

Going mega: The trend toward bigger churches

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

The ever-growing phenomenon of the megachurch continues to elicit study from researchers intrigued by how these huge congregational complexes—with more than 2,000 adults and children attending church on a weekend (using the usual definition)—market their religious product. These churches are typically evangelical in tone while being closely attuned to suburbanite expectations and consumer interests. Researchers also marvel at these churches' professional use of media in music, worship and sermons.

Worshippers at a megachurch may not know the people seated nearby, but they are offered a plethora of small groups, classes or ministries to join for service and spiritual growth.

A relatively recent development among megachurches is the move toward creating satellite campuses of the mother church, a move that increases the influence of the lead pastor and the core church. In 2000, 22 percent of megachurches were multisite churches, but by 2008, 37 percent had campuses in other areas and another 22 percent were considering taking that step.

The estimated 1,350 megachurches in the country amount to less than 0.5 percent of the 300,000 congregations in the United States, but they reach a wide swath of people and in some ways set the tone for much of the Protestant world. On any given weekend, 9 percent of churchgoers attend a mega church, said sociologist Warren Bird, research director for the evangelically oriented Leadership Network.

The attendance gap between megachurches and most Protestant churches is striking. The median U.S. church has 75 regular participants in worship on Sundays. Only 5 percent of the nation's churches have an average of more than 500 churchgoers on a weekend.

The rise of the megachurch “doesn’t mean that the smaller churches will disappear,” said Bird in an interview. “There are some long-established churches that have made it through incredible changes—whether it was the social revolutions of the 1960s or the economic ups and downs in this last decade—there is a durability to them.”

Yet bigness has an appeal among both evangelical and mainline churches. Bird noted the findings of fellow sociologist of religion Mark Chaves: the biggest church of every denomination is bigger now than its biggest was 10, 15 or 20 years earlier. “The clearest trend at every level is that there are more larger churches and they are continuing to grow larger,” said Bird.

Larger churches appear to weather economic downturns better. The United Methodist Church announced in March that its overall membership dropped 1.01 percent in 2008, the largest percentage of annual decline in decades. But UMC churches with 3,000 or more adherents increased their membership by 1.9 percent. By comparison, congregations with 100 or fewer members reported a 2.25 percent decline that year, according to the United Methodist News Service.

The pastor of the largest United Methodist congregation, Adam Hamilton of the Church of the Resurrection in the Kansas City area, estimated that as many as 50 UMC churches fall into the megachurch category of 2,000 adults and children at church on an average weekend.

Certain big-church/small-church disparities are described bluntly by megachurch expert Scott Thumma, who teaches at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, the site of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

“The fast-paced, big-screen and polished contemporary worship service of megachurches resonate far better with the daily lives most Americans lead than do the small-scale, slow-moving worship, complete with centuries-old hymns, organ accompaniment and archaic language that a traditional church’s service offers.”

Some traditional churches are moving in the megachurch direction—Hamilton’s Methodist church being an example: it drew 22,000 for Easter and has two satellite campuses. The question is whether the megachurches will nudge aside all but the most energetic smaller churches. Will mainline churches, strained by aging memberships and the weakening of denominational loyalty, lose out to megachurches, which measure their size by weekly attendance and not by

membership?

Some trends are evident. In the early part of the 20th century, churches with dynamic preachers built a wide following through radio. Later in the century, churches purchased television time to expand their ministry's reach. But these days, the role of radio and TV has diminished. Crystal Cathedral, founded by televangelist icon Robert Schuller in Southern California, has cut back its *Hour of Power* telecasts, suspended a holiday drama and is selling property to meet shrinking budgets.

"Many megachurches have shifted from more costly radio and TV media to Web-based media to broadcast their message globally for a fraction of the cost," noted Thumma. He suggested that low-cost Internet resources distributed by large-staff megachurches have strongly influenced the worship, music and teaching offered in the Protestant world.

Decades ago, high-profile megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago and Calvary Church near Los Angeles created nationwide quasi-denominations. Rick Warren at Saddleback Church in California has parlayed his best-selling *Purpose Driven* books into a cross-denominational, global alliance of pastors who stay in touch via the Internet.

The megachurch surge "already has completely changed the face of American congregational life," Thumma asserted in an e-mail interview. "I'm quite convinced that traditional denominations and churches won't completely disappear. But within another 50 years a lot more Protestant churches will look like megachurches and emergent/house churches."

"In some sense, megachurches are becoming de facto replacements for denominations and seminaries" by providing resources and training staff more efficiently. They are at the least providing "a thriving alternative," said Thumma.

The brand name value of *Baptist, Lutheran, Reformed* and *Methodist* in identifying a congregation, a seminary or an education program waned in the 20th century, and many congregations played down those affiliations in hopes of having a broader reach. Thumma sees this as "a rapid drift to de facto nondenominationalism."

It was somewhat surprising, then, that recent surveys found that as many as 63 percent of megachurches retain some denominational link. One example is the fast-growing Shep herd of the Hills in Porter Ranch, California, which is associated with

the North American Christian Convention, a fellowship of autonomous Christian congregations (see sidebar on p. 26). Whatever the link, most supersized churches want the freedom to customize their programs and avoid bureaucratic delays—which means that ties to the larger body can be relatively weak.

Megachurch leaders find resources for adult education, youth programs and for hiring an experienced and successful pastor “without ever needing a denomination or seminary, board of missions or other baggage of hierarchical institutional structures,” said Thumma.

A decade-old survey of senior pastors showed that the bigger the megachurch, the likelier it was that its lead pastor did not have an advanced theological degree. The survey showed that at churches averaging between 1,000 and 2,000 attendees, 84 percent of the senior pastors held a graduate degree. The percentage decreases at larger churches: at congregations averaging at least 4,000 churchgoers each weekend, only 58 percent had an advanced degree.

Thumma, who said a similar pattern appears in a follow-up study yet to be released, surmised that many megapastors have had success in other fields before becoming a pastor. He also pointed to cases like that of Joel Osteen, in which pastors inherit their fathers’ megachurches or extend a successful ministry. At megachurches, said Thumma, on-the-job training tends to be valued over seminary training.

Some important things are lost in this leadership pattern, conceded Thumma—tradition, heritage, oversight and rigorous theological and historical training—“but much is gained.” Megachurch pastors can become partners with other churches or networks for church planting, missions and other efforts “and then disconnect from that loose affiliation when they no longer have that need,” he said.

The megachurch pastor’s freedom to choose his associations has a parallel among churchgoers at these very large churches.

Attendees are usually offered a good deal of choice. They are ideally urged toward Bible study, personal piety, regular attendance and volunteer service, said Thumma, but churches are also “willing to accept that this may happen gradually as one becomes more involved in the life of the congregation.”

The flexible pace offered to churchgoers is appealing, according to a study reported last fall by sociologist Richard Flory of the University of Southern California. “The

issue of choice is really important for churchgoers,” Flory said. In his survey of megachurch attenders, he found that almost 50 percent strongly agreed that the church encourages service to others, but only 10 percent of the respondents said they were involved in community service.

In another survey, those attending megachurches appeared to be inarticulate about their beliefs and about Christianity, but they could expound on their “emotional experience” at church and on “falling in love with Jesus,” according to James Wellman of the University of Washington. “Not much talk about sin whatsoever; no talk of heaven or hell—this was about now.”

A once-popular theory was that the strongest and fastest-growing churches were those that make high demands of its members in the areas of belief, lifestyle, tithing and service. Recent trends indicate that lower birth rates, less success in winning converts and sociocultural changes are offsetting this growth, some analysts say.

A book published in April, *Thieves in the Temple*, written by journalist-minister G. Jeffrey MacDonald, finds fault with both the high-demand traditional church and the options-galore megachurch. MacDonald is unconvinced that high-demand churches “really open hearts to the ways of God,” and he sees churches offering “a comfort zone” that reinforces the conservative views of members. They are not likely to be “open to the kind of envelope-pushing spirituality that Jesus models.”

As for megachurches, “There are a number of them very orthodox in doctrine and which expect a commitment at some point,” MacDonald said in an interview. “For those who want it, it’s there. The problem I see is that when all your activity is optional and with such a wide range of affinity groups, you do not get much contact with people who are very different.”

MacDonald, a former United Church of Christ pastor, wrote: “I cherish the idea of the Church community as a distinct people, called by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus, to live counterculturally, to bear witness, to make sacrifices, and to change the world for the better as agents of God’s love.”

Thumma appreciates the patience that many megachurches show with members and potential members. “Conversion is a soft sell. . . . Salvation is seldom presented as a dramatic transformative experience, but rather is portrayed as an act of commitment followed by a gradual nurturing in the faith.

“As such, the explicit message in megachurches is that a onetime experience of conversion followed by church membership is insufficient.” Regular involvement in other church activities and outreach, plus an active role in leadership, is expected. Studies of attenders show that well over half of those in megachurches come close to achieving those goals, said Thumma.

Read the sidebar, "[Neighborhood megachurch](#)."