Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena:
Their characteristics and cultural context

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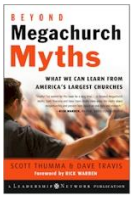

If you are interested in megachurches, you might find this 2007 book co-authored by Hartford Institute professor, Scott Thumma, helpful.

The information is from 1996 and may no longer report accurate numbers, however, many of the general characteristics are still valid. If you want the most recent information about megachurches, visit our website section on megachurch research.

My dissertation, from which this article is taken, is *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: Megachurches In Modern American Society*, Emory Univ. 1996. It can be obtained from UMI 300 North Zeeb Road P.O. Box 1346 Ann Arbor, MI 48106 Phone: 800-521-0600 **http://www.umi.com**. My research was funded by a Louisville Institute Fellowship. I want to thank Nancy Ammerman, Steven Tipton and R. Stephen Warner for their comments and encouragements.

INTRODUCTION

At its most basic descriptive level, a megachurch is a congregation which has two thousand or more worship attenders in a week. However, size alone is an insufficient characterization of this distinctive religious reality. The megachurch is a new structural and spiritual organization unlike any other. In order to understand fully the dynamics of megachurches, they must be seen as a collective social phenomenon rather than as individual anomalous moments of spectacular growth or uniquely successful spiritual entrepreneurial ventures.

Although variations exist, most megachurches have a similar identifiable pattern and share a common set of organizational and leadership dynamics. The rise of hundreds of these large churches in the last several decades implies that this new pattern of congregational life has a particular resonance to and fit with changes in modern American society and culture. Most importantly, this analysis offers a possible explanation of the symbolic significance of the megachurch phenomenon both for the spiritual lives of its members and its relationship to modern society.

The following descriptive portrait is the result of an extensive five year study of one megachurch (Chapel Hill Harvester Church, currently called The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit), multiple observations at six other congregations around the Atlanta area, and visits to nine megachurches around the country. In addition, numerous megachurch television broadcasts, distributed literature, and taped sermons from 28 other megachurches were analyzed to broaden the representativeness of this portrayal (See Thumma 1996a,b, 1993a,b) All reference details can be found in the article bibliography.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MEGACHURCHES

A generalized investigation of megachurches shows a distinctive set of common characteristics. Obviously size is the most evident attribute of these churches; however, the list of shared traits is much more extensive. There is a discernable general pattern to the way in which religion is organized and expressed across these large congregations. Within this generalized picture, three distinctive subgroups, or ways of expressing the megachurch message, can be identified and are described below as the "nontraditional," the "conventional," and the "composite." As with all general descriptions of social phenomena, any single megachurch will vary in its embodiment of this full set of characteristics. Nevertheless, these congregations have too much in common not to be seen as a distinctive social and religious reality.

A Recent Social Phenomenon

Megachurches are a new phenomenon. This is not to say that very large congregations were absent from the history of the Christian Church (See Vaughan 1993:17-28). Yet at any historical period there were no more than a dozen or so of these massive congregations around the world, none of which matched the functions of megachurches in contemporary society. The megachurch, as it is described here, is more than a church with a huge attendance. It is a congregation with a distinctive pattern of organization, programmatic ministries, and membership relations. The rapid proliferation of this form of congregational life has taken place within the last several decades. It is a particular and distinctive response to this cultural milieu. These definitive traits are uniquely modern, fashioned in reaction to and patterned after modern society.

Nearly all current megachurches were founded after 1955. The explosive growth experienced by these congregations, however, did not begin in earnest until the decade of the eighties (Vaughan 1993:50-51). The 1990's have not slowed this growth. **Data collected in 1992 revealed over 350 such congregations** (Thumma 1993b). Vaughan estimates that the number of megachurches grows by 5 percent each year (1993:40-41). Given this rate over two million persons will be weekly attendees of megachurches in the United States by the start of the new millennium. Anyone familiar with the American religious scene cannot help but have noticed the rapid proliferation of these massive congregations. In fact, it is precisely their size which attracts so much attention.

Mega-Sized

The most overt characteristic of megachurches is their size, the number of persons attending in a given week. Although some disagreement exists over what size attendance should constitute a megachurch, this study uses a minimum weekly attendance of 2000 persons. The size of some megachurches can be deceptive, however. A count of thousands of attenders is seldom completely accurate to the person. More often churches estimate their attendance based on the number of people their sanctuary holds. This is relatively easy to do if a sanctuary has individual seating, but pews complicate the estimation process considerably. Often megachurches report a cumulative attendance for multiple services based on the assumption that no person attends more than once. Given these issues, any reported attendance should be treated as an estimate, accurate to within several hundred.

This large number of worshipers creates several distinctive dynamics. Once a congregation reaches a critical mass of around 2000, its numeric strength alone becomes a powerful attraction. One megachurch member astutely commented on this fact.

You hit a certain size and you can become self-generating. You attract people by your sheer size. People know that you are on TV and that this is that big place....There is a sense of something going on here...and size itself begats more growth.

A congregation this large creates a social vortex which draws others to it (Ostling 1991:63). A Sunday morning stream of cars on an otherwise quiet street piques the interest, and perhaps ire, of the neighborhood. In addition, acres of parking lots and massive buildings capable of handling several thousand persons have a distinctive presence on the horizon.

Of course, as will be seen below, this size also produces difficulties to which the church must respond. Many megachurches work hard at justifying their large size for potential members. Roswell Street Baptist Church of Atlanta provides a perfect example of this. The church publishes a pamphlet which declares church growth to be a Biblical injunction and "the American way."

Big is Beautiful.... Any church in a large, growing community that is practicing the 'Great Commission' cannot keep from growing. To criticize a church for being big is to imply disbelief in Christ's commission.... A church gets big because its spirit is big.... Nobody ever started a business without hoping that someday, if he or she worked hard enough, it would be a big success. That is the American dream, isn't it?

Often it is not just its massive size which characterizes a megachurch's presence in its community. Most of these large churches experience rapid growth over a very short period of time. It is this "overnight success" that often defines a megachurch's unique place in the local religious ecology (Eiesland 1995). This explosive increase sets this congregation apart from the other spiritual options in the community. The jump from a nonexistent or medium-sized fellowship to a megachurch usually takes place in a short two to five year period of time. One of the earlier and better known megachurches, Anaheim Vineyard Church, grew, in the words of its founder John Wimber, from "Zip to 3000 in 5 years" (Wimber 1982).

Not only did this rapid growth create the perception that something unique was taking place at these congregations, but it established a degree of tension with the surrounding community (Eiesland 1995). This social strain was not so great as to inhibit recruitment but enough to generate publicity, build internal coherence, and strengthen the church's boundaries. For instance, the construction of an 8000 seat domed sanctuary by World Changers Ministries, an Atlanta congregation under the leadership of Creflo A. Dollar, caused considerable concern for local neighborhood associations. This in turn generated newspaper reports which provided free publicity for the new sanctuary and resulted in increased attendance (Ramsey 1992; Carnes 1995).

In addition, newly established congregations have a considerable advantage in becoming megachurches (Hadaway& Roozen 1993:129). They are able to build their structures and institutional forms along with the growth, not following it. More established congregations must undertake the painful task of discarding or revising many of their traditions, habits, and old

organizational forms in order to keep pace with the growth. New churches, however, have no set patterns to struggle against.

A Suburban Sunbelt Home

If size is a crucial element in the definition of megachurches, region and placement in a city create the context. The national distribution of megachurches reveals a clear pattern. Over 75 percent of these congregations are located in the Sunbelt states, with nearly half of them in the southeast region. According to 1992 data, California had the highest concentration of megachurches, followed by Texas, Florida, and Georgia (Thumma 1993a,b). Vaughan found that megachurches clustered around those metropolitan areas which were among the fastest growing in the country (1993:77-80). Sprawl cities, such as Houston, Orlando, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Oklahoma City, contained the highest number of megachurches.

In addition, megachurches are a suburban reality. Nearly all megachurches are to be found in the suburbs of large cities. These churches are primarily located in prominent places on highly visible tracts of land. They are generally near the expanding edges of the city, within easy access from major highways, and quite often in the immediate proximity of other megachurches. The only exception to this suburban pattern are those older inner city established "First churches" of all ethnic varieties.

There are many reasons why concentrations of megachurches exist in rapidly developing, suburban, Sunbelt metropolitan areas. Numerous researchers have found that in growing areas churches of all sizes grow faster (Hadaway & Roozen 1993:131; Olson 1988 **Go to Bibliography for full reference**). These suburban areas offer expansive, less expensive plots of land suitable for acres of parking lots and the multiple buildings that are needed to support a congregation of several thousand. Zoning regulations are often less restrictive than in established urban communities. Most importantly, the suburbs provide a continuous influx of exactly the type of person attracted to megachurches -- consumer oriented, highly mobile, well-educated, middle class families.

Functionally Nondenominational

For the majority of megachurches, denominational affiliation is an insignificant matter. The church itself (its size, pastor, programs, and reputation) attracts adherents, not its denominational ties. Consequently, almost one half of all megachurches are independent and nondenominational. In addition, many of the remaining churches are from denominations with a congregational polity which gives considerable freedom to individual churches. Nearly twenty percent of megachurches are Southern Baptist, while those associated with the Assemblies of God account for another nine percent. Around ten percent of megachurches belong to moderate and liberal denominations. Another ten percent have ties with historically African American denominations.

Actually, there are few overt differences between megachurches with denominational ties and those without them. Many of the large denominational congregations can be seen as functionally nondenominational (Schaller 1990:22; Hadaway 1993:353). They have an appealing identity as a congregation, regardless of their ties to a denomination. These congregations often downplay their denominational connections by dropping reference to it from their name and literature. Neither do

they have need for the denomination's resources. If anything, the denomination benefits more from their presence and that of their gifted leaders (Hadaway 1993:353). Gustav Niebuhr, writing for the New York Times, quoted one member of Walt Kallestad's Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona who recounted a common experience of many megachurch members, "We probably came here for a year before we knew it was Lutheran" (1995a:A12).

Three Expressions of One Basic Message

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. Megachurch pastors can often be heard commenting that they are "not just playing church." Nearly all megachurches have a conservative theological orientation. An overwhelming majority would be considered Evangelical, Charismatic, or Fundamentalist. Even the megachurches from moderate and liberal denominations often stand out as having a more conservative theology than do their counterparts (Stevenson 1993).

The ways they express this "serious Christianity," however, vary considerably. The content of the message and mission foci of individual megachurches are quite diverse. Nevertheless, when viewed as a whole, three general approaches can be seen as guiding the message and mission of megachurches. Each of these orientations differs in relation to the congregation's style and world view, its implicit or explicit message, its architectural representation, and its sponsored ministries. These forms offer a similar message of "our church is an extraordinary religious expression," but they address this message to three different clientele bases in three distinctive ways.

The first orientation, labeled the "Nontraditional" approach, best characterizes those megachurches which attempt to attract religious "seekers" and the "unchurched." This is probably the most prevalent form for American megachurches, and especially among churches started in the last eight to ten years. The explicit message of these congregations is "this is not your ordinary church." Pastor John Merritt, of CrossWinds Church in California, described this intention while discussing his nontraditional megachurch, "We're trying to create an environment here so the unchurched person can come in and say, 'this is church like I have never known church'" (Winston 1996:a10).

The goal of this approach is to create new religious forms, to remake the traditions, so they are acceptable and relevant to a modern person who had been turned off by traditional religion. To accomplish that, the buildings of churches using this approach are quite ordinary looking, duplicating everyday structures such as office complexes, schools, warehouses. Inside these structures, persons are greeted by large lobbies with well-lighted signs, information booths, and often a mall-like court yard complete with refreshments. Their sanctuaries are usually spacious auditoriums, with comfortable theater seating, large stages, and a minimum of religious symbols. The architecture of this orientation, "communicates a message - that religion is not a thing apart from daily life" (Goldberger 1995:b1). The sermon, probably delivered from a clear plexiglass removable podium, conveys a biblical but practical, non-dogmatic, this-worldly message that also suggests religion should not be separate from daily life.

Willow Creek Community Church, arguably the largest church in the country at present, epitomizes this form. The church's minister, Bill Hybels, characterized the intent of this approach in his

neighborhood survey done prior to organizing the congregation. He went door-to-door asking residents what they disliked about church and what they would want in a church. From this, he constructed a "user friendly" worship service with sermons oriented to practical life and devoid of appeals for money, religious jargon and "heavy guilt trips." The worship is laid-back, but the message remains solidly conservative Christian. The church's web site describes its efforts,

We may use up-to-date language, music and drama to communicate God's Word for today's culture, but our message is as old as the Bible itself. We embrace historic Christian teachings on all doctrines, emphasizing Jesus Christ's atoning death, salvation through repentance and faith as a work of divine grace, and the authority of the unique, God-inspired Bible.

Willow Creek "seeks to attract those who are probably uncomfortable in most churches" with its Sunday morning "seeker services" (Robinson 1991:68). As Hybels himself stated, "We're on the verge of making kingdom history, doing things a new way for a whole new generation.... [The] neutral corporate setting [is designed to] impress seekers with excellence, but not ostentatiousness" (Chandler 1989:A28).

Willow Creek is not the only shape this nontraditional approach can take. Crenshaw Christian Center, perhaps the largest sanctuary in the United States and one of the largest African American congregations, seats 10,400 in a huge geodesic "FaithDome" structure. This replica of a sports arena has a center stage platform with stadium seating 360 degrees around. In Atlanta, a similar structure resembling the Houston Astrodome and seating 8000, was recently completed for the World Changers ministry, also an African American congregation.

The architectural style and approach must not only convey the message of the movement but also be sensitive and adaptable to the context in which it resides. A different constituency requires a building which expresses the realities of their everyday lives. It is this effort which drives the second approach taken by some megachurches. This orientation, labeled "Conventional" can be found in most of the older "First Churches" that have grown to megachurch proportions . The approach is characterized by a retention of the images of traditional Protestant Christianity. This tradition is reconfigured, however. The implication is that this larger expression is not only more successful and more exciting, but it is more authentically Christian than other churches. It is traditional Protestantism, but on a "mega" scale. This approach is most often seen in Southern Baptist churches and in urban established Mainline and liberal megachurches.

The architecture of these massive churches is often either Neo-Gothic or Colonial, depending on the region of the country. Christian symbols, steeples, spires, and columns adorn the exterior of the building. Upon entering the church, one is greeted by a traditional foyer, floral arrangements, and bulletin-bearing greeters in business suits. The sanctuary is often an exaggerated replica of a country church. A box shaped interior space contains long straight, uncomfortable wooden pews, hymnals, poor lighting, a crowded altar space, and many traditional symbols such as crosses, candles, descending doves, and stained glass windows.

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, their attendance and baptisms are climbing, and they can even be found in cyberspace. Examples of this type include First Baptist Church of Dallas, Bellevue Baptist Church

of Memphis, Tennessee, Ben Hill United Methodist Church, and Peachtree Presbyterian Church, the latter two of Atlanta.

Although these conventional congregations have been established for many years, a second generation of similar churches has recently appeared around the Atlanta area. Many of the growing Baptist congregations in the city's surrounding suburbs have intentionally adopted this traditional form. This form epitomizes religion in the South. By employing this style, these suburban churches are providing links to the past for their mobile and more cosmopolitan constituency (Eiesland 1995). One such church, Rehoboth Baptist, reproduced the traditional southern red brick colonial church but at more than ten times "normal size." Its minister, Richard Lee, preaches a fundamentalist message, emphasizing personal piety, soul-winning, and preparation for the end-times. But the leadership also wants the city to know, as their huge highway billboards and television programs announce, that they are "Atlanta's Exciting Metrochurch." Their ministry includes everything from ties with Promisekeepers, the Pre-Tribulation Research Center, and the Christian Coalition to aerobics, karate, weight loss, and divorce recovery groups.

A third less common approach chosen by some megachurches entails a blending of this conventional form with the nontraditional style. This "Composite" orientation attempts to retain some connection to traditional religion but also embraces modern architectural forms and a contemporary worship format. The megachurches of this type often superimpose a traditional building facade onto a unconventional, "user-friendly" structure. The exterior, or at least the street exposure, of the church may appear "church-like," while the interior resembles a theater, with comfortable individual seating, state of the art sound and light system, and an adaptable performance stage. This building often has both the conveniences of the nontraditional church building and the symbols and trappings of familiar Christianity. Worship may be an equally eclectic mix of hymns, jazz, and praise choruses, combined with liturgical readings and charismatic healing sessions. This can be seen in the worship format at Chapel Hill Harvester Church in Atlanta. This congregation exemplifies this blended approach architecturally, with mixed results (Goldberger 1995:B10). Even in its theology, it overtly attempts to retain an "orthodox" Christian tradition while at the same time embracing "new," "original," and "fresh revelations from God."

Another church using this style, First Baptist of Orlando, describes itself as "a unique blend of the historic and the contemporary." Its ultra modern building is decorated with many Christian symbols, huge old stained glass windows, and the pipes of a giant organ. A second Florida congregation, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church led by James Kennedy, meets in a graceful white stucco building with a towering steeple. Its modern interior is filled with traditional religious symbols, stained glass windows and "one of the largest European-built organs in the country." A brochure entitled "A Walk Through the Sanctuary" explains to the uninitiated the significance of these symbols and sacred sanctuary areas while noting for the reader that the church is "built with the feeling of a cross in a modern configuration similar to a cathedral with a contemporary design."

Whatever the approach taken by a megachurch, these various congregations each convey the message that what they are about is not "ordinary religion." In the words of one Chapel Hill Harvester first-timer, "This is not what I have seen in the past."

A Distinctive Visionary Identity

Within this message of originality and uniqueness, resides another common characteristic of megachurches. Many of these large churches describe their mission in terms of a distinctive visionary identity or purpose. Given that most megachurches are at least functionally nondenominational, they must intentionally construct their congregational identities rather than rely on a traditionally-ascribed denominational label. Megachurches must create for themselves a unique identity. This congregational self-concept must be broad enough to appeal to a wide range of persons. Yet it must also be firm enough to define its position, offer a cohesive world view, and totemically unify a large and diverse gathering of participants. As a result, megachurch ministers often shape their church's identity to reflect a particular mission to a target audience, whether this be "seekers," "unchurched Harrys," "Saddleback Sams," young families, recent northern transplants, those who need healing, alienated teens, or retired adults.

Whatever the focus, this visionary identity is seen as a particular "calling" and God-given "mission." Many of the megachurch pastors speak of this special "mission" as having been given them in a supernatural "revelation," "dream," or "vision." The congregation's identity then is shaped around that vision. One megachurch pastor, Creflo Dollar of Atlanta, spoke of "receiving a vision, [where] believers would become world changers." Earl Paulk, of Chapel Hill Harvester in Atlanta, described his revelatory vision for his "Kingdom" church as "communicating and demonstrating the Kingdom of God."

A common identity motif for many megachurches was that of the "Church as refuge." Earl Paulk specifically identified Chapel Hill Harvester in this manner. John Wimber, the recently deceased founder of the Vineyard movement, described his church in similar terms. He (1982:21-22) referred to his church as,

a second marriage church.... God took us as he found us--broken-bodied refugees from various religious systems---and began to shape us.... Many people have chosen to opt out of the religious system because they felt they couldn't live up to the standards the church set for them. Other have been battered and burned by well meaning, but harsh, treatment. Cultural differences have made it difficult for others to relate to the traditional church. Many of these religious refugees are finding us.

Lakewood Church of Houston, Texas characterized itself similarly as "the oasis of love in a troubled world." A pamphlet of Valley Cathedral in Phoenix, Arizona portrayed the church's revealed vision as being "a forgiveness center, and not a guilt center, a city of refuge, where many who had been injured by the organizational machineries and other religious groups could gather and be healed." Willow Creek Community church has even been described in terms of being a refuge for those who have given up on religion (Robinson 1991:69). Robinson argued that megachurches are unique in that they realize persons have a high degree of emotional broken, individual uncertainty, and family dysfunction. Their success comes as they respond to and fill this need for personal healing (1991:69). Pastor Tommy Barnett of First Assembly of God Phoenix, Arizona summarized this strategy, "When you help people, your congregation grows" (Ostling 1991:62).

Something For Everyone

The programs and specific ministries of megachurches are shaped by the context in which they reside. Yet even with the potential diversity of programs, one common characteristic underlies the efforts of all megachurches and that is choice. A congregation of thousands encompasses many diverse tastes and interests which must be addressed. Not only does this need for choice affect the array of ministries offered, but it also influences the style of worship, preaching, and music exhibited in megachurches.

A number of social observers have suggested that megachurches resemble shopping malls in their wide array of consumer-driven ministerial offerings (Niebuhr 1995a; Eiesland 1995; Schaller 1992; Ostling 1991). The megachurch functions like the mall owner providing stability and a common roof under which diverse ministries, seen as specialized boutiques, can operate. In addition several core ministries, like anchor stores, offer a continuous draw to this spiritual shopping center (Eiesland 1995:73). This organizational arrangement allows the larger church structure to remain unchanged while the lay-driven specialized offerings rise or fall depending on changing needs. This system provides the entire membership with a continuous supply of appealing choices that fit their tastes. It also offers the highly committed members their choice of places to serve. Finally, it ensures that the church as a whole appears relevant and vibrantly active (a seven-day-a-week church) at a minimum of cost both structurally and financially. This mall-like approach enables the megachurch's leadership to maintain a stable worship environment and yet exhibit flexibility in serving a changing clientele by continuously altering their ministry choices. As one megachurch member explained, "It has everything I need in one package."

Worship is one of the central drawing cards that anchors the church. The worship service in megachurches is a high quality, entertaining and well planned production. Given the congregation's size, this service cannot be left to "the flow of the spirit," especially if there are multiple services on a Sunday morning. As a megachurch grows, worship becomes more professional and polished, but also more planned and structured. Many megachurches offer a diverse array of additional religious services of differing styles throughout the week. They hold prayer services, Bible studies, singing services, and perhaps healing or Charismatic praise services. Several megachurches have Saturday evening youth-oriented services, or beginner courses in basic Christianity. The diversity offered at a megachurch extends even to the choice of the style, form, and time of a worship event that best fits one's needs and tastes.

The majority of these worship experiences, even if they include extensive congregational singing, are focused around the preaching. Megachurch sermons are often inspirational, motivational, and well-delivered. The message empowers members with the challenge that everyone has choices, but that they are also responsible for what they choose. The listener is instructed, "You can do it, make a change, and make a difference." Sermons are almost always powerful, practical, down to earth, and relevant. As John Wimber stated, "We recognize we must answer the questions people actually are asking.... We seek to deal with today's issues in a practical, Biblical manner--a manner that will make a difference in the way people actually live" (Wimber 1982:21-22). About Hybels, Willow Creek's pastor, Sammonds writes, "The people come to hear God's word 'explained in a practical, relevant manner....the senior pastor vowed early on that he would never preach a sermon that couldn't be used by people in their everyday lives" (1994:6).

Another common aspect of the worship programs of megachurches is their use of the arts. Worship often includes performances by large choirs, orchestras, drama troupes, and other artists. Services on Sunday and throughout the week are filled with skits, special musical numbers, interpretative dance, and video presentations. Some churches produce major works of drama such as plays and operas. Several, such as Bellevue Baptist of Memphis, are known for their elaborate musical celebrations at Christmas, Easter, and the fourth of July, drawing as many as 30 thousand spectators to these events. Others offer smaller monthly or quarterly musical performances to suit a variety of tastes and styles. One megachurch, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, offered a "Sampler Concert Series" which featured 15 concerts during the 1995/96 season. This "sampler" included Handel's Messiah with Glen Campbell, a country music concert with Ricky Skaggs and Louise Mandrell, an evening of the Cathedrals performing Southern Gospel, a pops salute to the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber, and a nostalgic night of music from the 50's with the Nelson Riddle Orchestra.

Nowhere is the characteristic of programmatic choice more evident, however, than in the range of internal ministries and the diversity of groups offered by megachurches. Some of these ministries are oriented specifically to religious and spiritual issues such as age-graded Bible studies, prayer groups, new member sessions, and religious education classes. Other ministries focus more on enhancing interpersonal ties and strengthening fellowship and social interaction through home groups, covenant communities, recreational activities, sports events, and organized celebrations. There are always groups which organize and train church volunteers both to assist in the functioning of the church and in the performance of its ministries. Often programs address the physical and psychological well-being of members with health fairs, preventative health clinics, employment support, vocational training, job fairs, various 12-step type recovery groups, and individual counseling services. In addition, there are any number of interest groups and activities from musical lessons and choir rehearsals to political action committees and auto repair clinics. Many megachurches support elementary and secondary private schools, day care centers, scout troops, head-start programs, and countless teen and young adult activities. These large churches may even provide roller rinks, pools, gymnasiums, racquetball courts, weight rooms, and, as Second Baptist in Houston does, a movie theater. Given this list of possible ministries available to its membership it is not surprising that one researcher has described megachurches as "7-day-a-week churches" (Schaller 1992).

An Innovative Spiritual Entrepreneur

Megachurches are more often than not the product of one highly gifted spiritual leader. The majority of contemporary megachurches were either founded by or achieved mega-status within the tenure of a single senior minister (Vaughan 1993; Schaller1992). The character of these churches usually reflects the vision and personality of this one person. These pastors are usually personally charismatic, exceptionally gifted men. As senior minister, and often the church's founder, these persons occupy the singular, most prominent, high profile position in the congregation. The average length of tenure of these leaders has been estimated at 15 years (Olson 1988). These pastors are often visionaries and innovative spiritual entrepreneurs, many without the usual pastoral credentials (Greeley 1989). Olson reports that one third of megachurch ministers have had no seminary education (1988). For instance, Bill Hybels, pastor of the largest church in the country, is not seminary trained (Niebuhr 1995a:A12).

The organizational demands of these enormous churches necessitate a rational bureaucratic operation with a strong business leader at the helm. Yet, not all megachurch pastors are skilled business persons. Their spiritual visions and ministerial gifts which helped them generate a successful operation may in fact hinder them in managing their religious business. One pastor remarked that upon taking the leadership of an established megachurch he found himself, "acting more like a mayor or governor than a pastor" (Gregory 1994:318). Comments of a Chapel Hill Harvester Church staff member reflect this reality as well.

As the church has gotten so huge, its harder to make decisions based on an understanding of the Holy Spirit's leading.... By the time [a spiritual decision] gets down to the implementation level, it's nothing but sort of a bureaucratic 'do this' or 'do that.'

Many megachurches have ten to twenty assistant ministers, from 30 to 250 full-time staff members, and up to 2000 volunteers. In addition, the budgets of the smallest of megachurches are at least two million dollars per year. Willow Creek, at the other extreme, had a 1995 budget of 12.35 million dollars, 63 percent of which paid the 260 full and part time workers with the rest being used for operating expenses and the mortgage on a 34.3 million dollar building (Niebuhr 1995b:a10).

These are not just churches; they are also corporations. The administrator of Chapel Hill Harvester church noted this as justification for his rigid managerial techniques.

It's just good business practices that we all need.... We are a church but we are also a business that happens to be operating by the name of a church. We are a ten million dollar a year church that has to operate like a business.

This business may be led by a powerful senior minister but most megachurches also operate with a Executive Board which is said to oversee business affairs. For instance, Crenshaw Christian Center's board has 12 members: the pastor who is president of the corporation, three elders who are also assistant pastors, six deacons who are elected church members, each serving a maximum of four years, a board secretary, and the church treasurer. Ideally, this board, in conjunction with other assistant pastors, church elders and the congregation as a whole, acts as a check to any imbalance of power that may result from the concentration of authority in the senior minister. This may be the ideal, but it may not work as such in reality (Thumma 1996a). For instance, one megachurch minister was quoted as advocating a strong singular authority saying, "A committee run church is a dead church" (Gregory 1994:319).

On the other hand, several megachurch pastors explicitly make a point of decentralizing power, among them is Willow Creek's pastor Bill Hybels. It has been reported of Hybels that, "What hurts... is when he's portrayed as 'high profile, dictatorial, heavy-handed.' "That's not true, " Hybels says," "I'm an incurable team player." His staff agrees -- as long as he's the quarterback" (Chandler 1989:A30). A recent study of megachurch leadership shows that most pastors report using a "team approach" much as Hybels did (Zook 1993). This may or may not be an accurate representation of how these large churches are led (Schaller 1992:58; Miller 1997:149). Personal observation of one senior pastor's interaction with his staff during many crucial decision-making events showed a more authoritative, highly-directive style of leadership than was professed (Thumma 1996a). While

there may be numerous leadership styles used by megachurch pastors, these styles should be uncovered by observing moments of actual decision making, rather than taking the leadership's word for how they lead or are led.

The example of how Chapel Hill Harvester Church leaders viewed the governance of the church is instructive in the analysis of one style of megachurch leadership. On numerous occasions the senior minister described his leadership style as a "team approach." In a workshop on "the church as a corporation," however, the administrator portrayed a different form of congregational authority and leadership.

The Board of Directors does not control this ministry! It has one boss, period! Our job is to protect him...when he feels strongly about something, he feels like he's heard from God...I guarantee you everyone on the Board will fall right in line. Call it a "yes board?" OK, call it a "yes board," but that is the way we operate!...If there was any dissension on that board they would be gone a long time ago.

Not only did this senior minister have complete control of the boards, but the entire church structure reported to him alone. An associate pastor commented during that same conference, "Structure is built on the "one voice" principle...the rest of us are implementers of that." This structure was neither democratic nor congregational, but was as another pastor described it, "an episcopal form of church structure.... What does that mean?...the [senior minister] calls the shots!" (Thumma 1996a). Whether this form is representative of most or any other megachurch is unknown, but the organizational structures in place (a successful charismatic leader, with centralized power, few checks and balances, and perhaps inadequate management and leadership training) clearly allow for this possibility (Schaller 1992).

The claims of abuse by leadership and a lack of accountability, especially for nondenominational megachurches, are frequent charges heard from former members and external critics. Jack Hyles, pastor of the very large First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, his son, and several staff members have all been accused many times in recent years of sexual and authority abuses. Hyles has denied the allegations; however, they continue to plague his ministry (Elder 1990). Chapel Hill Harvester Church in Atlanta has also had numerous charges of sexual and authority abuse made against its leadership (Thumma 1996a).

Given the pivotal role played by megachurch pastors, it is hard to imagine their churches functioning without them. Indeed this is a concern for many such congregations -- how to create ministerial continuity and a congregational identity apart from the senior minister (Schaller 1992). This raises the ever-present question of succession. For those churches with denominational ties one would assume an easy transition, but such is not always the case. Joel Gregory's attempt to succeed W. A. Criswell at First Baptist Church in Dallas failed when, as Gregory wrote, Criswell essentially refused to relinquish control (Gregory 1994). On the other hand, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Anaheim has successfully survived the retirement and later death of its visionary leader John Wimber (Brasher 1992; Miller 1997).

The Membership of a Megachurch

Megachurches share another common characteristic, the type of person they attract. Several studies offer a similar portrayal of the membership of a typical megachurch (Brasher 1992; Miller 1993, 1997; Perrin 1989:90; Thumma 1996a). With few exceptions these large churches draw a predominantly "baby boom" constituency. These congregations have young memberships, with the median age estimated at 38 years or less. Between sixty and seventy percent of attenders are women. The majority of megachurches are also populated by Caucasians. Over sixty percent of participants are married and have an average of two children. Those attracted to megachurches are generally middle class, and highly educated. Miller's recent study of the Calvary, Vineyard and Hope Chapel movements found that 38 percent of respondents had college degrees (1997:196). Another examination of the Vineyard Movement also discovered 38 percent had college or graduate degrees (Perrin 1989:94). Survey data on Chapel Hill Harvester members showed over 40 percent had a college degree (Thumma 1996a). Megachurch members are upwardly mobile, highly transient, and generally live in suburban neighborhoods.

At the same time, this picture of a typical megachurch congregation is somewhat deceptive. This generalization masks the considerable degree of diversity often found in these large gatherings. Many of the megachurches entice persons of all racial groups. Some congregations have embraced this multi-cultural reality as a part of their identity. The congregation of Lakewood Church in Houston proudly claims its congregation to be forty percent white, thirty percent African American, and thirty percent Hispanic. Another Houston megachurch, Braeswood Assembly of God, reports that its membership contains persons from 48 countries who speak 22 languages (Vaughan 1993:100-101). In addition, ten percent of all megachurches are African American congregations; several are Hispanic such as Templo Calvario Assembly of God in Santa Ana, California, and a few, like Young Nak Presbyterian of Los Angeles, are Korean. Even the predominantly white megachurches in Atlanta and elsewhere generally contain a small representation from various racial groups.

These congregations also appeal to a diversity of economic levels, although a majority of members are upwardly mobile, middle class persons. No one occupational status dominates megachurch memberships. Instead, persons employed in service, managerial, professional, technical, and skilled labor are nearly equally represented. One church, North Phoenix Baptist Church actively promotes its economic diversity. A church pamphlet offered the following fictional dialogue and commentary,

"Is your church blue collar or white collar?" "Doesn't make any difference." "But blue collar and white collar are different." "True, but both need to be clean." North Phoenix Baptist Church has done the best job I have ever seen of blending ethnic and economic groupings."

Another distinctive trait of megachurch participants is their extremely high rates of participation and involvement. It is estimated that fifty percent of Chapel Hill Harvester Church's membership were weekly attenders, who consistently contributed large amounts of money, and regularly participated in church ministries (Thumma, 1996a). Both Miller (1997) and Perrin found that over 75 percent of their respondents in studies of "new paradigm" movements attended worship services every week (1989:103). Another study of a very large Presbyterian church showed that three quarters of its membership attended weekly and gave nearly 1200 dollars per member annually

(Stevenson 1993). Judging from those megachurches for which data are available, giving appears to be a minimum of between 1000 and 1500 dollars per person each year. This is considerably more than the estimated national average of 445 dollars per church member in 1992 (Niebuhr 1995b).

Every study of megachurch members indicates that personal religious practices take place at high rates as well. Members claim to pray, participate in religious study groups, evangelize, and read religious literature at rates considerably higher than national averages for conservative Protestant believers (See Perrin 1989 compared to Roof & McKinney 1987). Given that megachurches both require massive numbers of volunteer workers and offer hundreds of religious and social activities in which to be engaged, it is not surprising to find high rates of involvement by committed members. Willow Creek, for instance, requires 1000 volunteers a week to conduct its services. (Chandler 1989:A28). At the same time, one of the most prominent messages of many megachurches is that religion is not just a Sunday enterprise, but rather is a 24 hour a day, seven day a week lifestyle. Few megachurches preach that their members should retreat from the world. In fact, the opposite is nearly always stressed, that members should become "salt and light to a lost world." They are encouraged to change the system, take dominion, demonstrate the kingdom, and become world changers. This message finds a resonance with members since many of them report that they came to their megachurch intentionally to hear a stricter, more demanding, serious version of the Christian faith (Perrin 1989:141ff, 211, Thumma, 1996a).

The large worship gatherings at megachurches often raise the concern that members attend with the intention of being anonymous (Chandler 1989:A28). Others suggest that the massive worship service promotes a "pseudo-intimacy" of a "live studio audience" with worshipers as passive viewers seeking an intense but private religious experience (Robinson 1991:69). Some commentators even argue that megachurches offer "relatively weak systems for insuring individual religious accountability" (Eiesland 1994, 1995:94). These observations are all true to some extent. It must also be realized, however, that megachurches are actually made up of distinct, sizable clusters of both more and less committed persons. The congregational dynamic for the least committed group of members may be considerably different than for the more involved members.

The approach taken in many large churches is to preach the message of active involvement and high commitment, provide the structures and ministries to support that involvement, and then allow members to choose how committed they want to be. Earl Paulk, senior minister of Chapel Hill Harvester Church, spoke of this model as "preaching the standard but ministering to the need." These large churches, by allowing for anonymity and choice, draw some persons to church who never would come otherwise. As one writer said about Willow Creek, "seekers can be anonymous here. You don't have to say anything, sing anything, sign anything, or give anything" (Chandler 1989:A28). In fact, many people want to remain anonymous. Hybels' survey found this to be one of the primary components unchurched persons wanted in a worship service (Olson 1988:192). Other members use the private space to recover from burnout or over commitment (Neff 1990). Several megachurch members echoed one woman's comment about her involvement, "I hung around for several years, just resting, before I got involved."

Many of these megachurches intentionally try not to leave their uncommitted members in that noncommittal state for long. Some, such as Willow Creek and Johnson Ferry Baptist Church of Atlanta, have explicit steps toward increasing new members' involvement in the congregation

(Olson 1988:185ff). Saddleback, likewise, has a system that it calls the "baseball diamond strategy" for "moving people from unchurched and uncommitted to become mature believers who fulfill their ministry in...church and their life mission in the world." The components of this system are: first base - committing to membership, second base - developing spiritual maturity, third base - empowering for service, and home base - fulfilling a life mission to the world.

These churches, and others, have created intentional structures to promote commitment to Christianity, to the congregation, and to missions. Such structures include new member classes, personal deacons, care or fellowship groups, assistance in discovering ministry gifts, ministry "fairs," and volunteer recruitment "drives." Several congregations have established courses to instruct new members in the basics of the Christian faith, for instance Saddleback offers C.L.A.S.S. 101, 201, and 301 teachings which lead members into a deeper understanding of the faith. All the megachurches which use the above noted rhetoric of "refuge" also encourage the "rescued" members to help others once they themselves are mended. More than those non "full-service" churches, megachurches are intentionally structured to offer multiple avenues by which members can increase their levels of commitment and accountability, if they so desire. The choice is each member's to make, under the intense prompting of pastoral appeals for involvement.

At the same time, however, many megachurches direct their energies on those persons who are active participants and who choose to be highly involved, rather than on those who want to be affiliated but remain as minimally active members. Willow Creek, for instance, asks every participant to renew his or her commitment to the church each year. Those who do not are dropped from membership (Olson 1988:202). Participation counts; involvement is what defines membership for many of these congregation. Some megachurches even claim to have larger numbers of weekly attenders than they have persons on their membership rolls.

Megachurches, like all other congregations, must constantly try to reduce their attrition rates. They must also compete with the strong societal norm that justifies sporadic attendance and marginal participation. In addition, all churches have to deal with people who feel that they can drop in, enjoy the show, and ignore the threats to give or be involved, even at the cost of possible eternal damnation. Unlike many other congregation, however, megachurches often spend much more time attracting those who choose to be committed rather than trying to coerce marginal members to change their minds.

Every successful organization has to attempt to weed out its free-riders either by encouraging them to leave or by getting them involved (Iannaccone 1992). Megachurches contain large numbers of new, non-contributing, and marginal members, often as many as half the congregation. The percentage of such persons in megachurches may be greater than it is in smaller churches precisely because of the anonymity of size and the fact that these large churches often intentionally "cast their nets" upon an "unchurched" constituency (Schaller 1992). At the same time, these megachurch "free loaders" might not tax the institution to the extent they do in a smaller church (Stonebraker 1993:239). Several church researchers argue that even though the large churches require more money to maintain themselves, percentage-wise they are more efficient and generate considerable amounts of additional revenue (Vaughan 1990; Schaller 1992). Megachurches have a greater surplus of resources to compensate for the marginal participants (Stonebraker 1993).

The large number of minimally involved persons may, in fact, actually be an asset to the megachurch organization in a way they are not for smaller churches. Several thousand free-riders are crucial for the megachurch to maintain its large congregation, a "critical mass," of worshipers which help attract others to the church. These large numbers help the church stand out in the religious marketplace. Therefore, whether the free-riders are committed or not, their presence alone contributes significantly to the draw of these massive churches.

Another question which arises in relation to the members of megachurches is from what sources are they being drawn? Given that most of the megachurches began within the last 25 years, nearly all of their congregations are the result of proselytizing. Very few members were born into these churches. Much of the rhetoric of megachurch pastors suggests that they target and convert non-Christians and the "unchurched." One study found that among members of the Vineyard movement 13 percent had no previous religious affiliation. A total of 29 percent were classified as "unchurched," having attended church in their childhood once a month or less (Perrin 1989:126). A survey of Chapel Hill Harvester Church members found that 6.1 percent of respondents were "religious nones;" while over 27 percent claimed to have been new Christians for two years or less (Thumma 1996a). These data seem to indicate that a majority of megachurch members arrive by switching from other churches or denominations, rather than having been converted from noninvolvement. Church literature from one megachurch, Valley Cathedral of Phoenix, proudly proclaimed this fact, stating that it began with persons from 34 different denominations.

These thousands of worshipers from diverse backgrounds gathered in a massive service requires that megachurches must work hard to create a sense of acceptance and intimacy. The many groups and ministries in place offer small group opportunities to find intimacy in a megachurch, if one is interested in looking for it. At the same time, these structures may not provide the deep, long term relations, within a community of memory that promotes true intimacy (Wuthnow 1994).

Nevertheless, many large churches have been diligent in attempting to create a congregational atmosphere which promotes intimacy. Jerry Falwell wrote of his Thomas Road Baptist Church, "I believe you will find us to be a friendly church with a warm family atmosphere." Phoenix First Assembly (of God) speaks of itself as the "Church with a heart for the family." First Baptist of Orlando refers to itself in all its literature as "The First Family." Another Southern Baptist in an Atlanta suburb, First Baptist of Snellville, proclaims in its literature that it is "The Caring Place." Roswell Street Baptist Church, also of Atlanta, described itself as "A big down-home church where everybody is somebody." Its visitor's brochure attempts to prove this point, "studies show that most persons know an average of 60 people by first name. That is true if they belong to a church with 6, 60, 600, or 6000 members." This church developed an elaborate cell-group system of concentric rings labeled "Fellowship circles," "Friendship circles," and "Kinship circles" to promote intimacy and "build a friendly church." Chapel Hill Harvester Church leadership, likewise, encouraged the congregation to be friendly, warm, and open to each other. Judging from the congregational survey the membership reflects this attitude, two thirds of respondents stated that they knew as many or more persons at Chapel Hill Harvester than at other churches they had attended. Three of their five closest nonfamily friends attended the church. In addition, over forty percent had extended family at the church. Finally, over eighty percent of the survey respondents also reported that they "felt cared about" and "were not just another number" at the church.

A final innovative way nearly all megachurches promote intimacy and a sense of community is through the use of their media resources to enhance congregational communications. A reliance on various media is necessary given both the size of the congregation and the number of activities taking place in any given week. This knowledge distribution is essential for the functioning of the organization. This use of a church's media resources, however, extends far beyond information management. Newspapers, magazines, weekly bulletins, pamphlets, video presentations and taped messages create traditions even as their stories inform members of church history or current events. With the use of slick desktop publishing programs these media are colorful, attractive, and quite professional looking.

These various media forms function the way the "coffee hour" might in a smaller congregation. Articles in these various resources feature biographies on staff members, introduce the "deacon & elder of the month," and identify recent new members. Stories and regular columns in church newspapers provide an opportunity for key leaders or guest lay writers to give their testimonies. Some articles share the wisdom of members' experiences on how to parent, handle aging relatives, recover from a divorce, or even witness to a neighbor. Many megachurch ministers use these media forms to augment their sermons, to instruct the congregation, to press their position on upcoming issues, or to keep home bound members connected (Eiesland 1995:86-87).

In addition, media resources are employed by the leadership to compensate for their full and busy schedules. Ideally, they want to seem constantly available for every parishioner. Various modern technologies such as voice mail, paging services, cellular phones, faxes, and e-mail help make this possible. Many of the megachurches use automated phone forwarding systems, such as Chapel Hill Harvester Church's after hours message "If you are calling about a death in the family, press nine." Computers have also been a technological godsend for megachurches. They keep track of giving and attendance, organize members' volunteer interests, and customize form letters to members. For instance, Chapel Hill Harvester used its computer data base to generate personalized birthday cards "from the Senior Minister." These elaborate systems allow for a technological intimacy with otherwise unreachable spiritual CEO's and ministerial board members.

Of course, megachurches also make use of their media resources to spread their influence and extend their advertising budget. Tapes, printed materials, conference announcements, and radio and television broadcasts often cover the continent. Many churches televise their services, even if it is just in the local area and many use video presentations in worship as well. Willow Creek is a notable exception here, having intentionally chosen to avoid television entirely (Chandler 1989:A28). Within the last few years an additional medium, the Internet, has captured the attention of some megachurches. At present dozens of congregations, including Chapel Hill Harvester, Willow Creek, Saddleback, and First Baptist Atlanta, have very professional, and quite extensive pages on the World Wide Web.

Networks of Like-minded Congregations

The national influence of megachurches has given rise to another of their distinctive characteristics -- the creation of unique organizations which function somewhat like a "quasi-denominational association" gathered around the leadership of these large churches. The various associations, fellowships, or networks of megachurches and their affiliates represent a distinctive and major

structural innovation in the organization of American religion. A large number of megachurches are involved in networking with other smaller churches. For instance, Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard Christian Fellowship each have several hundred churches affiliated with them (including several other megachurches), many of which were started or "planted" from within their ministries (Parrott & Perrin 1991; Dart 1991). Saddleback Church has incorporated 27 "daughter churches," while Highland Park Baptist Church had in 1983 over 60 "chapel ministries" (Vaughan 1984:112). Willow Creek Association designed "to provide support to other seeker-sensitive congregations" had a 1992 membership of over 700 but by 1996 claimed to have 1400 affiliate churches from 70 denominations (Gilbreath 1994; Church's web site).

Legitimacy may have been the initial reason these independent congregations affiliated with the larger megachurches; however, the sharing of resources, instruction, and the need for direction from a leader with a successful model can also be seen as part of the attraction to these networks. This idea of a loose affiliation of like-minded churches fits with modern management Amegatrends" away from hierarchical leadership models (Naisbitt 1984). The networks allow individual congregations to choose their affiliational ties based on their momentary interests and needs rather than having it be denominationally-fixed, or permanently committed. These churches, both independent and nondenominational, are able to select with whom they want to associate and to whom they choose to submit and be accountable.

In none of these associational efforts was the denominational model adopted.. These networks intentionally envision themselves as non-bureaucratic, non-hierarchical, and non or intra-denomination. The head of one fellowship stated firmly, "This is not and never will be a denomination" (Dart 1991). These networks are often a loose affiliation of egalitarian congregations gathered around one or several outstanding ministries with the intent of sharing information, gathering resources, and linking up with other churches that share a similar vision of ministry. They may vaguely resemble the denominational structure, but the characteristics, quality, and grounds of the relational dynamics between the central congregation and its association of affiliates more resembles getting one's degree through a correspondence course than it does earning it by attending a college. One network, Fred Price's "Fellowship of Inner city Word of Faith Ministries, had 210 networked congregations. The requirements for membership in this fellowship were $100 per year dues and agreement with a statement of beliefs. Price states, "We have accountability to one another, but it is very loose. We're not saying you have to do things this way or that way" (Dart 1991).

Neither are these networks schismatic or sectarian in origin. Unlike sectarian splinter groups, these fellowships were ecumenical groupings of churches, some of whom retained their connections to denominational organizations. New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, founded by Pastor Eddie Long, is dually aligned with the NBC and ABC, in addition Long is a Bishop in the network headed by New Orleans pastor, Paul Morton. These networks, then, are not exclusive, rigid associations. Brasher notes, in her study of the Calvary Fellowship, the decentralized nature of member congregations' relationship with the mother church in Costa Mesa. She suggests, "It would be inaccurate to infer...that Calvary affiliates are totally independent. They are bound together with the fuzzy boundaries of indefinite connectedness.... the rudimentary tie which strings Chapels together as an approach to ministry" (1992:14). One pastor in the Calvary network called this "gentle accountability." Brasher also notes that the Calvary association was quite fluid with numerous churches leaving and others joining. In one year's time 76 joined but 35 congregations left the

fellowship (1992:15). In fact, a small church may link itself to several major ministry networks, so too might a network be connected to other networks through one of the broader umbrella groups.

The idea behind networks, as expressed by several of these groups and numerous affiliate church pastors, is cooperation in ministry, a sharing of mission perspective, and fellowship. These groups can be seen as functioning similar to "parachurch" organizations and "special interest groups" offering smaller churches information on a distinctive brand of Christianity or way of doing ministry. Many of the megachurches host church growth or pastoral development conferences for their affiliates and others. Willow Creek, for instance, offers three conferences a year. Its conference in May 1995 had 2,391 participants from 644 churches, with 78 denominations and 17 countries represented. In addition Willow Creek, as well as other networks, connects its associational members through cyberspace. The Association's web site provides considerable information on its "fellowship" as well as describing the extent of its relationship with affiliate churches, and offering on-line registration. It publishes its networking newsletter online and offers a listing of churches including home pages for each church.

Megachurches in general share most of the above described characteristics. Taken together these traits define a distinctive congregational form. Growth is partially responsible for the creation of this new reality, but it is not size alone which produced this phenomenon. The modern context can also be seen as constitutive. These churches, however, are not just accommodated versions of denominational or sectarian congregations.

Megachurches strain the boundaries of traditional ways of describing and categorizing religious phenomena. These massive congregations have certain qualities of a sect (they have high commitment costs, proclaim a unique legitimacy, and reject structural differentiation by seeing religion as important to all of life); they are like a denomination (they have an openness to society, high organizational complexity and a mass religiosity where choice is essential); they are like a parachurch organization (they provide a specialized service to interested consumers, function as a resource, and allow for minimal commitment). At the same time, they can not be encompassed fully by any one of these categories.

This new configuration of religious life is a result of the creative adaptation to a changing social situation. Megachurches as a social phenomenon can only be seen as a collective response to shifting social and cultural patterns of American society. The words of one Chapel Hill Harvester Church member underscore this reality.

[The church] is very open to change...and that is part of the success. It's that fluid posture that says, "Let's shift, Let's move." That really adds some strength to the ministry. You know the world is fluid, it changes. And a fluid ministry is one that can go with that flow.

MEGACHURCHES: A MODERN CULTURAL FIT

Megachurches are not just a unique expression of baby boomer religion, a "new paradigm" religiosity, nor are they the result of an overabundance of religious entrepreneurs. Rather changing cultural and social conditions have created a context in which this alternative form of religious organization has come to be seen as a viable option. The megachurch phenomenon is new. It

represents one of the most prominent religious patterns which has developed in relation to recent changes in American society. It is exactly this relevance which enabled most of the megachurches to reach their present size. They were able to adjust to a changing context in order to address the needs of their clientele. To do this, many megachurch pastors simply asked people what they wanted in a religion and then sought to create that product. However, this is not why megachurches exist. They are not a distinctive social reality because they crassly cater to choosy consumers. If this were the case, this religious expression of programmatic flexibility based on marketing expertise would have produced a shallow commitment to a watered-down Christianity and short-lived social phenomenon.

For the answer to why megachurches have become so popular and plentiful in the last several decades, one must examine their common characteristics in relation to the personal, social, and cultural reality of those who become megachurch members. These distinctive congregations must be seen in their cultural context in order to identify their appeal, beneath their obvious programmatic efforts.

A Mega Institutional World

If a congregation experienced rapid and phenomenal growth in 1996, that church would send representatives to conferences sponsored by Willow Creek or Saddleback Church to learn how to structure itself and how to manage its growth. The earliest megachurches, however, did not have the luxury of established models to draw upon or pattern themselves after. Their pastors and leadership had to create a new organizational form through a process of institutional adoption and syncretic blending, an organizational bricolage, of successful patterns around them to meet the specific needs of their expanding congregations.

To both plan and structure their burgeoning matrix of ministries, church leaderships looked to one of the most prevalent institutional realities in the neighborhood, the shopping mall. Consciously or unintentionally, the mall concept became the organizational style for ordering and presenting a diverse array of educational, support, political, fitness, and religious programs, all under one roof. These individual shops examined secular service organizations for their inspirations of what "sold" among consumers, but also to find out what the needs were that they had to address.

The creation of these large congregations came about, then, as gifted, innovative leaders began to draw masses of persons around them and around their visions of a relevant, lived Christianity. As this growth occurred these leaders drew upon the forms and structures of everyday life to fashion a reality which would meet the needs of their institutions and the requirements of their membership. As a result, their creations, megachurches, both fit their message of an practical, no nonsense religion and resonated with their experiences and those flocking to hear the message. Both the message and the form fit the constituency.

The Modern Megachurch Member

Those who are drawn to megachurches find their various organizational forms quite familiar, a part of their everyday lives (Eiesland 1995). Megachurch members are at home in large scale institutions (Ostling 1991; Schaller 1992). They grew up in them and were nurtured by them. They were probably born in a giant hospital, educated in a consolidated high school and large public university, and entertained by rock concerts, cable television, and multiplex movie theaters. No doubt they shop in malls and food warehouses, and may commute thirty minutes or more to jobs in large corporations situated in office parks. These institutional realities and their practices have shaped both the character and the needs of these people. 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 five thousand other relatively anonymous persons, just like they do every day of their lives.

These megachurch members are also highly mobile, transient, and without roots. They long for a place, a heritage, and commitments however fleeting (Roof 1993). Megachurches offer these persons a history, a narrative tradition, and programs to which they can commit (Eiesland 1995:78). The fellowship groups and need-based therapeutic social ministries provide a rapid integration into a community and the personal intimacy of subjective, expressive encounters (Wuthnow 1994; Hadaway & Roozen 1993). The advertisement of one megachurch succinctly captures this social situation of its potential members,

The difference is worth the distance! Have you noticed how far you have to travel in this metropolitan area to get to: a shopping center or grocery store, school or post office; doctor or mechanic? [Our] membership...assembles from a radius of twenty miles. Someone near you worships here. The road to the house of a friend is never very long.

Above all else these persons are looking for a choice that addresses their needs. This is not merely a superficial choice of a variety of market products, but a choice which is constitutive of who they are. Research shows that ascribed identities have been weakening, especially in a highly mobile society (Hammond 1988; Wuthnow 1988; Roof & McKinney 1987). As a result, the act of choosing functions to define who person are, it provides them with alternative achieved identities. Many megachurch members want to make personal choices which, likewise, require a commitment. They desire causes that matter and choices that demand something of them. It is this kind of person, one who is willing to commit, upon which megachurches specifically focus their attention. Megachurches accept all who come, but they also demand commitment. As one Chapel Hill Harvester pastor stated during a call for members, "This church is not for everybody. We call for a high level of commitment."

This requires two things of megachurches: that they offer a clear, well-defined identity, and that this identity be a worthy pursuit. As Roof suggests, many of these religious seekers are interested in finding "a religion you can believe totally in" (1993:213). This need not be expressed in a rigid fundamentalist way, although it is often a faith with a conservative theological orientation. Actually, many megachurches defy easy classification as strictly liberal or conservative in relation to both the diversity of members' beliefs and the programs sponsored. These congregations and their ministries exhibit considerable pluralism. Although the official theology espoused may be orthodox conservative Christianity, a variety of opinions and practices are tolerated in relation to women's roles, sexuality, abortion, and political persuasions. In a cultural climate which emphasizes the

self-construction of beliefs and spirituality, tolerance of a diversity of possible alternatives, unified under a common vision, is an asset. This vision, however, must be one which can be enacted, which propels members to engage the world and their neighbors. They must have a place to demonstrate their commitment to this identity. Megachurches provide exactly that -- countless possibilities for service united by a strong visionary identity (Roof 1993:184).

The Religious Reality

Megachurches likewise offer an organizational form that parallels much of the religious context of modern American society. Contemporary religion has been seen as characterized by a new voluntarism. Persons are free to choose whether to be religious or not (Roof & McKinney 1987). If they do belong to a church, they are more likely to shop around for a congregation that "has what they want" and "feels comfortable" (Roof 1993:5; Hadaway 1993:349). Megachurches offer an institutional setting that may be familiar to church shoppers. In addition, they provide the plethora of choices that allow spiritual consumers to get all their family's needs (spiritual, emotional, and recreational) met under one roof (Schaller 1992).

Within this context, "ascriptive loyalties" to the denomination of one's childhood have diminished in importance as a way in which persons define who they are religiously (Roof & McKinney 1987). The significance of denominational labels as a definitive characteristic of congregations is on the decline, a fact which is not lost to most nondenominational megachurches. As a result, persons are free to draw on multiple sources of religious experience to construct a faith that "works" for them. It is those persons who are most likely to do this, the middle class, suburban baby boomer, whom megachurches target as potential members.

Megachurches also address another characteristic of the modern religious life, that is the desire for quality, entertaining, and expressive worship combined with relevant, practical and biblical preaching (Schaller 1992). A large number of megachurch members left the ranks of "the unchurched" or switched from other congregations precisely because they claimed they wanted a deeper expression of Christianity (Perrin 1989). They were looking for a faith that could make a difference in their lives, give them a purpose, and provide them with a place to be of service to humanity. Megachurches were an answer to their needs.

Megachurches -- A Symbolic Presence in American Society

Megachurches offer a unique way of being religious in modern society; one that fits the social and religious context of many people. These large churches also create a distinctive symbolic presence as local congregations in contemporary society. Massive congregations of two to fifteen thousand participants occupy an undeniable space in the religious and social landscape. It is not just their prominent location, massive buildings, countless ministries, or television programs that give these churches their high visibility. It is also their vision of playing an role in changing society which both attracts attention and functions as part of their appeal. These congregations preach a message of action and empowerment to their membership. Their goal is to make a difference in individual lives, in the local community, and in the world. It is the rhetoric, and often the reality, that these churches are actively engaged in reshaping their social context which is appealing to members .

The cumulative effect of the mass gatherings, the giant structures, and the local and national influence which these churches have is to create a powerful symbolic presence of a publicly vital and influential congregation. The message offered implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, by these congregations is that they are not, as one pastor explained, "just a local church on the corner, but a world missions outreach center." These megachurch pastors and their congregations see themselves, in the words of this same pastor, as "World Changers - changing their worlds in their homes, workplaces, and communities."

Whether these churches actually will change the world remains to be seen. However, both their presence and their power in shaping their immediate surroundings have been actualized. The implication of this success can be seen as an unstated but real challenge to the impression that religion is impotent in a secularized society. For members of megachurches, as it is for many modern Americans, the influence of religion, and specifically Christianity, has been perceived as declining at an alarming rate. The powerful influence of their congregations provides considerable evidence to the contrary. The successful megachurch, with its thousands of vibrant committed Christians, offers the message to America that religion is alive and well, at least in this place.

It is always in congregational settings where new ways of being religious have their birth and are nurtured. In the current changing cultural and social context, megachurches offer new visions of faith and new structures in which to be religious. These forms have tremendous potential to reshape their members and their local communities as well as the face of religion in the United States. If they can accomplish this, perhaps they will, as they hope, remake the world.