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THE SCALE AND SCOPE OF MEGACHURCHES IN AMERICA

AMERICA HAS SEEN AN EXPLOSION in the number of megachurches over the past three decades. They are growing bigger, faster, and stronger and are thriving in nearly every state in the nation and in much smaller communities than was previously believed possible. A few have grown to hold more people than the town in which they reside. If all the people who are *members* of megachurches were combined, they would be the third largest religious group in the United States. Their combined annual income is well over $7 billion. Yet these megachurches account for only one-half of 1 percent of all the religious congregations in the nation.

In 2007, there were 1,250 megachurches out of a total of 335,000 U.S. congregations of all religious traditions. This relatively small number of very large Protestant Christian churches has the same number of attendees at weekly services (roughly 4.5 million) as the smallest 35 percent of churches in the country. The pastors of these churches wield tremendous power within their denominational groups, in the larger Christian world, and even in the public and political realms. The ministry activities and worship styles of the megachurches affect tens of thousands of smaller churches in the country and, thanks to the Internet, literally millions of pastors around the world. There is nothing insignificant about the megachurch phenomenon. Even the renowned management consultant Peter Drucker observed in 1998, "Consider the pastoral megachurches that have been growing so very fast in the U.S. since 1980 and are surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years."[1]

The megachurch is more than just an ordinary church grown large. The size and approach of a megachurch alters its social dynamics and organizational characteristics, making it bear little resemblance to smaller, more traditional congregations. Although large congregations have certainly existed throughout Christian history, the rapid proliferation of these churches in the past generation is both distinctive and is also fundamentally altering the American Christian landscape.

Beyond the raw number and power of these churches, we believe that megachurches, their practices, and their leaders are the most influential contemporary dynamic in American religion. They have superseded formerly key influences such as denominations, seminaries, and religious presses and publishing. Indeed, a large part of the resistance to megachurches comes from leaders of these organizations who see their own influence waning.

We are convinced that the mistaken impressions about megachurches have arisen, not necessarily due to jealousy, spite, or mean-spiritedness, but because of ignorance. This lack of knowledge is the fault of researchers, scholars, and consultants who watch American religion. The public has not had enough broad representative and reliable data about megachurches, despite the length of time this phenomenon has been around. We are trying to correct this situation. We offer data from two national studies of megachurches and draw extensively on the few quantitative studies of megachurches from the past ten to fifteen years.

We use this information to offer as broad and representative a picture as possible, while also framing it from our perspective and experiences of studying, worshipping at, and interacting with many of the megachurches and their leadership over the last two decades.

There are many myths, misperceptions, and misunderstandings surrounding these churches. These myths are repeated not only by reporters, but also by scholars, consultants, denominational leaders, and pastors. Like any good myth, there are bits of truth mixed into the fiction; that is part of what makes these myths so appealing and believable. We hope our book will sort out the wheat from the chaff regarding megachurches. But these fictional accounts about what megachurches are "really like" have blinded us all (including at times the authors of this book and the megachurch pastors themselves) to the lessons that can be learned from these congregations that have been so successful in appealing to contemporary Americans. These lessons are not just about church growth and relevant ministry; they also offer insightful glimpses into American culture and the psyche and needs of the citizens. We intend our use of the term *myth* to describe these misperceptions and misunderstandings, and

hope that our attempts to explain the reality of megachurches will bring readers to a point of greater understanding about the current American religious context.

America: A Religious Nation

Despite claims to the contrary, America is still a very religious nation. Its religious life, as expressed through congregations, remains stronger than its Western counterparts and equal to much of the rest of the world. The breadth and diversity of religious expression is also astounding, making the United States one of the most pluralistic and spiritually oriented nations in the world.

Religious Belief

America has grown over the centuries as a result of strong waves of immigration, much of it for religious reasons. The tapestry of various cultures and religions has thrived in the soil of religious freedom, ease of assembly, voluntary group formation, and friendly tax laws for nonprofit organizations. Americans have also transmitted their faiths to their children down through the generations at surprisingly high levels when compared to other Western countries. Religiosity, even the veneer of such, is still highly valued in American culture. In addition to the general expressions of religion and faith in America, the specific expressions of Christian churches and other religious congregations are vital when viewed as a whole.

That being said, there is some cause for concern. Some commentators view the current state of religion and churches with great alarm and dissatisfaction, others with worry about the future. Mainline church leaders, whose denominations are fragmenting over polarizing issues and whose attendance numbers have taken a dive over the past few decades, are rightly concerned. Leaders of evangelical movements point to numerous attitude and opinion surveys that seem to show the depth and content of religious faith as quite shallow. Some in both camps point to the rising presence of other world religions in the United States and New Age spiritual experimentation as causes for worry. Other social commentators point to a rise in births to unwed parents, increased drug-related arrests, and the rise of media and music celebrity culture as an indication of the substantive loss of influence of religious leaders in American public life. Still others have rightly pointed out that scandals and infighting among church groups are reasons to worry about the positive role of religion in our society.

We are not deaf to any of these concerns, but we try to keep our view of the American religious chalice as simultaneously half empty and half full. Yes, there are definitely aspects of religious life in the United States that give us pause for concern, but as a whole American religion and, specifically, American Christianity can still be seen as thriving and as influential as ever. Bad news makes for a better story for the newspaper and other media, but it is not the whole story.

Numerous surveys have been conducted over the years asking Americans if they consider themselves "Christian" in their religious beliefs. This figure has remained remarkably stable, around 85 percent, for a long period of time.[2] In addition, when phone pollsters ask self-identified Christians, "Have you attended a religious service in the past seven days?" the figure is consistently around 40 percent, with a recent poll showing a quite optimistic figure of 47 percent.[3] Recently, academic researchers Kirk Hadaway and Penny Marler have made very credible claims that this stated behavior doesn't match the reality found in actual congregations around the country.[4] We generally agree with these researchers' findings that show actual attendance on any given week to be around 20 percent of the adult population. Nevertheless, we feel the larger percentage is still a significant measure of those in the population with a strong commitment to Christian religious practice, even if this practice doesn't include worship attendance every week. Further, by some reports, 34 percent of Americans claim to be Christian but are "unchurched," meaning they did not participate in a church service on a regular basis in the past year.[5] Still, 65 percent of all Americans claim some sort of Christian church membership.[6]

Two points here are significant. First, although this percentage has remained relatively constant, the American population has grown from 200 million in the late 1960s to 300 million in 2006. Therefore, the percentage stayed the same, but the gross number grew. Second, while much is made about immigration making the country more diverse religiously, with significant growth in Islam, Hinduism, and other Eastern traditions, this has been counterbalanced by immigration from Central American countries with large Christian constituencies. So while the gross number of religious believers in traditions other than Christianity has grown significantly, the total percentage of Americans confessing a Christian tradition has at least remained constant.

America's Churches

The actual number of churches in the United States is difficult to calculate. Denominational records provide some insight, but the growing numbers of independent and nondenominational churches, the influx of

immigrant congregations of all religious traditions, and the ease with which congregations are formed and closed make it difficult to come up with exact numbers. Recent estimates range widely from 300,000 to 400,000, including congregations of all types: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, as well as Muslim mosques, Hindu temples, and other religious organizations. For the purposes of our calculations, we use 320,000 as an approximate number of the organized Christian congregations in the United States and 335,000 as the total for all congregations.[7] Most of these 320,000 churches are quite small. According to the National Congregations Study (NCS), the median size of a church (Protestant and Catholic combined) in the United States is seventy-five persons in regular attendance.[8]

We estimate that the number of clergy in the United States is over six hundred thousand.[9] Not all are leaders of congregations. Some serve as staff pastors or chaplains, or in other roles. In addition, as we will discuss in later chapters, the definition of church leader/clergy is somewhat fluid.

The predominance of small churches contributes to the general mental picture of churches in our culture. The assumption is that the "typical" church is a small organization that is fortunate if it has one full-time pastor. This romanticized view of the church has been long held in American history from colonial times to the farmer-preachers of the frontier. In the last century, with increasing urbanization, research has focused more on larger churches and in some ways has shifted the mental image. In many denominations and congregational studies, the mental picture of a representative church is one that has a few staff members in addition to a pastor and has an attendance of around three hundred. These mental images of the "typical church" carry considerable power and influence when one begins to assess the place of the megachurch.

Church Distribution and the Concentration of Attendance

There is yet another seldom-told story regarding the national religious picture that relates directly to megachurches. Attendance is not evenly distributed over different church sizes, and the size distribution has been changing dramatically. In the National Congregations Study, the smallest 50 percent of all the congregations surveyed contained only 11 percent of those who attend worship. At the same time, the NCS project showed that about 45 percent of the persons attending worship did so in churches in the top 10 percent in size.[10] This means that most people worship in relatively few large churches (with over three hundred attendees), but

a huge number of small churches are home to relatively few people. The largest 1 percent of U.S. churches contain at least 15 percent of the worshippers, finances, and staff in America. Across the whole of Protestantism, the largest 20 percent of the churches have around 65 percent of the resources. Money, resources, and people are concentrated in the largest churches.

Mark Chaves, the principal investigator of the NCS study, recently analyzed membership data across the last century for numerous denominations and discovered a general trend toward an increasing number of very large churches, especially since 1970.[11] At the same time, in many denominations, there were an increasing number of very small churches as well. We believe that this small, but growing, number of very large churches, when compared to the rest of the landscape of American Christianity, has a big impact on how religion is being practiced in the United States.

Megachurches in Context

Megachurches are not an entirely new phenomenon, in terms of size, charismatic leadership, multiple programs, or the use of small group ministries. But the rapid proliferation of these churches since the 1970s, and especially in the past few decades, is a distinctive social phenomenon. While there are roughly 1,250 megachurches at this time, we estimate that number is increasing by at least fifty churches per year. Until the last ten years, there was not an entirely reliable, accurate count of all the megachurches in the United States. While we have confidence in our own current numbers, we do not presume that our tally is 100 percent accurate.

Previous writers have provided very good overviews of the scale of the movement historically. In 1969, Elmer Towns, a longtime church growth expert and dean of the school of religion at Liberty University, listed sixteen churches with two thousand or more attendees weekly. We think this number may be low, as it did not include some, now well-known, very large African American congregations. By 1984, reports from John Vaughan and other observers claimed about seventy very large churches in the United States. In 1990, reports had the number at 310.[12] In 2000, we found six hundred megachurches that we could verify. We have continued to add megachurches to our list in recent years as our informal tracking showed their numbers continuing to increase, but we had not done any formal systematic research to verify this growth until 2005. That year, our survey efforts and research found that there were

Table 1.1. Megachurches per Million of Population by Year.

Year	U.S. Population (millions)	Approximate Number of Megachurches	Megachurches per Million Population
1900	76	10	0.13
1970	205	50	0.24
1980	227	150	0.70
1990	250	310	1.20
2000	275	600	2.19
2005	300	1,210	4.00

approximately 1,210 such congregations; our current count shows 1,250 verified megachurches.

It is natural to think that the rapid population growth of the United States in the past century would lead to more megachurches. Table 1.1 shows an interesting finding in this regard. When one examines both the population growth and the number of megachurches per million of population, it is evident that the number of megachurches per million Americans is increasing at an ever faster rate. Not only are there more megachurches, but also there are more megachurches per million Americans now than previously, and they are growing more rapidly than the population. From 1980 onward, the number of megachurches per million of population doubles every ten years and seems to be on track to do so between 2000 and 2010.

In an effort to document this phenomenon, our organizations have conducted two major academic surveys of megachurches. The first in 2000 was a part of a larger study, the Faith Communities Today 2000 survey. This survey was a small part of a larger study and marked our first attempt to survey the phenomenon. It collected information from 153 churches. In our recent Megachurches 2005 study, we were able to obtain data from a larger percentage of churches and have information on 382 churches with attendance of two thousand persons or more. Taking into account this recent study, the 2000 study, and other surveys, we feel we have a good base from which to analyze the megachurch phenomenon. The Appendix at the end of the book provides further details about these studies and others used to help generate this portrait of megachurches. We believe that this data, when combined with our experiences, firsthand stories, and observations, gives a clearer picture of these churches than has previously existed.

Table 1.2. Megachurch Distribution by Size.

Number of Attendees	Percentage of Megachurches
2,000–2,999	53.8
3,000–3,999	19.1
4,000–4,999	11.1
5,000–9,999	12.0
10,000 or more	4.0

Growth Trends in Attendance

In our 2005 megachurch survey, the average attendance each weekend was 3,585 persons, compared to their reported average attendance in 2000 of 2,279, indicating that attendance at these churches grew an average of 57 percent in five years. The median attendance in 2005 was 2,746 persons. (The median is the midpoint in the distribution, so half of the churches had an attendance between 2,000 and 2,746 and half had an attendance over that number.)

Obviously, not all churches fall within this range. In our 2005 survey, they varied in attendance from 2,000 to 20,000. A majority of megachurches fell in the 2,000-to-3,000 attendee range, while there are very few over 10,000 in weekly attendance. Table 1.2 indicates the range in attendance of all the megachurches on our total list of churches.

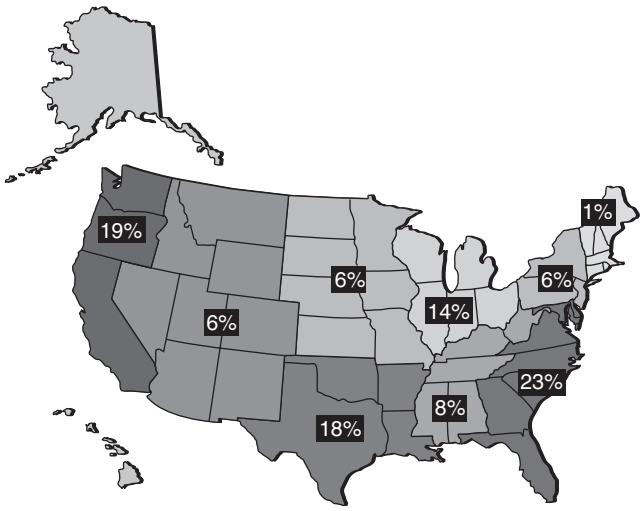
Location of Megachurches

The location of megachurches in the country can be addressed from a number of perspectives. The first approach has to do with their relationship to national geography. Another approach is to identify where they are within specific regions and states. Yet another looks at their position within major metropolitan areas and in the type of community where they are likely to be found.

Nationally, they are spread across the country. The map in Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of megachurches found in each U.S. census regional division.

In terms of state concentration, California leads the number of megachurches with 178, Texas follows with 157, Florida is next with 85, and then Georgia with 73. These are followed by Illinois, Tennessee, Ohio, and Michigan, each of which has 40-some megachurches. In the past five years, there has been significant growth in the number of these churches in the Northeast and Mid Central states. We have found no

Figure 1.1. Regional Distribution of Megachurches. Megachurches are now found in most states; the southern states retain the highest concentration.



churches in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, South Dakota, or Wyoming. Interestingly, even these states have churches of one thousand or more attendees in a typical weekend. We believe it is only a matter of time until every state has a congregation of megachurch size.

With a few exceptions, we estimate that there is a megachurch within a ninety-minute drive of 80 percent of the population of America. The map in Figure 1.2 shows the location of every megachurch in the country, represented by a small black dot. Notice that the large black masses in certain metropolitan areas actually represent many dozens of churches. We will address this pattern in later chapters, but this map makes it apparent that megachurches cluster around the largest metropolitan cities in the nation.

Within these regions and states, we also explored the megachurch's primary location in the metropolitan area. Figure 1.3 compares the locations of megachurches within a city for the 2000 and 2005 studies.

As Figure 1.3 illustrates, 45 percent of the churches are found in newer suburbs and another 29 percent in older suburbs. The remaining churches are split between being located in downtown and older residential areas. It is apparent from Figure 1.3 that newer suburbs have seen the most recent growth. In many cases, the new churches in this area are not the product of relocation but the result of newly planted churches growing

Figure 1.2. Megachurch Locations in the Mainland United States.

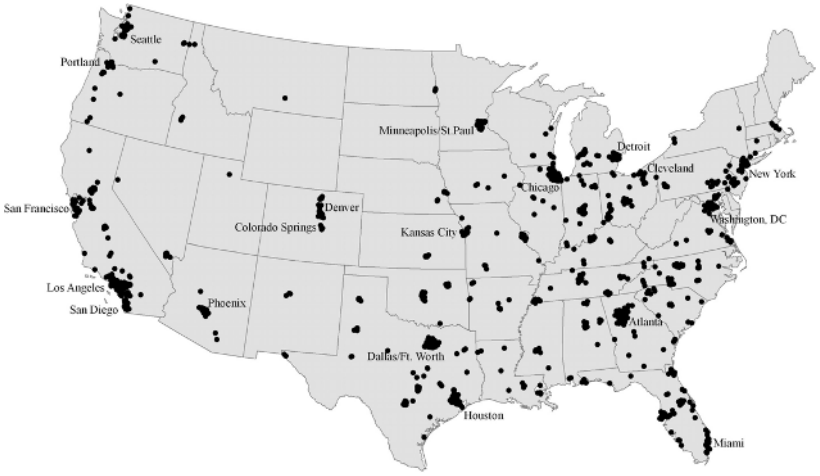
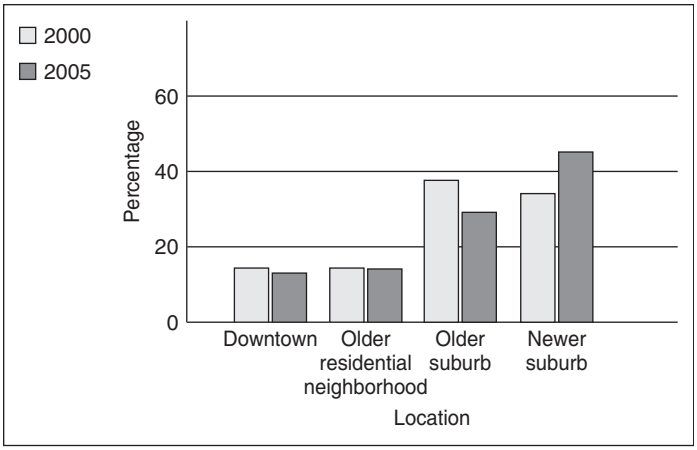


Figure 1.3. Metropolitan Location of Megachurches, 2000 and 2005.



very quickly to the two-thousand-attendee level. At the same time, a significant number of megachurches continue to reside in more urban settings.

A brief historical glimpse at the growth of megachurches in the past few decades shows the location of these churches relates strongly to when they grew to megasize. Nearly all of the oldest and earliest of these

churches were urban. They were often either the historic, high-status, predominantly white, downtown "First Churches" (such as First Baptist of Dallas, Texas; First Baptist of Atlanta, Georgia; First Presbyterian in Houston, Texas; Riverside Church and Marble Collegiate in New York City; and Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota) or they were the older, established, predominantly African American congregations (including Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City and Trinity Church in Chicago, Illinois). Due in part to their urban context and condition (such as older facilities, shortages of land, inadequate parking, and unique ministry situations), these groups of churches have adapted distinctive ways of being megachurches that set them apart somewhat from the rest of the phenomenon.

Ten years into the national proliferation of megachurches in the late 1980s, the location pattern of megachurches shifted dramatically, reflecting the country's migration dynamics. While megachurches were still predominantly found in the fastest growing metropolitan areas of the country,[13] over 75 percent of them were now located in suburban Sunbelt states. Nearly half of these were located in the Southeast, around the sprawl cities of Houston, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Atlanta, Oklahoma City, Orlando, and Nashville, although the metropolitan area of Los Angeles and surrounding cities contained the greatest number of megachurches. These churches were often located in the developing suburbs of these cities, areas now seen as older inner-ring suburbs.

Another decade or more of church growth has not substantially altered the areas of greatest concentration of megachurches, but the last ten years have seen an increased dispersal of very large churches throughout the country and widely distributed throughout metropolitan areas. The newest megachurches are predominantly locating in distant suburbs or exurbs, with a few developing in central city, urban locations often by reclaiming abandoned buildings for new spiritual purposes.

It is perhaps too soon to know for sure if this pattern of dispersal indicates that the megachurch phenomenon has become less dependent on population growth patterns, but there is evidence that it might be the case. Certainly there are very few states now that don't have at least one megachurch around their major population centers. As these congregations take on an increasingly regional character, there are very few large urban regions around the country that will be unable to support one or more of these churches.

There are numerous reasons why concentrations of megachurches exist in the most rapidly growing, suburban metropolitan areas of the country. Suburban areas offer larger, less expensive plots of land suitable for the acres of parking lots and auxiliary buildings needed to support a

congregation of thousands. In the initial phases of suburban development, zoning regulations are often less restrictive and planning officers less concerned about their tax base. Newly developing suburbs often come complete with easy access to major highways, support institutions such as new restaurants and gas stations, and most important, burgeoning residential housing complexes and their residents who are exactly the type of people most attracted to megachurches: consumer-oriented, willing to commute great distances, highly mobile and often displaced, middle-class, in middle-level management positions, well-educated, and with a traditional nuclear family structure. All of these characteristics point to the new suburban fringes of major cities as fertile soil for megachurches.

The recent founding or current relocation of many megachurches in the outer and newer suburbs hints at other explanations for why they often seem more able to grow, adapt, and remain technologically sophisticated. Research shows that newly established congregations have a considerably greater likelihood of growing.[14] These rapidly expanding congregations can evolve their buildings, leadership, and programmatic structures along with their growth. More established churches, if caught in a time of growth, must undertake the often difficult and painful task of discarding or revising many of their traditions, ingrained organizational habits, and even physical structures. All too often, established congregations end up limiting their potential membership increase by retaining leadership or organizational models that do not work for growth, or at least they are stuck in a building and physical setting that hampers their development.

However, brand-new congregations or churches with new locations and bigger sanctuaries have no existing patterns to revamp. In essence, they can choose to adopt whatever organizational model, or for that matter building structure, that works best for the size they anticipate becoming. It is a dynamic evolutionary strategy of growth versus a re-creationist effort to expand. This lesson is not lost on many national denominational leaders who have recently engaged in concerted efforts at new church development.

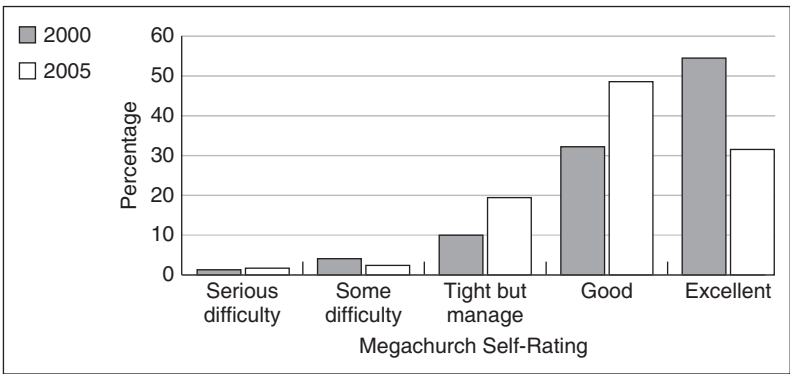
Given these factors, it is not surprising that many megachurches started out being housed in temporary structures—school auditoriums, abandoned shopping centers, and even circus tents—before building their own sanctuary in a still-developing suburban area. Perhaps the best-known example of maintaining a fluid congregational form during its most rapid growth period is Rick Warren's Saddleback Community Church. This congregation met in a high school, then in countless satellite locations around the Mission Viejo, California, area before they built their current sanctuary. Many megachurches report that every move to a

new structure generated a rapid influx of new members to fill the building to capacity.[15] Our 2000 survey of megachurches echoed this "living at the limits of capacity." Those churches we surveyed had an average seating of over two thousand, with 40 percent of them claiming to have moved into their building since 1980, and 85 percent describing the physical condition of their building as excellent or good. Nevertheless, over half the congregational leaders described their structures as inadequate for their current needs, both because of current and projected future needs.

Financial Resources

Financial resources are imperfect measures of the scale and scope of the megachurch phenomenon. However, some sense of the scale and influence of these megachurches can be derived from their budgets. The average total income reported from the megachurches in the 2005 survey was $6 million per year, compared to our 2000 figure of $4.8 million. In terms of financial health, even adjusting for inflation, the megachurches in this study appear on the surface to be better off than they were five years ago. The average expenditures for the congregations also increased to $5.6 million, reflecting almost the same ratio between income and expenses as the 2000 data. It is worth noting that the combined average income from the approximately 1,200 megachurches in the United States is roughly $7.2 billion a year. Nevertheless, when the churches were asked to describe their financial situation (see Figure 1.4), considerably fewer churches described it as excellent when compared to the 2000

Figure 1.4. Megachurch Financial Health Assessment, 2000 and 2005.



study. Almost 50 percent described their financial situation as good, but almost 20 percent said it was "tight but they manage."

Most of these churches have multiple streams of income that feed these enormous budgets. The largest stream by far is that described as undesignated giving, that is, offerings, tithes, and gifts from attendees that support the overall programs of the church as the leadership sees fit. A second stream would be various forms of designated giving that are directed toward a particular program or ministry. Additionally, some churches gather money for capital campaigns for buildings, land, or debt retirement. Others acquire money for outside projects, including missionaries and church planting, through special project offerings. Another stream includes user fees gathered for programs such as youth camp, books for special studies, and tickets for luncheons. Yet another includes income from operations such as bookstores, television ministries, schools, nurseries, gyms, coffee shops, and cafes, as well as rental fees for the use of the building. This latter approach is a growing stream for many churches that own their own facility. A few of these churches also have endowments, but unlike previous generations of American churches, these numbers are not so significant. Unfortunately, our Megachurches 2005 survey did not ask churches to break their figures down into the various income streams.

Megachurch Growth in Cultural Context

It is our contention that megachurches began to propagate rapidly in the 1970s because of changes taking place in modern American society that made this religious form more appealing to a broad range of contemporary Christians and potential Christians. This is not to deny that God is at work in these ministries or that megachurch pastors are not gifted men and women of God. However, we must ask: What happened to cause this organizational form to gain rapid acceptance in the past few decades when it had not gained such broad acceptance previously even though there were examples of large churches in the past? If one looks at this religious phenomenon in relation to larger cultural changes, then much can be learned about the social needs and spiritual nature of contemporary human beings.

It is absolutely clear that Americans have become more comfortable with large institutional forms. Since the 1950s, hospitals, schools, stores, factories, and entertainment centers have all grown to megaproportions; therefore, why shouldn't churches? Americans have not only grown accustomed to large organizations, but they have even had their character and tastes shaped by them. From the moment of birth, large hospitals,

schools, theaters, malls, and amusement parks have been teaching us how to read signs, how to find our path through a maze of hallways, how to wait in lines, how to recall where we parked in a vast lot, how to cope with cavernous indoor spaces, how to watch large video screens, and how to assert ourselves in a crowd if we have a question or need something. The megachurch assumes all these skills of its members. The megachurch takes for granted that those coming to church also work, shop, and play in similar institutional forms.

What seems anomalous and out of place in our contemporary context is when a person downsizes his or her expectations of organizational size to attend a small church once a week. After a week of working in a major corporation, shopping in a food warehouse and megamall, viewing movies at a multiplex theater, and having children who attend a regional high school, it seems incongruous that this family would feel comfortable in a forty-person church. So the force of cultural conditioning is on the side of megachurches.

Another reason for the success of megachurches may be because they unintentionally created forms and features in their churches to handle the size of the organization that in actuality answered the unspoken needs of a contemporary audience. Early megachurches borrowed models of organization and presentation methods from other institutions around them in order to cope with large numbers of attendees. These alterations in response to size created an organizational model of church that fit a new social and cultural context.

The creation of these social and organizational dynamics in megachurches seems to contribute to the vitality of this distinctive religious organization. Several of these dynamics include doing ministry with intentionality, including 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.

Out of necessity because of their size, megachurches have had to overstructure every aspect of member involvement. One cannot expect that natural processes at work in small-scale settings will happen within a massive congregation. As such, megachurches must institutionalize greeting people, ushering them into the sanctuary, incorporating new members into church rules and norms, involving people in the ministries of the church, and the interaction and fellowship of participants with each other during social times between services and week to week. Nothing is left to chance. The assumption is that people in this society do not know each other, nor will they make the effort if left alone. The megachurch assumption is that contemporary individuals do not interact unless forced

to and are relative strangers to those they meet. People need the intimacy of small groups, but will not seek them out. There is also the realization that people will remain spectators and marginal participants unless they are strongly encouraged to become involved.

Congregations must have an identity and a clear sense of themselves. This clarity is attractive to outsiders and compelling for insiders. One can choose to commit to something only if the person knows what they are committing to. In a capitalist world of niche marketing, a clear and easily communicated purpose is essential.

Anything done in praise and adoration of God should be done in the best manner possible. Quality denotes professionalism and indicates that the activity has merit and importance. The members of the congregation have been schooled on television, movies, plays, and other professional performances. Religious performances are judged in part by these standards. At the same time, contemporary culture is one that emphasizes informality and relaxed norms of dress and behavior.

These very large churches try hard to convey the Christian message in ways that connote that the faith is relevant to contemporary life. The sermons focus on Scripture but try to make it practical and down to earth, applicable for daily life. The church space and form suggest that it is similar to everyday secular structures, especially for those churches reaching out to persons formerly turned off by traditional church models. The culture of the worship service encourages everyone to "come as you are." There are low, and often almost no, boundaries between where the church's ministries start and the world's influences end. The distinctions between secular and sacred are often minimal at best. Such blurring is easily seen in the use of technology and pop cultural influences in the services. Recent movies are often used as examples in sermons; contemporary Christian music in the service could easily be heard on the radio or at a Grammy Awards show.

Worship is undertaken in part to entertain, to entice, to excite, and to inspire. The congregation is a mix of the committed and the spectator, the saint and the seeker. What happens in worship, however, is only one dimension of the full life of the church, one aspect of their vision of a complete Christian life that also should include education, fellowship, and service.

The religious message must have a relevance to everyday life and contemporary reality. It is not necessary for worship styles and sermon forms to be in contemporary idioms, but for them to touch on daily concerns, issues, and social needs. People have to be able to hear their lives in the message and glean understanding that translates into wise

actions throughout the week with their family, coworkers, or spouse. They want to learn about God and grow deeper the faith. They are at church to develop their spiritual lives.

These congregations create a small-town community in a placeless suburbia. Each has its culture and customs, its small groups and programs, its sports leagues and bake sales, and its reconstituted connections and community feel for transplanted and uprooted middle class Americans. In countless interviews, we have heard participants talk in terms of the church's family-like atmosphere, being a home to them, and finding a place there. This is likewise reflected in the names many of the megachurches have adopted. Out of the 1,250 megachurches, roughly a quarter have names that imply a place, whether it is an actual location, a biblical place, or a space such as a crossroads, valley, bayside, or ocean view.

Modern Americans want choice; they want options. In a society where everything is mutable and most identities can be chosen, the act of choosing creates commitment. A church will be able to attract a greater number of diverse persons if it offers a larger number of options for service times and styles, for ministries to meet needs, for places to serve others, and for opportunities to volunteer. Choice enhances commitment. Options allow people to choose exactly what they want to do and be in the congregation. They can interact with the church on their own terms, creating a customized experience of the church to satisfy their spiritual needs as they see fit. But then the church attempts to entice and educate these self-interested new attendees into a more mature Christian walk.

Involvement in the church and in a life of faith is defined by the continual act of personal commitment. The meaning of "being a part of this place" is less defined by a one-time decision—by becoming a member—than it is by active participation—by a continual choice to be involved. This is such a significant switch that many megachurches do not even have a membership category. Likewise, one is intentionally challenged to be involved and deepen their faith commitments—to move from anonymity to engagement.

Finally, the size of the megachurch proclaims the power of religion, exhibiting the prominent place of religion in the modern world. It is powerful in its influence on politics, in the courts, and in the national religious community. The success of the church translates into the success of each individual attendee. It is what they aspire to be. As such, it is a motivational element and inspirational ideal for many within the congregation.

Influence Beyond the Numbers

Because of the characteristics and growth we have discussed, it is apparent that megachurches and their leaders are key influences on American religious practices. To some, this is not a big surprise, but the behavior of certain political, religious, and social leaders would suggest that not everyone agrees with this assessment.

Publishing houses, religious newspapers, and even online blogs certainly play a role in religious leadership as do denominational leaders and seminaries, but our view is that leaders of megachurches are defining what Protestant America looks like for the foreseeable future. It is our contention that church leaders, both clergy and lay, look to megachurches and their pastors for their cues and direction for the future. These churches are the seedbed of innovation, change, and growth in other churches as well as their own. Some are becoming educational institutions and organizations in their own right through the establishment of Bible colleges and seminaries and numerous conferences and training events. There is an ever-growing number of publishing resources coming from these churches, especially in the area of small-group curriculum and worship materials. While a few parachurch organizations, including Leadership Network, seek to build networks of friendship and support among these churches, it is the churches themselves that are the leaders today.

Historically, larger churches in every denomination and tradition have had great influence over the state of affairs in their respective traditions. An examination of the speaker lists for conventions, gatherings, camp meetings, and conferences from previous eras would show that most of the speakers came from larger churches. Those meetings might also have included a professor, a denominational leader, or a popular writer. Now megachurch pastors tend to dominate those platforms.

Megachurches serve as a dominant influence on religious life in local communities as well. Each community has its own contextual system at play, but the largest fish in the pond help to set the agenda for the rest. In some communities, leaders of smaller churches act in opposition to, or distance themselves from, these megachurches. But many times the attendees of these churches have friends in the megachurches and report what these churches are doing, hoping to have similar programs and ministries within their own church, and leaving smaller church pastors more frustrated than ever.

Many of the megachurches are leaders in diverse areas of community life outside the church. With large resources of people, finances, and creativity, they apply themselves to the pressing problems of their communities in the areas of literacy, hunger, and homelessness.

Finally, a small handful of megachurch pastors such as Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, Max Lucado, T. D. Jakes, and Bill Hybels have gained prominence on the national and occasionally on the international stage. This is a continual cycle in American religious life. Each generation has its own prophets, preachers, and popular spokespersons. The most famous tend to sell lots of books, appear on television shows, and conduct regular speaking tours. This is never more than a small handful of pastors, but at present all of them are leaders of megachurches. Yet this is not the entire story regarding these churches or their leaders, and to judge the whole movement by this small group presents a distorted picture of the phenomenon. In the following chapters we hope to clarify that picture.

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Applying What You Have Read

In this chapter, we want you to consider the religious context for your ministry. Every region has its own culture and contextual factors to consider, but there are some key areas we think it wise to consider.

1. Define the contextual area that your church actually serves right now. If you were to mark on a map where the attendees currently live, what would that map look like? There are some handy Web tools that we mention on our Web site for doing this, but don't overdo it. A crudely drawn map will do just fine. In working with congregations over the years, we find that leaders are often surprised about how large an area the church encompasses.
2. Mark the locations of other churches in and around the same area your church serves. Our Web site includes tips on doing this easily. Include some larger churches that may not be in the area, but might have influence and draw attendees from your area. Remember to mark those in a wide variety of traditions, not just those in your own denominational family. In addition to their locations, write down the suspected weekend attendance of these churches. You can ask around through friends and acquaintances, or even just call the church to inquire. How does your church fit this picture?
3. Obtain key demographic information, which is easily gathered from local officials, real estate sites, or the census bureau for your area. You don't need exact numbers here; just get a sense of the area. On your map, write down the estimated population in the region. Most of the census studies also break down the population by age, income,

and racial groups. Also get some idea of how mobile and transient people are in your area. Mobility refers to the number of people that move into or out of the area in a given time period. A rough percentage is usually available from state and county government Web sites.

Now you can compare the total population of your area to the total attendance church attendance in the region. Most church leaders are astounded to see that the majority of people are not attending church. Additionally, many times we find that the number of highly mobile residents in an area can be equal to half of all the church attendees in that region.

In most areas of the country, there are many people not currently attending church anywhere, even if there are plenty of churches in a given regional locale. Reflect on this mapping and the place of your church within that region in light of the lessons of this chapter.

- How would you describe your map and your place on it?
- What are the largest three age groups (or other demographic characteristics), and how do these relate to your congregation's mission?
- Roughly, how many people are currently not attending any church and what could you do to reach them?