

Failing churches revitalized as megachurch outposts

by [Greg Garrison](#)

September 19, 2011

PELHAM, Ala. (RNS) Five years ago, Living Word Church had dwindled to 40 members, had lost its founding pastor and was unable to pack more than about 80 people into its 280-seat sanctuary and unsure of the future. Now, it's part of one of the nation's largest megachurches -- and could serve as a model for the thousands of small U.S. churches that are closed every year.

"The story's pretty amazing," said the Rev. Layne Schranz, associate pastor at Church of the Highlands, a Birmingham megachurch that attracts an average of more than 13,500 across its six campuses.

After the merger, teams from Church of the Highlands spent six weeks renovating the building, expanding parking and adding technology for its heavy emphasis on video feeds. Highlands then sent a worship team to lead weekly services at what was now the megachurch's Riverchase campus. Video feeds of Pastor Chris Hodges' sermons were beamed in from the main campus while a worship team led songs and prayers live.

"The only thing on video is the message itself," Schranz said. "The campus pastor leads prayer for the altar call. Everything is live with the exception of the message."

Attendance at the Riverchase branch now exceeds 1,300 weekly.

"Every campus has a personality," said Blake Lindsey, campus pastor at the Riverchase branch. "People find a campus that connects. We're all one big family."

Church of the Highlands has become Alabama's largest church, and was ranked the 27th largest in the country by Outreach magazine this year

and named the fastest-growing U.S. church in 2008, just seven years after its founding.

Construction is under way on a new 1,000-seat sanctuary on the Riverchase campus. The building is expected to open in December, Schranz said. A separate Hispanic congregation was also invited to join, and now draws more than 300 people each week.

"We have the same vision, the same theology," Schranz said. "We realized we could do more together."

Megachurches partnering with smaller congregations could be a significant development in revitalizing struggling churches, Schranz suggested. An older, declining church may have a campus that could be revitalized with the resources of a megachurch, he said.

"There could be a trend over the next 10 years," Schranz said. "There's a lot of great things that could take place."

About 3,500 to 4,000 U.S. churches close down each year, according to Ed Stetzer, president of Southern Baptist-affiliated LifeWay Research. But the country's 100 largest churches operate across a total of 328 sites, according to Outreach magazine's new list of largest and fastest-growing churches.

"There are empty churches all over America," Schranz said. "There are church planters looking high and low for buildings. We'd like to see a trend where a church that's struggling can get connected to a new church plant."

An established church with a little-used sanctuary could partner with a growing ministry that doesn't have a satisfactory place to meet, he said.

"There's a new mindset, a new paradigm that needs to be presented," Schranz said. "There are a lot of churches struggling financially. They've got a facility and no leadership. Some churches are growing that need new facilities."

Highlands started in February 2001 with 34 adults meeting in a home. In its first two years, the church had grown to more than 1,000 attendees in a high school auditorium. By 2007, Church of the Highlands had attendance of 5,000 a week and moved into a \$15 million main campus while sending Hodges' sermons by Internet feed to the branch campuses.

The branch campuses all have a common experience, Schranz said: "a life-giving message, a positive environment, great leadership through the worship team and ... volunteers," Schranz said. "All our campuses succeed based on those teams. You have volunteers that are taking care of babies, running the sound, ushering."

Living Word's founding pastor, the late Rev. Truett Murphy, dreamed of a growing church and talked to his wife, Susan, before his death about forming a partnership with Hodges.

"To see what happened with the church has been a fulfillment of all the prayers," said Julianne Chaney, who was on the Living Word staff with husband Vincent as worship leaders. They remain as part of the worship team. "The efforts we made in the past were not in vain."