

# The Megachurch Future

*Attendance is slowing and leaders are struggling. Thom Rainer examines where megachurches are today and where they could be going.*

*by Thom S. Rainer*

*from Outreach magazine, 2006*

Every level of research I have seen on megachurches in the past 20 years, including my own, has pointed to a clear and growing trend: The percentage of American churchgoers attending churches with an attendance of 2,000 or more is increasing. More church attendees are worshipping at megachurches, and fewer attendees are heading to smaller churches.

That trend seemed unabated until 2003, when our research team began to notice that the rate of increase in megachurch attendance was slowing. Indeed, if this new trend continues, the aggregate attendance in American mega-churches will begin to decline in 2010.

On a local level, more megachurch leaders began to call my consulting firm for analysis, insights and recommendations, commenting that the "easy growth" of recent years was no longer a reality. They wondered what was happening, and what, if anything, they could do about it.

However, I'm not writing this article to diagnose and make recommendations about the slowing growth trends of American megachurches. Rather, I'm here to look at how megachurches are responding to their slowing growth today. In other words, what are megachurches currently doing that may impact their health and growth in future years?

Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with more than 100 megachurch leaders of multiple denominations and non-denominational churches. I didn't conduct a scientific survey, but I did listen. And as I listened, I began to hear patterns in their strategies, methodologies and approaches to church health. These pastors shared candidly about their current struggles and what they're doing—or not doing—to address those issues. Following are my seven observations about megachurches—indicators of where they are today and where they could be going in the coming years.

## Expansion Without Construction

It's no surprise that more than 90% of the leaders I spoke with served in churches with more than one campus or venue, or they were seriously considering making the move to multi-site. The multi-site movement has become synonymous with megachurches and continues to grow. How a church functions as a multi-site runs the gamut—some pastors travel from one location to the next, preaching at all of them. Others have more than one teaching pastor. In the multi-venue megachurch, the worship service may use a live feed to another location on the same campus or to a remote campus. And several churches are now simply playing video-recorded sermons for the worship services. A few megachurches are both multi-campus and multi-venue.

The reasons behind the multi-site movement are diverse. Some megachurches cannot grow further at their present campus due to facility and land restrictions. Other churches are in slow-growth or declining demographic areas and desire to reach another demographic community without abandoning their current site. Still others have noticed a desire among churchgoers for a smaller congregation, so the one large church becomes several smaller churches. And many of these megachurches seek to replicate the "DNA" of their successful congregation in another location.

## Multiplying pastors

Our research has shown consistently that while megachurch growth can be explained in a myriad of ways, one factor is pervasive: Megachurches have high-quality preaching. And because the challenge of developing a high-quality sermon every week is daunting, many megachurch pastors now share this load with other teaching and preaching pastors. Moreover, some churches are realizing the need for other teaching pastors to protect their senior pastor's health and help prevent burnout.

"I can preach 45 or 50 good sermons a year," one megachurch pastor shared with me, "but I cannot preach 45 or 50 great sermons a year. That's why our church called a second preaching pastor. And as we continue to grow, we will probably add a third in four to five years."

Of course, the multi-campus and multi-venue megachurch often needs more than one preaching or teaching pastor. Sometimes, it's physically impossible for a pastor to preach in all of the church's locations.

## **The Back-Door Problem**

Four of every five megachurch leaders I spoke with noted "the back door" as one of their three greatest challenges today and in the future. "We see more than 500 people join our church each year," one megachurch leader confided, "but we are not growing. Our back door is as big as our front door."

Some of these leaders have added new member classes or similar approaches to raise expectations of those who join their churches. Other churches have begun extensive small group ministries, hopeful that the relationships built in the small groups will encourage assimilation. And a few megachurches offer extensive one-on-one mentoring or discipleship, hoping to tackle the back-door issue.

But no church leaders felt they had the back-door problem solved. Some leaders simply ranked the issue as a greater challenge than others.

## **Small Group Neglect**

Most of the megachurch leaders I talked to spoke with enthusiasm about the years of effort and prayer their churches have put into the development of quality worship services. But many admitted that they had neglected the development of a quality small group structure during these years of the worship revolution.

One California megachurch pastor commented, "We are really seeing the effects of years of neglect of Sunday school [that church's primary small group]. The back door is wide open, discipleship is weak and evangelism is almost non-existent."

The pastor's comment introduces another issue: What is the most effective type of small group? Home groups? Sunday school? Discipleship groups? Other groups? LifeWay Research recently completed a study of small groups in various sized churches. One of the problems we noted is the varied definition of "small groups." Sometimes it's difficult to make conclusions because churches are defining and approaching small groups so differently.

Regardless of definition and approach, we may be on the brink of a small group revolution. And the megachurches in America may be the leaders of this revolution.

## **The Move to Doctrinal Depth**

Nearly seven of 10 megachurch leaders noted that their churches were making intentional efforts to provide deeper biblical teaching and preaching for their congregants.

"We have had a decade of diluted preaching and teaching in our church," one pastor confessed. "You can see the impact today: biblical illiteracy and church members who behave much like the non-Christians with whom they associate."

Some of the church leaders I talked to have become highly intentional about deeper and more biblically expository preaching. "Meatier preaching doesn't mean you have to be less relevant," a Texas pastor told me. Other churches are providing avenues for deeper teaching rich in biblical content. "We can't have another generation grow up in our church with almost no biblical literacy," the Texas pastor said.

## **A Return to Basic Evangelistic Strategies**

When I shared with many of the leaders of these congregations that most of the growth in American megachurches the past 20 years had come from transfer growth (Christians moving from one church to another), few were surprised. Indeed, the majority of these leaders shared that a return to evangelistic basics was one of their key strategies for the future.

What did they mean by "evangelistic basics"? The most common responses included intentional training of church members to share their faith with non-Christians. Others said that they simply have to become more intentional about sending their members into the world with evangelistic passion.

"It's not whether one evangelistic approach is better than another," a Maryland pastor shared. "It's whether we evangelize at all. Our mentality for the past several years is to expect the unbelievers to come to us. The Great Commission tells us to go, not to sit around and hope a lost person shows up."

## **The Move to Simplify**

Most of the church leaders I interviewed were tired. And most of them told me that their members were tired. "We are all about activities," one pastor shared. "We take people away from their families. We give them no time to rest. We are almost a 24/7 church, and our strategy each year is to add more activities. This has to stop."

Some of the leaders had indeed begun doing less, and doing a few things better. The process is not easy, because many of the activities become sacred cows. Watch this development carefully. It's too early to know for certain, but it does appear that the move toward simplification may be key among megachurches in the near future.

## **The Megachurch of 2011?**

If, over the next five years, more leaders continue to pursue practices like multi-site expansion and a return to evangelism, as well as address issues like closing the back door and small group neglect, we could see a very different megachurch in the near future.

Most of the trends are encouraging. If they do come to fruition, we may very well see megachurches reaching more people with the Gospel; growing new Christians through effective small groups and other means; reaching different demographic groups through multiple campuses and venues; and seeing the next generation of Christians become more biblically literate and counter-cultural.

Such a future seems distant these days. But maybe God has incredible plans for megachurches and other sized churches in the days ahead. Stay tuned. We certainly will.

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*This content originally appeared in the Top 100 2006 special issue of Outreach magazine, the gathering place for ideas, insights and stories of today's outreach-oriented church leaders. For more ideas and information, visit [outreachmagazine.com](http://outreachmagazine.com). For your free 3-issue mini subscription to Outreach magazine, [click here](#).*