

Neighborhood megachurch: Shepherd of the Hills in Southern California

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

After reading the research on booming Protestant megachurches and their senior pastors, I couldn't help noting how my neighborhood megachurch and its lead pastor (an acquaintance for more than a dozen years) fit the trends.

Dudley Rutherford, senior pastor of the fast-growing, still-building Shepherd of the Hills Church in Porter Ranch, California, recently turned 52—the average age of a megachurch pastor, according to recent studies. He was not the church's founding pastor. He took over the pulpit after a church merger some 15 years ago, when he was one of three staff members. The congregation now has 136 paid staff and a \$10 million annual budget.

According to surveys, half of the nearly all-male corps of superchurch senior pastors cite sports as their favorite activity for relieving job-related stress. Rutherford, once an avid golfer, says the church's basketball league is his sports outlet. "I played last night, but not very well, I might add."

When I cited research that emphasizes how megachurches are consumer friendly and media savvy and offer churchgoers multiple options in ministry, he did not frown or roll his eyes. Rather, he was eager to explain why these characteristics emerge. Congregations today compete with high-tech entertainment and a raft of other activities, he said. "Everyone is busy, and if you have a church service that bores people to death, they are not going to come back."

"I learned something a long time ago about the worship service," he added. "If you waste one minute of time, it's not just one minute—it's one minute times the number of people sitting out there."

At the start of this year, an average of 9,000 people were attending the weekend services at Shepherd of the Hills and the Sunday services at five satellite congregations, which watch a video of Rutherford's sermon but otherwise conduct their own worship and ministries.

"You have to guard against doing things for a show or to entertain," he said. "We really want to make a difference in people's lives. And at the core is teaching in a clear, applicable manner what God has to say in the Bible." His biggest fears, he said, are that people might treat him like a celebrity and that he might deceive himself into thinking that large numbers equate success.

It's common in Los Angeles's northwest San Fernando Valley, where Porter Ranch is located, to see cars with license-plate holders that read: "Fall in Love at Shepherd of the Hills." Approaching the church complex, a different slogan appears under the church name: "It's all about Jesus." Rutherford said he never dives into politics but "will talk boldly about pro-life issues, that abortion is wrong, and that marriage is a union between a man and a woman."

With nearly 100 special ministries or groups to choose from at Shepherd of the Hills, the church is "like a mall," Rutherford said. "We need the small churches—not everyone is comfortable attending a large church," he said. In the long run, however, "the smaller churches are in danger" when it comes to salaries, upkeep of facilities and other expenses.

A preacher's kid, Rutherford was in his twenties and the pastor of a 100-member church in Des Moines, Iowa, when a large-church pastor, Tom Allen, "took me under his wing," prayed with him and gave valuable encouragement. Rutherford rarely attends pastor conferences at other megachurches such as Willow Creek, Saddleback or North Point in Atlanta, but he said most of his staff does.

Rutherford is not without church and mission connections. He is president-designate in 2011 for the North American Christian Convention, a fellowship of independent "Christian churches and churches of Christ." The NACC derives from the so-called restoration movement of the 19th century that wanted to emulate the "New Testament church." The movement spawned not only the NACC but the mainline Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ, which usually forbid instrumental music in worship.

The NACC, with an office in Cincinnati, puts its greatest effort into an annual four-day summer convention of preaching, worship, teaching, fellowship and networking (www.gotonacc.org). The NACC has no legislative authority over affiliated churches. Some colleges have ties to the NACC, such as Milligan College in Tennessee and Hope International University in California, where Rutherford earned his master's degree.

NACC's best-known congregation may be Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, one of two churches that contributed at least \$30,000 to NACC in the last fiscal year. Shepherd of the Hills is among five congregations in the second tier (giving between \$8,000 and \$12,000).

Despite that level of giving, neither the Shepherd of the Hills Web site nor its brochures mention the NACC nor the fact that Rutherford will soon become its president.

"I'll announce it to the church in January," Rutherford said. Indeed, that is when (if not earlier) the president for 2011 will be expected to go on the road to promote the June 2011 convention in Cincinnati, according to NACC managing director Larry Collins.

In keeping with its roots, Shepherd of the Hills also contributes to missionaries through the California Southern Baptist Convention, in addition to supporting independent missions and charities.

Shepherd of the Hills was the vision of Jess Moody, a Southern Baptist pastor well known in Texas and Florida before moving to California. Knowing that a large town center was planned on vacant land in Porter Ranch, Moody built a large multipurpose building on extensive acreage between the future commercial area and a busy freeway.

When delays arose in the building of the homes and the shopping center, the church incurred a debt. Moody sought to merge his congregation with another and retire from the ministry, and in the mid-1990s Rutherford added his 1,000 church members to the 600 at Shepherd of the Hills. The congregation grew as the outdoor mall and more homes were built.

Construction will start this summer on a double-decker parking structure at the church. Later, a new auditorium will be built to seat 3,500 people, replacing a

worship hall that seats 1,400. A planned access may reduce the traffic jams near the megachurch complex, which will be greatly welcomed by neighbors, including this one.

Read the main article, "[Going mega](#)."