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Mega-Myths

The *Megachurches Today 2005* survey, recently released by Leadership Network and Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research, is the most thoroughly researched study of the Protestant megachurch movement in the United States.

Doubling in number in just five years, there are now over 1,200 megachurches (defined as a church with an average weekly attendance of over 2,000) in the United States. As Dave Travis, Executive Vice President of Leadership Network noted in the study's press release, megachurch pastors are featured prominently in national news stories related to religion and public life, their books can be found on *The New York Times* bestseller lists, and their names dominate the lists of the most influential religious leaders in the country.

Yet the megachurch has been a favorite target of those who fear the church abandoning orthodoxy for the sake of warm bodies. Common critiques including a capitulation to cultural values, an unthinking embrace of cultural forms, the presentation of pop psychology over doctrine, and...well, you get the picture.

I know that as the pastor of a megachurch, I would read critiques of the megachurch and wonder, "Which church, exactly, are they talking about?" The critiques certainly were not applicable to mine.

Apparently they weren't applicable to many of the others, either.

For example, consider the contention that megachurches exist for spectator worship and are not serious about Christianity. In reality, the Leadership Network/Hartford study found that megachurches generally have very high spiritual expectations of their attenders and maintain seriously orthodox beliefs. As the *Christian Science Monitor* reported on the findings, the research has made it abundantly clear that it is "a myth that megachurches grow by offering 'theology lite.' The churches generally held strong beliefs; have a clear mission and purpose; and have high expectations for scriptural study, prayer, and tithing."

Another myth exploded by the survey is that all megachurches are homogenous congregations with little diversity. In truth, a large and growing number are multi-ethnic and intentionally so.

A final myth worth noting is that megachurches grow primarily because of great programming, manifesting an “entertainment” ethos. The fact is that megachurches grow because excited attendees tell their friends.

As I read the report, I couldn't help but have my thoughts turn to another megachurch study – one that held many parallels to these more recent findings. In the account, a single church had grown to over 3,000 through one service. While some may have instantly suspected a watered-down, compromised message (why else would so many attend and respond?), the report outlined the message and revealed its tough stance on sin, repentance, and the absolute necessity of coming to Christ as Leader and Forgiver. There was innovative methodology, to be sure (the service was actually held outdoors instead of indoors, and seemed fairly free of traditional forms of worship), but the results were unmistakable.

If you are interested in reading *that* report, it's titled Acts, was authored by a man named Luke, and the section in question is the second chapter.

It is easy to forget that the church was birthed by the Holy Spirit as a megachurch. There were assimilation struggles, and who can begin to fathom the challenge so many new converts brought to the discipleship task. Yet it continued to experience explosive growth at the pleasure of the Holy Spirit, as Michael Green has noted, as people talked about it with their friends as if it was gossip over the backyard fence.

I'm under few illusions about the strengths and weaknesses of megachurches. But it is undeniable that the megachurch is one of the most important and influential phenomena of our day.

All the more reason for my agreement with the press release for the report, which maintained that while tremendously significant as a cultural study, the survey also is instructive for churches that are anything but “mega.” Scott Thumma, Professor of Sociology of Religion at Hartford Seminary and primary architect of the survey, said, “I am absolutely convinced that megachurches have blossomed, at least in part, because they have responded creatively to the new needs and interests of people in a new cultural reality. There is much to learn from megachurches – and it isn't all about being big.”

Or about abandoning orthodoxy.

James Emery White

Sources

Downloadable copies of the complete Megachurches 2005 Today survey (in both html and PDF versions) are available at either www.leadnet.org or <http://hrr.hartsem.edu>. A 15-minute podcast discussion of key survey findings is archived on both sites.

*The direct link to the Hartford materials:

http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_research.html.

The press release from Hartford Institute for Religion Research can be found at http://hrr.hartsem.edu/org/megastoday2005_pressrelease.html.

"Megachurches Growing in Number and Size," Abe Levy, Associated Press, Yahoo! News, Friday, February 3, 2006 (http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20060204/ap_on_re_us/mega_churches).

"Megachurches way of worship is on the rise," Jane Lampman, Christian Science Monitor, February 6, 2006 (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0206/p13s01-lire.html>).

Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*.

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