

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Megachurches often seem to have a huge bull's eye painted on their walls. They are favorite whipping boys for small church pastors, seminary professors and denominational officials. And as the megachurches continue to grow in size and influence, the pushback intensifies.

However, a new book just published by Hartford Seminary asserts that megachurches have been getting a bad rap. Authors Scott Thumma and Dave Travis have incorporated exhaustive research done by the Hartford Research Center in their fascinating new book [Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn From America's Largest Churches](#). They claim in this book that most of the stereotypes of megachurches are just plain wrong, not supported by the facts. For those who are interested in the arguments, I would highly recommend the book.

They begin with the definition of a megachurch. A megachurch as currently understood is a Protestant congregation which averages at least 2000 people in worship on a weekend. They agree with most statisticians today that membership numbers have far less value; what is truly a more accurate measurement of the size of a church is the worship attendance. Even here, there is some disparity. Some congregations count just adults, while others count adults and children. Nevertheless the number 2000 is the agreed upon size.

Thumma and Travis set the stage by heralding the incredible impact of the megachurch in 2007, far greater than even a decade ago. They found that such churches are growing bigger, faster and stronger in almost every state in the U.S. In summary, if all of the people who worship at megachurches were combined, they would be the third largest religious group in the country. In 2007 there were about 1250 megachurches, up from a couple of dozen in 1970.

However, they assert, the influence of such churches is even greater than the size. "Beyond the raw numbers and power of these churches, we believe that megachurches, their practices, and their leaders are the most influential contemporary dynamic in American religion. They have superseded formerly key influences such as denominations, seminaries and religious presses and publishing."

Today megachurches are growing more rapidly than the population. From 1980, the number of such churches per million of population has doubled every ten years and seems to be on track to do so between 2000 and 2010. They estimate that there is a megachurch within ninety minutes of 80% of the U.S. population.

Megachurches did not spring out of a vacuum. Rather they parallel changes which are taking place in modern American

society. It is clear that in the past generation Americans have gravitated toward large institutional forms, including hospitals, schools, stores, factories, entertainment centers and malls that have grown to mega-proportions. Churches are just following suit.

In fact, all of our interaction with large institutions have prepared us for the megachurch: our ability to read signs, to learn how to proceed through a maze of hallways, to wait in lines, to recall where we parked in a vast parking lot, to cope with huge indoor spaces, to watch large video screens and to assert ourselves in a crowd if we have a question or need something. The megachurch assumes all of these skills of its members. So, the authors assert, the force of cultural conditioning is on the side of the megachurch.

Also in modern society we value choice and options. A church can offer numerous options that will attract larger numbers of people: worship, ministries to meet needs, places to serve and opportunities to volunteer. Choice is valued by most Americans and choice enhances commitment.

Then, the authors address what they call "myths" about megachurches. They state the myth, examine the criticism, and then demonstrate how the research debunks the myths. In very brief form, here are the myths, the argument and then the counter research.

Myth one - All megachurches are alike. They are all huge non-denominational "seeker-oriented" churches less than forty years old. All of them seldom use Christian symbols such as crosses or stained glass. They embrace capitalism, the Republican Party, and evangelical theology. They are under the influence of a strong authoritative leader. But the research shows that only about 25% of megachurches fit this model. In fact Thumma and Travis delineate four kinds of megachurches:

1. Old/line, program based. Many of these are the established old "First" churches. Most are more than forty years old, and denominationally based. Many have classic church architecture that include pews and hymnbooks.
2. Seeker churches. These have targeted the baby boomers (born 1946 to 1964), highlight contemporary worship and promote small groups in homes. Most are denominational, but many don't mention this in their name.
3. Charismatic/Pastor Focused. Usually a very gifted pastor began the church. The primary goal is to energize believers, have the longest sermons and are heavily Spirit-focused.
4. New Wave/Re-Envisioned. These attract primarily those in their 20's and 30's, are least traditional and emphasize in public commitment to Christ.

Lutheran Church of Hope does not fit any of those categories completely.

Myth two - Megachurches are just too big. People are just a number, anonymous. But research demonstrates that people in megachurches know as many people or more than in smaller churches. Two thirds reported they had received pastoral support from a pastor, and 80% felt cared for in the large church. Increasingly large numbers of members are involved in regular ministries, programs and worship.

What the authors found was that megachurches have learned well the lessons of not addressing size issues. So, they over structure every aspect of member involvement. They assume people do not know each other, nor will they make the effort to meet people on their own. They assume people desire intimacy of a small group but will seldom seek it out. This is why Hope has the "large group-small group strategy."

Myth three - Megachurches are cults of personality. It is true that some megachurch pastors are larger than life, especially when seen on the big screen or the TV. But pastors in small churches are just as visible, and if not more so, just as important. In fact, as a church grows larger, the senior pastor has less and less contact with members than in a small church. Most megachurches have a whole team of leaders who organize and lead much of the ministry, not the senior pastor.

A primary difference that characterizes the senior pastors of megachurches is a passion for reaching out to the unchurched. They are not so much interested in the numbers of their own church as they are in increasing the Kingdom of God, (or as we say, making heaven more crowded.) Megachurch pastors tend to be risk takers, creative in approach, and idea people.

Myth four - Megachurches are only concerned with themselves. Early in the phenomenon, 1960 -1980, there was some truth in this statement. But in recent years megachurches have taken the lead in turning their attention to the transformation of the community, to meeting needs of the poor and oppressed. Led by Rick Warren of Saddleback, megachurches now are creating small groups with a mission component (Feed a Million).

Myth five - Megachurches water down the faith. They are a mile wide and an inch thick. Part of this myth arises from the bias of many commentators who assume that serious churches do not grow. Thus if a church is growing, they assume it must be shallow in theology and faith. (Wonder how they interpret Acts 2?) However, the research gives a different picture.

In fact, most megachurches have a very high commitment to the Christian message, to discipleship, and to service. Over 80% of megachurch participants engage in devotional acts at least once a week, and 55% of them do this daily. These churches very intentionally move people from "crowd to core," where they become deeply committed to Jesus Christ and his mission (i.e. Alpha).

Myth six - Megachurches are bad for other churches. Research shows that some of this concern is accurate. Up to

one-third of new members transfer from other congregations. Of course this means that two-thirds were either unchurched or dechurched. What often happens, the research suggests, is that when a smaller congregation in a community becomes highly conflicted, often substantial numbers will move to the megachurch, to seek relief from the pain and to find positive energy. Who deserves the blame for this trend is an open question.

On the other hand, megachurches are often good for smaller churches. Megachurches are very good at bringing people in the front door, but not everyone does well in that setting. So when they leave by the back door they often want to find something smaller, more intimate. Also megachurches can become resource centers for smaller churches by providing programs, conferences, curriculum and support. For instance, Hope has many leaders from smaller churches that attend Alpha and then go back and introduce it in their own congregation.

Myth seven - Megachurches are full of the same kind of people, age, race, class and political orientation. Hardly. Every study shows that megachurches demonstrate wide diversity in the area of economic status, racial makeup, and religious background. In fact, smaller congregations usually have more sameness than the megachurch.

The average megachurch today has 14% of the congregation not representing the majority race, and the majority of such churches are making specific efforts to become more multiethnic. A natural result of wide diversity of worship styles, programs and ministries is the ability to attract different kinds of people.

Myth eight - Megachurches grow because of the show. Worship is slick, neon, professionally produced with high-tech inducements. (Maybe this is why Pastor Richard says, "We don't do neon at Hope.") But it is clearly much more than show, roughly 90% of worshippers at megachurches find worship to be joyful, inspiring and thought provoking.

The major reason why these churches grow is because they have a vision for growth; they focus on evangelism. One result of having joyful and inspiring worship is that people are so excited that they will invite others. Of course we realize that none of these churches started out as megachurches. The only way they got that way was to create worship that was inviting and inspiring. This would not happen if this were only show.

In summary, Lutheran Church of Hope worships more than 5000 on the weekend. And with the opening of a new worship center, that will soon grow again. In addition, North Branch had 459 in worship last weekend, and Immersion worships some 300 each week. These statistics are not included in the 5000.

Also according to the list from Hartford Seminary of the 1250 megachurches, there are five in Iowa. They are: First Assembly in Des Moines, Third Reformed in Pella, First Assembly in Cedar Rapids, Nazareth Lutheran in Cedar Falls and Lutheran Church of Hope.