

Speaking Volumes

<< BACK

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Megachurches offer religious life that meets peoples' needs

by: Ronald E. Keener

"The megachurch is more than just an ordinary church grown large," say Scott Thumma and **Dave Travis** in their book, **Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches** (Jossey-Bass, 2007), even as many criticize them for their theology, inclusiveness, practices and substance. **Thumma is a researcher in the Hartford Institute for Religion Research** and on the faculty at Hartford Seminary, and Travis is executive vice president of Leadership Network, Dallas, TX. Dr. Thumma shared his thoughts with Church Executive on megachurches:

Just how mega is the megachurch movement?

Three statistics about megachurches are critical and each tells a different story. There're about 1,250 in the U.S., but this number has dramatically increased over the past two decades — from one megachurch per a million Americans to roughly four per one million people. Yet they are still less than half of one percent of all churches. But a large number of attendees are concentrated in these very large churches, roughly 5 percent of those who attend or about the same amount of people as those attending the smallest 35 percent of churches. This group of churches is growing, has considerable draw and is highly influential although it is still a relatively small number of congregations.

What's distinctive about the last few decades that has promoted the development of so many megachurches?

Basically, society has upscaled. All our institutional forms have grown larger, first to accommodate the Baby Boom and then to become more efficient at customizing to meet diverse individual needs. Technological advances have helped this effort but not driven it. Rather, it is primarily fueled by Americans living in a super-sized context. For good or for bad, in the current cultural climate bigger is seen as better. Churches of this size are increasingly being seen as normal; they fit the cultural norms just like Home Depot, Wal-Mart, and the malls of America.

You say Americans are looking for choice and options, which leads to commitment and community. In what way is the megachurch a metaphor to today's social and cultural directions?

Addressing an individual's needs and desires, for good or for ill in our society, has become the starting point for the spiritual quest. Megachurches treat that impulse seriously and customize their programs and worship to meet that need. However, many of the best megachurches entice and demand their attendees grow beyond these self-serving individualistic desires into committed, missions-oriented mature Christians.

While megachurches are only a small portion of total congregations and parishioners, do they set the pace and agenda for the rest of the religious community? You call them the "seedbed of innovation, change, and growth."

These congregations have both prominence and resources. With their abundant resources of human talent and energy plus the financial ability to put ideas into action, they have the flexibility in their budgets to innovate and the impulse in their vision to risk experimenting to reach new audiences. Given their notoriety and prominence they have the cultural spotlight to be examples and models for other churches in ways smaller congregations don't. These programs, techniques, curriculums and worship forms developed by megachurches are both widely observed and copied.

What surprises did you find that you didn't expect in your research?

Diversity within these churches was expected but the level of and interest in diversity around race and ethnicity were much more than we expected. We were astonished to see the rapid growth to larger

sizes of the very newest megachurches that have been in existence less than 15 years. Another surprise was that the data showed what we experienced — that these churches are full of persons under 35 years of age.

What is there about a vision that attracts people? How does it have to be cast?

It has to be God's vision for your congregation. If it is, it will resonate with the people you are to attract. It has to be presented in an authentic and inspiring manner. It must be intrinsic to, embodied in, and proclaimed by all the members of the congregation, not just the leadership. And foremost, it must be the vision that you know God is calling you to live out — not of your own making.