

# Megachurches: How Do They Count?

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Through the long history of the *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, its preceding volumes and editors have sought to observe the religious landscape around them and annually draw attention to changes in the topographical features of that landscape. Over the decades these changes have reshaped the religious landscape's familiar features in significant ways. In this 71<sup>st</sup> edition of the *Yearbook*, we keep faith with that tradition to focus upon "megachurches." In this preliminary study of megachurches we have found that such congregations:

- Account for a large and apparently growing number of American Christians, but remain largely invisible in statistical reports of church membership, such as the *Yearbook*. Over 1.5 million believers and perhaps many more are absent from studies that rely upon denominationally aggregated data.
- Capture a disproportionately oversized share of all persons attending worship weekly. While the median church has only 75 participants at worship, 10% of all worshipping *individuals* attend a congregation with 3,000 or more participants, and the 10,000 largest *congregations* (around 10% of all congregations) capture almost half of all churchgoers.
- Have a set of stereotypes about them that do not adequately or effectively reflect the real diversity of megachurches and the distinct types of megachurches which have emerged.
- Are woefully understudied as a phenomenon. A plethora of popular press on megachurches does not offer the critical analysis that might be gained through well-constructed research and study.
- May hold trenchant and authentic indications of an innovative way of formulating Christian life and faith for a relatively broad segment of Protestantism. The study of megachurches is important not only in itself, but for what it can help us learn about the Christian faith and the future within the religious life of the American people.

While nearly all those who speak or write about religious life in America are familiar with the term "megachurch," there is no consensus on the definition of the term. Scholars and researchers generally use a membership of at least 2,000 as an operational definition to delineate megachurches.

Such quantitative aspects, while necessary, are not a sufficient criterion to provide an adequate definition. Size alone does not a megachurch make. Megachurches, in the absence of a clear definition, are commonly linked with a freewheeling style of providing engaging worship with high-energy music, and a de-emphasis of traditional music, vestments, and liturgical formality. These churches are associated both with small group intimacy and the large congregation capacity to get things done. Often centers of diverse activities, the term "megachurch" is suggestive of much more than the size of the membership

and/or physical plant. Indeed, many congregations with membership exceeding 2,000, including many Catholic parishes that count all baptized Catholics within a geographic area as members, are not ordinarily classified as megachurches.

Further complicating the problem of adequate definition is the persistent presence of two or three distinct *types* of megachurches. Some megachurches are quite as conventional, though much larger, than the churches within their respective theological traditions. Other megachurches share distinctive styles of leadership, program focus, and theological leanings. Still other megachurches and their offshoot congregations appear as loose confederations of congregations or proto-denominations. While many megachurches have developed during the last twenty years, others can trace their roots to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In virtually every aspect—size, date of origin, organizational style, leadership orientation, ecclesial relations, and missions—megachurches defy a single definition. More specialized studies are needed to understand the commonalities and subtle differences among megachurches.

Although megachurches are not the only understudied aspect of American church life, the implication and a lack of clarity about the phenomenon may have especially extensive consequences. Megachurches have been the subject of increasing attention for both popular religious literature and scholarly publications, and scholars have recently taken steps toward systematic study. Demographically, megachurches present a particular difficulty for such researchers such as the *Yearbook* staff. Most reliable estimates place the number of megachurches at a number greater than 600. The recent Faith Communities Today (FACT) study identified 600 in a database that is readily available (see box). Using a projected membership of 2,000 for each congregation (and many megachurches have membership in excess of 5,000), megachurches can conservatively be thought to account for at least 1.2 million American Christians. A broader estimate suggests that more than 2 million Christians are affiliated with megachurches. Enumerations such as those published in the *Yearbook* rely upon data collected by national denominational structures concerning membership. Since many megachurches are not affiliated with any denomination, a substantial lacuna exists within the data of church membership.

Beyond organizational affiliation and membership studies, megachurches present a more complex challenge to understanding the newer ways of “being church.” With sprawling multi-purpose buildings, seven-day-a-week programming, and innovative worship (or, as some prefer to call it, “celebration”) megachurches sometimes represent more distinctive differences from traditional churches other than their size. Popular literature has been fascinated with tales of the variety of the more exotic offerings—drive-in theatres, closed circuit worship services, on-site fast food restaurants, and special interest groups (including Christian quilting and faith-based auto repair). Whether and to what extent these innovations alter faith convictions, mission goals, and long term membership patterns must be studied carefully over time by those equipped to distinguish authentic and meaningful changes from those changes that are of less enduring importance. It is likely that such studies will enable scholars, church leaders, members, and the public to better understand the dynamics and the direction of change for this important segment of American church life.

*From “Megachurches Today: Summary of Data from the Faith Communities Today Project”*

The primary finding from this study is that megachurches have many common characteristics but that there are important differences within the group. All megachurches are not carbon copies of Willow Creek Community Church, Calvary Chapel, Saddleback Church or even First Baptist of Dallas. And the distinctions between churches may be as important as the similarities. Clearly there are several distinct types, or forms, of megachurches although more detailed analysis of this data must be done to isolate these unique groupings.

The misconceptions about megachurches abound. Yet this initial and somewhat sketchy data does not confirm many of the stereotypes Americans have of megachurches. The survey reports that this sample was, for the most part, solidly middle class in its membership. They are also more diverse racially than most evangelical, moderate and mainline congregations. Therefore, a secondary learning is that much more research needs to be undertaken on this very prominent, but understudied, segment of American religion.

Many megachurches have been around a very long time and others, roughly 15%, are less than 20 years old. However, nearly all of the growth of megas has taken place in the past two to three decades. Megachurches are located everywhere in the United States, but they do have areas of concentration, including California, Texas, Florida and Georgia. They are primarily Evangelical and Pentecostal in their theology, but a sizable minority does fall within the moderate and mainline denominations.

These congregations are not blind to the world’s or their local community’s needs. The congregations are very active in social ministry areas, targeted both at its membership and also at those outside its walls. These efforts are more likely accomplished through their own congregational efforts rather than in conjunction with other churches or external ministry and mission organizations.

Likewise, this data points to the somewhat tenuous relationship megachurches have with their affiliate denominations. They seem considerably less involved with their denominational structures, less dependent on denominational resources and less likely to interact in joint projects with churches from its own denomination than from churches outside its affiliate religious organization.

The rapid growth of megachurches on the United States landscape shows very little sign of diminishing. However, this information collected begins to show how complex these large churches are and how little we know about them as a total group.

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*Excerpted with permission from the conclusion of the research report at: [http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith\\_megachurches\\_FACTsummary.html](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html) If you are interested in additional information about megachurches, visit the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary web site at [www.hirr.hartsem.edu](http://www.hirr.hartsem.edu). On the megachurch section of the web site you can search a database of over 600 megachurches and read several extensive articles on the characteristics of megachurches. Information from the much larger Faith Communities Today research project can be found at <http://FACT.hartsem.edu>.*

In our current and future religious landscape, megachurches will account for an increasingly large share of all those attending worship. The meaning and style of the worship life experienced by those attending megachurches will also

continue to “count”—that is, have significance—for understanding contemporary changes in Christianity itself. Well-planned and executed studies of these changes in church life and practice should become a priority among religious researchers.

The FACT study based at Hartford Seminary has done much to document the rough dimensions of the phenomenon of megachurches. Dr. Scott Thumma of Hartford has made substantial contributions to the analysis and literature concerning megachurches. In debunking myths about megachurches and in collecting data from a broad range of them, these initial studies lay a promising foundation for further study. Much remains to be done, including the development of a more precise understanding of the ways in which megachurches uniquely minister, to whom they minister, and the ends and outcomes for which they minister.

The bibliography that follows includes both studies and religious journalism about megachurches and is, by necessity, brief. It is offered here in the hope that it will facilitate insight and stimulate further inquiry into how megachurches count.

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