

More people, looser ties: Social life in the megachurch

by [David Eagle](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue



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The size of the church attended by a typical Protestant in America has increased over the past few decades. According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, the number of megachurches (churches with more than 2,000 people in attendance at weekly worship) increased from fewer than 100 in 1970 to nearly 1,800 today. And according to the National Congregations Study, about 15 percent of Protestants in this country attend a megachurch—twice as many as did in 1998.

Megachurches are hardly a new phenomenon. The landscape of Protestantism has been dotted since the mid-19th century with very large churches—like Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, Temple Baptist in Philadelphia, Moody Church in Chicago, Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, and Second Baptist in Houston. All of these large congregations rose to prominence before 1930. The increase in popularity and prominence of megachurches is new, however. The reasons for the rise remain murky, but some guesses can be made.

One guess concerns one of the most important social trends of post-World War II America: the increased participation of women in the paid workforce. According to the Census Bureau, 57 percent of working-aged women participated in some form of paid work in 2013—up from about 35 percent in 1950. Among women who work, far more work full time than in the past. Meanwhile, most men are employed, and if employed they usually work full time. This means that in more and more marriages, both partners are spending more time at work than they did in previous decades.

What does this have to do with churches? A good deal. Churches are volunteer-driven organizations and need a plentiful supply of volunteer labor to function. The bulk of church volunteers come from the ranks of the married. If married people have less discretionary time at their disposal, then churches will feel a corresponding time crunch with volunteers. Think of it this way: a congregation with 100 married couples today has 1,000 hours fewer hours of potential volunteer labor to tap than it did in 1970.

Imagine that you are part of a busy couple, both working as accountants, and you are looking for a church to attend. If you enter a church of a hundred people, it is likely that in a short time you will be asked to put your professional skills to work for the church. But if you were to walk into a church of 2,000, it is likely that the church already pays a bookkeeper to manage its finances, and you would face a lot less pressure to get involved. At the very least, you could more easily pick and choose your level of involvement.

Churches that survive and thrive in today's environment allow for the flexible participation of volunteers. The advantage of size lies in the ability to pay staff to do the things that require sustained commitment—things like bookkeeping, coordinating programs for children and youth, and planning and organizing services. Megachurches create a more hospitable environment for time-stressed people.

Some additional evidence suggests that the success of megachurches has to do with their ability to attract dual-earner couples. It should come as no surprise that dual-income households outearn their single-earner counterparts. If you double the number of hours available for paid employment, on average, household income will rise. Researchers with the National Congregations Study asked a representative sample of pastors to estimate the proportion of their congregation that earns more than \$100,000 per year (pastors tend to be very accurate in making such estimates). In congregations with 100 attenders, about 5 percent of the congregation fits in this category; in congregations with more than 3,000 attenders, 30 percent have high incomes.

One might object that this relationship derives merely from the fact that megachurches disproportionately exist in suburbs dominated by high-income families. But when comparisons are made between congregations across urban and suburban areas, this relationship continues to hold.

Another factor may be that families today have fewer children, which means it takes a larger church to form a critical mass of kids for youth groups and Sunday schools. Larger churches, because they have access to more resources than small churches, can also produce much more polished and professional programs. And success breeds success. As megachurches become more popular, they come to define what success looks like, which leads in turn to more people copying their model.

Some observers have thought that megachurches, given their capacity to create extensive programs, have an unusual power to shape people's beliefs. In 1990, a writer in the *San Antonio News Express* argued that the megachurch "provides a total environment under a single sacred canopy" and worried that congregations of this size would become a "sealed bubble."

But the evidence above suggests that the popularity of megachurches is more likely related to their *inability* to provide a "total environment." Families are pulled in multiple directions by the demands of work, childcare, housework, and leisure, and they want a place that won't make too many more demands. If anything, megachurches represent the loosening of religious bonds.

Nearly 120 years ago, the German sociologist Georg Simmel argued that organizations that exercise total control over individuals are necessarily small in size. Only in organizations in which everybody has direct contact with everyone else can behavior and belief be restricted. Small, tight-knit organizations have many tools to enforce commitment. As organizations get larger and the internal networks of relationships become more diffuse, it gets harder and harder to demand conformity. In large organizations, people with minority opinions are likely to find sympathizers, whereas in small organizations, dissenters often fail to reach a critical mass.

If Simmel is right that large organizations have a harder time exercising control over individuals, then it makes sense that members of small churches attend church more frequently than members of megachurches. Large churches are more anonymous places—your comings and goings aren't noticed from week to week, and you may not face the same encouragement (or pressure) to attend.

It's probably equally true that if you are the sort of person who doesn't have the time or the interest to attend church every week, you might gravitate to a larger church. My research has found exactly this dynamic. Large-church attenders are

significantly less likely to attend weekly than are their small-church counterparts. This pattern holds across denominations, which gives credence to the argument that size, independent of other factors, promotes lower levels of involvement. The fact that a larger share of Protestants attends big churches may say something about the loosening bonds of religion.

Ironically, while the rise of megachurches may signal the loosening hold of organized religion, it may create a larger role for some churches in public life. Consider that in 2008, Saddleback Church in Southern California hosted a presidential forum between candidates Barack Obama and John McCain. Because of its size, a 20,000-member church like Saddleback can host a presidential debate; it carries a lot more cultural influence than, say, a coalition of 100 congregations of 200 members each.

And since, as pointed out earlier, larger churches contain a higher proportion of people with high incomes, they are even more likely to attract the attention of politicians. In this fashion, megachurches can both reflect the loosening of religious ties and prompt the rise of some churches' social and political influence.