

A Profile of Megachurches Today – 2000 Study

Introduction

Much of what we know about very large congregations is not derived from social scientific research. We have learned about the birth, success and functioning of large churches by reading experiential accounts written by either pastors or church consultants. These efforts have their place, but they seldom do justice in mapping the diversity of large congregations, nor in identifying the nuances within this phenomenon.

Until this present effort, in conjunction with the [Faith Communities Today](#) (FACT) project, no systematic study of the full range of megachurches had been undertaken with the intent to map their characteristics, growth patterns, or programmatic efforts. For this report, we define the size of a megachurch as a congregation with an average weekly worship attendance of 2000 or more.

A question we have been asked repeatedly is why survey megachurches separately for the FACT project. Since any random sampling of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, and United Methodist Church as well as other denominations, would inevitably include very large congregations; what is the need to question these congregations separately?

Whether we like it or not, *very large congregations are viewed as the trendsetters of the contemporary Christian world*. These success stories are read by thousands of pastors and members alike as what they want to grow into. Even if a small congregation doesn't desire to have a 3500-person worship service, they still look to the programmatic characteristics of the megachurch for clues about what their congregation should be doing. And even if there are congregations who would not agree with these statements, all churches – including the megachurches themselves – have mistaken impressions (both positive and negative) about these large congregations because so little actual research has been done on them.

Yet, any national survey of congregations would collect information on only a few megachurches since they represent a very small percent (less than half of 1 percent) of the total number of congregations in any denomination. Therefore, the only way to get a good snapshot of the characteristics of these influential congregations was to survey them as an independent population and then later adjust (weight) their scores relative to their actual distribution in the total population of congregations in the United States.

The pastors of a total of 600 megachurches were mailed the questionnaire which contained the core Faith Communities Today questions plus several additional items. These 600 churches were from an existing database of known megachurches. After email reminders, a total of 153 usable forms were collected, for a response rate of 25.5 percent.

The following report is an initial summary of some of the findings of this research.

The survey of megachurches was undertaken and analyzed by Dr. Scott Thumma, assisted by Dr. John Vaughan, endorsed by the Leadership Network of Dallas, Texas and funded by the Lilly Endowment and Hartford Seminary. This summary report, compiled and written by Scott Thumma, focuses on information from the responses from the megachurch key informants.

This information should not be assumed to be representative of the over 600 Protestant megachurches in the United States. This study, however, does offer an initial systematic glimpse at some of these influential religious bodies.

Overview of the Faith Communities Today Project (FACT)

FACT was a cooperative venture of over 40 religious groups and denominations. Professors Carl Dudley and David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary coordinated this research project.

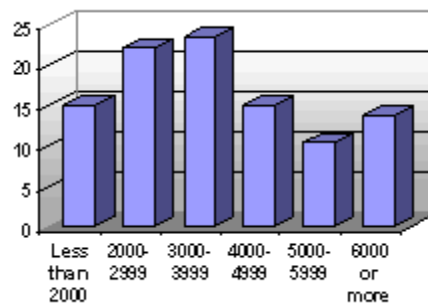
The strategy of the project was to recruit social scientists from within different faith traditions to jointly shape and distribute a common core questionnaire to key informants within their congregations. Using this questionnaire, the project collected parallel information on 14,301 faith communities.

After several years of planning and consultation, this project was completed and the overall findings officially released on March 13th, 2001. The project received, and continues to generate, considerable publicity with news reports in over 150 newspapers, as well as radio and television stations.

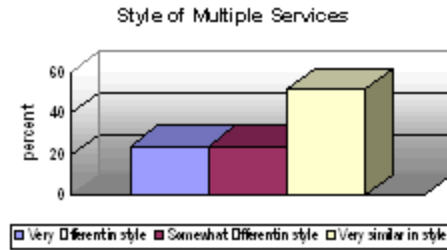
Findings From the Megachurch Report

Size

The most obvious characteristic of megachurches is their size. The average weekly worship attendance was 3857 people. Roughly 50 percent of the churches had between 2000 and 4000 in attendance, with almost 15% reporting 6000 or more attenders. Interestingly almost the same percentage of churches reported worship attendance less than 2000, mostly in the 1800–1900-person range. These congregations have been left in the analysis.



Two-thirds of the responding megachurches planted "daughter churches," with the majority planting 5 or less. Slightly less than a fourth have satellite worship sites, but nearly all of these "branch campuses" offer distinctively different worship styles from the main church.

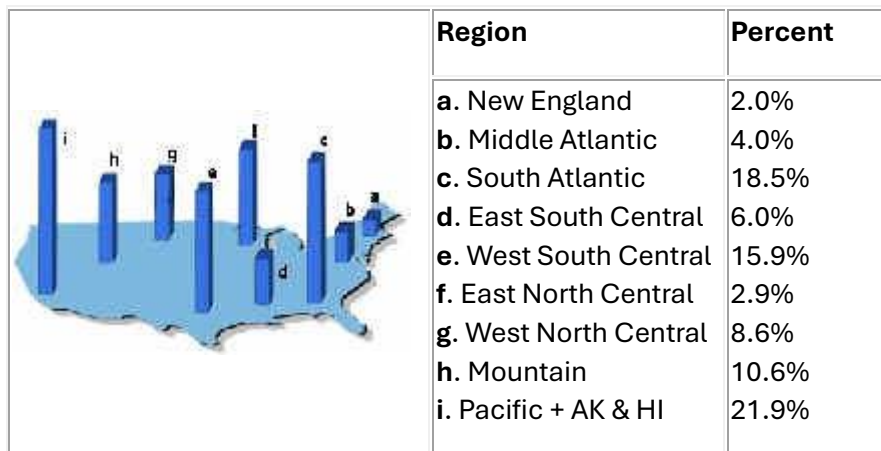


Growth

Over the past twenty years, the attendance of churches in this survey increased by an average rate of 90 percent. In the last five years, the weekly worship attendance for three-quarters of these congregations grew by 10 percent or more. During that same period, however, twelve percent of surveyed churches lost members.

Location

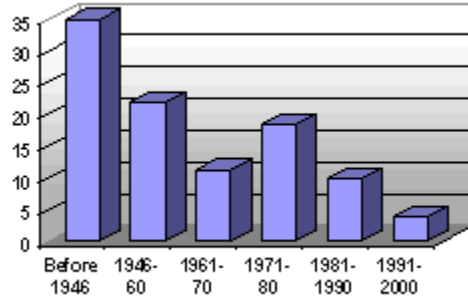
Forty percent of megachurches are found in the South, 32% in the West, and 21% in the Midwest, but only six percent in the Northeast. The states with the greatest concentration include California, Texas, Florida, and Georgia.



Megachurches are predominantly a phenomenon of the suburbs of very large cities. Sixty-three percent are located in or around cities of 250,000 people or more, with 23% in cities with populations between 50,000 and 250,000. Nearly three quarters of the churches reside in the older or newer suburbs of these large cities.

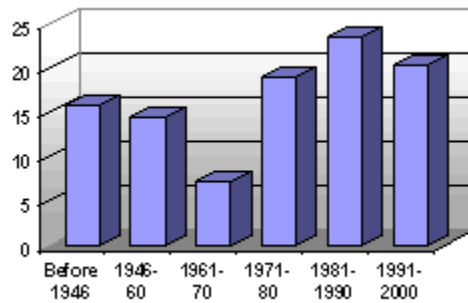
Founding Date

Megachurches are both an old and new phenomenon. Fifty-seven percent of these churches were founded before 1961.



Year Congregation Was Founded

On the other hand, nearly two-thirds of the congregations moved into their current locations after 1970, with 20% moving in the last decade.

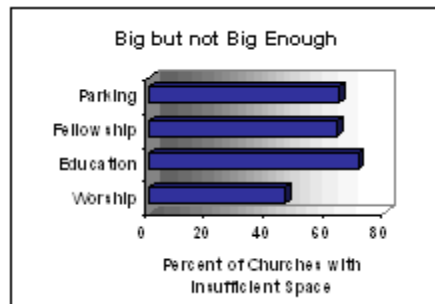


Year Church Moved to Its Current Location

The majority of these congregations report that their tremendous growth has taken place in the past 25 years. Seventy percent of these churches report that they experienced their rapid growth within the tenure of their current pastor, and 1987 was the average year the current pastor was called.

Facilities

The median seating capacity in the surveyed sanctuaries is 1700 people. A quarter of congregations have sanctuaries that seat more than 2500 people and 5% had seating for 5000 or more, but 18% seat 1000 or less. Fifteen percent of the churches allow other congregations to use their worship space. Even as large as they are, a majority of the megachurches feel they have insufficient space for their ministry.



Worship

All megachurches offer an opportunity for worship on Sunday mornings, 20 percent also have a Friday service and nearly half have a service on Saturday. Sixty-five percent have Sunday evening service. The average attendance on Sunday mornings is 2913 people. Ninety-three percent offer two or more services on Sunday morning, 48% have three or more.

A majority of congregations report that worship always or often includes:

- Sermons (100%)
- Organ and/or piano music (92%)
- String or wind instruments (79%)
- Time for people to greet each other (93%)
- Altar call for salvation (60%)
- Prayers for healing (45%)
- Speaking in tongues (17%)

The worship and music style in a large number of nondenominational congregations appears to have a contemporary and electronic component in the service always or quite often.

- Seventy-two percent use visual projection equipment.
- 75-80 percent of churches use electronic keyboards and guitars, and drums.
- Forty-three percent include recorded music in the service.
- 22 percent report they always or quite often use dance or drama.

Nearly a quarter (21%) of congregations report that their primary worship service has changed a lot in the last five years, with the same percentage (21%) reporting somewhat of a change. The rest of the churches report that worship is either basically the same (22%) or has changed only a little (37%).

Preaching

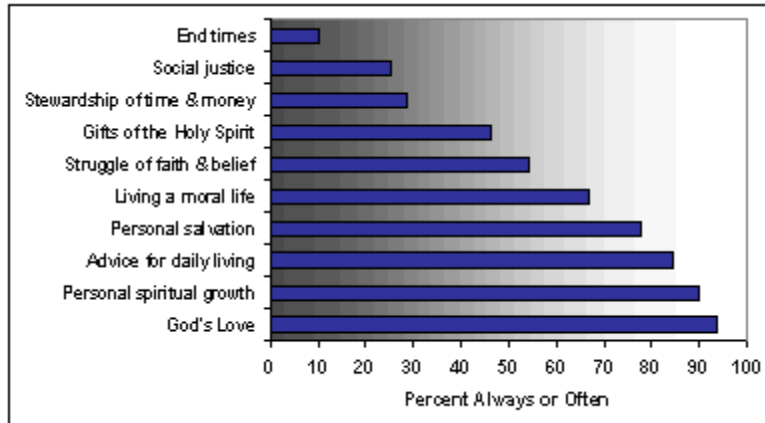
Respondents say that sermons during the worship service MOST often always focus on:

- God's love and care (44%)
- Personal salvation (42%)
- Personal spiritual growth (38%)
- Practical advice for daily living (34%)

The sermons LEAST often always focus on:

- The End Times/ Second Coming of Jesus (1.0%)
- Stewardship of time and money (5.0%)

- The gifts of the Holy Spirit (11%)



These sermon messages are always or often combined with personal stories or first-hand experiences of the pastor (75%), illustrations from contemporary media (75%) and detailed explanations of scripture (57%) rather than literary or scholarly references (30%).

Theology

Ninety-two percent of megachurches state the Bible is foundational as a source of authority. 88% of respondents name the Bible as the one most important authority for their congregation's worship and teaching, while 8%, historic creeds, doctrines, and tradition, 6% name the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and 6% say the one source of authority is the congregation vision and purpose.

In terms of theology of the congregation, the label respondents selected to best fit their membership were as follows:

- Evangelical 48%
- Charismatic 14%
- Pentecostal 11%
- Moderate 12%
- Traditional 8%
- Seeker 3%
- Fundamentalist 2%
- Other 3%

Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations accounted for roughly 25 percent of the respondents, judging by the chosen theological labels (25%), the sometimes to always use of speaking in tongues in the service (26%), and the fact that 25% agree that the statement "our congregation encourages the public expression of speaking in tongues" fits them very well to somewhat.

Participants and Members

Counting everyone involved in congregational life (including both members and non-members however irregular their participation), yields an average of 6,876 persons per megachurch. The average number of regular adult participants is 3392. The average number of regular participants under the age of 18 is 1348.

Demographics of Regularly Participating Adults

The percentages of congregations which reported that....	20 percent or less of their members:	Over 60 percent of their members:
are female	0%	5.2%
have less than a high school diploma	83.2%	3.1%
are college graduates	7.0%	25.3%
are aged 35 or less	6.1%	9.8%
are older than 60 years	51.1%	3.0%
are married	3.8%	30.5%
have children under 18 years at home	7.9%	6.3%
live near the church	36.1%	15%
live more than 15 minutes drive from the church	23.2%	11.9%
live in households with less than \$20,000 annual incomes	83.3%	.8%
live in households with more than \$75,000 annual incomes	29.0%	13.0%

are new to the congregation in the last five years	29.1%	9.7%
are life long members of nondenominational churches	34.1%	22.5%

Race of the Regularly Participating Adults

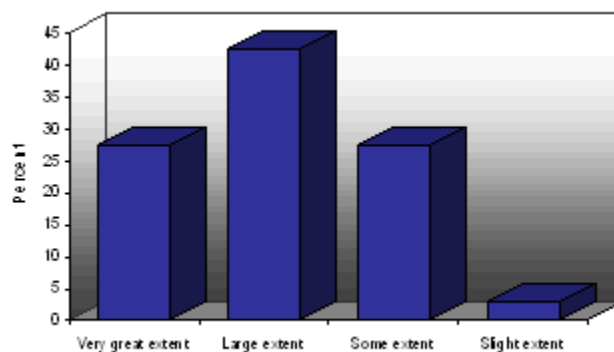
Nearly all the congregations have some minority racial presence. Nearly 50% of the white congregations have 10% or more regular minority adult participants. 16% of churches without a Hispanic majority have significant (10-49%) Hispanic presence among their regular attenders. Twelve percent of churches without a black majority have significant (10-49%) black presence among their regular attenders.

	Average percent per congregation	Percent of churches with more than 50% of participating adults
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.6%	0.0%
Asian	2.0%	0.0%
Black or African-American	10.5%	6.7%
Hispanic or Latino	5.5%	1.4%
Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.9%	0.7%
White	79.5%	85.8%
Biracial/Multiracial	1.7%	0.0%

Congregational Programs

It is a well-known fact that megachurches offer a multitude of programs and ministries for members to choose from. This data allows us to see both that wide range of programs and the rate at which they are offered. Ninety-five percent of megachurches have a weekly Sunday school program. The average total weekly adult attendance at this Sunday school is 856 with an average of 788 children under 18 years of age. Over seventy percent said their teenagers were involved in the life of the church to a very great or large extent.

Percent of Churches Reporting Teen Involvement



In addition to the regular Sunday school programs, other programs were offered as on-going events throughout the year, on average, by the following percentages in megachurches.

- Bible studies 78%
- Prayer groups 83%
- Youth/teen activities 94%
- Men's/women's ministries 86%
- Spiritual Retreats 34%
- Young Adult activities 83%
- Choirs 85%
- Community Service programs 65%
- Parenting/marriage classes 52%
- Senior Adult activities 82%
- Self-help groups 57%
- Sports/Fitness teams 59%
- National Parachurch programs 53%

Outreach to New Members & Visitors

Megachurches do not get to the size they are without an active evangelism emphasis. Thirty-eight percent of megachurch respondents say their current members are involved in recruiting new members at moderate levels and another 29 percent of churches reported extensive recruitment involvement on the part of their members. Thirty percent of congregations report minimal recruitment with only 4 percent saying their members are not at all involved in evangelistic efforts.

Ninety-six percent of congregations strongly encourage their new members to volunteer in church ministries.

Over three quarters of churches (76%) require new members to take an informational class prior to or after joining.

A third of those megachurches surveyed said they assign a pastor or lay leader to mentor new members into becoming incorporated members of the church.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of churches thought that new members were very or quite easily incorporated into the life of their church.

Slightly over 50 % provided special parking for visitors, and around 40% acknowledged them in a demonstrative manner such as making them stand, raise their hand or receiving a visitor label.

Somewhat surprising for these massive congregations, nearly fifty percent thought the statement that their church feels like a close-knit family described them very or quite well.

This is in part due to the extensive use of small group fellowship in megachurches, 50% say their use is central to their strategy for Christian nurture and spiritual formation. Another 44% have such groups but say these groups are not central to the church's program. Over eighty percent say they have an organized program for keeping up with members' needs and providing ministry at the neighborhood level.

96% of respondents thought church members were very or quite excited about the future of their church and 90% thought the statement that the congregation was spiritually vital and alive described them very or quite well.

86% of the megachurches that the statement that they had a clear sense of mission and purpose described their church very or quite well.

Service to the Community

Almost all megachurches (99%) provide some sort of food assistance (either through a food pantry or soup kitchen) to the needy in their communities. Other service programs that megachurches said they provided or supported independently included:

Congregational Social Ministry Programs

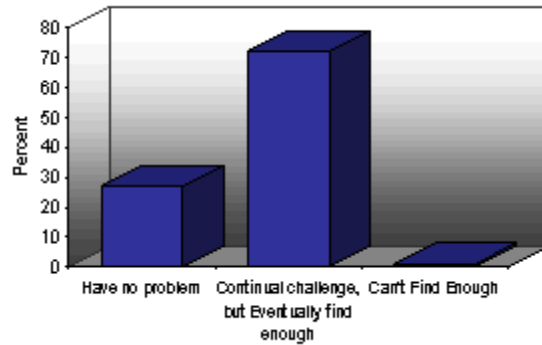
(Support is defined as material or financial contribution, member volunteer time, or space in building. The following are the percentage of churches reporting these activities.)

- cash or vouchers given to families or individuals 91%
- programs for youth and teens 99%
- counseling services or support groups 95%
- hospitals & nursing homes 80%
- prison ministries 91%
- thrift store or thrift store donations 78%
- temporary or permanent housing/shelter 78%

- senior citizen programs 84%
- substance abuse & 12 step programs 85%

The average number of volunteer workers (giving 5 or more hours a week to the church) was 297.

Percent of Churches reporting size of Volunteer Pool (giving 5+hours/week)



Denominational Affiliations, Networks and Interfaith Involvement

Sixty-seven percent of megachurches in this survey belonged to an organized denomination. Denominational information will be posted soon.

Other questions in the survey indicate the megachurches ties to their denominations were tenuous at best. Only 37% thought the statement "Our congregation clearly expresses its denominational (or nondenominational stance) heritage" described them very or quite well. Likewise, the authority of the denominational leaders was rated foundational or very important for just 29 percent of churches. Only 27 percent of these megachurches purchased worship, educational and other programmatic supplies and resources exclusively or primarily from sources within their denomination. On the other hand, 43% created their own, or bought exclusively or primarily from sources outside their denomination.

Roughly thirty percent said they were independent or nondenominational. Twenty percent of the respondents belonged to a Network, Fellowship or Association of churches. These networks ranged anywhere from 15 members to several thousand. The median network size was 600 churches.

Megachurches were also involved with churches in other ways. Many participated in doing the social ministries listed above, although at only one third the level they were active by themselves.

They also participated in activities with other congregations within their respective denominations (or if independent - with other independent churches) and with congregations from other Christian bodies. Interestingly they participated in activities with congregations of other denominations at higher rates than they did with churches within their denominations.

How often is your church involved in these activities with other churches from:	Our Denomination	Other Christian Denominations.	Other Faith traditions
Joint worship services	26%	34%	12%
Joint programs/celebrations	24%	32%	14%
Social outreach programs	26%	41%	14%
Church councils, min. assoc.	19%	33%	12%

Slightly over one in ten megachurches reported any kind of interfaith activity with congregations from other faith traditions.

Many of the megachurches sponsored pastor's or ministerial conferences (47%). Nearly 42% operated their own Christian school, and 30% had a Bible school or Institute.

Forty-four percent had a radio ministry and nearly the same number (38%) ran a television ministry.

The Internet was another way these congregations were present within the larger Christian community. Nearly 100 percent had a church email address. In early 2000, 99 percent of these congregations also had a web site.

Finances

Fifty-four percent of megachurch respondents describe the current financial health of their congregation as excellent, and another third say it is good. This financial picture has improved considerably since 1995 when only 30 percent rated it as excellent and 40% as good.

The average total annual income of the megachurches in the study for 1999 was 4.8 million dollars.

The average expenditure in 1999 for these churches totaled 4.4 million dollars.

Leadership

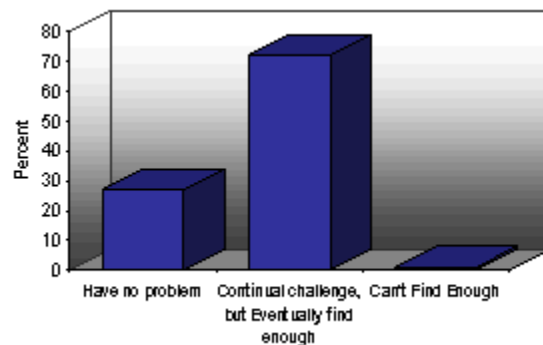
Ninety-eight percent of the congregations report they currently have a full time senior pastor.

On average the senior pastor is 52 years of age and has been at the congregation over 12 years. Ninety-nine percent of these pastors are male. Eighty-eight percent are white, six percent are African American and six percent were of other racial and ethnic backgrounds including Hispanic, American Indian, and "other."

These pastors are generally well educated with 97% having secular college degree or higher. In terms of ministerial education, 5 percent had no training or a certificate, 22 percent went to Bible college or had some seminary training and 73 percent had a seminary degree or better.

These megachurches averaged 13 full time paid ministerial staff persons, and 25 full time paid program staff persons. The average number of volunteer workers (giving 5 or more hours a week to the church) was 297.

Even given these numbers, 72% said that recruiting volunteer leaders is a continual challenge, but that they eventually find enough willing people. Only 27% said they did not have any problem getting volunteer leaders. ▲



Conclusions

What can we know from this information? 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. 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, or 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 for a very long time and others, roughly 15%, are less than 20 years old. However, nearly all of the growth of megachurches 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 affiliates with 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 within its membership and addressing those outside its walls. These efforts are more likely accomplished through their own congregational efforts rather than in conjunction with other churches or external ministries and mission organizations.

Likewise, this data indicates 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.

Additional analysis of this data may shed new light on how and why these congregations grow as they do. In comparison to the full Faith Communities Today dataset, we may be able to also obtain a more accurate picture of how these megachurches are similar to and different from smaller congregations.