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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Herb Miller and Lyle E. Schaller, Co-Editors - For photocopy permission, E-mail HrbMiller@aol.com

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Cynthia Woolever

What Can Other Congregations Learn from Megachurches?

The megachurches are becoming more numerous in the American religious landscape. Dr. Scott Thumma, a megachurch researcher, defines a megachurch as: A *Protestant* congregation—affiliated with a denomination, non-affiliated, or independent—whose worship attendance exceeds 2,000 people.

Church historian Richard Niebuhr observed that major societal changes lead to new Protestant denominational forms. In the post-1950s ecumenical-climate, these social changes led to new types of congregations *within* each denomination. Currently, only one-third of Protestant megachurches are NOT affiliated with one of the denominations.

BIG is not new or typical. Large Protestant congregations date back to our country's founding. Now more than 1,000 Protestant megachurches dot the land. Thus far, they represent a tiny fraction of the more than 330,000 U.S. congregations¹—less than 1 percent of all Protestant congregations say they attract more than 2,000 to their services.

Yet megachurches report reaching more than 4 million worship attendees. If these estimates are accurate from Thumma's national megachurch research and other congregational studies, megachurches could claim they capture as much as 8 percent of all worshippers.

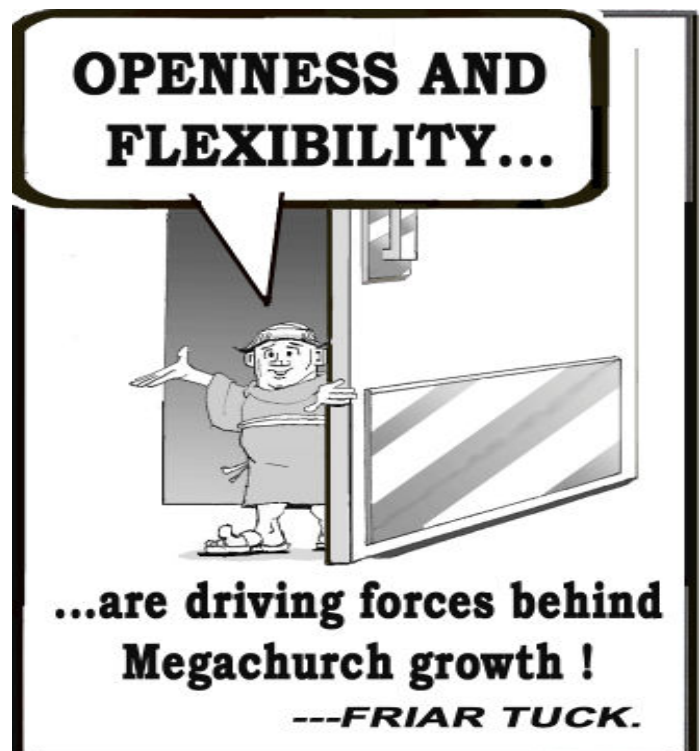
Our heightened awareness of their existence results, in part, from their increasing numbers and media attention. For example, many people have heard of one megachurch pastor, Rick Warren—author of the best-selling non-fiction book in U.S. publishing history—other than the Bible: *The Purpose-Driven Life*.

BIG doesn't happen everywhere in equal numbers. Megachurches appear more often in some regions than in others. The southern part of the U.S. has the largest number. In recent years, these giants began appearing in other regions of the country, but the northeast still has the fewest megachurches. Located near large population centers, high-density people-clusters provide megachurches with particularly rich catchment areas. Contrary to popular opinion, megachurches are NOT limited to the suburbs; some are in downtown areas and others in both old and new suburbs.

BIG doesn't describe buildings. The average (median) megachurch sanctuary seats a mere 1,400. Therefore, these religious giants creatively use what is on hand. Forced to expand in their current location, nearly all hold multiple services, and many hold services in multiple locations. And more than a third expand by planting new churches!

BIG doesn't mean impersonal. Megachurches offer a stunning number of choices—classes, groups, mission activities, social events, types and times of services. The underlying strategy is something for everyone—creating many niches under one big umbrella. Megachurches know they cannot use one format or formula, so they intentionally create a religious mall containing countless specialized boutiques.

BIG doesn't mean unfocused. The research suggests that the numerical achievement of megachurches remains linked to a clear identity about who they are (e.g., Rick Warren's earlier book, 1995, *The Purpose-Driven Church*). Megachurch leaders name their unique mission in their unique location. Some critics equate megachurches with suburban



tract-housing developments. However, these inaccurate descriptions miss the diversity seen among megachurches. Further, these observers ignore the level of intentionality and one-of-a-kind, focused vision that marks each megachurch.

BIG doesn't require a best-selling book. Megachurch pastors are a wildly diverse and creative lot. Some have no seminary or college education while others have a Ph.D. However, these pastors share one significant trait—a long tenure at their current church. Building an effective institution through transformative leadership is not instant; it takes time. In addition, these mega-leaders reach out to people. The megachurch pastor possesses greater internal evangelistic drive, or focus, than do typical pastors. Urging staff and laypersons to connect with unchurched people to offer them Christ is a priority. Megachurches do NOT grow large by accident; their pastors and staff think it should happen—not because they want a bigger church but because they believe Christ makes a big difference in human life.

BIG isn't always blissful. Megachurches, like their smaller sisters, experience conflict, mismanagement, and disappointment. A few past megachurches are no longer, having experienced painful theological or leadership debates resulting in departing members or ministers. Many people are looking for a new church to visit, and many of those lookers try megachurches. Many of them stay. Many of them pass through. Attendee turnover in big churches is big, too. But more people stay than go out the back door.

What can other congregations learn from BIG Churches? Congregations of any size can use some of the strategies that come from effective megachurches:

1. Invite friends. Thumma writes, “Megachurches grow because excited attendees tell their friends.” Why do our members not invite friends and family? Is it because they're not excited about what their congregation has to offer? If so, commit to creating more engaging and culturally relevant worship and programming.

2. Welcome new people and be clear about expectations. Many of the megachurches encourage new people to do three things: (a) volunteer in some form of ministry—in the congregation or wider community; (b) attend a new members' class; and (c) relate to a “mentor,” another member who assumes shepherding responsibility. Rather than focusing on recruiting reluctant people to fill offices and positions, megachurches focus on building ministry teams comprised of individuals with a passion for specific ministries.

3. Invest in effective stewardship education. Megachurches attract contributions of \$1,700 to \$2,700 per year, per-average-worship attendee, compared to \$700 to \$1,200 per year, per-worship-attendee given in smaller

churches. Big-church economy of scale is a myth. Bigger does not mean fewer expenses per average worship attendee; it means greater expense per person due to a more extensive range of ministries.

4. Focus on mission. Megachurches emphasize helping hurting people both inside and beyond their church. As a result, their contributions to world missions, benevolences, and community outreach are often 20 to 35 percent of total congregational giving, rather than 8 to 15 percent in smaller churches.

5. Bring God, inspiration, and innovation to worship. Megachurches built their reputations on dynamic and engaging services. Review your congregation's services from a newcomer's perspective. Which of our current worship elements help us feel God's presence and inspire us to action? Which worship elements drain us spiritually? How can we make our services meet diverse needs, especially of all age groups? Follow the mega-model and use what's on hand to innovate!

6. Be open to change that is inconvenient and risky. Megachurches leaders feel like pioneers, cutting new paths through uncharted territory. Failures and successes fill their stories. Their members sacrificed security, stability, and predictability for a larger vision. For example, megachurch members often followed the congregation through multiple services in multiple locations, embraced new worship styles, or took on uncertain financial burdens. All vital churches involve members who are committed for the long haul to a clear vision about the future.

7. Find a niche, and do it with excellence! Even megachurches “specialize” in some sense because their mission focus spotlights some activities and not others. Identify your congregation's strengths, focus on your unique mission, and strive for excellence in all that you do.

When Peter preached at Pentecost, 3,000 people responded. That was not a small church. Yes, churches may start small, like Jesus and the twelve. But the early church did not stay small.

If you are serving God in a large church, you are serving a church the size Peter put together in Jerusalem. That is a high calling!

¹ C.K. Hadaway and P.L. Marler (2005) “How many Americans attend worship each week? An alternative approach to measurement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 3(44), 307-322.

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