

Church Size: A Three-Part Series

[Part I: Size Matters](#) | [Part II: Large Church, Small Identity](#) | Part III: We Don't Want to Be a Mega-church

Part III

We Don't Want to Be a Mega-church

“Who are we? Well, we are a large church, and we'd like to keep growing, but we don't ever want to become one of those mega-churches.” And by that, leaders imply that they don't want to embody the stereotypes typically associated with the megachurch experience. Specifically, they don't want to exhibit the following characteristics: entertainment driven worship venues, shallow spirituality, low-participation-consumer-driven mentality, impersonal, pastor-centric personality cults, and box-shaped buildings devoid of religious significance.

But, is this what the mega-church experience is really about, or have we simply created a caricature of the mega-church experience so that we don't have to feel threatened by their presence and their success? Do we dismiss the mega-church as something incredibly “other,” so that we don't have to bother engaging or learning from their experience?

Perhaps it is time to look at the mega-church (more than 2,000 in average worship attendance) more realistically, to better understand our true distinctiveness in relationship to it. In 2009, The Leadership Network and the Hartford Institute for Religion Research jointly published a paper entitled, “Not Who You Think They Are: The Real Story of the People Who Attend America's Megachurches”. http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/megachurch_attender_report.htm

In this research piece, Scott Thuma and Warren Bird begin by pointing out that there has been no slow-down in the growth of U.S. megachurches. They continue to grow at a rapid rate and they are thriving in an environment that has not been friendly towards churches of other sizes.

The report highlights nine distinctive features of mega-church attendees. I invite you to read through the list with an eye toward the similarities between the people described here, and the people in your congregation. I suspect you will discover more similarities than differences.

1. Nearly two-thirds of attenders have been at these churches 5 years or less.
2. Many attenders come from other churches, but nearly a quarter haven't been in any church for a long time before coming to a megachurch.
3. New people almost always come to the megachurch because family, friends or coworkers invited them.
4. Fifty-five percent of megachurch attenders volunteer at the church in some way (a higher percentage than in smaller churches).
5. What first attracted attenders were the worship style, the senior pastor and the church's reputation, in that order.
6. These same factors also influenced long-term attendance, as did the music/arts, social and community outreach, and adult-oriented programs.
7. Attenders report a considerable increase in their involvement in church, in their spiritual growth, and in their needs being met.
8. Attenders can craft unique, customized spiritual experiences through the multitude of ministry choices and diverse avenues for involvement that megachurches offer.
9. In many ways, large churches today are making good progress in reaching people and moving them from spectators to active participants to growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

In many regards megachurch attenders look quite similar to attenders of other large Protestant churches. They deepen in their faith, in their participation, and in their service to others over time. Most have a strong sense of belonging to their congregation. They report having meaningful spiritual lives that are nurtured by their involvement in their congregations.

Megachurch attenders are also distinctive in a few important ways. Megachurch attenders are younger and more of them are single. Additionally, they are more educated and wealthier. They are not as long-tenured in their participation.

So, when we define ourselves as large churches that have no desire to become mega-churches, what are we really telling ourselves? Are we saying that we aren't interested in attracting more youthful and more single congregants? I hope not. Are we defining an upper limit to our attendance growth, so that we don't become a caricature in our own eyes? Or are we simply trying to dismiss something that feels threatening to us?



Susan Beaumont

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I'd like to hear church leaders talk more realistically about the distinctiveness of their own identity, realistically comparing and contrasting their strategic identity with that of the nearest mega-church. "We value our worship style which is rooted in something ancient and very much alive. Our spirituality grows out of a time-honored tradition, yet bears our unique stamp. We advocate a progressive theology, a culture of radical inclusion, openness to dialogue with hard questions, and a commitment to social justice advocacy. Our musical style holds great appeal to those who value a more classical orientation. "

What accurate points of comparison and contrast can you draw upon when considering the mega-church in your community? Let's be clear about our strategic identity and about how our size really shapes us and our missional focus. Let's not let easy characterizations of the "other" keep us from being clear about whose we are, who we serve, and what we are feeling led to do or become.