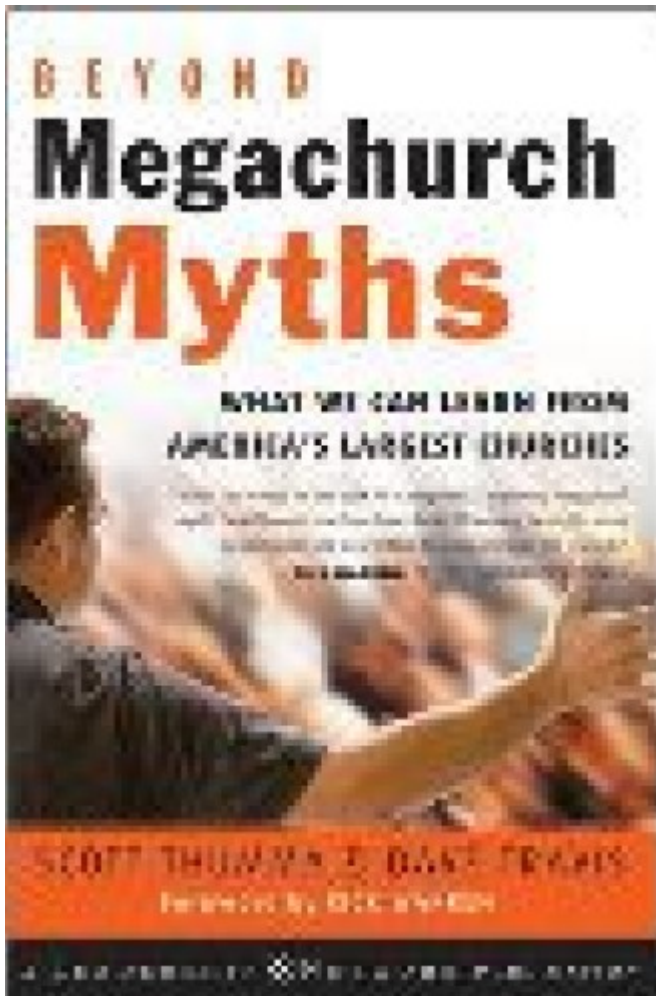


# Megalessons

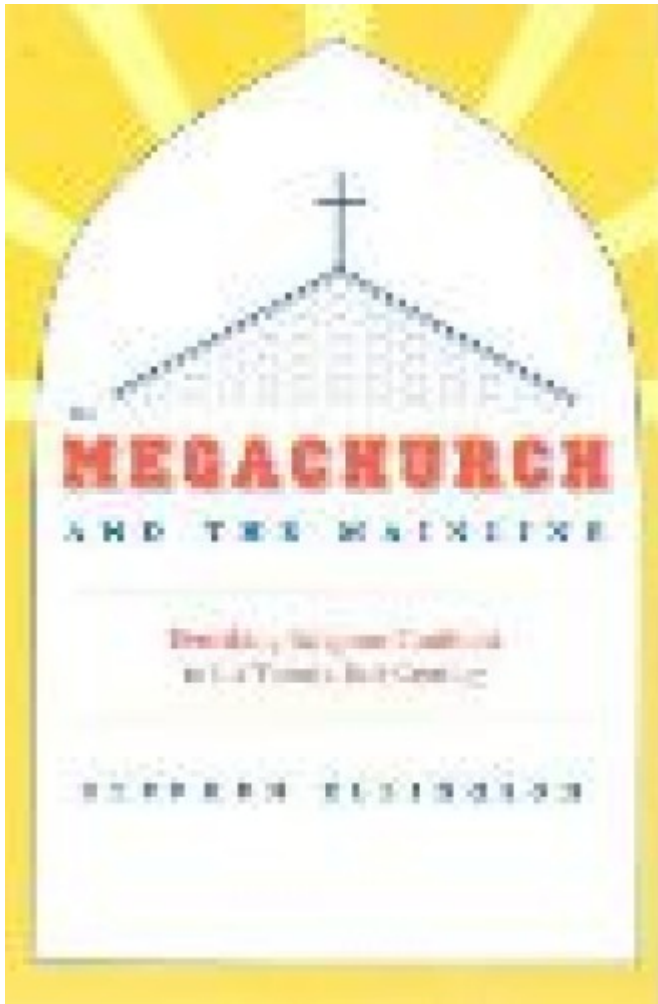
By [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches

Scott Thumma and Dave Travis  
Jossey-Bass



## **The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century**

Stephen Ellingson

University of Chicago Press

When I speak to mainline Protestants about church life, I usually get questions, often only half-formulated, about megachurches. “What about those, what do you call them, megachurches?” “Isn’t that the problem with those megachurches?” “Isn’t that what megachurches do?”

Often the question reflects what Scott Thumma and Dave Travis call the myths about megachurches: that they are too big, that what they offer is really only entertainment, or that they tell people what to think. Often one can detect in the question an attitude of sour grapes.

The megachurch phenomenon is, perhaps belatedly, on the minds of churchgoers and average Americans. I say “perhaps belatedly” because the megachurch phenomenon in its current expression is at least 30 years old. Moreover, some observers argue that the lifecycle of megachurches is nearing its end. The books under consideration don’t concur with that view. Rather, the authors of these two quite different studies believe that the megachurch is changing the shape of religion, for better or worse. Their opinion was shared by the recently deceased management guru Peter Drucker, who once said that megachurches “are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years.”

As scholars should, the authors challenge some stereotypes and conventional wisdom associated with megachurches. Both studies are also concerned with the bottom-line questions: Are megachurches good for Christianity? Are they good for American society?

Thumma and Travis's book is the product of the 2005 Megachurches Today study conducted jointly by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary and the Dallas-based Leadership Network. A data-laden chapter opens the book, and one that extrapolates trends into the futures closes it. In between, nine myths about megachurches are considered in light of the Megachurches Today study and a wider congregational study done the same year, the National Congregations Study. The latter provides a basis for locating megachurches in a wider context. The myths are framed by quotations from various critics of megachurches.

What is a megachurch? According to Thumma and Travis, it is any Protestant congregation that averages 2,000 or more in worship attendance at its weekly services. In one way, that definition is too limiting, because it excludes Roman Catholic parishes that fit the numerical criterion. It is too wide in another respect, for it would include congregations of that size in the early 20th century, well before the term *megachurch* was coined.

Thumma and Travis break down megachurches into four types: the “old-line, program-based” church; the “seeker” church; the “charismatic pastor-focused” church; and the “new wave/reenvisioned” church. This elaboration helpfully complexifies the topic and provides a ready response to Myth Number One, “All megachurches are alike.” (It is interesting to learn that 60 percent of all megachurches are in the Far West or South, and that most of them are in just three states, California, Texas and Florida.)

Sometimes the myths do not lend themselves to being proven or disproven. For example, the chapter “That Church Is Just Too Big” concludes that the people who like and attend megachurches don’t find them to be too big. Does that mean they really aren’t too big? The authors also suggest that bigness is what Americans are used to and that it’s small churches that are the anomaly.

Other myths can be challenged by the data—such as the myth that the membership of megachurches is homogeneous, whether by race, class or politics. Perhaps the most important chapters are those that respond to the charges that “megachurches water down the faith” and that “megachurches grow because of the show.”

While providing interesting information, Thumma and Travis tend to offer a defense of the megachurch against what often appear to be the sour-grapes attitudes and stereotyped views of its detractors. “There are clear reasons that these large churches are so appealing,” the authors conclude. “They offer a form of organized religious life that responds to the needs of modern Americans. There is considerable resonance between what ordinary people in society value and what the megachurches have to offer.”

To put it another way, megachurches are in touch with the market. Is this an achievement or a problem? Thumma and Travis see it as a plus. Megachurches, they argue, have much to teach other churches in North America about “doing ministry with intentionality; . . . organizing member interactions; having a clear niche identity; creating professional-quality, contemporary, and entertaining worship; and addressing modern individuals in a way that allows them choice and yet asks them to become serious in their commitments.”

Rather than looking at megachurches themselves, Stephen Ellingson, a sociologist of religion, looks at mainline churches to see what effect the megachurch is having on them. His broader interest is in how congregations change, how tradition is handled and reinterpreted, and what is gained and what is lost in the process. He challenges the notion that mainline Protestant churches and evangelical megachurches inhabit two different worlds that seldom meet or interact. In fact, among Ellingson’s most important conclusions is that the evangelical megachurch style and theology are “colonizing” mainline congregations.

For several years Ellingson closely studied nine Lutheran congregations in the San Francisco Bay area. Lutheran congregations provide a good Petri dish for studying

the megachurch impact, because Lutherans have a distinct theological tradition which they express in a particular liturgical style of worship. While the colonization of Lutheran congregations by the megachurches varies a great deal in the nine congregations, they all feel strong pressure to adapt.

The churches' situation is a bit like the problem that downtown retailers face when Wal-Mart and Costco come to town. Can such stores keep alive their local identity? Can they keep their customers?

The result of the colonization may be not so much that smaller businesses (or in this case, traditional Lutheran churches) go out of business. Rather, the long-term effect on religion may be similar to the way that every shopping area in America now offers the same string of stores: Gap, Bed Bath & Beyond, Barnes and Noble or Borders, and Old Navy. Not everything becomes Wal-Mart or Costco, but local variation and history tend to be swept away in the effort to adapt to the market.

Ellingson is troubled by the loss of what he calls "communities of memory." Communities of memory are increasingly being replaced, he says, by "communities of interest." A traditional congregation is a community of memory because it not only maintains its own congregational story but is part of a larger moral tradition that extends back through time. Communities of interest, on the other hand, are the kind suggested by terms like "the intelligence community" or "the social-service community." These communities tend to form around limited interests, often self-interests. Ellingson's implication is that megachurches, which lack enduring bonds, look more like communities of interest.

Ellingson reaches back into American history to find the antecedents of megachurches in the frontier revivalist tradition. He reminds us that as innovative as megachurches may seem, their ministries, including their patterns of worship, are those pretty much in line with that of camp meetings and revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries. Moreover, the tension between revivalistic and more established forms of Christianity is nothing new, even if megachurches have given it a new face and form.

Ellingson terms this revivalistic tradition "pietism" and "evangelicalism." He contrasts it with the "confessional" orientation embodied by the Lutheran tradition. While the latter understands becoming a Christian mainly as "learning to worship as a Christian" and being part of a congregation, the pietistic or evangelical tradition

“recasts Christianity into individual and therapeutic terms, reducing the faith to a set of principles that will make the individual happy or fulfilled.” This is “a theology in which the individual replaces God and church as the primary religious actor and in which growth is elevated to the highest organizational and religious value.”

Moreover, in the pietist-evangelical expression, the church is viewed “instrumentally”; the church is “a context that may facilitate conversion and personal faith but is ultimately not necessary.” In contrast, the confessional Lutheran tradition “emphasizes, not a momentary decision to convert, but instead the process of becoming a Christian and thus the ongoing life of faith. The tradition, especially the rituals of worship, serves as the vehicle through which individuals are introduced to and sustained in a corporate life of Christian faith.”

All three authors seem to agree that the focus on the individual in the more pietistic tradition works better in contemporary America. Where they differ is that Thumma and Travis by and large approve of this approach, while Ellingson by and large does not. Thumma and Travis see megachurches and evangelicalism reaching people with the gospel, while Ellingson sees the same success working to erode communities of memory.

The contrast between the two books fairly well identifies the heart of the megachurch contribution and challenge. People are being reached, often in large numbers. But are communities being created, or even imagined, that are more than the sum of their individual parts? Does the megachurch movement and its colonization of mainline congregations constitute gain or loss?

Of course, these questions cannot be separated from the larger social context, one that tends to prize individual fulfillment or customer satisfaction over institutional life and its continuities. Shall the church adapt to such an ethos or resist it? Or is it possible to do both—adapting at some points while resisting at others? Can congregations exhibit greater intentionality and focus on personal spiritual growth, and yet call and invite people into communities of memory and hope that have deep theological significance? Can such a church survive or thrive in a market-driven society?

Helping such churches thrive in a market-driven society is the project being undertaken by postliberal mainliners (as described by Diana Butler Bass in her recent study of vital mainline congregations, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*) as well

as by postevangelical congregations, sometimes dubbed “emerging” churches, that are associated with the work of Brian McLaren and others. In other words, there may be a third way, one that is neither rigidly traditional for tradition’s sake nor vacuously market-driven for growth’s sake.

Testimony about the need for a third way comes from the megachurch world itself. A recent self-study done by a Willow Creek Community Church, *Reveal: Where Are You ?* indicated that simply creating programs to meet perceived needs—the church’s longtime strategy—had not led to the formation of mature Christians. According to Willow Creek founder and pastor Bill Hybels, more emphasis needs to be placed on equipping people to further their own faith growth through spiritual practices. Instead of providing the program of the week or year, the church needs to develop practices of faith for a lifetime.

To be sure, such a third way is not the easy path. It may, for the time being, be the road less taken, but it also appears in many ways the road more promising. Too many congregations seem to perceive their only options to be either doing church way it was done in the 1950s or throwing all that out and bringing in praise bands and big screens and proclaiming that “contemporary worship” has arrived.

My own sense is that the true vitality lies with congregations that are able to take the contemporary interest in spiritual life and growth seriously and yet are able to draw on the riches of Christian tradition and history to do so. To return to the store analogy, a third way lies beyond the run-down mom-and-pop grocery and Wal-Mart. Maybe it is like the organic food co-op in my neighborhood: It is local and it is hip. It is neither large nor small. It offers products that are good for you, but in a setting and in a style that are inviting and interesting. And many people are called to participate in the ongoing life and operation of the co-op.

Congregations that should be communities of memory are too often, Ellingson admits, congregations that have little understanding of their own theological tradition. If they find themselves colonized by pastors in aloha shirts who are backed by rock bands and who take cheap shots at the Lutheran Book of Worship, it is at least in part because they have ceased to steward a compelling and living tradition with the power to change lives.

The good news, or so it seems to me, is that there are congregations that combine cultural engagement and adaptive capacity with a strong grasp of the historic riches of Christian faith. May their tribe increase!