

	% Doing This Activity
Invitation to participate in a fellowship or other small group	88%
An orientation class for new members	78%
Invitation to volunteer for service in the congregation or the community	69%
Designated people extend hospitality and invite them for meals	58%
Follow-up visits by clergy, lay leaders, or members	52%
Other activities	22%
No planned procedures or activities	3%

A Look at Patterns in Megachurches by Date of Founding

The numbers of Protestant churches with average attendance over 2,000 has continued to increase dramatically over the past decades. This research project has identified over 1,200 megachurches, which increases the previously known number of churches by almost 400. That means it is possible that nearly a quarter of all megachurches have been founded in the past 15 or 20 years. When a church is relatively young, it tends to function in ways that set it apart from an older congregation. In particular, being founded recently has a discernable effect on the functioning, identity and member composition of the congregations. The more recently a megachurch was founded the more rapidly it is likely to be growing.

Founding date	Average % of growth in 5 years
Before 1946	47%
1946-1970	55%
1971-1990	83%
1991-2005	424%

Likewise, the more recently a megachurch was founded, the greater median 2005 attendance it has.

Founding date	Median 2005 Attendance
Before 1946	2,600
1946-1970	2,859
1971-1990	3,000
1991-2005	3,440

Megachurches founded since 1991 are more likely to be nondenominational and less likely to describe their congregation as traditional, moderate, Pentecostal or charismatic, but they are more likely to say they are seeker oriented.

The more recently a megachurch church was founded the greater the likelihood the pastor is younger and has less formal education.

The membership on average of these more recently founded churches is significantly younger. This membership also has more families with children, a slightly larger multiracial

percentage, more new converts and more people who are new to the congregation in the last 5 years.

In terms of the worship style and atmosphere, these more recently founded churches are less likely to use choirs and piano but much more likely to have electric guitars and drums in the service. The services are also described as informal and exciting at higher rates than churches founded in earlier periods. This optimism perhaps aroused an evangelistic fervor in members since the churches founded most recently were more highly rated as having members involved in recruitment.

Finally, the megachurches founded since 1970 scored significantly higher on saying they welcome innovation and change and have a clear mission and purpose than do churches founded earlier.

A Look at Patterns in Megachurches by Size Groupings

Not all megachurches are the same size. Variations in size make more differences than just the amount of income, staff and other resources. In comparison with more recently founded megachurches, the larger the megachurch the more likely it is to be seen as having an exciting worship service. These largest churches are also significantly more likely to use electric guitars and drums, while also less likely to use a piano frequently in worship.

These churches are described as being more spiritual vital and alive, welcoming of innovation and change, having a clear sense of mission and vision, holding strong beliefs and values and being willing to meet new challenges when compared to megachurches of smaller sizes.

The membership of these largest churches has larger percentages of younger people and smaller numbers of those over 65 years old. They claim to have much larger percentages of persons who are new converts. They are somewhat more likely to be nondenominational.

Church Size	Average Income	FT ministerial & admin staff	Volunteers 5hr+	Median 5yr growth rate
1,800 – 1,999	3.17 million	21	126	38%
2,000 – 4,999	5.20 million	36	236	44%
5,000 – 9,999	9.14 million	64	533	56%
10,000 or more	24.80 million	131	904	74%

A Look at Patterns in Megachurches by Rates of Growth

The growth rates of most megachurches are such that most churches only dream about, but even among these congregations the rates vary considerably. The rate of growth among megachurches alters more than just their size.

The largest worship service of the fastest growing churches is described as having higher scores of being informal, filled with a sense of God’s presence, joyful, exciting, inspirational and thought-provoking than other megachurches. The faster growing a church is the more it is described as being more spiritual vital and alive, having a clear mission and vision, holding strong beliefs and values, meeting new challenges and welcoming innovation and change.

Likewise, those with higher rates of growth over the past 5 years also have more persons under 35, fewer persons over 65, a larger percentage of families with children and not surprisingly, more new converts and persons new to the congregations in the past 5 years. These congregations also have larger percentages of members reported to be involved in recruitment as well as increased scores on the question of whether the church has people assigned to extend hospitality to new members.

A somewhat surprising finding was that almost none of the many evangelistic programs and efforts (such as advertising, creating recruitment plans, sponsoring visitor events, contacting persons new to a community or actually contacting persons after they visited the church) we tested had a strong influence on the variable growth rates of these megachurches. If anything the increased rates of growth seem to be more due to the characteristics of worship and the active involvement of the membership in recruitment.

		Grouping by Growth Rates				
		No growth or decline	1 to 20% growth	21 to 50% growth	51 to 100% growth	More than 100% growth
What extent members involved in recruiting new members	Not at all	6.5%	1.8%	3.3%	2.4%	1.2%
	A little	32.3%	21.8%	9.9%	14.3%	7.1%
	Some	41.9%	40.0%	42.9%	33.3%	27.1%
	A lot	19.4%	36.4%	44.0%	50.0%	64.7%

Interestingly, as the education levels of the pastors decrease, the rates of growth of these churches increase. This finding is similar to the findings from the Faith Community Today 2000 study. It raises interesting questions about the mentoring of young pastors and the role of seminaries in producing clergy to fill these very large congregations.

The rate of growth of these megachurches is also strongly correlated with the reported absence of conflict in the congregation. Those churches that grew by the greatest percentage also experienced the least amount of major conflict and conversely those that experienced on growth or an actual decline in attendance had the greatest rates of major conflict.

		Grouping by Growth Rates				
		No growth or decline	1 to 20% growth	21 to 50% growth	51 to 100% growth	More than 100% growth
Has the church had conflicts or disagreements in past 2 years	No conflict I am aware of	9.1%	50.0%	50.0%	56.1%	66.7%
	Some minor conflict	60.6%	38.9%	43.3%	40.2%	33.3%
	Major conflict	30.3%	11.1%	6.7%	3.7%	.0%

All these findings leave more unanswered questions than they offer conclusive answers about what makes these very large congregations so successful. The research team will continue to analyze the information over the coming months to further explore the insights within the survey.

Eleven Misconceptions Explored **

As the introduction to this report noted, one goal of the Megachurches Today 2005 research is challenge stereotypes that may be inaccurate or inappropriate. The Megachurches Today 2005 survey instrument is based on descriptive questions and statements (see below for more details on the survey itself). However, the research findings readily lend themselves to challenging various false impressions as to what megachurches are like and how they function. The following material explores 11 of those misconceptions.

MYTH #1: All megachurches are alike.

FACT: They differ in growth rates, size and the things they emphasize.

MYTH #2: All megachurches are equally good at being big.

FACT: Some megachurches clearly understand how to function as a large institution but others flounder noticeably at being big -- and some even struggle and decline.

MYTH #3: There is an over-emphasis of money in all the megachurches.

FACT: Our data doesn't show this. Rather it is often a low priority, except when engaged in a building or capital campaign. At the same time, most don't shy away from occasional sermons about putting God first in individual financial priorities and preaching on tithing.

MYTH #4: Megachurches are just spectator worship and are not serious about Christianity.

FACT: Our data shows that most megachurches demand a lot; they have high spiritual expectations and serious orthodox beliefs and preaching.

MYTH #5: These large churches only care about themselves and are not seriously involved in outreach and social ministry.

FACT: Considerable ministry is going on at the megachurches from solitary outreach to the local communities, joining with other churches in an area to tackle problems, as well as contributing to efforts nationally (say in New Orleans) and internationally (such as ministry to persons with AIDS in Africa)

MYTH #6: All megachurches are major political players and pawns or powerbrokers to the Republican Party or George Bush.

FACT: A vast majority of megachurches surveyed said they are not politically active. This parallels survey data on smaller churches, most churches have an internalized separation of church and state. A few megachurches and their pastors are vocally politically active but not most, not even a majority.

MYTH #7: All megachurches have huge sanctuaries and enormous campuses.

FACT: Megachurches show widespread use of multiple worship services over several days, multiple venues, and even multiple campuses. Mega refers to attendance, not building size.

MYTH #8: All megachurches are nondenominational.

FACT: While many megachurches are nondenominational and most others often act like it, the vast majority belongs to some denomination.

MYTH #9: All megachurches are homogeneous congregations with little diversity.

FACT: A large and growing number of megachurches are multi-ethnic and are intentionally so. Likewise, many of them have considerable diversity in terms of class, education levels, income, ages, backgrounds, occupations, and even theological and political styles.

MYTH #10: Megachurches grow primarily because of great programming.

FACT: Megachurches grow because excited attendees tell their friends. They may be encouraged and helped to do so by church leadership but it is not what megachurches “do” in terms of evangelistic programs, neighborhood surveys, etc. that makes them grow. The survey did not show any significant correlations between the programmatic items and the increased rates of growth in the fastest growing ones.

MYTH #11: The megachurch phenomenon is over and on the decline because it was just a Baby Boomer phenomenon. Gen Xers and Millennials aren't interested in megachurches.

FACT: The increased numbers of megachurches we found is shocking, and it seems there are many more on the way. We see no indication of this trend slowing. Others have pointed out that the biggest churches in all denominations are getting bigger over time, since the 70s. Likewise, the idea that youth don't find megachurches appealing could not be further from the truth. While the megachurch phenomenon exploded with the Baby Boom, it was around before them and will be after them. Many of the fastest growing, largest and newest megachurches are full of people under 35 years old. Not all youth like megachurches, but then neither do all Baby Boomers.

** These and other myths will be explored in greater detail in Scott Thumma's upcoming book on megachurches.

Conclusions: What Does All This Mean?

These findings of the Megachurches Today 2005 project clearly indicate that not all megachurches are alike. It is a mistake to assume that all these very large churches are monolithic and function in a similar fashion. While they do have many characteristics in common (often they have more in common with each other than they do with smaller churches), they are not all identical. The above information points to several variables such as founding data and size that affect the functioning and dynamics of the megachurches. It is likely that after additional analysis other variables such as denominational affiliation, region, and dominant race of the congregation will also be shown to have an effect on their functioning.

Second, while there is some overlap among the groupings of most recent, fastest growing and largest churches, the patterns in the data discussed above are consistent across founding periods, all growth rates and different sizes of megachurches. Therefore, the characteristics that repeated in this analysis such as adaptation to change, sense of being spiritually vital, having a clear mission as well as youthfulness of the congregation and the use of electric guitars and drums, and the rates at which members tell others about the church are significant variables in terms of growth and health of the churches.

Third, these findings indicate that much more research of a nuanced and careful nature should be done if we are to accurately understand the dynamics of these largest and influential congregations.

There are many misconceptions about megachurches, inaccuracies that this research and the activities of the sponsoring organizations hope to dispel. As explained in appendix C, our two organizations have teamed up to do this research project because we are eager to provide correct and accurate information about megachurches in the United States. Churches large and small have much to gain from a comprehensive national picture of large churches throughout the country.

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Appendix A: Profile of Total U.S. Megachurches

Total number of megachurches in the US & Canada – 1210 at 2000 average in attendance

Total number of churches on online database – 1319 at 1800 average or more in attendance

Regional Distribution:

DIVISION	PERCENT
New England	1%
Mid Atlantic	6%
South Atlantic	23%
East South Central	7%
West South Central	18%
East North Central	14%
West North Central	6%
Mountain	5%
Pacific	19%
Canada	1%

Attendance:

Average attendance of all megachurches 3612 persons

Median attendance of all megachurches 2746 persons

SIZE GROUPING	PERCENT
2000 to 2999	53.8%
3000 to 3999	19.1%
4000 to 4999	11.1%
5000 to 9999	12.0%
10,000 or more	4.0%

1210 churches - total average weekly attendance = 4,374,400 people

Denominational Distribution:

AFFILIATION	PERCENT
Nondenominational	34
Southern Baptist	16
Baptist, unspecified	10
Assemblies of God	6
United Methodist	5
Calvary Chapel	4.4
Christian	4.2
Four Square	1.2
COC – ELCA – VINE	1% each

These top 11 affiliations account for nearly 84% of all megachurches

Distribution by State

California (178)
 Texas (157)
 Florida (85)
 Georgia (73)
 Illinois (46)
 Tennessee (44)
 Ohio (44)
 Michigan (43)
 North Carolina (39)
 Indiana (31)
 Maryland (31)
 Washington (30)
 Oklahoma (28)
 Colorado (26)
 Pennsylvania (26)
 Virginia (25)
 Minnesota (24)
 Arizona (24)
 Missouri (22)
 New York (22)
 South Carolina (21)
 Alabama (20)
 Oregon (18)
 New Jersey (16)
 Louisiana (15)
 Kentucky (14)
 Kansas (11)

Nebraska (10)
 Arkansas (10)
 Mississippi (9)
 Wisconsin (8)
 Nevada (8)
 Washington, DC (7)
 Massachusetts (7)
 New Mexico (5)
 Hawaii (4)
 Idaho (4)
 Alaska (3)
 Iowa (3)
 Connecticut (3)
 Delaware (1)
 North Dakota (2)
 Montana (1)
 Utah (1)

The following states do not have any megachurches on record:

Maine
 New Hampshire
 Rhode Island
 South Dakota
 Vermont
 West Virginia
 Wyoming

Appendix B: Comparison of 2000 Study and 2005 Study

Worship Services Offered:

How many worship services does your congregation usually hold each weekend (not including special services, weddings, or funerals)? 2000 – Most 2005 - 80% offer 4 or less

Are these services:	2000	2005
	52%	52% All very similar in style
	24%	23% 1 or more are somewhat different in style
	24%	25% 1 or more are very different in style

During the past 5 years, has your **congregation changed the format or style** of one or more weekend worship services?

	2000	2005
No change	22%	15%
Changed a little	37%	26%
Changed some	21%	36%
Changed a lot	21%	23%

Sanctuary seating capacity: 2000 - ave. 2040 2005 - ave. 1709

In what year was your congregation officially **organized or founded**?

2000 Median - 1956 2005 Median - 1965

Is your congregation formally **affiliated with a denomination**?

	2000	2005
Yes	67%	58%

Region

2000	Northeast - 6%	South – 40%	Northcentral – 21%	West – 33%
2005	Northeast - 6%	South – 49%	Northcentral – 20%	West – 25%

Location around the city:

	2000	2005
A downtown or central area of the city	14%	13%
An older residential area in the city	14%	14%
An older suburb around the city	37%	29%
A newer suburb around the city	34%	45%

How often are the following a part of your congregation's worship services?

		NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
Piano (2000 asked Organ and/or Piano)	2000	3%	2%	3%	14%	78%
	2005	3%	4%	9%	21%	63%
Electric guitar or bass	2000	1%	6%	14%	17%	61%
	2005	2%	1%	4%	13%	80%
Drums	2000	1%	5%	9%	19%	66%
	2005	1%	0%	5%	12%	82%
Visual projection equipment	2000	9%	14%	6%	7%	65%
	2005	2%	1%	2%	4%	91%

Our congregation: (Note different wording* 2000- How well does the statement describes your congregation?)		STRONGLY DISAGREE (NOT AT ALL)	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE (SLIGHTLY)	NEUTRAL/ UNSURE (SOMEWHAT)	SOMEWHAT AGREE (QUITE WELL)	STRONGLY AGREE (VERY WELL)
Is like a close-knit family	2000	3%	11%	38%	37%	11%
	2005	2%	11%	15%	54%	18%
Is spiritually vital and alive	2000	0%	0%	10%	49%	41%
	2005	1%	2%	2%	30%	65%
Has a clear mission and purpose	2000	1%	1%	12%	30%	57%
	2005	2%	3%	5%	21%	70%
Is working for social justice	2000	7%	22%	37%	23%	11%
	2005	5%	17%	30%	33%	16%
Welcomes innovation and change	2000	2%	1%	15%	44%	40%
	2005	1%	5%	9%	34%	52%

Which label is the closest description of the **theological identity** of the majority of your church's regularly participating adults?

	2000	2005
Fundamentalist	2%	2%
Evangelical	48%	56%
Pentecostal	11%	8%
Charismatic	14%	8%
Moderate	12%	7%
Traditional	8%	5%
Seeker	3%	7%
Other	3%	7%

Of the total number of regularly participating adults, what percent would you estimate are:

		NONE 1-10%	HARDLY ANY 1-10%	FEW 11- 20%	SOME 21- 40%	MANY 41- 60%	MOST 61- 80%	ALL OR NEARLY ALL 81- 100%
Female	2000	0%	0%	0%	7%	88%	4%	2%
	2005	0%	0%	0%	4%	88%	8%	1%
College graduates	2000	0	1	6	29	39	22	4
	2005	0	2	5	29	38	20	7
Age 35 or younger	2000	0	1	5	48	36	9	1
	2005	0	0	7	46	35	11	1
Over 60 years old	2000	0	16	36	33	12	3	0
	2005	0	25	41	25	8	0	1
New to your congregation in the last five years	2000	0	4	25	32	29	8	2
	2005	0	0	13	43	27	12	4
In households with children under 18 at home	2000	0	2	6	39	47	6	0
	2005	0	1	7	31	45	15	2

Senior Pastor's Age 2000 Average = 52 years old 2005 Average = 50 years old

Pastor's Race/ethnicity

2000 White = 88% African American = 6% Hispanic = 1% Asian = 0% Other = 5%

2005 White = 89% African American = 8% Hispanic = 1% Asian = 1% Multiracial = 1%

Senior Pastor's Highest level of education:

	2000	2005
High school diploma or GED	3%	2%
Some college or technical school	4%	6%
College Bachelor's degree	35%	19%
Masters Degree (including M.Div)	28%	37%
Doctoral Degree (Ph.D., D.Min)	31%	35%

This person became the **senior pastor in what year?**

2000 Median = 1987

2005 33% prior to 1989 and 35% since 1995 Median = 1992

Did the church's most **dramatic growth occur during the tenure of this senior pastor?**

2000 70 % Yes

2005 83% Yes

During the past 10 years, how many senior pastors (including the current one and all interims) have served this congregation?

2000 Average = 1.5

2005 Average = 1.4

How many **paid leadership staff positions** do you have in your congregation?

Total full-time 2000 Average = 13

2005 Average = 20

Total part-time 2000 Average = 3

2005 Average = 9

How many **paid administrative or support staff positions** do you have in your congregation?

Total full-time 2000 Average = 25

2005 Average = 22

Total part-time 2000 Average = 14

2005 Average = 15

What is approximately the **total number of volunteers** at the church who work more than 5 hours a week?

2000 Average = 297

2005 Average = 284

How would you describe your congregation's **financial situation**?

	2000	2005
In serious difficulty	0%	1%
In some difficulty	3%	1%
Tight, but we manage	10%	19%
Good	32%	48%
Excellent	54%	31%

What is the total amount of **income** your congregation received from all sources during your most recent fiscal year?

2000 Average = \$4.8 million

2005 Average = \$6.0 million

What is the total amount of **expenditures** of your congregation during your most recent fiscal year?

2000 Average = \$4.4 million

2005 Average = \$5.6 million

Appendix C: Overview of the Project

In the Megachurches Today Project from 1999-2000 a questionnaire was mailed to the 600 known megachurches at the time. No follow up or second mailing was attempted. The result was a response of 153 questionnaires or 25.5% response. This effort was the first of its kind, and although it is uncertain how well this sample paralleled the total number of megachurches, the survey still offered an overview profile of US megachurches. The summary report of that material can be found at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html

In early 2005, Scott Thumma, the primary investigator of the previous study joined with Warren Bird and Dave Travis of Leadership Network to redo the earlier study in a more comprehensive manner. We were supported by outstanding team members including Stephanie Plagens, Peggy Faroe, Kim Iltis, Rick Long, Sheryl Wiggins and Samantha Gonzalez. We combined our separate databases of known megachurches, and then augmented these with lists of possible churches over 2,000 in attendance from 7 additional sources. The resulting list of potential candidates totaled 1,838. A paper and online questionnaire was constructed that paralleled parts of the previous megachurch survey as well as matching a national survey entitled Faith Communities Today 2005. The survey was mailed to 1,236 and emailed to 600 for whom we had accurate email addresses. Several email reminders were later sent both to the 600 and approximately 900 of the other churches based on email addresses found on their web sites. Additional efforts such as press releases in the Leadership Network newsletter and other Christian and secular publications, articles about the study and reminders to networks of megachurch pastors were used to spread the word about the study. The result was a total of 667 full and partial responses or a 36% response rate. The total number of fully completed surveys was 529 with 133 of these having attendance of less than 2,000. Total number of confirmed, complete surveys of megachurch with attendance of 1,800 or more persons is 406, and 382 with attendance of 2,000 or more. The information in this report is based on the analysis of questionnaires from these 406 churches.

Along with this survey effort, we attempted to contact and confirm several facts about all the other churches in the total list of 1,838 in order to determine, as accurately as possible, the entire population of megachurches in the country. This effort entailed sending emails, checking web sites, communicating with many denominational research offices and calling well over 500 churches. This procedure resulted in confirmation of 1,210 congregations who reported having average worship of 2,000 or more attenders. If one adds those churches within 200 persons of the 2,000 mark, then the total rises to 1,319. At present we still have 120 unconfirmed churches from the original list.

Because we undertook the considerable effort to confirm the total population of megachurches in the United States, we have been able to weight the survey respondent questionnaires to approximate the total US megachurch population. We are certain that the findings generally represent the total group of megachurches in the U.S.

See Appendix A for a profile of the total population of megachurches in the United States.

A listing of all the megachurches in the country can be found at http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_database.html.

The survey used for this study has many questions in common with the Faith Communities Today FACT2005 research, a larger national random survey of congregations. The results of that survey will be released by Hartford Seminary's Hartford Institute for Religion Research and the Cooperative Congregations Study Partnership in April 2006 <http://FACT.hartsem.edu>. At that time additional analysis will be done to compare the megachurch findings with a sampling of smaller congregations.

Because many of the survey questions replicate the 1999-2000 study of 153 megachurches, it is possible to investigate how megachurches have changed in the past 5 years. Caution should be taken at drawing conclusions on this data since it is unknown exactly how representative the earlier study was and several questions were repeated with slightly different wording. Nevertheless, putting these two surveys side-by-side is very interesting in their similarities and differences as well as the potential implications regarding the possible changing nature of the megachurch phenomenon.

See appendix B for a few direct comparisons of the two studies.

To read more about the study, the authors of the research, or the sponsoring organizations go to http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches.html or www.leadnet.org.

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