

Does size matter? What counts for congregations: What counts for congregations

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What exactly is a megachurch—aside from a church with more than 2,000 weekly worshipers? Several years ago, in a book titled *Beyond Megachurch Myths*, Scott Thumma and Dave Travis noted that mega churches come in various flavors. Some are homogeneous, some are economically, ethnically and racially diverse. Some revolve around a charismatic pastor, others have team ministries. Some are oriented toward religious seekers, others are not. Some feature easy-listening rock music, with lyrics projected on large screens; some rely on traditional music. Most are theologically conservative, but some are moderate.

So in discussing megachurches it's important to determine if one is talking about sheer size or about a brand of theology, a particular focus in mission or a certain style of worship, music, architecture or leadership.

Size itself is clearly a factor of its own, of course, since a larger church means a larger staff, more programs and more specialized ministries. On this score, much of U.S. church life is shadowed by a size differential: 60 percent of all churches have 100 or fewer members, but half of all churchgoers attend the mere 10 percent of churches that have 350 or more members. Churchgoers' expectations are more and more shaped by what they've experienced in large churches—which means, for starters, that they expect an array of programs for all ages, led by skilled professionals (with child care provided).

Critics of megachurches often complain that they are consumer-oriented, market-driven institutions, overly enamored with numerical success. The critics can appeal to Jesus on this score, for Jesus seemed to get uneasy when his crowds grew, worried that people were misunderstanding his message.

To this, megachurch defenders can reply that the book of Acts offers a different emphasis: the story of how the preaching of Christ draws people of all cultures. If the early church could find ways to gain a foothold in pagan Rome, why shouldn't churches today find ways to gain a hearing in our mobile, fast-paced consumer culture?

In the end, the meaning of *church* is more important than the meaning of *mega*. Tiny or mega, a church is meant to be an *ek-klesia*, a people "called out" to be a community of practice, worship and service whose primary loyalty is to God. It is called to be a place where people not only hear about the faith but are shaped by their life together to be part of Christ's body for the sake of the world. If that is the measure, small churches may fall short as often as mega ones. Size matters far less than the content of the theology, the intentionality of the ministry and the scope of the mission.