



LUTHERAN

looks at...

MEGA CHURCHES

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INTRODUCTION

For someone living in an average to small-sized town in America, the word *church* usually means a certain group of people who meet in a building at a certain location in town. In most towns there is the usual assortment of churches. Some claim to be “first,” such as First Baptist, First Lutheran, or First United Methodist. One Lutheran church in town is larger, older, or considered more conservative in doctrine than the others. One church has a more prominent location than the rest. One church has a school, while the others do not.

Until recently, no church claimed to be “mega.” Combining the word *mega* with the word *church* is a current phenomenon. For a church to be mega, it needs to have a lot of people attending worship on a given weekend. And to arrive at the kind of numbers that make a church mega, there must be a large population center nearby from which to draw members. Getting several thousand—in some cases, tens of thousands—to attend worship is hard in a town with a population of five thousand.

The mega church located ten minutes from where I live, Willow Creek Community Church, has more than 23,000 in attendance every weekend. To accommodate such a large crowd, it has built a \$73-million-dollar auditorium that seats 7,095 people, making it more than twice as large as the Kodak Theater in Hollywood where the Academy Awards are presented.

This book looks at mega churches, or the mega church phenomenon, through the eyes of a Lutheran. I’ve conducted my ministry in the shadow of the Willow Creek Community (Mega) Church for 16 years. Year after year, Willow Creek has

been voted the nation's most influential church. I've known many people who attend Willow Creek, or at least claim that mega church as their home church. I've seen firsthand how much Willow Creek's way of doing church has influenced the Chicago area and the nation. I also have a heightened sensitivity to some practices in my own synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, that appear to be "Creekish."

As I wrote this book about mega churches, I had Willow Creek in mind and I refer to it often. But this book is not a critique of Willow Creek. Today, Willow Creek is only the third largest church in the nation.¹ Instead, I intend to show the common threads that tie mega churches together. I'll do this not as a disinterested researcher but as someone who wants to give the Lutheran reader insights into the mind and heart of a neighbor who attends a mega church. I pray that this book will better equip confessional Lutherans to understand their mega church neighbor and provide information useful for the kind of religious discussions that take place over the backyard fence.

As I wrote this book, I was aware that a lot of criticism has been directed at mega churches and mega church leaders. The leaders of mega churches have become especially sensitive to these attacks. Lynne Hybels, wife of Willow Creek senior pastor Bill Hybels, writes, "Throughout the early years we were vehemently criticized by traditional churches, often publicly from the pulpit. We were called deceivers and phonies."² Mega church leaders and defenders of the movement claim these attacks have come as a result of envy. "Indeed a large part of the resistance to mega churches comes from leaders of these [denominational congregations, seminaries, and religious presses] who see their own influence waning."³

One of the main resources for this book, *Beyond Mega-church Myths*, was written to dispel misconceptions and misunderstandings (at least from the authors' perspectives) concerning mega churches. Its intent was to quiet the critics

of mega churches. While there may be some truth that some church leaders criticize mega churches out of envy, our approach here will be based on the fact that Lutheranism and mega-church-ism are very different in what they teach. To show how the churches are different in their teachings and practices has nothing to do with envy. My concern is not about influence or size but about doctrine and the salvation of souls. I would hope that after reading this critique, even a mega church pastor would say, “Yes, this is an objective appraisal of mega churches from a Lutheran point of view.”



1 WHAT IS A *Mega Church?*

Experts usually define a mega church as a church that has two thousand or more in attendance each weekend. Experts add the word *protestant* to their definition of a mega church.⁴ Catholic parishes are not included, and for good reason. In large population centers, Catholic parishes often fall in the mega range. For example, the Catholic parish in my relatively small town has 4,250 member families.⁵

The mega church definition refers to two thousand in attendance per Sunday on one campus. Some churches in the Chicago suburbs are called mega churches by the media because they have that number in attendance, but the people are meeting at several different campuses. If you expand the definition of a mega church in this way, you would have to call my church body—the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)—a mega church, since we have 1,279 congregations or “campuses.” But we don’t call a synod such as WELS a mega church. The multi-campus definition, however, normally applies to what we might call a mini synod or a numerically successful church that has spun off clones of itself in its own area or part of the country. In my mind, a mega church is a mega church because it has mega facilities to handle mega crowds in one location.

Mega, meta, and super

As it turns out, the term *mega church* may soon be passé. Many of the churches that have reached the two thousand mark for average weekly attendance have broken a new barrier of ten thousand or more for their average weekly

attendance. Mega church consultant George Carl has coined the term *meta church* to describe a church of “several tens of thousands” of members.⁶ The term is used by some authors to refer to churches that have expanded beyond the mega church definition and have the distinction of being able to break barriers and set new standards. And what lies beyond mega and meta? Super church, of course!⁷

The numbers

In 2007 only 1,250 churches out of 335,000 in America could be considered mega churches.⁸ Yet even though the number of mega churches (2007 statistics) was relatively small, the number of people attending mega churches is rather large. “Four and a half million Christians attend mega churches each week. Twelve million call mega churches their home, or 10% of all participating church members in the United States.”⁹

More than simply possessing a large number of attendees, mega churches possess tremendous resources as well. When you have a lot of people, you can do a lot of things.

Mega churches also tend to be regional churches, drawing from a large geographical area. “In a study of the members of one mega church, nearly 50 percent drove over fifteen minutes to get to the church, and 10 percent traveled more than 30 minutes to church.”¹⁰ I have always been amazed by members of mega churches who talk about attending the mega church that is three suburbs away. It doesn’t seem to bother them. To them, it is worth the drive to be part of something so big.

Ancient mega churches

Those who suggest that the mega church should be the norm refer to the New Testament Christian church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem started out on Pentecost with blockbuster numbers. Three thousand were baptized on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). The numbers continued to increase because “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). That church met in the temple

courtyard, a large outdoor facility that could accommodate thousands. “All the believers used to meet together in Solomon’s Colonnade” (Acts 5:12). The growth continued until the stoning of Stephen, when a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Yet, even though the church was scattered, “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). Those who say the mega church model is the true biblical model like to use this example.

The second mega church would probably be the congregation at Hagia Sophia, a grand cathedral thought to have been built by Emperor Constantine in Constantinople.

Reported to have covered an area of 55,000 square feet, [it] was built by 10,000 workmen under the direction of 100 foremen and had a staff fixed by Justinian at 60 pastors, 100 deacons, 40 deaconesses, 90 sub deacons, 100 readers, 25 singers and 100 custodians/porters. Since churches did not have pews until about A.D. 1100, approximately 10,000 to 20,000 people could have attended any one public worship service (assuming that there was only one gathering each Sunday).¹¹

In a certain sense, the cathedrals of Europe were mega churches. Think of such churches as the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, Saint Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican in Rome, and Westminster Abbey and Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London.

While several of these churches conduct multiple worship services, with the exception of Saint Peter’s and its reported standing capacity of at least 40,000 people (some say 50,000), most of these cathedrals can accommodate only approximately 2,000 during each worship period. Mass at the largest service in Rome is reported to comprise nearly 8,000 worshipers.¹²

Unfortunately, as you know if you have ever visited any of these magnificent structures, they often have become tourist attractions and museums instead of places where Christians

regularly gather to worship God. Unless it's Christmas or Easter, or some member of the royal family is getting married, only the few and faithful show up for weekly services.

Modern mega churches

America has had its share of mega churches. A long list of examples could be given. One example is Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights, New York. The church, officially known as Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, is a Congregational church. One of its early pastors, Henry Ward Beecher, who began his ministry in 1847, was a fiery preacher best known for his denunciation of slavery. Henry incorporated drama in his services—mock “auctions” at Plymouth urged the congregation to purchase the freedom of actual slaves. In 1850, after the congregation's original structure burned down, it was replaced with a structure that seats 2,800.¹³

Another example is Aimee Semple McPherson's church in Los Angeles, California. McPherson was a Pentecostal preacher who made use of the latest technology of the day, radio. By 1923, her organizing activity was successful enough that she was able to build the Angelus Temple, seating more than five thousand, with two prominent radio towers perched on the roof. The movement McPherson started continues to this day, with more than two million members located in 30 countries.¹⁴

And let's not forget the Moody Church in Chicago, Illinois. Dwight Lyman Moody, a man who had only a fifth-grade education, founded this church. What he lacked in education, he made up for in zeal. Moody was originally a shoe salesman and went at building his church with a businessman's mentality. The Moody Church continues today and meets in a facility that seats approximately 3,800 worshipers. Incidentally, Moody's application of business principles to the church can be clearly seen in the operation of mega churches today.

And finally, consider Charles Mason's Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. Charles Mason was the founder of the

Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal church that today has an estimated 8 million members. The congregation in Memphis meets in an auditorium that was built during World War II and became the largest convention hall owned by an ethnic religious group in America. The Mason Temple seats 3,732.¹⁵

These examples have a couple of things in common. They were developed in large population centers. They feature other elements found in modern mega churches today: the use of drama, media, and the application of business principles.

Early examples of mega churches, however, are few and far between. Today, mega churches are much more a part of our general population and seem to be well received by our culture. “The culture at this time has proved to be fertile soil for this form (of church) to proliferate at a rapid rate compared with previous times in the United States history.”¹⁶ People today are more comfortable with larger institutions, including larger churches.

Mega churches are definitely not exclusively a North American phenomenon. The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, has a weekend attendance of two hundred thousand.¹⁷ The Yoido Church is the largest church in the world. It has more than 763,000 members, 600 missionaries, and is currently working to establish five hundred new churches. To achieve two hundred thousand in attendance per weekend, the Yoido church has seven worship services every Sunday, beginning at 7:00 A.M. All the services are in Korean, but interpretations are provided in English, Chinese, Japanese, French, Spanish, and Russian.¹⁸

Types of mega churches

To get a better understanding of mega churches and to move beyond the idea that all “extremely large” congregations are mega churches, it may be helpful to divide mega churches into two categories: large denominational churches and large nondenominational churches. The first category is easy to

understand. A local Baptist church has grown to the point where it has two thousand or more per weekend at its services. It has become a large denominational church. The information provided in the series A Lutheran Looks At on specific denominations like the Assemblies of God or the Baptists would clearly identify the beliefs and practices of denominational mega churches. To a certain extent, a Baptist mega church will teach what all Baptist churches teach. One such church, which meets a few blocks away from my home, is Quentin Road Bible Baptist Church. This church gathers in a 76,000-square-foot auditorium that seats three thousand. It also offers a preschool that enrolls nearly two thousand children.¹⁹

The focus of this book will be on the second type of mega church, the large nondenominational church, also known as a community church. These mega churches are the most influential and get the most press. We might add, though, that community church mega churches have influenced denominational mega churches to the point where there is little, if any, outward difference between them.²⁰ Denominational mega churches have a tendency to downplay their connection with their denomination. So, even though a mega church in your community may belong to a denomination, it may function and act like a community mega church. One author writes:

Although it is often assumed that all mega churches are nondenominational, in reality nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ belong to a formal national denomination. However, there are twice as many nondenominational mega churches as there are mega churches from any single denomination. Because many of these churches hide or at least downplay their denomination label, it is not surprising how the perception that most mega churches are nondenominational has arisen. Denominational names carry with them a preconception about style, theology, and worship formats. Mega churches want to be judged

on what they have to offer, not on the latest announcement coming from a denomination's national office. Mega churches are also quite self-sufficient; they don't need the resources, guidance, or identity that a national body can provide. As such, many of the mega churches are functionally nondenominational; they hold both the national body and the denominational label and identity at arm's length.²¹

The authors of *Beyond Megachurch Myths* have broken down mega churches into four types: (1) old line/program-based churches, 30 percent; (2) seeker-type churches, 30 percent; (3) charismatic/pastor-focused churches, 25 percent; and (4) new wave/reenvisioned churches, 15 percent.²² The old line/program-based mega churches are the mega churches that belong to a denomination. The seeker mega church designs services for those they believe are searching for something—a connection with God. Such churches have services called seeker services, which are specifically designed for newcomers. The charismatic/pastor-focused mega church is one driven by a dynamic personality, most often that of the founding pastor. The new wave/reenvisioned is the mega church that finds value in incorporating elements of Christian worship from the past as well as more contemporary elements.

From what I have seen visiting mega churches in my area, a single mega church may fit two or three of these categories, or even all four of them. A certain mega church can belong to a denomination, design services to seek the lost, have a dynamic preacher, and make use of things from historic worship rites all at the same time. However, the one umbrella that seems to cover the majority of mega churches is what we will talk about in the next chapter. They all share an approach I like to label “community churchism.”