict Framing in the Mars Hill Leadership Crisis and Table 2: Image Restoration Strategies in the Mars Hill Leadership Crisis.

To begin, the issues named in the four primary texts are found in Table 1: Conflict Framing in the Mars Hill Leadership Crisis and categorized into the naming (identifying the issue), blaming (attribution of responsibility for the issue), and claiming (salience or acceptance of responsibility). Issues ranged from a generalized concern expressed in the A29 Removal Letter that Driscoll *dishonored* “the name of Christ” to more specific issues named in the Resignation Request from 9 Mars Hill Pastors such as *lack of transparency, culture of fear, deception, and lack of accountability*. To further understand the development of issues, the issues could be further categorized as leader-specific behaviors (e.g. speaking style and bullying) and organizational behaviors (e.g. lack of transparency and culture of fear).

**TABLE 1  
CONFLICT FRAMING IN THE MARS HILL LEADERSHIP CRISIS**

Naming of Issue	Blaming Attribution	Claiming of Responsibility
<b>A29 Removal Announcement</b>		
<b>Accused “dishonored” the name of Christ</b>	Driscoll blamed for dishonor, and Mars Hill blamed for passivity.	A29 claims that Mars Hill and its leadership should “respond in a distinctive and godly manner so that the name of Christ will not continue to be dishonored.”
<b>Resignation Request from 9 Mars Hill Pastors</b>		
<b>“Lack of transparency” and “masters of spin” regarding controversies</b>	Mars Hill Church blamed for lack of transparency regarding “controversies.”	The 9 pastors claim, “This not the fault of one person, or even a just a small group of people. We all share in

<p><b>in the media with specific controversies enumerated in lists within the letter</b></p>		<p>this responsibility...” In a list of 6 clear action steps, the pastors call for a candid account to be presented to Mars Hill.</p>
<p><b>Organizational “culture of fear” at Mars Hill Church</b></p>	<p>The 9 pastors cite external consultant Paul Tripp stating, “This is without a doubt the most abusive, coercive ministry culture I’ve ever been involved with.” The 9 pastors clarify that Paul Tripp blames Driscoll and Mars Hill leadership for the culture.</p>	<p>The 9 pastors require the “stepping down” of Driscoll and the Full Council of Elders to halt all ministries to address the culture of Mars Hill beginning with Driscoll. A recommendation to provide full salary and benefits for Driscoll is included with a provision that he cooperate.</p>
<p><b>Deception: “Misleading” organizational leadership regarding investigation into bullying</b></p>	<p>Michael Van Skaik and Board of Advisory and Accountability (BOAA) blamed for misleading Mars Hill leadership that interviews could not be conducted with the 7 witnesses to former Mars Hill elder Dave Kraft’s charges of bullying. BOAA blamed for “getting their information from the people they are supposed to be holding accountable.”</p>	<p>The 9 pastors ask Mars Hill leadership to give a candid account to the church.</p>
<p><b>Deception: “Misleading” organizational leadership and the public regarding the Acts 29 removal</b></p>	<p>Mars Hill leadership blamed for misleading claims that A29 had not contacted them regarding the removal of Driscoll from the board or Mars Hill as a network church.</p>	<p>Michael Van Skaik admitted to Mars Hill pastors that “multiple members of both boards had been in direct contact with each other, and with Mark, exhorting and rebuking him over the course of months and years...” Mars Hill is perceived as accepting responsibility for the misleading claims.</p>
<p><b>Executive Pastor Sutton “lacks emotional and spiritual maturity” to hold Driscoll accountable</b></p>	<p>The letter implies that Driscoll, Sutton, and the BOAA are to blame.</p>	<p>The 9 pastors cite Paul Tripp’s recommendation that Sutton be removed as executive pastor in favor of “a 55 year-old seasoned godly man” to hold Driscoll accountable for aggressive behavior.</p>
<p><b>Driscoll’s Apology on the Mars Hill Social Network</b></p>		
<p><b>Unhealthy church clarified as organizationally challenging</b></p>	<p>Driscoll blames his anger and shortcomings but also blames the rate of organizational growth/expansion.</p>	<p>Driscoll claims the BOAA and two executive elders have already begun to address unhealthy organizational issues.</p>
<p><b>Unhealthy leader clarified in description as “angry-young-prophet;” correlating to but not a</b></p>	<p>Driscoll blames himself, saying he “was angry in a sinful way.”</p>	<p>Driscoll assumes responsibility and claims a new identity as a “Bible-teaching, spiritual father.” Driscoll apologizes, in general, to those who</p>



<b>repetition of the “culture of fear”</b>		“saw or experienced [his] sin during this season and are hurt.” Finally, Driscoll offers a series of commitments to “reset” his life including.
<b>Unethical use of church funds for marketing scheme</b>	Driscoll blames himself saying, “I now see it as manipulating book sales reporting system...”	Driscoll assumes responsibility claiming he will not repeat the marketing scheme and will request the publisher remove #1 <i>New York Times bestseller</i> from the current and past publications.
<b>“Celebrity pastor”</b>	Driscoll implies that he is a celebrity pastor.	Driscoll assumes responsibility to give up outside “speaking and writing opportunities” to focus on the local church.
<b>Driscoll’s Resignation Letter</b>		
<b>Repetition of unhealthy leader issue but with greater specificity</b>	Driscoll blames himself for and acknowledges “past pride, anger and a domineering spirit” and a divisive “personality and leadership style.” But, he rejects claims of “criminal activity, immorality or heresy, any of which would clearly be grounds for disqualification from pastoral ministry.”	Driscoll assumes responsibility by resigning and pledging support for Mars Hill and leadership.

As blaming attributions accompanied issue development, the organizational documents were replete with conflict escalation strategies that emphasized the differences between the stakeholders. Blame is attributed to Driscoll, Sutton, his executive pastor, Michael Van Skaik, and the Mars Hill BOAA. Additionally, Driscoll places blame on his anger, his shortcomings, his domineering spirit, his pride, his divisive personality, his leadership style, the rate of organizational growth and expansion (creation of other organizations), the desire for success as an author, and his celebrity status. On the part of other leaders and the Mars Hill BOAA, they are attributed blame for being passive in their willingness to temper and respond to Driscoll’s toxic leadership, for lacking transparency when controversies arose, for constructing an abusive and coercive culture, for neglecting to investigate claims of toxic leadership and unethical behavior against Driscoll and leaders by not questioning actual victims, for misleading claims that denied A29 had contacted them about removing Driscoll, and for aggressive behavior.

As seen in the framing of blame, Driscoll did not act alone. Toxic leadership was escalated by a culture, as represented by what Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) call passive and active accomplices. When the abuse and coercion needed to be halted, it was not dealt with “in a distinctive and godly manner.” Yet, clear in naming and blaming of the abusive and coercive issues lies a differentiation of predominantly active abuse and coercion on the part of Driscoll and, most often, passive abuse and coercion on the part of other Mars Hill leaders. In sum, while Driscoll is the figurehead in this case, the other leaders are equally complicit for sitting by or enacting aggression. Claims of responsibility, whether by others or Driscoll himself, only solidify the abusive and coercive practices present at Mars Hill. Both Driscoll and other leaders, identify ways restoration or change is happening to address the toxic leadership throughout their claims of responsibility. The presence of these claims and mortification strategies directed us to further examine how the actors use image restoration strategies in the course of the issues development.

In Table 2, we have bracketed the image restoration strategy used by Mars Hill leadership and provided definitions and examples of each strategy found in the data. First, Table 2 demonstrates the complexity of the crisis by the examples of image restoration strategies present as the conflict devolves and the organization dissolves. In the findings, Driscoll constructs a contradictory image of mortification and corrective action to one of simple denial, shifting blame, claiming incompetence or ignorance, minimization, and self-deprecating humor. In correlation with the definition of toxic leadership provided earlier by Lipman-Blumen (2005), toxic leaders impugn their own reputation and organizations by the onslaught of their abusive and coercive behaviors. The vacillation from expressing guilt to expressing anger at the investigation demonstrate toxic leaders have a consistent desire to ramp up their own reputations. By mapping the use of image restoration strategies with issues development, we can recognize the patterns of how conflicts are being named, blamed, and claimed responsibility for, and we, also, recognize how leaders use rhetorical strategies, both ethical and unethical, both intentionally and unintentionally, and for self-protectionism and selfish gain.

**TABLE 2**  
**IMAGE RESTORATION STRATEGIES IN THE MARS HILL LEADERSHIP CRISIS**

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example(s) from Case</i>
<i>Simple Denial</i>	Express innocence or diffuse harmfulness of act	In resigning, Driscoll mixes a simple denial with minimization: “Last week our Board of Overseers met for an extended period of time with Grace and me, thereby concluding the review of formal charges against me. I want to thank you for assuring Grace and me last Saturday that I had not disqualified myself from ministry.”
<i>Shift Blame</i>	Attribute blame to someone/something else	Rather than stepping down for an agreed upon period of time, Driscoll resigns on October 14, 2014 shifting blame to the review process. “Consequently, those conducting the review of charges against me began to interview people who had not even been a party to the charges.”
<i>Provocation</i>	Responding	The 9 pastors specify the offensive issues that provoked their transition from privately and individually processing conflict to publicly and collectively addressing BOAA and Driscoll offenses.
<i>Defeasibility</i>	Ignorance or incompetence	Driscoll’s open apology explains that he “felt the crushing weight of responsibility but did not know what to do” and that he “lacked the abilities to figure it out.” He describes himself as “overwhelmed” and having “shortcomings” to cope with the organizational growth of Mars Hill.
<i>Accident</i>	Inadvertent	Not explicit in the reviewed texts.
<i>Good Intentions</i>	Well-meaning	Driscoll underscores his open apology and resignation with his prayers and intentions for Mars Hill claiming to “love” and “genuinely appreciate” those praying for him and encouraging him.
<i>Bolstering</i>	Mount a defense of oneself	Both the A29 board and the 9 Mars Hill pastors defended their collective actions that publicly attributed blame for a “culture of fear” and dishonoring behaviors to the Mars Hill leadership and Driscoll, specifically.

<i>Minimization</i>	Re-frame offense as less serious	In the resignation letter, Driscoll writes, “Prior to and during this process there have been no charges of criminal activity, immorality or heresy, any of which could clearly be grounds for disqualification from pastoral ministry.”
<i>Differentiation</i>	Act less offensive than others	Not explicit in the reviewed texts. Although secondary texts demonstrated this strategy early on in the crisis in an interview with Driscoll and radio host Mefferd.
<i>Transcendence</i>	Justify with competing values	While not explicit in the reviewed texts, A29, the 9 Mars Hill pastors, and Driscoll reference overriding concerns for Mars Hill, well-being of Driscoll, and the name/reign of Jesus.
<i>Attack Accuser</i>	Levely claims against accuser to discredit; shifts attention to the accuser	Not explicit in the reviewed primary texts. Although secondary texts demonstrated this strategy early on in the crisis in an interview with Driscoll and radio host Mefferd.
<i>Corrective Action</i>	Describe how to correct the offence, follow through with the correction; take preventative actions	The open apology to Mars Hill focuses on how Driscoll will shift from being an “angry-young-prophet” to a “helpful, Bible-teaching spiritual father.”
<i>Mortification</i>	Apologize	The open apology was a means of expressing remorse, with Driscoll claiming to be “deeply grieved and even depressed by the pain” caused by himself and the Mars Hill leadership. The open apology specifies offenses that he apologizes for including his leadership style, culture of fear, misuse of funds, and celebrity pastor status. “Specifically, I have confessed to past pride, anger and a domineering spirit.”
<i>Humor</i>	Self-deprecation to humanize oneself or other forms of humor to deflect or minimize	In his public apology on the Mars Hill social media site, Driscoll uses several plays on words including references to himself as an “angry prophet” likely to be humorous to sympathizers familiar with his preaching style.

*Note.* Table 2 adapted and modeled after Benoit 1997, 2015, 2018 with the addition of humor from Dewberry and Fox (2012).

## CONCLUSIONS

In summation, we draw attention to several implications of this research for the study of crisis communication, the understanding and practice of image restoration in corporate rhetoric, and the practice of crisis planning and response in faith-based organizations. First, this study underscores the value of multiple and complimentary frameworks in crisis communication research. Crises are complex implicating a wide range of stakeholders, organizational conflict being no exception. Layering multiple frameworks enables simultaneous inquiry that can be put in conversation with one another.

Second, the understanding and practice of image restoration is advanced through a secondary layer of conflict framing. Addressing RQ3, conclusions suggest that conflict framing and the salience of claimed responsibility may impact the legitimate image restoration strategies available to stakeholders discredited by the conflict because of the nature of claimed conflict (e.g. culture of fear, abusive, etc...). Furthermore, given the intra-organizational (A29 board and other evangelical organizations and Paul Tripp, the consultant) salience attributing blame onto Driscoll, Driscoll’s range of legitimate image restoration

strategies to address his responsibility for such consequential issues were plausibly limited. This conclusion was reached based on several rhetorical moves in the primary texts. Driscoll's public statements must demonstrate that he is still *qualified* for ministry if he is to experience *personal renewal* following the organizational crisis yet still acknowledge substantiated issues for which he was attributed responsibility. In his public apology and resignation letters, Driscoll uses simple denial and minimization to emphasize that the Board of Overseers did *not disqualify* him for ministry. Also, when using mortification, Driscoll is careful as to what he apologizes for, thus, ensuring that he does not admit to and apologize for *disqualifying* offenses.

Then, addressing RQ 4, humor functions on the periphery as an extension and reconstitution of the image Driscoll embodied in his preaching. Drawing on self-deprecating humor, Driscoll humanized himself and re-identified with stakeholders supportive of his leadership (whether aware or unaware of his abusive, toxic leadership), which positioned him for *personal renewal* following the crisis. Simultaneously, his self-deprecating humor trivialized the severity of the toxicity named, blamed, and claimed in the conflict. Taking responsibility yet using humor, Driscoll reframed the conflict as less severe or consequential. By using these image restoration strategies, Driscoll does not contest the salience of blame but remains silent on particular issues (e.g. culture of fear and withholding information, organizational financial misconduct related to book promotion), and by doing so, Driscoll demonstrates how image repair is contextualized and restrained by the conflict framing leading up to the resignation and is influenced by the personal and organizational plans for *renewal*. By layering conflict framing and image restoration as analytic lenses, we were able to better understand how and why certain image restoration strategies were invoked and the relationship to organizational action.

Third, compassionate organizations such as faith-based organizations may experience conflict framing and ethics failures differently, and, subsequently, necessitate different types of issues management and crisis response planning and strategies, especially when the conflict centers on a toxic culture undermining its compassionate purposes. Liu (2010) raises a particularly relevant concern apropos for this research, what mistakes and failures can a leader make and recover from using image restoration strategies? Lui (2010) points out that for-profit organizational leaders face increased media scrutiny for born, inherited, and adopted failures whether realized or potential, and as such, they use framing to shape public perceptions, which is not unlike Driscoll, who was faced with framing choices regarding the issues named in his publicized leadership conflict. However, for faith-based organizations, leaders' organizational productivity and growth outcomes may not outweigh moral or relational failures in the same way as a for-profit or non-faith-based organizational leader, as in the case of Driscoll's and Mars Hill's book scheme and *member abusive* relationships. Literature on leader failure, framing, conflict, and image restoration should take into account the organizational type and the unique set of stakeholder expectations associated with it. As in the case of Driscoll, Christian ethics and doctrines from the Bible dictating relational behaviors were used in the naming of issues by stakeholders and, subsequently, influential in the claiming of responsibility. Additionally, faith-based organizational stakeholders may expect nuanced image restoration strategies that reconstitute their faith communities. For example, how would differentiation or attacking the accuser be perceived in the faith community? Differentiation requires that the offender engage in a moral comparison, and attacking the accuser requires, at the least, assertiveness, and at the most, aggression. In both cases, those image restoration strategies may be perceived as inconsistent with the faith espoused by the offender, and therefore, incur greater image threats rather than repair. This case illustrates that the range of legitimate image repair strategy is not only limited by the nature of the offense, public outrage, or even the conflict framing but also by the organizational type.

The focus of the Mars Hill Leadership Crisis case study sedimented in the corporate rhetorical strategies adopted by stakeholders in the crisis through official letters made public in media. As scholars, our research decisions impact the process and outcomes; therefore, we would like to point out alternative avenues that may be explored to further this case study and its contributions to crisis communication and leadership. By foregrounding the public rhetorical strategies of certain stakeholders, other messages and stakeholders in the case were backgrounded. However, it should be noted that scholars Garner and Peterson's (2018) work with this case study has already addressed the case from a qualitative approach foregrounding a different

stakeholder – the Mars Hill members. Different stakeholders not part of the national, public crisis may have different issues salient to them and be exposed to different types of rhetorical strategies. Additionally, since the resignation of Pastor Driscoll from Mars Hill, the church dissolved, but numerous church campuses part of the multi-site network remained churches, emerging with new organizational identities. Similarly, Driscoll himself relocated to Phoenix, AZ and has established a new church. Crisis frameworks of renewal may be advanced by extending this case study with a shift in focus to post-crisis communication and intractability of conflict framing when individual renewal occurs at the expense of organizational renewal.

Overall, image restoration in crisis communication research remains a viable framework to enhance understanding and strategizing of organizational and individual response to image threats. When one image restoration strategy undermines another based on ethical or religious imperatives, religious leaders in particular, not unlike Norte Dame's presidential response evading responsibility and creating mixed messages during COVID-19 rhetoric (Spradley, 2020), demonstrate a dark side of image restoration and crisis leadership that should be explored further. The 2014 Mars Hill Leadership Crisis causes the scholarly and practitioner community to think more comprehensively about organizational type, conflict framing, and the range of legitimate image restoration strategies that organizations, leaders, and stakeholders can reasonable invoke as their crisis response as well as to better contextualize analysis like this into extant literatures that shed light on how leaders, followers, and the organizations they constitute devolve and dissolve in the wake of toxicity.

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Because the Mars Hill website did not remain active with a biographical information of its former Pastor Mark Driscoll and the two websites affiliated with Mark Driscoll's newer ministries do include a full biography, this information was pieced together from the primary and secondary texts reviewed for the case study. As such, citations are provided. Notwithstanding, we thought appropriate to note the research challenge when looking for biographical information from credible sources on an individual who resigns due ethical allegations that both the individual and organization have a vested interest in removing from their content. When working with electronic texts, we would encourage researchers to not simply add websites to bookmarks but to create documents with the content to archive sensitive content that may be removed during or following a crisis. While web-based archival data can be retrieved later, it would behoove research efficiency to create a personal archive of the data.

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