Since the 1970s, the number of so-called megachurches — churches that attract at least 2,000 people to weekly services — has been exploding in the United States and abroad, particularly in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Many of the more than 1,200 U.S. megachurches sit on large suburban campuses and boast vast sanctuaries with multiple large TV screens and other high-tech amenities. Several serve meals at their own sprawling food courts and cafés and offer gymnasiums and other facilities. Megachurches are typically Protestant evangelical and espouse conservative positions on social issues. Church leaders are often charismatic ministers who preach the “prosperity gospel,” stressing personal fulfillment and success as much as theology. Some researchers suggest megachurches are a unique, collective response to people’s needs amid sweeping cultural and societal changes. But critics say megachurches are straying from their traditional religious mission by focusing on helping parishioners get rich rather than worshipping God.
RISE OF MEGACHURCHES

THE ISSUES

• Do megachurches dilute the Christian message?
• Do megachurches blur the line between church and state?
• Are megachurches becoming too worldly?

BACKGROUND

Recent Surge
Most of the 1,200 U.S. megachurches were founded in the past 25 years.

Big-Box Approach
Megachurches fit the suburban mold.

Filling Seats
Megachurches make economic sense.

CURRENT SITUATION

Business 101
Megachurch pastors know how to market their message.

Church Politics
Courts are lowering the barrier between church and state.

OUTLOOK

Mirroring Society
Experts predict churches will continue growing.

SIDEBARS AND GRAPHICS

Most Megachurches Are in the South, West
New England has lowest number.

Top 10 Megachurch States
California and Texas have the most members.

From Big to Truly ‘Mega’
More than 25 percent of megachurches have more than 4,000 members.

Most Megachurches are Denominational
Baptists are the largest group.

The Megachurch Difference
Support groups are among the key activities.

Houston’s Lakewood Church Is Biggest
Average attendance is 30,000.

Preaching the Prosperity Gospel
Critics say black megachurches abandon social justice.

Megachurches Outpacing Nation’s Growth
Rise has been dramatic.

At Issue
Are megachurches too big?

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

For More Information
Organizations to contact.

Bibliography
Selected sources used.

The Next Step
Additional articles.

Citing CQ Researcher
Sample bibliography formats.

Cover: AP Photo/Bob Riha Jr.
Universal Pictures devoted more than $200 million to “Evan Almighty,” a comedy released in June about a congressman who gives up politics to build an ark. Most of that money went into production, but a fair share of it was spent on marketing — much of it devoted to reaching out to spiritual leaders and church groups.

Universal hasn’t yet made a profit on the film, but its strategy appeared to make sense. Alerting church groups about religious-themed films has paid off in recent years, translating into a $370 million domestic gross for “The Passion of the Christ” and $300 million for “The Chronicles of Narnia.” Mel Gibson’s “Passion” provided the marketing model, with megachurches — commonly defined as those that attract more than 2,000 parishioners on any given Sunday — buying big blocks of tickets and generating word of mouth among the faithful.

Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., home of prominent pastor and best-selling author Rick Warren, hosted a screening for 4,500 pastors and separately purchased 17,000 tickets for its congregants. Two members of a megachurch in Plano, Texas, bought out 6,000 seats at a local 20-plex so churchgoers could watch “Passion’s” local premiere. A church in Costa Mesa, Calif., even canceled its weekend services during the film’s 2004 opening, sending its parishioners to watch on any of 10 rented screens. 1

Housed in a former sports arena, Pastor Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston is reportedly the largest and fastest-growing in the country, with 52,000 English and Spanish-speaking worshippers. There are more than 1,200 megachurches in the United States, many serving middle-class suburban congregations with a “prosperity gospel” promoting personal fulfillment and success.

Megachurches in particular are proving to be fertile ground for products, services and messages that cross the line that divides the sacred from the secular. Twenty-five years ago, there were only 74 churches in the United States that attracted more than 2,000 people per week. Today, there are more than 1,200. 3 Megachurches have been growing in size and influence at the same time that the line between church and state has been fading, according to religious scholars and historians.

It’s not just their sheer numbers and explosive growth that have made megachurches friendly to marketers. The messages preached in different megachurches can vary as much as they do in smaller churches. Megachurches, however, are particularly conducive to secular messages by their very nature.

They tend to feature the latest communications technology — everything from high-quality video screens to sophisticated in-house broadcasting centers. They offer not only religious services within their sanctuaries but also recreational and dining services in other parts of their facilities, including Starbucks cafés, Subway sandwich shops and top-flight gymnasiums.

Megachurches, in other words, already tend to resemble the secular commercial world and imitate commercial strategies for communicating their messages: “We do attempt to harness the full potential of modern technology and business strategies to communicate with our members and our community,” said Bill Hybels, founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, a trend-setting megachurch in South Barrington, Ill. 4
But such harnessing has led many critics to wonder whether megachurches have strayed away from core Christian messages and toward something that is altogether too worldly.

“In this country, the Christian faith has succumbed to consumerism,” says Os Guinness, a social scientist in Northern Virginia and the author of numerous books about faith and society. “One of the reasons Christianity is so strong numerically but so weak culturally in this country is the watering down of the message.”

Despite offering such strong criticism, Guinness notes that he finds nothing wrong either with the size of megachurch congregations or their use of modern marketing, psychology or communications techniques. “The megachurch movement’s aim is laudable — to reach out to people and bring them to Christ,” he says.

Such ambiguity seems to color many discussions about megachurches. Their growth itself is evidence that they are fulfilling many people’s needs. Their preachers are often highly charismatic and learned. Equally important is their flexibility — their willingness to offer multiple services not only on Sundays but also throughout the week. In addition, megachurches typically offer many other convenient options, such as free day care and other programs for youth.

“They offer a lot of the things that churches have always offered — stuff for your kids to do and groups for you to be in and high-production-value worship services,” says Mark Chaves, a Duke University professor of sociology, religion and divinity. “Smaller or even average-sized churches used to be able to do that,” he says, but he notes that building and staff costs have made such programs unaffordable for many smaller congregations in recent years.

It’s difficult to know whether frequently heard complaints that megachurches offer up “theology lite” are true, says Scot McKnight, a professor of religious studies at North Park University in Chicago. He hasn’t seen a formal study that compares messages in megachurches with those in smaller churches.

“What we do know that dispels this idea,” McKnight says, “is that increasing numbers of [traditional] pastors are using the messages and adapting the messages of megachurch pastors.”

But critics say the messages megachurch pastors are sending out often seem to be more about personal

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**Most Megachurches Are in the South, West**

*The South and Far West have the highest percentage of America’s megachurches; New England has the lowest.*

**Concentration of Megachurches**

(by percentage and region)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Megachurch Attendance</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Megachurch Attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>364,612</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>69,319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>267,818</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>57,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>130,494</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>56,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>112,913</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>48,613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>81,802</td>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>46,051</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top 10 States with Most Megachurch Members

*California and Texas had the most megachurch members in 2001; megachurch-goers represent less than 2 percent of the population of any state.*

fulfillment and prosperity than finding communion with Christ. They also complain that some megachurch pastors have crossed the line not only separating the sacred from the secular in terms of letting private companies appeal to parishioners, but also the line separating church from state.

Some megachurch pastors have been prominent players in political debates, spreading campaign messages from their pulpits and lobbying hard on issues such as opposition to gay marriage.

At the same time, even their critics recognize there is a broad spectrum of both messages and approaches among the nation’s megachurches. Many are indistinguishable except in size from traditional churches in terms of their approach to the Gospel and their interaction with secular entities.

“My read is not that they’re becoming secularized but that they are highly adaptable and are not bound by what we think of as traditionally religious,” says Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist at Boston University’s School of Theology. “They’re not bound to the notion that you have to have a particular Book of Prayers or liturgy, or even that church always has to be on Sunday morning.

“In some ways, you might say they’re more secularizing than secularizing, in that they take any place and any time as available to have a religious service.”

As megachurches’ influence on American religious practice and the wider culture continues to grow, here are some of the questions people are asking:

Do megachurches dilute the Christian message?

In 2005, Christmas fell on a Sunday. A small number of megachurches — but a number that included Willow Creek and other influential congregations — closed their doors that day. Others held fewer services than usual, enabling parishioners to stay home with family rather than attend church.

Willow Creek, which draws as many as 20,000 worshipers on a typical Sunday and is among the nation’s largest churches, produced a DVD for the occasion featuring a contemporary Christmas story. “What we’re encouraging people to do is take that DVD and in the comfort of their living room, with friends and family, pop it into the player and hopefully hear a different and more personal and maybe more intimate Christmas message, that God is with us wherever we are,” Cally Parkinson, Willow Creek’s communications director, told The New York Times.

For some, Christian churches closing their doors on Christmas Day exemplified the notion that megachurches may have strayed from Jesus’ teachings in favor of making the comfort of their parishioners paramount. “I see this in many ways as a capitulation to narcissism, the self-centered, me-first, I’m-going-to-put-me-and-my-immediate-family-first agenda of the larger culture,” Ben Witherington III, professor of New Testament interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., told the Times. “If Christianity is an evangelistic religion, then what kind of message is this sending to the larger culture — that worship is an optional extra?”

Indeed, many megachurches, inspired by the examples of Saddleback Church’s Warren and others, take what is known as a “seeker-friendly” or “seeker-sensitive” approach. That is, they avoid mentioning difficult topics such as sin and judgment in hopes of not scaring people off. Instead, they stress God’s love and mercy. In addition, many megachurches preach what has been called the “prosperity gospel,” promoting personal fulfillment and debt reduction.
— even how to shake an addiction to pornography. “If Oprah and Dr. Phil are doing it, why shouldn’t we?” he asked. “We should be better at it because we have the power of God to offer.”

Leaders of fast-growing churches say their popularity doesn’t necessarily translate into shallow theology. They say their success is based on the potency of their message, not its weakness. “They’re not marketing just to grow numerically, because then you just become a business,” George Barna, author of numerous books on religion, told the Los Angeles Times. “You may do marketing that brings people in, but they’re not going to stay unless there’s something deep and meaningful spiritually.”

The fact that basic concepts of Christianity such as sin and repentance are often missing from megachurch vocabularies that include terms such as weight loss, counseling and rock climbing leads critics to complain megachurches are serving up tepid, lowest-common-denominator fare. “Clearly, they have done to churching what Wal-Mart did to merchandising,” says James B. Twitchell, a University of Florida English professor who has written two books about megachurches, including the new Shopping for God. “They are the low-cost deliverer of salvation.”

But Chaves, the Duke sociologist, notes that although some megachurches seem to water down their messages to appeal to their vast audiences, many others do not. “Although some of them are into the prosperity gospel, others are more traditional, such as Baptist messages,” he says.

Many church leaders themselves have noticed that younger worshippers seem to want a more substantive message. Robert B. Whitesel, who teaches church management at Indiana Wesleyan University, says that while baby boomers embraced the production values and personal-fulfillment messages megachurches have become known for, younger worshippers are looking for their church experience to be more “authentic” and “spiritual.”

The trend is not limited to megachurches. Larry Hollon, head of the United Methodist Church’s marketing and outreach arm, similarly notes that people born during the 1960s and ’70s “want a more traditional understanding of religion and faith.

“The contemporary worship that we’ve come to see in the past couple of decades appeals to the baby boomer, but younger generations connect with a more traditional style of worship,” Hollon said. “Quite frankly, that’s surprising to us.”

In addition to adapting their messages and services to appeal to a younger, perhaps more theologically rigorous generation, megachurches including Willow Creek are presenting more small-scale-gathering opportunities, including meals and Bible study classes, as an alternative to their sometimes overwhelming main services.

“Megachurches don’t want a kind of ‘no-accountability’ Christianity,” says McKnight of North Park University. “They want people in small groups, in Bible study, not treating church like entertainment.”

Ammerman, the Boston University sociologist, points out that megachurches, because of their size, can offer any number of intimate experiences. People can sometimes choose from up to 30 different social-outreach ministries if they want to do work in their community, she says. A larger megachurch, she adds, may offer 50 different Bible study groups, each designed to appeal to a different demographic group.

“They may have a group tailored for 30-year-old divorced women with three children,” she quips.
In general, Ammerman contends, megachurches are not likely to offer a significant variation from more traditional pastoring messages due simply to their size. Although the prosperity gospel has been very visible in some of the large churches, it can also be heard in some smaller churches — and not heard at all in many megachurches.

“I think the difference is not in message, it really is in form,” Ammerman says. “It’s whether people want to hear that Jesus can change your life. It’s whether people want to have the option of going to church on Thursday night or being part of something really big.”

Do megachurches blur the line between church and state?

When the Kansas legislature met in special session in 2005 to consider, among other things, new restrictions on abortion clinics, Joe Wright and Terry Fox — both megachurch pastors in Wichita — walked around the capitol like they owned the place. Hanging around before lunch one day outside the state Senate chamber, the two men offered up hugs and handshakes with the effortless familiarity of the most seasoned lobbyists.

They were in Topeka to make it clear that, in the wake of their triumph in forcing a vote on a constitutional ban against gay marriage, they planned to keep using their influence on a variety of political issues to come. For the most part, they found a warm welcome. “Topeka, in my opinion, is a very dark place, and these people bring some light into this building,” said Republican state Sen. Peggy Palmer. “They keep us on the right path, and I appreciate their help.”

Palmer had good reason to feel supportive. She attends Wright’s Central Christian Church — as did two other sitting Kansas legislators — and Wright had encouraged her to make a run for the Senate the year before against a veteran incumbent. Angered by the legislature’s refusal to move the gay-marriage issue onto the 2004 ballot, Wright, Fox and other Wichita pastors joined with allies throughout the state’s religious community to register tens of thousands of new voters. They published voter guides and helped elect enough conservative legislators to force a referendum on gay marriage, which passed easily in 2005.

When Wright and Fox started coming regularly to the capitol to lobby against gay marriage, some senators called them “the Taliban” and “the two ayatollahs from Wichita.” But they heard little name-calling on their return visit. Honored-guest status at the legislature was particularly gratifying for Wright, who hasn’t always been a popular figure there. He prompted a walkout back in 1996 when he opened that year’s House session with a prayer in which he told the members, among other things, that they had “abused power and called it politics . . . polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression.”

“The thing legislators understand is the power of who’s got the votes,” Fox says. “When we first came up here, some were friendly, most were cordial at best, but after the success of the marriage amendment, they not only will see us, they’ll buy our lunch anytime.”

Wright and Fox may have been relative newcomers to partisan politics, but it wasn’t entirely surprising the two Wichita preachers would become so

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**The Megachurch Difference**

Support groups are viewed as key activities by nearly two-thirds of megachurch congregations, compared with 15 percent in other churches. In another major difference, nearly 40 percent of megachurch congregations said fundraising was a key activity, compared with 20 percent of other churches. Meanwhile, religious education is considered a key activity among 90 percent of other churches compared with 71 percent of megachurches.

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**Percentage of congregations that considered the following as key activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>All churches</th>
<th>Megachurches only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious education classes</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer, meditation or faith sharing groups</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study or discussion groups</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowships, club or other social activities</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support groups (12-step, wellness, parenting, etc.)</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelism or recruitment activities</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community/social service activities</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choirs or other music programs</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising activities</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America’s Largest Churches, Jossey-Bass, 2007

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Available online: www.cqresearcher.com  
Sept. 21, 2007  
775
engaged. Abortion is the issue that sparked the modern conservative movement in Kansas and was a crucial, mobilizing force for religious activists around the country. During the 1991 "Summer of Mercy," thousands of abortion protesters descended on Wichita, leading to 2,700 arrests.

The issue has remained an important dividing line within the Kansas Republican Party ever since. But religious leaders have found other issues on which they’ve made their opinions known. In addition to the gay-marriage fight, Kansas has been the scene for recurring battles since 1999 over the teaching of creationism or intelligent design as alternatives to the Darwinian theory of evolution.10

The state’s church leadership is not only aroused but sophisticated, with some 1,200 ministers in constant electronic communication about political issues. Of course, many of their parishioners are engaged as well.

Not surprisingly, pastors of megachurches — who can preach to more potential voters from their pulpits than anyone else — hold the greatest sway. “If we represent the numbers we do in this state and we pay taxes, we ought to have a voice like everybody else,” says Jerry Johnston, a politically prominent conservative megachurch pastor in Overland Park.

In 2004, megachurches were a cornerstone of Republican strategy for turning out the vote in the presidential election. The Bush-Cheney campaign urged megachurch pastors to supply it with their directories to ease voter registration and contact efforts. “For the first time, we didn’t just engage businesspeople or Second Amendment supporters. We engaged people who said they were motivated first and foremost by their values, and these people were often churchgoers,” said Gary Marx, a Bush-Cheney liaison to socially conservative groups. “We asked them to reach out to their community, and their community is the megachurch.” 11

But not everyone feels that politics properly falls within the purview of preachers. “I’m uncomfortable with my preacher telling me how to vote,
and mine doesn’t,” says Sheila Frahm, a former lieutenant governor and Republican U.S. senator from Kansas. “Our country was built on the separation of church and state.”

The separation issue is being raised across the country. The influence of the Christian right on Republican politics — and the effort among the current Democratic presidential candidates to talk openly about their faith — have been among the most well-documented stories in contemporary politics.

“In the last generation, the Republican Party has been extraordinarily successful at linking being a Republican with being a good Christian,” Boston University’s Ammerman says.

Indeed, determining whether people regularly attend church or consider themselves secular is as good a predictor of how they are likely to vote as their stance on almost any particular issue. In 2004, 74 percent of white evangelicals voted for Republicans in House races, compared with just 25 percent who supported Democrats. Democrats sliced that margin slightly in 2006 but made greater inroads among Catholics and churchgoers in general.

But Ammerman and other observers point out that not all religious voters — and not all Christians — vote alike. They also detect a slight waning of Christian conservative influence. There has been a backlash against religious influence on a variety of issues, from the teaching of intelligent design to efforts to keep alive Terri Schiavo, a brain-dead Florida woman.

“God is not a Republican or a Democrat. That must be obvious, but it must be said,” said Jim Wallis, a leading evangelical and founder and president of Sojourners/Call to Renewal, a progressive organization concerned with the intersection of faith and politics. “There has been this hijacking or takeover of the Republican Party by its right wing and hijacking of religion by the religious right.”

It’s not surprising that liberals have grown wary of the Christian right. But even many Christian conservatives seem fed up with their role in contemporary politics. “Lots of individual people have come in and gone out,” Ammerman says. “They come in for a while, get disillusioned and go out again.”

Evangelicals and other churchgoers have certainly shed their historic reluctance about organized political engagement over the past 30 years, driven by anger over the Supreme Court’s
RISE OF MEGACHURCHES

1973 decision legalizing abortion, as well as by religious leaders such as the late Jerry Falwell, founder and head of the Moral Majority, who convinced them that such participation does not amount to consorting with the devil. Yet many have grown frustrated by failures and by the types of compromises inherent in politics.

“The problem with aligning your church with a political party is that almost invariably the party screws up,” says the University of Florida’s Twitchell. “Aligning yourself with politics is a bad idea when you’re in the business of trying to reveal the truth.”

And, for all the attention that politically active preachers such as Wright, Fox and Johnston have received in Kansas and other states, the reality is that most of their brethren have shied away from direct participation in the partisan arena.

“Only 16 percent of [megachurches] surveyed claim they partnered with other churches in political involvement in the past five years,” according to a Hartford Institute for Religion Research study. “And 76 percent of churches say they have never done this.” 14

Are megachurches becoming too worldly?

Megachurches have become more than just testing grounds for movies with religious themes. In addition to using the megachurch “audience” as a means of building buzz, some producers nowadays are screening movies in megachurches themselves, rather than at traditional movie theaters.

“We’ve got a theater chain sitting here that’s empty most of the week,” said Peter Lalonde of Cloud Ten Pictures, referring to the projection and video quality available at megachurches. 15

Lalonde’s company produces movies based on the best-selling “Left Behind” series. Its first two offerings bombed at the box office, but the third picture, starring Academy Award winner Louis Gossett, Jr., found a more welcoming home when it opened directly in 3,200 churches. “I tell everyone, the most important 10 minutes of this movie is not on film. It’s when the pastor goes up afterwards and shares the Gospel with the people who are there and invites them to make a decision for Christ,” Lalonde said. 16

Many pastors indeed have embraced religious films as an opportunity to communicate a Christian message with their flock, and perhaps a wider audience. The question some people ask about megachurches, though, is whether their open-door policy toward many commercial projects goes too far, turning sermons into sales opportunities.

“It’s a very intriguing bit of synergy, with churches and their messages about the next world getting integrated with commercial messages about this world,” says Twitchell.

Bishop T. D. Jakes, of The Potter’s House, a megachurch in Dallas, convinced companies such as Ford, Coca-Cola and Bank of America to sponsor his popular annual Megafest religious festival. 17 Coca-Cola and McDonald’s have long given out free samples of new products to 18,000-member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Ga. And Chrysler last year offered test drives of its vehicles at four of the nation’s largest black megachurches. “We try to go out to our best prospects in their environment, where they’re already engaged,” said David Rooney, director of Chrysler brand marketing, “and in the African-American community, one of the opportunities is the church.” 18

Some ministers lauded the car company for sponsoring a gospel tour and for giving parishioners free tickets — along with a $5 donation to a cancer center — for every test drive. But one Brooklyn church, while participating in the promotion, didn’t allow test drives on its property. The churches didn’t want to appear to be “in it for the money,” according to Senior Pastor A. R. Bernard.

Megachurches offer many services — and now one of them, it seems, is retail commerce. “With 330,000 churches in America, it’s potentially the largest distribution network in the country,” said A. Larry Ross, president of a Dallas marketing firm with many evangelical clients. “But most pastors are all about changing lives, so they’re going to be resistant if it’s a product that does not have an evangelistic message.”

Many megachurches not only host corporate visitors making sales pitches but also offer commercial services themselves, running bistros, gymnasiums and even nightclubs on site. Such ventures have opened them up to criticism that their enterprises are too entrepreneurial and they don’t focus enough on theology.

“It’s blurring the lines,” says Barry Harvey, a professor of contemporary theology at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, the world’s largest Baptist university. “The church is essentially becoming indistinguishable from its biggest competitor, the mall. To allow the commercial enterprise to come into the church is to allow the desire for accumulating things, buying things, to dominate even the relationship with God.”

But some observers say such criticism rings false. The restaurants may have gotten fancier, they say, but they are essentially just offering an opportunity for fellowship, like humble church suppers of old. “In the old days, 30 or 40 years ago, they had potluck dinner on the grounds, and people would bring food to the church,” says Mike Buster, Executive Pastor at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, which houses an upscale café. “This is our version of dinner on the grounds, providing an opportunity to meet and connect with church family and enjoy food and fellowship the Baptist way.”

Continued on p. 780
1970s Modern-day megachurch movement takes root.

1973 Supreme Court’s Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion spurs conservative pastors to develop an activist, politically interventionist Gospel, led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell.

1975 Bill Hybels launches Willow Creek Community Church with only 125 people in attendance. In three years it grows to 2,000 members and relocates on 90 acres of farmland in South Barrington, Ill.

1979 Falwell, by now the pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., helps found the Moral Majority.

1980s Megachurch pastors build grander churches, begin merging fundamentalist doctrine and involvement in political affairs.

1980 Dr. Robert H. Schuller builds the dramatic, all-glass Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, Calif., signaling the beginning of the modern megachurch movement. His “Tower of Power” television ministry eventually reaches 20 million people in 180 countries.

1990s The number of megachurches explodes, attracting media and scholarly attention.

1995 Pastor Creflo Dollar moves his World Changers Church International, a prominent African-American megachurch, to an 8,500-seat sanctuary outside Atlanta.

2000s Megachurches wield influence in politics and public life.

2000 Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act prohibits local governments from applying land-use laws to religious buildings, enabling megachurches to continue to get bigger. . . . Africa counts some 350 million Christians — roughly a 30-fold increase since the dawn of the 20th century.

2001 Jamal-Harrison Bryant founds Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, holding first service in a bank building’s lobby; within six years the church boasts 10,000 members

2002 Rick Warren publishing The Purpose Driven Life, based on his sermons at Saddleback Valley Community Church.

2004 Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ,” marketed heavily to megachurches, takes in more than $26 million on its opening day, eventually grossing nearly $400 million.


2006 In February, 86 evangelical Christian leaders urge Congress to limit carbon-dioxide emissions to combat global warming. . . . In June 100 black ministers gather at a Dallas summit and denounce megachurches, saying many have abandoned Jesus’ emphasis on social justice in favor of a gospel of wealth. . . . Warren concludes 13-nation tour of Asia in July. . . . Chrysler launches gospel tour in October featuring singer Patti Labelle, as part of a promotion that includes test drives for parishioners at major black megachurches.

2007 On May 6 Dollar begins broadcasting his sermons live via satellite to a community center in Battle Creek, Mich., as part of a plan to broadcast into churches in all 50 states . . . . Moral Majority founder Falwell dies on May 15 . . . . Kingway International Christian Center in London announces plans to open a 9,000-seat church, the largest in Britain . . . . Supreme Court rules on July 25 that a group of taxpayers could not sue to block the Bush administration from directing federal grants to religious organizations . . . . On Aug. 30 the Taliban releases the last of two-dozen South Korean Christian missionaries who had been held hostage for six weeks in Afghanistan . . . . D. James Kennedy dies; the influential televangelist presided over the 10,000-member Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale. . . . Simon & Schuster plans Oct. 15 release of Become a Better You, the latest book by Houston megachurch pastor Joel Osteen, with an initial printing of 3 million copies.
‘Reverse’ Missionaries Aim at Developed Nations

South Korea has 17,000 people in 170 countries.

The celebrations were muted after the Taliban freed 19 South Korean Christian missionaries in September from captivity in Afghanistan. The hostages’ return was, of course, a happy occasion, but they also were widely criticized for proselytizing in a Muslim country in the face of government warnings not to.

“The Protestant churches need to stop their hitherto egocentric and unilateral missionary style of pushing for their own religion, without respecting the specific, different beliefs and cultural characteristics of those whom they intend to convert,” editorialized The Korea Times, an English-language daily in Seoul. 1

The oldest hostage, Yoo Kyung-shik, spoke of the group’s contrition upon its return to Seoul. As part of the release agreement, South Korea promised to block more missionaries from traveling to Afghanistan.

Although the group’s ordeal and the tense negotiations that led to its release triggered anger in some precincts, many applauded the group’s efforts. South Korea has become the world’s second-largest source of missionaries, after the United States, with some 17,000 people spreading the Word in 170 countries. 2

Asian, Latin American and African countries have long played host to Christian missionaries from the industrialized West. But now developing nations are starting to send their own apostles into the world — not just to poor countries such as Afghanistan but to the United States and Europe as well.

These so-called reverse missionaries are preaching the Gospel where it has fallen out of fashion. In London, a church founded by a Nigerian immigrant is building an auditorium at its new home that seats 8,000 — or 5,500 more than St. Paul’s Cathedral. 3 “When we became Christians in the East, we read the Bible and it said, ‘Go out into the world and spread the Gospel,’ ” says Ravi Chandran, a missionary pastor from Singapore who runs a church in Denmark — one of about 150 run by foreigners there. “And guess what? We came back to the West!” 4

Many of these missionaries hail from megachurches. The freed Koreans all belong to the 5,000-member Saemmul Presbyterian Church, which is far from that country’s largest. In part, suggests Scott Thumma, a professor of the sociology of religion at Connecticut’s Hartford Institute for Religion Research, huge churches thrive in foreign capitals because of the density of population. “The megachurches there can be 10 times as large because you don’t have to deal with cars and parking ramps,” Thumma says.

The new wave of foreign missionaries differs from the traditional way Christianity spreads overseas. Often the Gospel is printed as part of church bulletins.

And although some commercial messages can certainly be crass — a 2002 Chevrolet promotion featured the slogan “What Would Jesus Drive?” — the corporate sponsorships are different in scale but not in kind from the local business advertisements long found printed in part of church bulletins.

Megachurches, says Boston University’s Ammerman, simply offer people a variety of ways of interacting with each other and their religious brethren. “It’s very much a community center,” she says.

“What they’re trying to do,” said North Park University’s McKnight, “is create a space that permits different kinds of activities — conversation, fellowship. I applaud [the chance for] the younger generation to think about building buildings for churches that can be used other than one day a week.” 19

BACKGROUND

Recent Surge

Super-sized churches have been around since at least the late 1800s, when 5,000 people gathered weekly at Charles Spurgeon’s Park Street Chapel in London, attracted by his dynamic sermons.

In the United States, similarly, a number of notable early preachers built enormous congregations, often emerging as important voices in the broader culture. Abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher became known as “the most famous man in America” with his widely reprinted sermons preaching love and forgiveness, which drew thousands weekly to Brooklyn’s Plymouth Church in the mid-19th century. Aimee Semple McPherson traveled far in spreading the word through revival meetings but in 1923 established the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles, which seated 5,300 and was generally packed. She grew an even larger audience through radio. Similarly, Billy Graham, well-known as a spiritual adviser to presidents throughout the post-World War II era, reached thousands through his traveling “crusades,” but millions more through an active broadcast ministry.

Today’s megachurches also are founded, more often than not, by charismatic individuals. These popular pastors differ from their forebears, however. Although there have always been large congregations, the scale and scope of today’s megachurches is without precedent, with some 1,200 megachurches
has been spread through smaller “cell groups,” which meet in homes and other modest surroundings. “Pastors in the United States have more of an infatuation with size and who can build the biggest church,” says Donald E. Miller, director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. “Rather than measure success by size, these global churches measure success by how many daughter churches they can start.”

Many of those daughter churches are now in the United States. In New York City alone, more than 100 churches conduct services in African tongues. The most prominent African church in this country, however, seeks to reach not immigrants but English speakers.

The Redeemed Christian Church, which was founded in Nigeria, operates more than a dozen branches in New York City, with more than 200 parishes nationwide. The church is building a new national headquarters and conference center on 500 acres in rural Texas, north of Dallas. Despite its success, the church has not always received a warm welcome. Its largest U.S. congregation — a 2,000-member church in Bowie, Md. — was vandalized with racist graffiti last year that included swastikas, the letters “KKK” and anti-black epithets.

Warren has not only supplied other pastors with thousands of free copies of his book. He also has trained some 300,000 ministers through seminars and Internet classes, while well more than 10,000 churches have offered his 40 Days of Purpose study-group course.

“For Purpose-Driven church leaders, he has developed an ‘evangelism strategy’ that includes a casual dress code, convenient parking, bright lights, live bands, short prayers and simple sermons that accentuate the positive,” reported Time magazine in a 2004 profile. “The result, he says, will lead not only to filled pews but, ultimately, more saved souls.”

Only a few other contemporary pastors can rival Warren’s influence. Hybels, at Willow Creek, also has published many influential works and conducted extensive training of other pastors. The Willow Creek Association, founded in 1992 to spread his church’s core philosophies, now boasts nearly 12,000 member churches.

In general, many networks and consultants share spiritual and management strategies, offering instructional “podcasts for pastors” and even providing advice about what color ties to wear during services.

Big-Box Approach

Several reasons help explain why megachurches have flourished in recent years. In general, megachurches have become part of mostly suburban developments. Increasingly, people no longer tend to think of their community as being limited to their immediate neighborhood and its schools, parks and shops. Instead, they are ready to travel widely within...
Preaching the Gospel of Prosperity

_Critics say black megachurches abandon social justice._

_Creflo Dollar is looking to spread his message far beyond his megachurch ministry in suburban Atlanta. He hosts a syndicated television show and operates a publishing house and record label. Earlier this year, he announced plans to open satellite World Changer churches in every state—with the goal eventually to open 500 in all._

Dollar preaches what is known as “prosperity gospel,” helping people lead not only spiritually fulfilling but also financially rewarding lives.

“I define prosperity as total prosperity,” he said. “We take the word of God and bring it down to a practical level to let them see that it is relevant and can be applied in every area of life.”

It’s not unusual for megachurch pastors to preach the prosperity gospel. But because Dollar is African-American—as are most of his congregants—some critics charge that he has abandoned the black church’s historical mission as an agent for broader social justice.

“The message of many churches has been co-opted by American capitalism,” acknowledged Frederick Haynes III, who spreads the gospel of prosperity at his 8,000-member African-American church in South Dallas. “A megachurch should not just be known for the traffic jam it creates on Sunday, but for doing something more in the community.”

There are basically two types of African-American megachurches, says Scott Thumma, coauthor of the 2007 book _Beyond Megachurch Myths_. One is the inner-city megachurch, which tends to be activist, for the most part, and attached to a predominantly African-American denomination.

“The relationship between religious involvement and serious crime is inversely related,” according to Baylor sociologist Byron R. Johnson. “That is, the higher the religious involvement, the lower the level of serious crime.”

Some critics charge that the newer megachurches, with their emphasis on material wealth, threaten the African-American church’s historic role as a progressive force.

“The prosperity gospel is a distortion of longstanding commitments black churches have had to the social well-being of the black community,” said R. Drew Smith, scholar in residence at the Leadership Center of Morehouse College in Atlanta. “Historically, where black churches emphasized prosperity, they were generally referring to black prosperity in a collective sense, as opposed to this individual focus within the contemporary prosperity gospel.”

Dollar’s own lavish lifestyle has been dubbed the “gospel of bling.” Some days he travels on his Lear jet, other times he flies in his helicopter, or he might decide to drive around in one of his two Rolls-Royces. Still, Dollar maintains that his message has been distorted, that he is concerned about helping others embrace God.

Despite the prominence of liberal black preachers such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, says Boston University sociologist Ammerman at Boston University.

_a suburban region. Driving to a megachurch out near the Interstate falls within that general pattern._

“Driving to a regionally based institution that’s very big and offers kind of one-stop shopping, if you will, is the way we do lots of things,” says sociologist Ammerman at Boston University. “A megachurch becomes a typical, comfortable way of doing things for people who are used to driving to the regional mall or the regional sports stadium.”

While megachurches are virtually everywhere, they do tend to locate near Interstates or other major highways out in suburban or exurban areas, and are most often located in fast-growing Sun Belt states. Church growth reflects not only the growth of the surrounding population but also may be a byproduct of it. That is, the megachurch provides an anchor to people living in communities where they don’t otherwise have roots. “Exurban cities tend not to have immediately recognizable town squares,” writes Johnathan Mahler of _The New York Times_, “but many have some kind of big, new structure where newcomers go to discuss their lives and problems and hopes: the megachurch.”

Typically, that big, new structure is rather ordinary looking and almost hard to tell apart from office buildings or warehouses. This architectural anonymity seems to be intentional. “We want the church to look like a mall,” said McFarland, the Arizona megachurch pastor. “We want you to come in here and say, ‘Dude, where’s the cinema?’” This embrace of the everyday is part of the typical megachurch’s message—that religion is part of the whole of life, not something that comes around once a week on Sundays.

Amplifying that message is the effort by most megachurches to provide more than inspiration to parishioners. Megachurches act as de facto community centers, providing day care, athletic facilities, counseling and...
schooling as well as occasional extras such as surfing programs and car repair. They are designed to compete with other potential destinations seven days a week.

University of Florida megachurch critic Twitchell says megachurches “clearly are meeting consumer demand.” He says churches don’t like to discuss the notion that they are competing with each other for attendance, but megachurches clearly have learned from modern marketing techniques. “They’ve taken the efficiencies of mass production into a realm that has always been competitive, but not quite this effective.”

**Filling Seats**

Duke sociologist Chaves agrees that economics has a lot to do with megachurch growth. Megachurches are able to offer programs beyond the strictly religious in a way smaller churches no longer can afford. “There’s been an economic shift,” Chaves says. “The run-of-the-mill 150- to 200-person church can no longer afford a youth minister, musicians, high-quality programming for all ages. That has led to people shifting from smaller to larger churches.”

More than a third of the nation’s megachurches are nondenominational, according to the Hartford Institute. That means they can keep the money that they raise at home, using it for programming, production and ministries, rather than sending portions of their collections to a hierarchical church bureaucracy elsewhere. In 1970, Chaves says, about 8 percent of Southern Baptists attended the largest 1 percent of churches. Today, an estimated 15 percent of Baptists attend the biggest churches.

“The church has prospered, but neighborhoods surrounding them have not,” said Mark Whitlock, a pastor in Irvine, Calif., who provides neighborhood-outreach training to other African-American clergy. “The churches must go beyond the walls.”

4 Ramirez, op. cit.
Megachurches Outpacing Nation’s Growth

Since 1900, the nation’s population quadrupled while the number of megachurches increased 121-fold. In 2005 there were four megachurches for every million people—30 times more than in 1900.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Year</th>
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Source: Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America’s Largest Churches, Jossey-Bass, 2007

a stranger. That’s not an issue in a megachurch that seats 2,000 or more. For a generation accustomed to large, fairly anonymous institutions, says Thumma of the Hartford Institute, “They find the megachurch to be ‘home.’ They are willing to drive past dozens of other congregations, fight to find a parking space, follow the signs to get to the nursery and worship in a communal setting with 5,000 other relatively anonymous persons, just like they do every day of their lives.”

But to attract such large crowds, megachurches have to be more than comfortable. They not only offer extras such as day care and free parking but also, to put it in secular terms, when it comes to the main event they can be counted on to put on a good show. “They’ve taken advantage of all the innovations in music and video to make it very unstressful in church,” says Twitchell. “A lot of music, no hymns and they make it very easy to see the ministers.”

Megachurch ministers speak quite openly about their use of technology in spreading the Gospel. They study each other’s offerings in terms of message, facilities and management and argue it is all in service of the larger goal of bringing more souls to salvation.

“If there is a common message shared by all megachurches, it is that they want to portray what they do as more vital than other congregations, somehow better than ‘ordinary’ Christianity,” says Thumma. “The image these congregations want to portray is, ‘This is your parents’ religion, but bigger and better.’ The choirs are superb, the preaching is first-rate, the church-school choices are overwhelming and their attendance and baptisms are climbing.”

Students taking many theological courses now have to pass business courses in order to graduate, according to John N. Vaughan, founder of Church Growth Today, a Missouri-based megachurch research center and consultancy. “They must know how to successfully market their message to save souls,” Vaughan says.

Megachurch pastors are certainly experts at marketing, spreading their messages to thousands in their sanctuaries, the Internet and broadcasting. Their church complexes may comprise several buildings spread across dozens of acres, offering worshippers a choice of contemporaneous services in a number of different styles. “At the really big ones, you can choose a jazz service or a contemporary service or a traditional service,” says author and social scientist Guinness. “You can literally choose the one you want.”

Church members and guests are greeted by large lobbies and well-lit signs that guide them on their way along courtyards that often offer refreshments, says Thumma. The sanctuaries are usually spacious with comfortable seating but sparsely decorated, containing a minimum of religious symbols. “The sermon, probably delivered from a clear, plexiglass, removable podium,” says Thumma, “conveys a biblical but practical, non-dogmatic, this-worldly message.”

Both the sermon itself and the lack of religious decoration, he continues, are meant to convey that religion is not something that stands apart from the concerns of this world and daily life. Megachurch pastors approach their enterprises like CEOs, while so much about both their services and ancillary church activities conveys a connection with both contemporary and commercial life. “They have used, for better or worse, the best modern ideas in terms of messages and marketing and so on,” says Guinness.

Continued on p. 786
Are megachurches too big?

RUTH TUCKER
FORMER PROFESSOR OF THEOLOGY, CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY; AUTHOR, LEFT BEHIND IN A MEGACHURCH WORLD
WRITTEN FOR CQ RESEARCHER, AUGUST 2007

Megachurches are a blight on the landscape of America — as physical structures and as authentic expressions of religion. Their sprawling campuses, consuming vast tracts of land beyond the suburbs, are comprised of buildings and parking lots that are put to full use only one day a week. They draw worshipers who drive their SUVs dozens of miles each way. Their large auditoriums utilize air-conditioning, heating and other utilities far beyond normal per capita use. Their tax-exempt status is supported by all of us.

Although megachurches declare that their message is biblical, in line with historic Christianity, they unconsciously — if not consciously — promote a religion of materialism and status to self-absorbed consumers. Stars fill the stage. Worship is a show. Pews are filled with people who have abandoned the old, red-brick church in the neighborhood or the white clapboard chapel amid rolling farmland.

There are exceptions to the rule. Megachurches do not always follow the above pattern — particularly certain urban megachurches that have reclaimed run-down inner-city neighborhoods. Consider Living Word, in Chicago’s Forest Park Mall, only recently considered an eyesore and a so-called deadmall. Now the mall is filled with spiritual life and economic vibrancy. Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York is another example of a church that has reversed urban blight.

But whether they are sprawling campuses beyond the suburbs or re-designed downtown malls, megachurches suck the life out of smaller neighborhood churches. Like a Wal-Mart that lures customers from the family-owned shoe store on the town square, the megachurch attracts customers. It offers everything in the realm of religion — and more — that a middle-class family could want. The little neighborhood church, like the shoe shop, closes its doors. It simply cannot compete.

This little “left-behind” church is often romanticized — as in the fiction of Jan Karon’s Mitford series. But the small church has as many moral malfunctions (per capita) as do the megachurches. It has also bought into a materialistic lifestyle, though it is often more dream than reality. It has grown inward and has become complacent in many instances. Maybe it deserves to die, so the reasoning goes.

No one can deny the “success” of the megachurches. The little churches are left behind — sometimes in a mode of slumber. They must wake up and take up the cross and follow Jesus, ever aware of the biblical admonition, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

EDDIE GIBBS
PROFESSOR OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY, FULLERTON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY; AUTHOR, CHURCHNEXT
WRITTEN FOR CQ RESEARCHER, AUGUST 2007

Some megachurches are criticized because they have mainly drawn their attendees from other churches. Others come under fire because of their undue focus on a high-visibility, celebrity preacher and their promoting of “consumer” religion, which does not forge authentic Christian community. There is some basis in fact for these criticisms, and I fully understand and appreciate the concerns articulated by some highly respected and close friends and colleagues. However, one might balance these concerns with the positive contributions of megachurches.

Megachurches have played a strategic role during the past three decades of high population mobility, especially in areas of the country where there has been extensive suburban development. Entrepreneurial leaders with a vision for these burgeoning communities have established churches that are attractive and readily accessible to previously churched people moving into the area — people searching for a worship experience that has cultural relevance and a range of high-quality programs that meet their personal and family needs. If such churches had not been established, it is questionable whether these people would have reconnected with a church at all.

Megachurch leaders with ability, integrity and a message that brings hope and purpose have high public profiles that may extend beyond their region to the national and international level. They may have access to leaders in political, financial and military circles that would be out of reach of the small church pastor. For instance, last year, just before Christmas, Tim Russert, moderator of NBC’s “Meet the Press,” conducted an hour-long interview with Pastor Rick Warren, of Saddleback Community Church in Southern California.

A most significant distinction among megachurches is between “parasite” churches and those that seek to attract people who have given up on church or have little or no knowledge of the Christian message. The latter are more concerned about life transformation taking place than on a Sunday morning head count.

According to recent surveys, the majority of megachurches are not independent but belong to a traditional denomination. They conduct a wide range of social and relief ministries and seek to establish branch congregations. While these megachurches struggle to retain the “under 35s,” the aging Boomer generation means they will continue to play a significant role in the nation’s religious life.
Megachurch pastors say that what might be called their side offerings — day-care facilities, soccer fields, cafés and the like — are merely an attempt to provide further opportunities for fellowship among their flock. Some of their neighbors, however, complain that megachurches can take their forays into business a bit too far. After all, megachurches, like any other religious organization, operate as tax-exempt nonprofits.

Competing restaurateurs and other businesses don’t seem to mind the megachurch operations, but some local governments worry such enterprises will eat into their tax base. With this in mind, some churches have sought ways to give back to their communities, Thumma says. “Some churches are trying to offset most of these [concerns] by donating land for parks,” he added. “Or they open their tennis courts or soccer field to the public.”

Local governments have also occasionally sought to block new megachurch construction or expansion due to worries about their impact on traffic, parking and other such issues. “We [Americans] left Europe for religious freedom, and now we have zoning ordinances that prevent the ability to practice your faith,” said David C. Watkins, a lawyer for a Korean Catholic church whose plans to construct a 24,000-square-foot home were put on hold this year by Rockleigh, N.J. “It’s more sophisticated, but it’s still discrimination.”

Such zoning disputes have become fairly common, but in recent years churches nearly always have prevailed, thanks to the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. Enacted in 2000, it bars governments from imposing “land use regulation in a manner that imposes a substantial burden on the religious exercise of a person, including a religious assembly or institution,” unless there is a compelling government interest in doing so.
Local governments have found that a high bar to reach. “Basically, the law makes it easier [for churches] to get relief in the federal courts if their building plans are challenged,” said Samuel E. Wynkoop, former director of the Prince George’s County (Maryland) Department of Environmental Resources.

Church Politics

Courts in recent years have tended to look favorably on arguments from the religious community that they have been excluded from the public square. Some courts have issued rulings that some critics complain threaten to melt the barriers between church and state.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, 5-4, that a group of taxpayers could not sue to block the Bush administration’s faith-based initiatives, through which religious groups were counseled at White House seminars on ways to receive federal grants.

In 2001, the court ruled that public schools must make their facilities available to religious activities on the same basis as any other after-school programs. A year later, the court gave the green-light to a school-voucher program that mainly benefited religious schools in Cleveland.

John Witte, Jr., director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University, says court rulings have led to a retreat from “strict separationism,” with Congress and state legislatures now building into statutes special accommodations and exemptions for religious groups, “which certainly do benefit megachurches and other strong religious organizations especially.

“While part of this might be viewed as religious affirmative action, designed to undo decades of treating religion as undeserving of government support,” Witte continues, “part of this has given religious groups unusual new political power and access, with all the dangers that entails.”

Religious leaders have certainly made their presence felt in politics and government in recent years, enjoying unusual access to the Bush White House. Many megachurch pastors, along with other religious leaders, actively campaigned for President Bush in 2004, distributing voter guides to their congregations and spreading mostly pro-GOP messages from their pulpits. “Praying for a candidate in and of itself does not present difficulties,” said IRS spokesman Frank Keith at the end of that campaign season, when questions about whether politicized churches were putting their tax-exempt status at risk.

Organized religious groups have tended to favor the GOP since the Supreme Court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion. Large-scale mobilization efforts led by conservative pastors, including Falwell and Pat Robertson, founder of the 700 Club, have also encouraged churchgoers to side with Republican causes.

Democratic presidential candidates in next year’s race, including Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois, have consciously sought to neutralize this Republican advantage by reaching out to the faith community. Church groups also have banded together to take the lead on issues than gay marriage and abortion. Christian organizations provided early and persistent voices trying to point out and stop the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan. A group of 86 evangelical leaders banded together last year to pressure Congress to limit carbon-dioxide emissions as a means of curtailing global warming.

The ones that do are so big that even if only 10 percent of megachurches are active, then that would be a lot of people,” Witte says. “It’s just that there are a lot more who aren’t.”

A single 2,000-person church is much easier to mobilize for social and political action than 10 200-member churches, says Duke’s Chaves. Politicians are more likely to want to address the larger congregations, while their pastors will find it easier to gain the ear of policy makers.

For all the attention given to religious voters, Chaves argues that the political activism of a very few megachurches, or their pastors, skews the public view of how politically active these churches are. It’s much more typical for churches not to participate in politics, he says.

“The ones that do are so big that even if only 10 percent of megachurches are active, then that would be a lot of people,” Chaves says. “It’s just that there are a lot more who aren’t.”

OUTLOOK

Mirroring Society

There has been a pronounced counter reaction to megachurches in recent years. Known variously as house churches, organic churches or churches without walls, gatherings of small groups to worship in private settings are, in the view of some, a return to the earliest days of Christianity.

Such gatherings enable people to get together in intimate groups and share their thoughts and prayers, rather than all sitting face-forward listening to a single individual preach.

“People are creating a new form of church, and it’s really exciting,” said California-based author and researcher Barna. “We predict that by the year 2025 the [megachurch’s] market share will be cut in half.”

Available online: www.cqresearcher.com Sept. 21, 2007 787
RISE OF MEGACHURCHES

That great a sea-change may sound far-fetched, but a 2006 survey by his firm found that 9 percent of U.S. adults attend house churches weekly — a ninefold increase from the 1990s — and some 70 million Americans have experienced a home church. 33

Megachurches are nothing if not adaptable, and many are now endeavoring to provide more intimate experiences by forming “cell groups,” size-limited Bible study groups, youth groups and ministries.

For the most part, however, there appear to be relatively few takers. A single megachurch may offer 80 small groups of various kinds, but it’s rare for more than 30 percent of church members at any given megachurch to participate in any of them, according to Gibbs, at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena. 34

Still, it’s clear megachurch congregants are more than passive viewers of big-screen presentations. Megachurches require enormous numbers of volunteers to keep their doors open. Willow Creek, for example, requires 1,000 volunteers a week to conduct its services in South Barrington, Ill. 35 There and at other churches, parishioners also volunteer through church ministries or enjoy networking at the myriad athletic and dining facilities that amplify both the spiritual and social experience of belonging to their church.

According to Duke University’s Chaves, the growth of megachurches has not been the result of their ability to bring new people into the flock. Overall church attendance has not increased during the megachurch boom, suggesting that people are shifting from smaller churches to larger ones. That sort of consolidation is happening among churches in general, he says, not just in megachurches.

“In every denomination on which we have data,” he writes, “people are becoming increasingly concentrated in the very largest churches, and this is true for small and large denominations, for conservative and liberal denominations, for growing and declining denominations.” 56

As megachurch expert Thumma writes in Beyond Megachurch Myths, the megachurch phenomenon is going to continue into the foreseeable future. By 2010, Thumma and coauthor Dave Travis predict the number of megachurches will have increased by 50 percent, to 1,800. The number of churches that draw 1,000 or more worshipers but fall short of the megachurch “cut-off” of 2,000 attendees has been growing rapidly as well.

After all, megachurches mirror many other aspects of American society, such as retailing, that have experienced enormous consolidation. “As members of this society continue to be raised in and nurtured by these mega-institutional realities,” they write, “it seems very unlikely that the entire U.S. population will reject this form of church that has so much in common with the rest of our large-scale world.” 37

For that reason, Chaves predicts, “For some more years, we will see increasing concentration of people in bigger churches.

“There’s a limit to it — we’re not all going to wind up in one big church — but I don’t know what that limit will be.”

About the Authors

Alan Greenblatt is a staff writer at Governing magazine. He previously covered elections, agriculture and military spending for CQ Weekly, where he won the National Press Club’s Sandy Hume Award for political journalism. He graduated from San Francisco State University in 1986 and received a master’s degree in English literature from the University of Virginia in 1988. His recent CQ Researcher reports include “The Partisan Divide” and “Media Bias.”

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Notes

8 Warner, op. cit.
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Center for Religion and Civic Culture, University of Southern California, 825 Bloom Walk, Suite 439, Los Angeles, CA 90089-1481; (213) 740-8562, www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc.

Center for the Study of the Law and Religion, Emory University School of Law, 310 Gambrell Hall, 1301 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30322-2770; (404) 712-8710, www.law.emory.edu/index.php?id=1570.

Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 North Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91182; (625) 584-5200; www.fuller.edu.

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The Leadership Center at Morehouse College, 830 Westview Dr., S.W., Atlanta, GA 30314; (404) 614-8565; www.morehouse.edu/centers/leadershipcenter/index.html.


Texas Freedom Network, P.O. Box 1624, Austin, TX 78767; (512) 322-0545; www.tfn.org.

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20 For background see Marcia Clemmitt, “Intelligent Design,” CQ Researcher, July 29, 2005, pp. 637-660.
24 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Mahler, op. cit.
36 Chaves, op. cit.
37 Scott Thumma and Dave Travis, Beyond Megachurch Myths (2007).
Books


An assistant sociology professor at Hamilton College examines how Lutheran churches in the San Francisco area try to compete with megachurches, sacrificing hymns in favor of rock music and scrapping traditional white robes and stoles for Hawaiian shirts.


An author specializing in faith, society and public policy examines the then-nascent megachurch movement and asks key questions, such as, Should churches' missions be formed by the Word or by the world?


Two emeritus professors at Louisiana State University trace how evangelical megachurches evolved from multiple models and influences.


An academic (Thumma) and a consultant explore the phenomenon of contemporary church growth while debunking a number of “myths” that have accumulated about megachurches.


The best-selling Christian author and founder of one of the nation’s largest churches outlines his “purpose-driven” life theology.

Articles


Corporations are embracing megachurches as a marketing opportunity and ready-made distribution channel.


A Duke University sociologist examines the megachurch movement and the economic reasons behind it.


The former head of President Bush’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives discusses how Christianity is growing and becoming revivified in developing countries.


Holley examines how the late Jerry Falwell, who built one of the first megachurches, convinced evangelicals to engage in — and influence — American politics.


Mahler examines how megachurches are serving not just as spiritual homes but community centers in fast-growing communities.


Famed Atlanta megachurch pastor Creflo Dollar is expanding to other cities, but critics argue his “prosperity gospel” message betrays the black church’s historic role.


Reddy’s profile of a prominent Baltimore pastor examines the controversies surrounding black megachurches in general.


Churches from places such as Ghana and South Korea are sending thousands of missionaries to European countries.


This cover story delves into the controversy over “prosperity theology,” the belief promoted in some megachurches that God wants all Christians to be wealthy.


Megachurches are shifting their internal strategies as part of a larger trend of churches attempting to provide more intimate, spiritually rigorous programming.


So-called reverse missionaries from Nigeria have opened hundreds of churches in the United States.

Studies


The most recent survey of large congregations by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and the Leadership Network finds 50 percent more megachurches than previously thought, located in all but five states.
Church and State


With support from megachurches, backers of an abortion initiative are planning a substantial push to motivate Christian voters to go to the polls.


By inviting Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., to speak about AIDS at his megachurch, Pastor Rick Warren sent the signal that his megachurch is not under the influences of the Republican Party.


An increasing number of Christian conservatives have been moving into politics, stimulated by favorable Supreme Court rulings on abortion, school prayer and other issues.

Faith and Teachings


Several prominent black leaders, including Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, have said that megachurches have abandoned Jesus Christ's emphasis on social justice by preaching a gospel of wealth and self-help.


In keeping with their “family friendly” approach, many megachurches have decided not to hold services when Christmas falls on a Sunday.

Grossman, Cathy Lynn, “Dissatisfaction, Yearning Make Churchgoers Switch,” USA Today, April 23, 2007, p. 6D.

Many worshipers have switched to megachurches because they say their old churches failed to engage their faith, according to a new study.

Growth and Commercialization


Megachurches have become popular because their founders have made them attractive to mildly religious individuals.


Researchers have identified 1,210 American megachurches with an average weekly attendance of 3,612.


Megachurches are beginning to televise their sermons and build satellite campuses in order to accommodate their growing congregations.


A new evangelical awakening has reshaped America’s religious landscape through a surge in the construction of megachurches.

Prosperity Ministry


Creflo Dollar, a nationally known prosperity preacher in suburban Atlanta, told an audience in Oakland that being rich should not be considered a sin.


One drawback of attending a megachurch is having to defend the size of the pastor's personal finances.


Preaching of the “prosperity gospel,” which teaches that the truly faithful are rewarded with wealth, is partly to blame for recent religion-related fraud.

Citing CQ Researcher

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