

Wanted: Megapastors: Can successors find success?

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

With his folksy, conversational style, Pastor Frank Harrington turned Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta into a megachurch over three decades. At its peak, Peachtree had nearly 13,000 names on its rolls—six times the membership when Harrington assumed the pulpit in 1970. On the first Sunday of 1999, membership stood at 11,800, making Peachtree the largest congregation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

But Harrington fell ill the following Saturday, and died six weeks later at age 63. “No retirement or succession plan was in place,” recalls Stephen Bacon, a minister who handled administrative duties at Peachtree then and now. And no such plan had been officially talked about. After Harrington’s death, attendance dropped, giving slipped and membership dived, accounting for 10 percent of the total PCUSA membership decline reported in 2000.

To some church observers, Peachtree Presbyterian illustrated what can happen to a megachurch when its founding pastor or charismatic leader departs. The Peachtree story seemed to confirm suspicions that a megachurch depends deeply on the personality and star power of the senior pastor.

Yet it turns out that Peachtree Presbyterian didn’t fit that scenario after all. The membership drop occurred largely because the post-Harrington congregation put 2,400 members on the inactive rolls, shearing away names of people no longer showing up at church. “For all of his gifts, Harrington had a huge ego and it served his purposes to keep every member on the rolls,” said Jerry Van Marter, coordinator of the PCUSA Office of Communication. Bacon said that most members already participating in Sunday school and church activities kept coming to Peachtree.

Fifteen months after Harrington’s death, Victor Pentz from Houston was in the Peachtree pulpit and the church was humming again. Attendance is “probably around 3,000 a Sunday now and membership at about 9,500,” he said. Pentz readily

delegates duties to a ministerial staff that has remained largely unchanged from Harrington's tenure.

According to church consultant and author Lyle Schaller of Naperville, Illinois, who visited Peachtree in late 1997, Harrington had "bright young people, male and female, as top-line administrators" on the staff, and this factor "bought time for the pastor-nominating [search] committee."

Bacon conceded that if Harrington had lived many more years, "it would have been difficult" to develop a workable retirement or succession plan. "We had had some 'what if' discussions," he said, "but it was hard to differentiate then between the person and the church."

There in a nutshell (or peach pit) are some of the perils facing a large congregation when a dynamic and successful pastor steps down. With the sudden exit of a founder or wildly successful pastor whose personality was synonymous with the church, the church may be unprepared for a succession. Furthermore, the retiring pastor may not be willing to relinquish the spotlight or decision-making. The most-cited example of the latter case was that of the late W. A. Criswell, who never let go of the First Baptist Church of Dallas after he brought in Joel Gregory as his successor.

Yet megachurches usually became large and multifaceted by spreading ministries among numerous clergy, talented staff and lay leaders. For that reason, the megachurch may not be as personality-driven as it might seem from the outside.

"A lot of these megachurches, though they have a central leader, are highly decentralized," noted religion sociologist Donald Miller, who authored a study of the quasi-denominational Calvary Chapels, Vineyard Fellowships and Hope Chapels. "Many people I interviewed said that the heart and soul of these churches are the small groups and that the worship service was just the common celebration," said Miller, director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

Megachurches "are far less fragile than we would have supposed," said Scott Thumma, who did the first systematic survey last year of megachurches (defined as averaging 1,800 or more in weekly worship) for the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Half of the megachurch respondents said that their congregation felt like "a close-knit family," which was due largely "to extensive use of small-group

fellowship,” according to Thumma, a faculty associate at the institute, affiliated with Hartford Seminary.

Megachurches are less common among United Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Evangelical Lutheran or other mainline congregations, but the issues they face are similar. When a pastoral change looms, the denomination’s rules or customs may be bypassed for the sake of making the next shepherd a good fit for the megachurch, or “regional church,” as some prefer to call it.

The Episcopal bishop of Los Angeles was not too happy, for instance, when leaders of All Saints in Pasadena, with nearly 8,000 baptized members, wanted to call a successor for George Regas in the mid-1990s before that high-profile rector ended his 28-year pastorate. As in other mainline traditions, Episcopal practice favors calling an interim pastor for a one-to-two-year “grieving” period to help the congregation adjust. Regas balked at the idea. “We had too many things happening to go into neutral for very long,” said Regas.

Parish leaders worked up a profile of the kind of pastor they wanted. By early 1995, they chose Ed Bacon, dean of the Episcopal cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi, who accepted, and Regas, 65, was able to retire on schedule. By all accounts, All Saints made a smooth transition and continues to grow.

Special treatment for the megachurch is warranted, many say, because so much is at stake. Even though megachurches constitute less than 1 percent of the nation’s churches—and in that respect offer a false impression of religious life—their role is significant, said Thumma. “Whether we like it or not, very large congregations are viewed as the trend-setters of the contemporary Christian world. These success stories are read by thousands of pastors and members alike. Even if a small congregation doesn’t desire to have a 3,500-person worship service, they still look to the programmatic characteristics of the megachurch for clues about what their congregation should be doing.”

Furthermore, though megachurches may be only a tiny minority of all churches, they are home to a huge percentage of total churchgoers.

One Lutheran pastor with a large flock contends that there is a bias among pastoral leaders in most Protestant denominations against large churches and megachurches. “We don’t have seminaries that raise up or train leaders who can move into these positions,” said Mike Foss, pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran

Church in Burnsville, Minnesota. The third-largest congregation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Prince of Peace has about 9,300 members and a weekly average of nearly 5,500 worshipers. Foss said that some research points to a trend for ever-larger congregations. “In my own denomination, almost 25 percent of the members are found in 63 churches [out of 10,850 churches].”

Great numbers of people are affected when a megachurch faces a succession crisis. Civic leaders may regard the continuing success of a huge congregation as important to a city’s pride and vitality, partly because members come from a wide arc of nearby communities and the church stimulates the local economy.

A megachurch’s denominational family has vested interests in its success as well. The 12-year-old United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, is unusual among megachurches for its strong denominational ties. The church has upwards of 5,500 people at its six weekend services.

“By 2006, we will be paying \$1 million a year into the Kansas East Conference, which means that the conference becomes a shareholder in our success,” said Senior Pastor Adam Hamilton, 37, in an interview last year. “We also try to pay our benevolences [contributions to the larger church] fully by the first quarter rather than spread it through the year,” said Hamilton.

Pastoral succession looms as a large problem for any congregation led by the same pastor for 20 years or more. The problem is doubly critical for well-known megachurches. Said Carol Childress, a researcher with the Dallas-based Leadership Network, which assists large congregations: “What happens most of the time—and this is an educated guess—would be some kind of decline, in some cases a significant decline in attendance and ministry of the church.” Few people disagree with that conclusion, though Thumma and others point out that there are no actual data to prove it.

At Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical churches, the choice of a successor in the pulpit frequently comes down to a son or son-in-law (rarely a daughter or daughter-in-law). If not a family member of the founding pastor, then someone already on the church staff is often tapped, said John N. Vaughan, whose Church Growth Today office in Bolivar, Missouri, tracks megachurch trends. “The transition is easier when somebody is already within the congregation who understands its culture,” he said. “A high trust level is an important factor.”

On the outskirts of Houston, Baptist-turned-charismatic Pastor John Osteen used a converted feed store in 1959 to launch what would become the 20,000-member Lakewood Church with a large television ministry. When he died in 1999 in his late 70s, son Joel took over as senior pastor and Lakewood continued to expand. “It doesn’t seem to me that they’ve missed a beat,” said Childress, noting also the major role played by the senior Osteen’s widow and Joel’s wife in the family-style transition.

Father-son handoffs don’t always work. In downtown Akron, Ohio, during the 1980s, the founding pastor of the Chapel, a nondenominational church, died on the operating table. His son David, who was already on the ministry staff, succeeded his highly popular father but later wanted the Chapel to have two churches—one of them in sunny Florida. Church leaders rejected the idea, and eventually called Knute Larson as pastor.

Consultant Lyle Schaller recalled that Larson asked him for advice about taking the post. “I said, ‘Don’t do it. Nobody would be successful there.’ I was 100 percent wrong.”

An all-in-the-family transition still under way and apparently working is at the Church on the Way, a Foursquare Gospel congregation in Van Nuys, California, that had only 18 members when Jack Hayford arrived in 1969. Thirty years later, with the church membership at about 10,000, Hayford began spending less time in the pulpit, and co-pastor Scott Bauer, his son-in-law, ran the daily operation and increased his preaching time. Hayford already was shifting more of his efforts into education—conducting seminars for pastors and tending to an undergraduate college on the church campus, then opening King’s Seminary, now the largest Pentecostal seminary in the western states.

“The weekly attendance average, for all activities and services, has increased, including for a Wednesday night service that Scott does,” said Doug Anderson, executive director for ministries. A well-attended Spanish-language service was incorporated as a part of Church on the Way’s worship schedule instead of treating the Hispanic group as an adjunct congregation. Hayford, a nationally known reconciling figure in the charismatic Pentecostal-evangelical world, also has a radio ministry and a television program on Trinity Broadcasting Network.

Media ministry is not nearly as essential to the Church on the Way as it is to the Crystal Cathedral, where Robert H. Schuller and his son, Robert A. Schuller, are officially co-pastors.

“This co-ministry is different from others in that this is primarily a television church; it became that because the program was so well received,” said the senior Schuller, 75, a pioneer of the megachurch format. He maintained that the key to the Crystal Cathedral’s sustainability is the appeal of its architecture, which will remain regardless of who is in the pulpit (see [Schuller's glass act](#)).

Several years ago, the younger Schuller was tapped as the eventual successor, and the two appear together every Sunday in the service taped for broadcast, one handling the preliminary part of the service and the other preaching the sermon. Schuller said of his son, a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary, that he “has special gifts that work very well on television . . . —frankly, an attractive face.” The senior Schuller expects to deliver the majority of sermons at the church until he turns 80, then reverse the ratio with his son when he’s between 80 and 85 years old, and to preach even less after that. “Then between [the age of] 90 and 100, I would preach twice a year, Easter and Christmas,” he said. Early this year, the Crystal Cathedral board named a part-time CEO for the church, but his duties were not yet fully defined, a spokesman said.

The Schullers represent another church that is bucking the conventional wisdom that says a new pastor needs a clean pass of the baton over a relatively short time. Brad Smith, president of Leadership Network, without reference to the Crystal Cathedral, said it is rather rare for a founding pastor to do a good job of handing off the post. Longtime, influential pastors often “attempt to stay beyond their level of effectiveness,” Smith said. “If the transition period is too long, there is too much conflict between two visionaries in the captain’s quarters.”

A notable clean break with the past, Smith recounted, occurred when Gardner C. Taylor, longtime pastor (1948-1992) of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, told successor Gary Simpson that he would not preach within 50 miles of that church for the next five years. And at a Baptist church in Texas, Smith said, the founding pastor was making all his elders resign their lifetime posts, and asking the designated successor to select his elders in overlapping terms so that when the transition occurs “the elders are of his choice.”

When George Regas was preparing for retirement at All Saints, he said he took a six-month sabbatical to allow parish leaders to evaluate the congregation and its needs, and he and his wife decided not to attend the church for two years. But before that time was up, the new rector was urging him to return, saying (as Regas recalls), “You need to come back. You are tithers, and we need your damn money.”

Some megachurches have been known to go through a series of successors before the right minister surfaces. The problem may be that the senior pastor moves on without giving the church time to plan. Or the pastor may leave behind divisions in the congregation arising from allegations of sexual or financial wrongdoing, or disagreements over church relocation. These divisions can bedevil successors for years.

“We deal with a lot of congregations where the beloved pastor stays a long time, and when he leaves, the church goes through a succession of short-term pastors,” said James Wind of the Alban Institute, a research and consulting organization for congregations.

Both Wind and Schaller point out pitfalls for churches that put their faith in customary searches for a new pastor. “The chances for distortion are very high,” Wind said. “The person who presents his or her most ideal self is the one who is chosen, and of course the congregation is also presenting its ideal self.” Schaller compared some search committee methods to a “beauty contest,” favoring the people who provide high-quality videos of their preaching and perform well in interviews.

“There is a special quality about being a founder,” Wind noted. “You are viewed as a distinct type of authority, and personal relationships are important in what is done.”

But that does not necessarily spell Doomsville for the new pastor. Eventually, one of the successors “can in some sense be a founder too—of a newly envisioned congregation,” Wind said.