



2002

## **Would You Like Your Jesus Upsized? McDonaldization and the Mega Church**

Elizabeth Cook

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_interstp2](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp2)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Cook, Elizabeth, "Would You Like Your Jesus Upsized? McDonaldization and the Mega Church" (2002).  
*Senior Thesis Projects, 1993-2002*.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_interstp2/85](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_interstp2/85)

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College Scholars at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Thesis Projects, 1993-2002 by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

Would You Like Your Jesus Upsized? McDonaldization and the Mega Church

Elizabeth Nicole Cook  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
Spring 2002

Dr. Suzanne Kurth, Advisor

Copyright © 2002 by Nicole Cook  
All rights reserved

*To Kevin for his unfaltering help and support, to my parents for all they have sacrificed, and to Robbie for always making me question.*

"The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who, in  
times of moral crisis, preserved their neutrality." --- Dante's *Inferno*

## CONTENTS

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii.
ABSTRACT.....	viii.
HISTORY OF THE MEGA CHURCH.....	10
<i>Mega Church as a New Movement</i>	
<i>Why the Mega Church is Different</i>	
<i>Church Finances and Staff Specialization</i>	
<i>Architecture</i>	
<i>Denominational Ties</i>	
<i>Church Decline</i>	
<i>Church Federations</i>	
THE MEGA CHURCH AS A BUSINESS.....	22
<i>The “Vision” Statement</i>	
<i>The Spiritual Shopping Mall</i>	
<i>Worship as a Product</i>	
<i>Competition</i>	
<i>Advertising</i>	
<i>Pastor as Chief Executive Officer (CEO)</i>	
MCDONALDIZATION AND THE MEGA CHURCH.....	36
<i>Predictability</i>	
<i>Calculability</i>	
<i>Efficiency</i>	
<i>Use of Non-Human Technology</i>	

*Irrationality of Rationality*

*Sacred vs. Profane*

THE POSTMODERN CHURCH.....57

*Organizational Structure*

*Audience*

*Strange Bedfellows*

CONCLUSION.....60

PERSONAL RESPONSE.....62

REFERENCES.....67

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my deepest thanks and gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Suzanne Kurth. Without your guidance, this project never would have become what it has. To the College Scholars program at The University of Tennessee, and to its director, Dr. David Tandy, thank you for giving me the option to pursue the degree of my dreams and for requiring a research project. This experience has been invaluable. To my college roommate, Christy Claiborne, thank you for listening to me read my research, giving me ideas, and helping me in so many ways. Finally, to the Honors Program, also at The University of Tennessee, I extend my deepest gratitude for the services and opportunities you have provided over the course of my undergraduate career.



## ABSTRACT

The Protestant American mega church is growing at a time when overall church attendance is in decline. An explanation as to why these churches with memberships greater than two thousand are growing so quickly needs to be developed. By means of a review of recent periodical publications, grounded in a small body of academic publications, and supplemented by observational personal experience, this thesis asserts that the mega church is a new social movement, separate from the large churches of the early twentieth century. One key distinction that sets the mega church apart is that it is operated like a business. Mega churches take part in competition and advertising to produce the professional product of worship services. Because of its business-like structure, the mega church is effectively analyzed with the effects of George Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization in the areas of calculability, efficiency, predictability, use of non-human technology, and irrationality of rationality.

Mega church, the religious catch phrase of the past decade, for some is the salvation of modern Protestant worship while others view it as the everlasting proverbial thorn in the side of America's churches. While dialectical struggles of sacred versus profane ensue, the history of the mega church has received only passing contemplation. While it in no way encompasses all the characteristics of the mega church, a basic definition is a church with an average weekly attendance of more than two thousand (Thumma 1996). Is this social shift in today's Protestant church a recent phenomenon? Were the large congregations of the eclectic roaring twenties the social spheres that today's mega churches have become? Will the historical evidence reveal that the mega church is another ebb and flow in the cycle of American social trends within the Protestant church, or does the trend still possess qualities unique to the current era?

To answer these questions, and many more, this thesis will examine the mega church as a recent movement among American Protestant churches that has led to a business-like structure. It will also analyze how the tenets of McDonaldization can be applied to the structure of mega churches and the resulting struggle of sacred vs. profane and the postmodern church as an answer to that dialectical struggle. A grounding in some academic sources, a survey of news media, periodicals, and web pages, along with my personal visits to selected mega churches, provides the base of information for this paper. Additionally, I have incorporated my impressions as a participant observer. For approximately one calendar year, I attended and participated as an attendee of a mega church. My experiences led me look for particular themes in the literature pertaining to the business-like aspects of the mega church.

## HISTORY OF THE MEGA CHURCH

With the advent of the highly publicized Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, on October 12, 1975, the young Protestant American middle class began a visible journey of discovery. The mega church became the designer church of one segment of the middle class. As Willow Creek and its founder, Bill Hybels, gained notoriety, the model put to use in Chicago suburbia spread, concentrating itself in the Sunbelt states of California, Texas, Florida, and Georgia (Hamilton 2000). Other churches across all denominational and racial lines began implementing portions of Hybels's model, in large cities as well as in small towns. At the same time that many churches and denominations declined in membership, nearly two million Americans became attendees of mega church congregations (Hamilton 2000).

### *Mega Church as a New Movement*

The mega church trend seems to mirror another time in the religious roots of America. A mere two decades after the turn of the nineteenth century, a similar upshot of large Protestant congregations was seen in the United States. Some claim that the growth of the mega church is just another rise of the same social trend as was evidenced in the early twentieth century. Others dismiss this view as simplistic, claiming that attendance is just a number; the atmosphere and function served by mega churches today contrasts with that of large churches during past times (Hamilton 2000).

*Number comparisons.* The most obvious point of comparison lies in the numbers. Some of the most notable are the 15,000 member Saddleback Valley Community Church in Los Angeles, 17,000 plus attendee Willow Creek Community Church, and the 8,000 plus member First Baptist Church of Dallas (Gillmor 2000). Possibly most notable, in

Garden Grove, California, the Crystal Cathedral is the home base for the international Crystal Cathedral Ministries, including a congregation of over 10,000 members and the internationally televised "Hour of Power (Crystal Cathedral International Ministries, 2002)."

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been large Protestant congregations in the United States. Beginning in 1922, and lasting over a decade, Paul Rader's Chicago Gospel Tabernacle drew a capacity crowd to its 5000-seat auditorium. There was also the 3000 member Baptist Temple in Philadelphia, and St. George's Episcopal in New York City involved 6600 people. Similarly, Seattle sported a congregation of 9000 during the same period. The famous John D. Rockefeller provided the monetary resources for Riverside Church of New York City, which often recorded attendance of 8000 or more. Most famous of all: Aimee Semple McPherson packed a 5300 seat temple in Los Angeles at least twice on Sunday during the 1920s and 30s until the Great Depression and its financial stressors finally weighed too heavily (Hamilton 2000).

*Target population.* In the area of sheer attendance, the large Protestant churches of the 1920s may seem similar to today's mega church. The characteristics of the parishioners may differentiate the churches of the two periods. During the early twentieth century, nearly one third of Americans were immigrants or the children of immigrants (Hamilton 2000). Although immigrants from some countries maintained their Roman Catholic affiliation, many were not Catholic. Newcomers began to take residence in downtown districts. With the population succession, the churches had to either follow old members to their new uptown homes or reach out to the new population of the heart of the city. This environment of a "continuous influx" of a certain type of

person is what spawned the growth of those churches that decided to transform their outreach to the immigrant population (Thumma 1996).

If the large churches of the 1920s appealed to immigrants, the mega church of the 1990s and 2000s serves a specific population segment, the family of suburbia. Mega churches such as these provide services in addition to being places of worship. The services and the style in which they are offered appeal to quite different population segments. The mega church suits “consumer oriented, highly mobile, well-educated, middle class families” (Thumma 1996). In contrast, the large churches of the 1920s and 1930s attracted mainly poor, working class families with little or no means of obtaining the services offered by the church from other sources (Hamilton 2000).

Research shows that churches of all sizes grow faster in growing areas of population (Thumma 1996). Center cities have lost population and churches have declined in membership in those areas at the same time outlying areas have grown. Yet, the shift of population to suburbs is only a partial answer. Mega churches were increasing in number as overall church attendance dropped nearly 20 percent in the 1990s. Church attendance is a weekly activity of only 40 percent of the nation, down from 49 percent in 1991 (Kapp 2001).

Proponents of labeling the mega church a new phenomenon, such as religious scholar and sociologist Scott Thumma, claim that no more than a dozen massive congregations existed at the same time in the past. The number of mega churches today is estimated at 350 and growing (Thumma 1996). Others counter this claim with population statistics. Comparatively, the then much smaller United States population had

a comparable number of large churches. In almost every major city during the 1920s through the 1930s, existed a large church (Hamilton 2000).

The proponents, such as the Hartford Institute for Religion, touting the mega church as something of a new phenomenon have to go beyond sheer numbers to justify their claims. When asked for evidence to establish the uniqueness of the mega church, proponents scream, "Programming!" The modern mega church claims to have something for everyone. A vast array of ministries, worship styles, and music are available within the structure of one church.

*Services and staging productions.* Not only do mega churches seek to proselytize and grow numerically, but they also sell books, provide counseling and aid to women in crisis pregnancies, nurture families split by divorce, provide single parent ministries, run award winning school systems, and start whole new spin-off churches in other communities (Walter 2000). To proselytize and grow, Willow Creek for example, offers multiple services aimed at target audiences. There, seventeen thousand plus people attend six services. Two are aimed specifically for the ambiguously defined Generation X. These services are well-planned and orchestrated productions that boast 50 vocalists, a 75-piece choir, 7 rhythm bands, a 65-piece orchestra, 41 actors, a video production department, and an arts center with two hundred students being trained as future talent for worship services (Gillmor 2000). The versatility of programs and classes, and the style of worship services is what proponents of the mega church claim separate them from the large churches of the past.

Yet, earlier Protestant churches had programming before the term came to be. Earlier large churches accommodated the immense inrush of immigrants by developing

services to meet parishioners' needs. They built gymnasiums, swimming pools, medical dispensaries, employment centers, loan offices, libraries, day care centers, and classrooms. Services were held in multiple languages. They taught the Bible but gave ample time to English, hygiene, home economics, and work skills (Hamilton 2000).

The very large congregations also staged productions that drew people to services. McPherson did not have a pulpit. She had a stage. Using live sheep and camels, ships, motorcycles, sirens, and elaborate casts of dozens, Sister Aimee lit up Angelus Temple like a casino complete with "searchlights sweeping the sky" (Hamilton 2000).

Angelus Temple was a type of model of the large Protestant church of the 1920s and 1930s. Gospel Tabernacles employed similar techniques offering weekday noon services, youth groups and crusades, choirs, orchestras, parades, prayer ministries, healing services, adult classes, radio broadcasts, magazines, and similar illustrated sermons (Hamilton 2000).

#### *Why the Mega Church is Different*

Early twentieth century churches had the numbers. They had the programming. However, there remain two paramount contrasts.

*Affluence or poverty?* The first difference lies in choice. The financial situation and limited geographic mobility of immigrants made them dependent on the church for these services. They had no other means of obtaining the goods and services offered by the large church with their working class wages. Those attending mega churches, however, are usually affluent members of their communities. Even with the vast array of commercially operated businesses offering goods and services, for which they can afford to pay, members choose the church backed programs over secular ones. Instead of going

to the YMCA or the local commercial gym or community center, members trek to the family life center of the mega church. Counseling services, social events, even library books are directed through the mega church rather than through other sources.

The population that attends a particular mega church is no longer a direct reflection of the community surrounding it. While most immigrants attended the church nearest their home, people drive substantial distances to attend these new “super-sized” congregations. Some families make as long as a one-hour drive or more to attend a particular church (Thumma 1996).

*The mega church as its own culture.* Another aspect that sets the mega church apart from its earlier counterparts is how each congregation almost forms its own community, crossing geographical boundaries. Mega churches provide a virtually complete social environment. Not only do they provide a broad base of programs, groups, and clubs, but they also are embarking on ministries that effectively eliminate the need for secular programs in their members’ lives.

One area where this is evident is in athletics for both children and adults. Based on my observations, Bellevue Baptist Church outside of Memphis has not only an entire baseball complex for all ages to play in their baseball leagues, but they also provide a series of practice fields that dwarfs other facilities in the city. Other mega churches sport basketball courts, pools, and even roller-skating rinks. Some even have movie theaters and retirement homes built into their complexes (Kapp 2001).

One writer equates the list of activities offered by a mega church with Club Med or a small liberal arts college (Kapp 2001). More and more mega churches are not encouraging their members to be “in the world, but not of it.” They are building “a place



basically where you can spend a day at church,” says Brian Norkaitis, senior pastor of Mariners Church in Los Angeles. Thus, the need to interact with secular organizations shrinks with each new program. Juggling the kids’ athletic events and music lessons, with Dad’s bowling league and Mom’s aerobics class can all be facilitated under the auspices of the mega church.

Therefore, families no longer know their neighbors because Johnny plays ball with their son in the summer. Dad no longer even has to ask the guy next door who his mechanic is, because some mega churches even offer auto repair clinics. Church becomes the community, even if church is physically distant

#### *Church Finances and Staff Specialization*

Large churches have large budgets whatever the time period. Management of numerous programs and large numbers of people also require large staffs. The earlier churches had large budgets and staffs. In Chicago, one church had 30 paid staff. Yet another, St. Bartholomew’s, employed 249 paid workers (Hamilton 2000). The *specialization* among staff members at mega churches is the new development.

For example, in a church of only moderate size among mega churches, about 2700 members, there are numerous paid positions. From the data provided in a church newsletter: there are eight pastors: senior, executive, pastoral care and senior adults, youth, family life and young adults, education, worship, and single adults and college. Each of these pastors has an administrative assistant. There is also an assistant minister of music with his own assistant, financial director, tape ministry director, receptionist, children’s ministry coordinator and assistant, a preschool ministry coordinator and assistant, two family life assistants, a facilities director, a seven person facilities upkeep

staff and a three person kitchen staff. This accounts for 38 paid staff positions in one church (Cutshaw 2000).

The specialized division of labor creates bureaucratic barriers and limits volunteer opportunities to contribute on the basis of personal preference. The Onion, a popular, Wisconsin based satirical newspaper published an article in which Christ was reported to have hired an assistant Christ (Siegel 2000). Poking fun at the sometimes overly specialized staff has become a staple of humor, both in and out of the church.

Even the popular *Simpsons* animated television show has addressed the issue of the mega church. In one episode, Homer and Bart build a model rocket together but lose control of it as it burns down the church. Without any money for repairs, the church decides to sell out to corporate sponsors: mainly Mr. Burns. Lisa is appalled by the shameless display of billboards and corporate monikers emblazoned on the church walls and finally decides to simply quit the church for good.

In contrast to the modern mega church, the large churches of the past worked in a less specialized fashion. Usually, a small board of individuals made most of the decisions. Meanwhile, the other paid staff members were used as multi-purpose employees completing tasks from publicity all the way down to electrical work. This administrative structure allowed for a large base of unpaid volunteers (Hamilton 2000).

### *Architecture*

Modern mega church architecture is viewed as an innovation. The overbearing Gothic style of older Protestant churches contrasts with that of new mega churches that boast sleek, and at times postmodern, styling. One journalist describes a mega church's sanctuary, "much of the heavy weight symbolism of traditional Christianity crosses,

altars, stained glass, have consciously been removed from the sleek ultramodern design of the new auditorium. A single cross hangs above the baptismal pool behind the choir (Thumma 1996).” Excepting those mega churches that have sprouted from preexisting congregations, the mega church building typically follows this style. A sprawling campus of multifunction buildings in sleek modern style is the norm.

There is one clear reason why Willow Creek has been used as a model for building a mega church rather than Dr. Robert Schuller’s Crystal Cathedral. Schuller’s all glass cathedral started as church at the drive-in movie theater and has grown to a massive 10,000-member congregation. However, a cathedral of more than 10,000 windows of tempered silver colored glass that are held in place by a frame of white steel trusses is not feasible for every mega church. Hence, Schuller’s model of building a church has been overlooked in favor of the Willow Creek model, despite the fact that the two very similar ministries constructed their buildings within one year of each other (Crystal Cathedral International Ministries, 2002).

Yet, the architectural styles of the large churches of the 1920s were different from the Gothic style now seen as traditional. Most of the large churches of that decade resembled warehouses. They used what buildings were available or constructed nondescript warehouse type buildings. St. Bartholomew’s was a nine-story building with a rooftop garden (Hamilton 2000). Angelus Temple appeared to the uninformed as a type of sports arena homologous to the Coliseum. As most were in cities, cost of space would have made it impossible to construct a campus like those seen in suburban mega churches (Hamilton 2000).

*Denominational Ties*

One trend that clearly seems to belong to the modern mega church movement is the growing dominance of nondenominationalism. While more than twenty percent of mega churches are of the Southern Baptist denomination, this affiliation is not evident to the uninformed observer. Mega churches of all denominations tend to downplay their denominational ties (Thumma 1996). From my own observations and according to research, there are often no indications from signs, advertisements, or web site that a church is of a particular denomination. “Independent churches are flourishing and churches within denominations are asserting their autonomy as never before” (Hamilton 2000).

Some large churches of the 1920s were nondenominational ventures by individuals, while others had strong denominational ties, which were incorporated into their titles. McPherson even founded the Four Square Gospel denomination (Hamilton 2000). The advent of Bill Hybels’s model at Willow Creek Community Church plays an essential role the current nondenominational trend. In Lee Strobel’s book Inside the Mind of the Unchurched Harry and Mary, he discusses Hybels’s’s action of shedding the denominational title due to the preconceptions people have about such organizations (1993). Hybels also initiated the Willow Creek Association, an organization to help train developing new mega churches in how to encourage and deal with growth. The Willow Creek Association, however, specifically seeks to avoid becoming similar to a denomination. It is a network of resources so that mega churches can establish symbiotic relationships. No monies are exchanged; no doctrine is debated or necessarily shared.

However, Hybels's hand in training staff and lay personnel in these new mega churches could also explain the proliferation of the nondenominational approach he advocates.

*Church Decline: The Consequences of Size*

If large churches flourished, why did they not continue? Using social service as an evangelistic tool began to drain the financial resources of the church. High demand for social services led to a drop in proselytizing and religious services. These two functions competed with each other for fiscal resources. A de-emphasis on the sacred religious aspect contributed to a decline in the appeal that churches once had. At some tipping point, this meant larger and larger social service budgets and fewer and fewer people in the congregations to give the necessary funds to sustain such large ventures. With huge financial strains creating precarious fiscal situations, the Depression was the final straw that bankrupted and crippled many of these churches until they faded into obsolescence. Yet, others merely dwindled down to average church size and became just another church in their respective cities (Hamilton 2000).

A few gospel tabernacles thrived after the Depression. One in Indianapolis continued to draw nearly ten thousand every Sunday through the 1950s. The Angelus Temple might have faded, but it birthed a new denomination, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (Hamilton 2000).

However, as a whole, the popularity of the urban gospel tabernacle was exhausted. The population began to move to the suburbs, and the cultural tastes were transforming to the commercially driven consumerism of the modern day. The cunning observer cannot let it pass by that the foundation of the second mega church movement

finds its roots a mere twenty-five years later. This relatively short time was filled with another trend, similar to the nondenominational development of the modern mega church.

*Church Federations: The General Decline of Mainstream Churches*

With churches not growing as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, Roy Burkhart, a Methodist minister, proposed that churches of differing denominational ties unite to form one church body, combining resources, and reaching the community together (for example the Evangelical United Brethren and the United Methodist Church). It did not take long, though, to discover that combining churches did little to facilitate growth. These churches remained stalemated at the same attendance as each individual church that was absorbed into it. This short-lived trend met its death in the 1960s. Social turmoil made it every church for itself. As church attendance sank, denominations such as the United Methodist Church withdrew from the federated church unions and began their own approaches to deal with decline (Hamilton 2000).

Churches are reflective of society. They are not removed from social trends. No different from fad diets and teenybopper fashion, church programming and structure experience continuing change. Due to social influences, what changes do occur in programming are directly connected to what people want. Responding to the growing immigrant population, the urban gospel tabernacle provided the necessities for the surrounding community. Not only was it a center for food, medical care, and practical training, but it also provided an outlet for social interaction. With its entertainment-like services, it offered something unique for a church

The onset of the Depression and advent of the population centers shifting to suburbs called for other measures. The church federation was a flawed growth concept—

in that it did not draw in new members—and it fell victim to the social unrest of the 1960's and the Vietnam War created additional challenges in the form of calls for relevance. To appeal to the disenchanting and unchurched baby boomers, the modern mega church is a good fit. (Hamilton 2000).

#### THE MEGA CHURCH AS A BUSINESS

Because the mega church is aimed at the “consumer oriented, highly mobile, well-educated, middle class families” of young Protestant America, these organizations reflect an approach that appeals to their consumerist tendencies. This population is accustomed to marketing campaigns, so mega churches treat their organizations as businesses with something to market. Therefore, it is not unusual that the mega church itself is operated, marketed, and governed in a businesslike fashion. The leaders of these congregations deny that they are governed by hierarchy, market themselves as having a product, or are looking to gain financially from their members.

Insight into how the mega church uses the business model to do more than maintain solvency can be found. In William D. Hendricks's work Exit Interviews, he interviews several of the boomer generation about their disillusionment with the modern mega church and how it contributed to their eventual abandonment of the institutional church (1993).

What distinguishes today's mega church is not size but **strategy**. Indeed, size is merely a function of strategy. In marked contrast to the traditional way of “doing church,” the mega church operates with a marketing mentality: who is our “customer” and how can we meet his or her needs? (p.247).

To ask that question and act on its answers at a time when a significantly large segment of the population is reexamining spiritual issues is one way to end up with a mega church. That's why the idea that “worship in the 1990s must be made relevant to the culture of the Baby Boomer generation” is gaining rapid acceptance among denominational executives as the “grope for ways to stem the decline of mainline church membership” (Spohn 1992).

Pastors even think of themselves as administrators. Rev. Darrel Baker of Covenant Baptist Church in Ellicott City, Maryland, as quoted by Alice Lukens in *The Baltimore Sun*: “I spent 10 years in Corporate America. And when I look at the church, I guess it’s hard for me not to look at it somewhat as a business.” This business world mentality becomes reflected in every aspect of the church, from church staff to the membership (1999).

#### *The “Vision” Statement*

The first aspect of the mega church that models itself after a business is the mission statement. The trend among mega churches to downplay denominational ties, if they have any, has left the identity of the individual church in limbo, to guests, members, and pastoral staff alike. Consequently, churches form a relatively brief declaration that not only defines the church for its members, but also establishes the epitome of the church’s character to the outsider. This oft referred to “vision statement” serves the exact same purpose as the mission statement of the average finance company, footwear manufacturer, or hamburger chain. A statement full of action verbs, the vision as defined in a leadership textbook is to: “Reflect a management’s vision of what a firm seeks to do and become, provide clear view of what the firms is trying to accomplish for its customers, and indicate an intent to stake out a particular business position” (Kouzes and Posner 1996:167).

One example of a vision statement that very closely epitomizes the church brand of vision statement comes from Sevier Heights Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. “To bring people to Jesus and His church, to teach and to equip them for ministry, resulting in gain for God’s kingdom and glory to his name” (Cutshaw 2000). Compare



this vision statement to one of a popular car manufacturer, the Saturn division of General Motors.

“To market vehicles developed and manufactured in the U.S. that are world leaders in quality, cost, and customer satisfaction through the integration of people, technology and business systems and to transfer knowledge, technology and experience throughout GM.” (Kouzes and Posner 1996;167)

The vision statement of the church apparently is intended to appeal to the suburban middle class. It sounds similar to what they hear from companies on television, read in magazines, and listen to via radio.

The church also seeks to teach by repetition. After developing such a statement, they repeat it on their service programs, on banners around the church grounds, and even on their stationary. It becomes their label, as identifiable as the tag on their designer jeans or the logo on their sneakers.

### *The Spiritual Shopping Mall*

Once the mission statement is developed, it then can begin to market to the target audience that they had in mind. Church pastors and administrators masterfully present their mega church as a product to be consumed. There are even external consultants from marketing firms who have been titled experts in church marketing. The staff members of mega churches are trained that the secret behind mega church marketing is programming.

Due to the immense number and variety of outlets for services, mega churches must not merely offer social services such as counseling, child care, schools, financial programs, and the like, but they must offer the best of these. Competitively vying within the marketplace requires not only the finances to do so, but also the platform to let others know that such services are available. Additionally, churches must provide something

for everyone in the family from the toddler to the grandfather so that it is convenient for the entire family to choose a particular mega church.

Scott Thumma, drawing upon a number of supporting sources, compares this vast array of offerings to a shopping mall. The mega church provides the building, the mall owner, while a few core ministries act as the anchor department stores that draw in the customers. These are usually the worship services, choral programs, youth outreach, and children's ministry. Because of the support from the core ministries, the smaller and more diverse "boutique" ministries can be tailored to fit specific needs, all the while rising, falling, and even failing with demand or the lack thereof. However, due to the stability of the core ministries, these failings are relatively inconsequential to the overarching stability of the church and add a component of flexibility (Thumma 1996).

A more specific example of this would be a popular footwear company. Nike manufactures hundreds of different shoe models. As a result of the constant revenue that they receive from their staple and most popular styles, the company can experiment with more diverse types of footwear aimed at specific target audiences. Producing a shoe aimed specifically at runners, tennis players, or soccer teams carries relatively low risk of loss because if losses do occur, revenues from the more reliable staple styles can cover them.

### *Worship as a Product*

If the mega church is viewed as a giant shopping mall or even a corporation, then its main product is worship. This aspect of the programming draws the most members, results in the most financial gain, and is the main drawing card for attracting new visitors. In order to accommodate the busy schedules of a large number of consumers, mega

churches offer multiple services. Additionally, providing multiple services solves logistics quandaries caused by sanctuary capacities and lack of parking space. For example, Willow Creek Community Church offers four weekend services, two GenX targeted weekend services, and two midweek services. This accrues to 17,000 people in attendance on weekends, and between 6,000 and 7,000 during the week.

*24/7 availability.* Mega churches have undertaken the same 24/7 availability that is spreading to so many organizations. From early morning weekday prayer services down to all night youth lock-ins, some activity usually has the church campus in use at all times every day of the week.

*Variety of worship styles.* The content of worship is aimed at a target consumer as well. Mega churches take many approaches with this. Some pick a particular population segment and all services are aimed at that particular social group. A contemporary approach complete with guitar and drums is often the case if a church desires to attract Generation Xers or younger. To attract the Baby Boomer generation and their more conventional parents, traditional four count hymns with traditional sermons are a possible but less probable drawing card.

Most larger mega churches, however, try to broaden their appeal to satisfy several social groups using one of two approaches. The first approach is to offer different types of services with different messages, music, and general worship styles. This is the model undertaken by Willow Creek. There are contemporary, rock, traditional, and combination services offered separately to meet a broad range of worship needs.

(Gillmor 2000). In this model, worshippers choose the product but it all comes from the

same manufacturer. The program listing of worship services is much like a multiplex movie theatre with different shows and different times

The most popular approach is to cover a wide array of worship styles with varying music genres and sermons in different months. One would be likely to find a four-week chain of sermons on complex theological issues, to be followed by a multi-week succession of sermons applicable to daily living. This alters the target audience weekly, or at least at a regular time interval, in order to keep all ages and tastes engaged and satisfied. Throughout the service traditional hymns and contemporary praise choruses are dispersed and interchanged with little thought to the drastic differences. This musical approach is a compromise that gives everyone a small helping of what he desires, while introducing the congregant to alternative approaches to worship, as well. The worshipper is given only one product: eclectic worship. However, the product of eclectic worship attempts to somewhat accommodate a wide range of consumers.

*Professional quality of worship services.* No matter what the approach to worship, the professional quality is unmistakable. A large infrastructure with high levels of order and very little variance from the scheduled program are present. This is further the case when church services are televised and must meet the scheduling demands. Some churches offer full orchestras and complex and beautiful choir performances. Others have highly talented musicians with guitars and drum sets. The quality, however, is always top notch and the service is highly planned. This professional approach provides the mega church “consumer” with the same top-notch results that are expected from any for-profit production.

Most musicians and musical performers within the church are congregational volunteers. However, the remainder of the church service is dominated by the professionals on the church staff. One criticism is that this highly coordinated worship allows for very little, if any, personal expression from the congregation. If free form time for worship is offered, it has a set time and place within the strategic order of worship (Thumma 1996). Time limits are enforced and everything shared in worship is most likely routed through an individual or a committee for approval.

*“In the same way, the church as a whole has become a business that exists to attract consumers by marketing a product. So the gospel is no longer something you participate in—it’s something you consume. And when it’s a business, it has to compete with the church down the street and fight to draw consumers. That’s a major reason why we’re nowhere near thinking of ministry in missiological terms—it’s all about goods and services. Profit and loss. Consumption”* (Driscoll and Seay 2000).

It is the quality of precision planning that so restricts parishioners’ active involvement in the service. With so little participation from attendees, the mega church corporate worship is more like a show than a worship service. Congregants play a passive role, thus making them more like an audience than a communally worshipping congregation.

*Close proximity of churches.* Another testimony to the church producing a clearly marketed product is the close proximity of many mega churches to one another. Not unlike how large grocery stores, discount stores, or any other merchants often cluster together in metropolitan areas, mega churches can be found within yards of each other. The result is the same: the consumer gets more for less as the churches (or stores) cut inconveniences (or prices) and offer more services (or goods) for less commitment. In Dallas, Texas, one street is referred to as “mega church row.” First Baptist Church, First

Methodist Church, and the Cathedral of Hope all draw thousands of attendees week, even though they are within blocks of each other (Walter 2000). Initially, this setup draws large numbers of people into the area. Individuals and families alike will try most of the churches in a given area, a type of exposure unlikely to happen if the churches were not so closely located. However, the close proximity leads to another common plight of businesses: competition.

### *Competition*

In line with the business model for the church, one cannot neglect the reality of competition. All churches, not just those described as “mega,” compete with each other. Customers (called members), indeed, are one area of competition. Nonetheless, precious building space and land are other areas of contention. The driving force behind this competition is that more space and parking are needed to house more people because having more people results in more money. The surplus profit is used to start more ministries, which in turn bring in more people. This is where the cycle starts over again. Not unlike a business, churches are running on the treadmill of production and it does not appear to be slowing any time soon.

*Competition between churches.* The most recently publicized conflict involving church competition is between two Dallas churches. The involved churches are the giant Prestonwood Baptist Church that resides very near the massive but still smaller Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. “From all appearances, a bigger mega church is about to gobble up another mega church,” one observer writes (Cascione 1999a). This sounds similar to a corporate buy out. Prince of Peace and its two thousand members await the unveiling of the 7,000-seat auditorium at Prestonwood in order to see what happens to their

attendance. When the nearby First Baptist of Hebron church and its 800 members are also competing for audience shares, one can see how smaller churches fear they are unequipped to keep their members (Delgado 1999). “Like Main Street stores replaced by strip malls that are replaced by larger shopping centers, and mom and pop shops replaced by K-Mart, Wal-Mart, and Home Depot, mega churches are drawing people away from ...small and middle sized congregations” (Cascione 2000).

When churches lose members, they lose money. Church members are reportedly giving 4 percent less of their income to churches than they did in 1980 (Conklin 1999). With a dip in giving comes a dip in capital. Without money, smaller churches do not possess the financial base that is necessary to expand. Without expansion, smaller churches are unable to provide the services offered at mega churches. Lee Strobel in his book, Inside the Mind of the Unchurched Harry and Mary predict that as many as 60% of new members at mega churches are old converts from other churches in the same area. This means that the numbers of evangelical Christians are not growing as much as churches are passing around members as they travel to whatever church offers the biggest and the most entertaining services within a reasonable area (1993).

Smaller churches are suffering the most from this competition, too, because of their lack of mobility. Jack Marcum, a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) statistician said about small church decline, “We’re not like McDonald’s. We don’t simply close a store in one spot and open one in another when marketing research tells us that’s where the people have gone” (“Racial Shift” 2002).

Despite their carefully tailored mission statements, the nondenominational qualities of these mega churches often leave them nondescript in theology so that

members decide where to attend based on what they can get for their time, not for a specific theology or denominational statement of faith.

“We are told that today’s church going crowds are not seeking churches for their theology as much as for their facilities, programs for their families, and entertainment. They are looking for a combination of the YMCA and a religious rock concert” (Cascione 2000.)

*Competition with citizens and government.* Mega churches are not only in competition with each other, but they are progressively finding themselves at odds with the local government and citizens where they are located. The most publicized hotbeds of controversy are the outlying areas of Seattle, Washington. Christian Faith Center is proposing what could possibly be the largest church complex in the state. The proposal of a main sanctuary housing nearly five thousand and a campus covering square feet in the hundreds of thousands has locals in the city of Federal Way protesting. Proposed limits on church construction in King County claim that such large structures destroy rural character (Pryne 2001b).

Citizens also assert that the infrastructure cannot support a complete K-12 school, parking for 2000, a 1000 seat youth center, classrooms, and a library for Dominion College, a wedding chapel, café, and bookstore. The land use rules in King Country support the citizens. The land is zoned as a business park, not open to church building. The citizens also worry of setting a precedent that would draw other churches similar to Christian Faith Center to the area. Losing business-zoned land to churches also means a decline in tax dollars. The church and its members, however, will not go quietly.

Multiple requests for rezoning are being pursued, with the outcome yet to be seen. The



planning commission has made several recommendations in compromise, but the city council has denied them all thus far (Pryne 2001b).

Christian Faith Center is only one example. Another church in the county, Timber Lake met similar opposition in 1996 when its members proposed an eighty thousand square foot project. When it met outrage from citizens, the plan went to court and was limited to a 48,500 square foot facility. The decision left both groups angry. Church members claim their freedom of religion has been violated, while citizens decry the violation of the county's Growth Management Act (Pryne 2001a).

So goes the battle in urban areas across the country. Mega churches clearly are in competition for the limited resources of land and political power. Citizens are boycotting the organizations in retaliation. Mega churches, however, have little to lose from this local outrage, just as Wal-Mart does not. Because their attendees commute from such distance, upsetting local citizens is of little consequence because they are not neighborhood churches.

### *Advertising*

Comparable to any business, mega churches employ advertising in order to gain the upper hand in competition. The advertising budgets of mega churches have experienced a marked increase for the past decade or more (Ray 2000). Congregations use a broad range of advertising means in order to attract new visitors to their services. The traditional methods involving audiotapes, printed materials, and conference announcements supplemented with the growing popularity of radio and television broadcasts are commonly used to "get the word out." A phenomenon that has been popular with other businesses for decades, but that just recently took hold at mega

churches, is the interstate billboard. Due to the growing number of mega churches in prime locations, billboards are effective advertising when placed in close proximity to the church building (Ray 2000).

In addition to these more traditional methods, churches have taken multimedia by storm. Video presentations and web pages are growing in use by mega churches. These techniques reach not only the local area, but have a national impact. Families moving to a new area can scout prospective churches before they make the move. Church members can stay connected to their church even when away for business trips or long vacations (Neff 2001b).

The most effective and least expensive method of advertising for mega churches is the size of the congregation in attendance on Sunday. The presence of large numbers of people alone contributes significantly to the draw of these massive congregations. Once a church reaches a certain size, then size itself may pique the interest of those driving by on Sunday or even through the week when onlookers see only a seemingly endless church campus (Thumma 1996).

*Pastor as Chief Executive Officer (CEO)*

Finally, the most important perhaps the most prominent, business-like aspect of a mega church is the CEO, or chief executive officer. Most likely referred to as the Senior Pastor or a similar title, this position is usually held by a middle-aged to slightly older white male. Most churches are founded by or achieve mega status during the term of a single senior pastor. These individuals achieve power through charismatic means, in accordance with Max Weber's types of authority (Gardner 2000). They are usually undeniably personable and charming. Senior Pastors carry much weight and influence in

making primary decisions that direct the church in every facet of the ministry.

Consequently, their personalities can be seen reflected in everything from the vision statement down to how office activities are carried out daily at the church (Thumma 1996).

“The organizational demands of these enormous churches necessitate an rational bureaucratic operation with a strong business leader at the helm” (Thumma 1996). This results in a Senior Pastor with a type of executive board. The Senior Pastor makes decisions in conjunction with the other high ranking pastors and ministerial staff members on such a board. Most mega church boards also have a congregational representative, or maybe even a few, who are either chosen by the board or elected by the congregation usually from among such positions as deacon or elder.

*Governing bodies of the church.* Similar to a business, this board’s supposed function is to act as a type of check and balance. An even distribution of ministerial power seems to be a key goal when these boards are formed. However, even the best attempts at equal distribution of power end up flawed. The Senior Pastor often plays a key role either in choosing those that reside on the board, or in influencing who is chosen for positions on the board. The result is what is termed a ‘yes board,’ a collection of individuals whose function is to protect the pastor, carry out his ideas and inspired plans, and act as liaisons to the general population of a church. In most cases, it has been observed that the senior pastor ends up with almost all of the control. Just like the owner of a business has the final say in decisions, so does the Senior Pastor (Thumma 1996).

Thumma clearly observed such a phenomenon in his examination of Chapel Hill Harvester, a mega church that he studied in depth. Drawing from Schaller, Thumma

found that the organizational structures of a successful charismatic leader, centralized power, few checks from external authorities and inadequate management of leadership training all allow for the possibility of complete pastoral control of large church body (1996).

*When mega church pastors leave.* Similar to how some large corporations flounder and stocks plunge when a successful CEO resigns, large churches, in general, also have concern over functioning without their key pastor. Transitions are not always easy. Often, a former pastor refuses to relinquish control, members leave and follow the pastor to his new congregation or cease to attend anywhere at all, and establishing a congregational identity becomes extremely difficult. Outcomes tend to vary greatly among congregations. Some churches continue to grow as pastoral control goes through transition after transition. Others fall to the wayside, ineffective without the show's leading actor. This transition appears to be more difficult for mega churches because of the large amount of the control that the pastor has in his role as CEO.

*Accountability of church staff.* A final area that is problematic for mega churches is leadership accountability (Thumma 1996). Especially for nondenominational churches, keeping pastoral powers in check is difficult. Sexual misconduct, embezzlement, and general abuse of authority are all charges brought against a plethora of mega church leaders. Without a denominational office or convention to keep a church on track, abuses of power may not only be more common, but unfounded accusations are harder to combat without the organizational resources and support of a larger network such as national denomination (Thumma 1996).

The precepts that the church is a business, aimed at a specific consumer, and that its products consist of worship and services have been set forth. Similar to a shopping mall, the mega church provides a wide range of goods and services to consumers primarily from America's middle class suburbans. Churches partake in advertising, competing for members. All the while, a charismatic male, who directs, decides, and delegates most of what the church accomplishes, usually drives this whole organization.

As said by an administrator at Chapel Hill Harvester mega church: *"We are a church but we are also a business that happens to be an operation by the name of a church. We are a ten million dollar a year church that has to operate like a business"* (Thumma 1996). Therefore, if a church is a business, then it, too, suffers the same plight that any other business does from its organizational features. As a modern day social institution, the church is undergoing a form of McDonaldization. "Churches are sprouting up like fast-food restaurants," observes Dr. Bryan Stone, a professor of Evangelism at Boston University and former Fort Worth Pastor (Conklin 1999).

#### McDONALDIZATION AND THE MEGA CHURCH

McDonaldization is a concept introduced by George Ritzer. Ritzer employs a type of neo-Weberian theory that holds that predictability, calculability, efficiency, irrationality of rationality, and the use of non-human technology have become organizational features of businesses in the social sphere. An emulation of McDonald's, the ever-popular fast-food chain that is robbing cultures across the world of their individuality and flair, has its hold on American religion in the form of the mega church (Ritzer 2000).

*Predictability*

While the new mega church may not be traditional in many facets, predictability still exists among the churches. Based on my church visits and a review of web page pictures, building architecture is undeniably predictable. There are usually no hymnbooks and pipe organs. The mega church is more “cosmopolitan.” With the comfortable upholstered chairs that look like part of someone’s living room furniture on the stage, an orchestra pit, and in some cases with fountains in their massive vestibules, the mega church has a distinctive atmosphere and look.

*Buildings and their uses.* Most churches even have the same functional uses for their many buildings. If lists of buildings found on many mega church campuses were compared, one would most likely find: a family life center with gymnasium, billiards and other recreational facilities, a fellowship hall for informal meetings and meals, an educational building for Sunday School and Bible study, a counseling center, and a small scale chapel on the church grounds used for smaller functions such as weddings and funerals (Walter 2000).

So common is the architecture found among mega churches that entire architecture firms now specialize in church design alone. Some very prolific firms are known by name among the Protestant community and have built entire mega church campuses across the country. The web page of Myler (<http://www.myler.com/>), one such “church” architecture firm boasts the sketches of buildings that are uniquely different, but strikingly similar. The company is self-titled “The church building people.” The sketches are of churches that are all postmodern, combining the modern style of glass and

sleekness with some Baroque and Gothic artifacts. This makes for an atmosphere unlike previous church architecture

*Nondenominationalism leading to predictability.* In addition to the building and grounds of mega churches being predictable from one church to another, so are the programs available and the curricula used. The downplaying of denominational ties is associated with predictability in mega church worship services and Bible study. The mega church has birthed the mega Christian Bookstore where any number of Christian novelties can be purchased. Multiple Christian publishing companies focus only on printing curriculum materials for such mega churches and their programs. This leads to multiple churches across denominations offering classes based on the exact same materials aimed at similar populations, a contributing factor to the interchurch competition mentioned earlier.

It is through these major suppliers that the majority of churches obtain supplies. Therefore, many Protestant churchgoers have read the fictional Left Behind series of books, lost weight through the Weigh Down Workshop, listened to the music DC Talk, Jaci Velasquez, and Caedmon's Call, perused the pages of The Case for Christ and The Case for Faith, all at the encouragement of mega churches that refer to these icons of the Protestant culture through sermons, Bible study classes, and worship service music.

*As evidenced in fashion.* This predictability is evidenced in even teenybopper fashions. The ever popular W.W.J.D. bracelets and apparel (translation: What would Jesus do?) recently took the teenage market by storm. Children and teens can also be seen sporting the popular characters of Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber from the popular *Veggie Tales* video series, all of which can be purchased at mega bookstores of

the Christian type. Thus, most mega churches not only teach the same materials, but also produce an entire subculture, evidenced even by the way that children and teens sport their W.W.J.D. bracelet and *Veggie Tales* shirt.

*Worship styles.* With the same Bible study and worship materials at their fingertips, churches are becoming increasingly predictable in their worship styles as well. Thumma (1996) describes the typical mega church service as an “eclectic, yet innovative, mix of styles” that is “very attractive to new members.” Most churches attempt to combine familiar gospel hymns with charismatic praise choruses. Some even incorporate drama, sign language, and interpretative dancers, along with classical orchestral preludes in order to offer a smorgasbord approach, with something for everyone.

#### *Calculability*

Because of the competition between churches and their ever-growing memberships and budgets, calculability becomes central to the congregations. Churches are constantly pushing for higher attendance and even have high attendance Sundays to which everyone is encouraged to bring a friend. Church administrations count every person, as well as every nickel and dime. Mega church programs or bulletins list both the attendance and the monetary intake of the church for the previous week. An emphasis is placed on these numbers by the church staff, and the attainment of set numerical goals is sometimes encouraged. Churches have also undertaken the task of building multi million-dollar complexes to house all of the people that their ministries attract. So common has the building of massive churches become, that it has been increasingly satirized in the media. In the Weird Harold, a columnist pokes fun at the growing size of churches by satirizing a fictional church that has built skyboxes overlooking the pulpit (Green 1999).



This functions hand in hand with the predictability function in determining why some contractors and architects center their entire business on constructing ostentatious modern church buildings.

*Integrity and accountability.* Numbers are also important to a church because, again, it is a business. For financial integrity, as well as appeal to newcomers, every penny of a large budget must be meticulously counted. When dealing in multimillions, church budgets grow increasingly more complex and involved. In order to effectively carry out the many boutique ministries discussed earlier, funds must be tracked as they come in and go out to finance such endeavors. In addition, publishing records of finances encourages the congregation members who give to continue with their generosity, invoking a feeling of trust and good use of funds.

*The attraction of numbers.* People numbers become an attraction. Thousands of cars at a church on a prominent highway or interstate pique the curiosity of others, drawing in more potential new members. It also produces a feeling of being left out, that something is occurring that to which the passerby is not privy. Therefore, the individual wants to know “what’s going on over there?” “We picked up 700 new people when we built the last center. We applied the ‘Build it and they will come’ factor,” says Dan Dorner, administrator of First Baptist Woodstock in Georgia (Reinolds 2000).

*Tithing.* Getting new people through the doors is only the first step. This is only an opportunity to show the unaccustomed visitor what the church can do for them. New visitors are to the greater good of the church only if they become members, members that give money. In order to obtain this level of commitment, mega churches have to first offer the consumption minded individual something that is to his or her benefit. This

may vary for each individual. It could be a sense of purpose, counseling services, social interaction, or any one of the programs the church has to offer. After this individual decides that he or she and/or his or her family benefit from remaining in that congregation, then they will be more likely to become members. The draw of a mega church at times is even driven by the mere participation in the latest trend. Another suburban attempt at keeping up with the Joneses.

Once individuals become members, most mega churches teach a doctrine of tithing. Tithing consists of giving a percentage of wages earned (usually ten percent) to the church. The church then uses this money to expand and add ministries. This in turn draws more people and makes more members. Thus, the aforementioned treadmill of production can continue. The reward of tithing is two-fold. Not only does the church gain monetary resources, but the individual also experiences a sense of contribution and pride without sacrificing any actual time. A sense of belonging and contribution is what keeps members coming back when the newness of the services offered by the church wanes. With so many paid staff and such a large membership pool, volunteers are not as necessary and can be easily replaced. Therefore, the sense of contribution invoked by tithing is essential in maintaining membership. This suits the suburban audience, which typically has a sizable disposable income and a penchant for spending it.

*Personal finance workshops.* Tithing by a continuously growing congregation is so central to mega church survival that personal financial counseling is yet another service they offer. These budgeting workshops are like any other secular program in all but one way. The first line item on the budget is the obligatory percentage tithe. Other Churches may not regularly enforce the tithing practice or attach any consequences to not

tithing per se. However, in the mega church, the contribution of each member is calculated. Members use offering envelopes pre printed with their name and address so that all money given can be tabulated for a year-end statement to deduct on their income tax. The sermons often focus on stewardship, or giving of tithes, as do Sunday school and Bible study lessons. This full-scale indoctrination as a means of social control is necessary for the church to possess enough monetary resources (Garner 2000).

*Church debt and lending companies.* One of the main reasons for the growing need for monetary resources is because most churches are in debt, large debt. “The rise of mega churches with a host of ancillary services like day care and housing has been a big spur to bank lenders. A number of banks have even formed specialized units to pursue church lending around the country” (Sweeney 1999).

America’s bankers were once chilly to faith-based organizations that were seeking loans, but today they are providing many millions of dollars for religious institutions, mainly mega churches. Rev. Steve Smith of the Life Christian Center in St. Louis has established such a relationship with one bank. Not only did Boatman’s Bank (now part of BankAmerica Corporation) help his church pay down its \$2.2 million debt in construction bonds, but loaned the money at a decreased interest rate, saving the church \$10,000 every month. The bank later went on to back a mortgage on the church parsonage and make auto loans to church staff members. Without such adventurous banking, the mega church would have been much slower in coming about due to lack of funding and high interest rates (Sweeney 1999).

Another way that the banks may benefit from this relationship is that they are tapping into a large customer base. With the unofficial endorsement of the church,

members may feel compelled to also take their personal banking to the same bank the church uses. A bank that already has a relationship with one's church may foster a feeling of trust and relationship that can mean a considerable increase in business for a bank when a church has thousands of members.

As banks have found mega churches to be solid but not spectacular investments, more have tried to get a piece of the pie. More and more banks are developing special programs, teams, loans, and offers for these churches. In fact, the competition has increased with more and more banks entering the market. "Bankers who specialize in church lending say that the key is understanding church financial statements, recognizing the importance of cash flow-rather than the ostensible value of the property and spotting the characteristics that distinguish viable borrower from a possible failure. Moreover, experts in the area say that church officials are more likely to treat bank debts as a moral issue and are less willing to walk away than a lay borrower" (Sweeney 1999).

Making this determination has become somewhat of art. Church income depends on pledges that have no legally binding terms. In a time of economic hardship, even the affluent members of a church can experience a reduction in their income. Making this determination successfully is what distinguishes between banks that have to reassign their special church financing teams, and those that advertise in the glossy pages of evangelical magazines such as Christianity Today. Also, foreclosing on a church is "a prime-time public relations disaster" (Sweeney 1999).

### *Efficiency*

Hand in hand with calculability comes the necessity for efficiency. Mega churches are practices in efficiency. With millions of dollars in debt dependent on

member contributions, everything has to run as smoothly as possible. From the sheer number of people and money that filter through church down to where to park all the cars, the mega church is a logistical feat with many obstacles to be overcome. Paid staff who do things like make parking lots function with theme park like efficiency play an essential role.

*People and their cars.* First and foremost, the problem of people and their cars has to be solved. Without people, there can be no church. Mega churches are also not within walking distance for most attendees. If going to church is more stressful than rush hour traffic in a busy metropolis, then people will not desire to return. Mega churches have developed several interventions for dealing with such logistical quandaries. One pastor summarizes the need for efficiency. “We have three services, back-to-back, a half hour apart. We’ll have in excess of 1,000 people there for each. With people arriving before others depart, we need additional parking (Hacker 1999).”

To accommodate the massive amounts of people and limited building space, multiple services are offered. This solves the problem of a packed sanctuary while appealing to 24 hours a day 7 days a week sensibilities of the Baby Boomer generation and beyond. Sunday school and/or Bible study is offered in the same manner so that individuals can mix and match program times to match their personal lifestyle.

With thousands of families coming and going throughout the day, transportation can be a hairy situation. Some churches, especially in situations of limited space, employ the use of parking garages like those that one would find for a corporate headquarters or on a college campus. Luring suburbanites from their homes means plenty of cars to take up the space. Other churches cut brand new roads and help finance part of such

improvements as encouragement for local governments to approve those projects. These new roads provide more inlets and outlets for the traffic. From my personal observations, I have found that some that are located near interstates even have new interstate exits that lead to the church campus.

Other churches that have more available space continually expand their asphalt in all directions to accommodate growing membership. When this happens, other measures have to be implemented to insure efficiency. First Baptist Woodstock in Georgia uses a fleet of six 15-passenger golf carts to shuttle members around its campus. Several churches have followed suit to various degrees. A fleet of golf cart type vehicles is especially necessary for rainy days, huge parking lots, and women in high-heeled shoes. These carts provide transportation to the building from the parking lots on Sunday mornings or for building-to-building transitions throughout the day (Reinolds 2000)

When First Baptist Woodstock, Georgia, completes its latest addition, four 40-passenger trolleys will be added to their fleet, all in the name of efficiency (Reinolds 2000). Other churches specify parking spaces near buildings for special populations. In addition to curbside handicapped parking spaces, are ones marked with “senior citizen,” “expectant mothers,” and “church member of the month.”

Southeast Christian Church in Kentucky has 50 acres of parking lots. Members were so concerned about the logistics that 2,000 members attempted to drive into the facility’s parking lot at the same time in order to predict the problems that might take place before the 9100-seat sanctuary greeted worshippers for the first time. “We’ve looked at computer simulations and crunched the numbers, but until you try it with a couple thousand cars, you just don’t know what will happen” (Redding 1998).

The Crystal Cathedral has developed a unique way to deal with logistical quandaries. In addition to the 2,800-seat auditorium, there is a projection screen adjacent to the cathedral for “drive-in” worshippers who remain in their cars. Sociologist Emile Durkheim might propose that this likens church service to watching a movie rather than coming together as a collective body of worshippers. It also allows more people to attend each service, whether inside the Cathedral’s completely glass walls or not (Crystal Cathedral International Ministries, 2002).

*More support staff.* The fear of what just might happen has also prompted churches to employ their own traffic policemen, install traffic lights, have parking lot attendants, and put crossing guards to use. All of these interventions are in the name of efficiency and safety. Safety is a function of efficiency. If members and visitors are unsafe coming to services, this not only makes injury and bad publicity, but also gobbles up time and involves financial responsibility.

*Other methods of control.* Once church visitors get cars situated and get to the building an entirely new set of efficiency structures are put into action. Offering envelopes are pre-printed with barcodes to record giving by simply scanning instead of manual typing. Scriptures are printed in the program, eliminating all the fumbling around for Habakkuk chapter 2. Directional signs and an information booth make the foyer and concourse seem like an amusement park. Announcements are made via computer presentations preceding the service, eliminating the need for announcements made by a person. This practice saves precious worship time, a commodity when the next service starts in a little over an hour. This method was used at every mega church that I personally visited.

Some churches also build entire cafeterias to feed attendees. From personal observation, the serving lines at Willow Creek can easily be likened to what one would see in a professional sports arena. Multiple lines with self-serve fountain drinks and condiments in little plastic pouches are all used in the name of efficiency. Think McDonalds disguised as a coffee shop in the middle of a church. The best view comes from the overhead balcony in the bookstore just one floor above.

#### *Use of Non-Human Technology*

With calculability and efficiency as necessary considerations for the mega church, the advent of non-human technology has most definitely been put to use. Video, television, audio, and computers have become staples to any large church. Not only do these technologies increase numbers and efficiency, but they also help alleviate the mega church's challenge to "respond to a culture that has been radically transformed by the introduction of new communication technology" (Bedell 2001).

*Media as outreach.* Many churches have simulcasts of their services on radio or television. Most if not all offer either audio or videotapes of the church service. An individual has to make no further contact than to turn on the television screen, or arrange for a weekly videotape of the service to be delivered via the mail, in order to be updated on what happens in a worship service. One exception to this rule is Willow Creek Community Church, the mega church that is credited with starting the phenomenon. Willow Creek has forsaken any use of television to filtrate their services to the masses (Bedell 2001).

*Technology as management tool.* Additionally, churches use computers to manage their massive congregations through address books, databases, and mail merge



programs. This all cuts down on the number of volunteers needed to perform tasks and their opportunities to serve within the church and on the amount of time such tasks consume. As previously discussed, computer programs are also used to track tithing, bills the church incurs, and payroll necessities. Most mega churches also employ complicated phone systems complete with voicemail. Someone may call the church and never speak with a human. If one calls after business hours, he will most likely be given a pager number to the pastor on “emergency duty.”

*Media to enhance worship.* With the absence of printed hymnals, projection screens and Power Point slides are used to project the song lyrics so that the congregation might follow along. Because the sanctuaries have grown so large, a video feed of the worship service is projected onto these screens so that those in the back might see the service as well as those in the front.

*Christian music industry.* Besides using these technologies for distributing and enhancing worship services, technology is implemented in other areas of ministry. The Christian music industry is booming, largely due to Christian radio stations that play only such music. The genres are varied, but the messages are the same. Many program curricula use CD-ROM technology. The entire Bible in nine different translations and fully searchable is available online (<http://bible.gospelcom.net/>).

*Church websites.* Meanwhile, I discovered that most every mega church has a web site on the Internet. Sixty percent of churches of all sizes have developed web sites in the last three years. Researchers from Pew International and American Life Project found that 83 percent of church sites are specifically aimed at visitors to encourage and facilitate attendance at worship services. Of the 1,309 congregations with web sites that

Pew surveyed in December of 2000, it was found that 20 percent of internet users in the United States get religious information online, making it more popular than internet banking or online auctions. In addition, eighty-one percent of clergy use the Internet to gain information for worship services, and 82 percent of clergy use email to contact their parishioners (Neff 2001b).

*The Bible on video.* In the practice of film making, the former American Uranium Incorporated was bought out by Visual Bible International in August of 2000. This move was designed to acquire the company's stock listing so that VBI could begin the process of producing a verbatim movie version of the entire Bible. The project rolls in at a cost of \$400 million and is being filmed in several different versions of the Bible. To attract investors, VBI is sponsoring a stock car in the Pepsi 500 NASCAR competition and staged a massive Passion play in Toronto's Skydome. *The Gospel of Matthew* has already sold more than 500,000 copies over the past three years, earning \$50 million dollars. If all 66 books of the Bible are produced, buying the entire set will cost approximately \$6,600 (Neff 2001a).

Uses of non-human technology are different on some level for all mega churches. All across the nation, churches, their leaders, and members are coming up with innovative solutions that include non-human technology. A prime example of this is Wilfred Greenlee's invention: The Greenlee Communion Dispensing Machine (Burling 2001).

*Other oddities.* In Louisville, Kentucky, at Southeast Christian Church, seven volunteers spent thirty hours filling 350 trays of communion cups. Greenlee, a retired engineer, cut those numbers down to three volunteers and ninety minutes with his new

machine. The stainless steel bucket with 40 plastic tubes that run through a sheet of Plexiglas into the cups of a communion tray is lever operated and never overflows. The contraption is not only patented, but sells for nearly \$3,000 (Burling 2001). Greenlee makes the machine by hand in his home workshop. A volunteer at the church jokingly remarked that Greenlee's invention was going to "make our jobs obsolete" (Burling 2001).

Another employment of non-human technology is by the Crystal Cathedral. From their web page (<http://crystalcathedral.org/>), they employ crisis counseling via a set up similar to a chat room. Anytime of the day or night, a counselor from possibly across the country, or even the world, is available. A significant, new approach to therapy, it is highly efficient, but lacks the close interpersonal relationship a client usually builds with a counselor or therapist (Crystal Cathedral International Ministries, 2002).

### *Irrationality of Rationality*

The melee of programs, people, and ministries occasionally makes for some irrational results. Churches try hard to focus their programs toward what appeals to the average citizen. Sometimes this results in paradoxical events that seemingly contradict the message of the church.

For example, the Christian Discovery magazine has a Christian gossip column. Gossip is a popular topic that those previously mentioned boxed curricula speak out against regularly. Similarly, a local Christian radio station in Knoxville, Tennessee publicized a Christian rave party. A rave is usually known for its availability of illegal drugs, violence, and punk and techno music. All of these are clearly in contradiction to

the belief statement of any Protestant church. There have also sprouted up Christian dance clubs for teens and adults alike, an interesting contrast to the alcohol and cigarette smoke atmosphere of most clubs. Similarly, Christian rock concerts have debunked the traditionally drug heavy scene of secular rock and roll.

The actions of those in supposedly Christian professions seem to reflect irrationality at times as well. Such high profile names as Jim and Tammy Faye Baker have been tarnished by scandal. The church, however, has openly accepted them back into the fold, preaching forgiveness and repentance. Similarly, in the Christian Music Industry, Michael English voluntarily withdrew himself from the industry after he was revealed to be having an affair. He later returned to the industry only to leave due to substance abuse problems.

Another example, Amy Grant received little or no chastisement, much less banishment, for her divorce because of her affair with Vince Gill, also a married adult. Recently, the couple appeared on a magazine cover, newly married and with a new baby. In his article, "The Land of Big Religion," Scott Walter (2000) encapsulates the new church philosophy, "...a welcoming, 'nonjudgmental' approach to those outside the fold. Fire and brimstone have been traded in for warm smiles and open hands." On the other hand, some claim, "But when folks like Sandi Patti and Michael English commit adultery and Amy Grant gets a divorce, the illusion of what is 'Christian' begins to crumble. The Christian cultural bubble in effect bursts" (Driscoll and Seay 2000.)

The "Christian role models" that are evident within the popular culture of the mega church often violate the tenets of Christianity. With a culture that is reflective of such values, it is difficult to enforce stringent moral and ethical standards on the pastors

and administrators in the mega church. The popularity of such big name stars and their occasional notoriety also make the contradictions within the mega church look small in comparison. Therefore, the irrationalities within the mega church are overlooked because of the prominence in the media of other issues within the Christian market.

Perhaps the most evident irrational rationale involves the consumerist tendencies of modern and postmodern culture to which the mega church has ascribed. An entire counter cultural movement has sprung up to combat what some view as crass consumerism within the mega church. Those participating in this counter movement cite the passage of the Bible where Christ destroys the tables of merchandise for sale in the temple. This is likened to the merchandising seen in the modern mega church and Christian bookstores.

Tapes, books, compact discs, and other merchandise are commonly sold within the many walls of a mega church. This population also frowns upon the alleged alienation that results from the mall approach to church programs. They also claim that the typical Christian bookstore is shrouded in merchandise that is in poor taste and demoralizes the Christian message to chintzy Bible verses printed on candy wrappers. The Christian bookstore, they claim, is a profiteering scheme that mega churches help to proliferate.

Additionally, the businesses that function within the walls of the mega church are very much for profit. Instead of offering for-cost purchasing as a service for church members, Willow Creek uses its bookstore to promote authors within the church for the same price as at the corner for-profit store. Cafeteria prices are most definitely for profit as well, with a hamburger costing over two dollars. Seemingly even more irrational are

the products that you find in the mega church. Britney Spears and her provocative dress as portrayed in Pepsi commercials go against basic Christian tenets, but the word Pepsi is splashed about at every drink station in the centrally located cafeteria. The church and the soft drink company have a symbiotic relationship, in which both profit.

Then again, the consumerist atmosphere is very appealing to suburbanites. For the family whose weekend entertainment is found at the mall, the mega church is the ultimate integration of religious life with their secular lifestyle.

Opinions and stances on these issues vary among churches, denominations, and even individuals and staff within the same church. Even those outside the church vary on their views on these issues, meaning that most of them reduce to personally held beliefs and ideas. Still, amid the many examples, every individual can see how the large infrastructure required by a mega church leads to some contradictory and ironic events on occasion.

### *Sacred vs. Profane*

With so much change, modernizing, and growth, debates over religion losing its sanctity are inevitable. From music, hymnals (or lack thereof), and sermons all the way down to architecture, Biblical translations, and art, mega churches have sparked a dialectical struggle over sacredness. “If the churches imitate the forms of the culture too closely, the people don’t have the sense of stepping across the threshold into that other reality” (Byrne 2000).

Mega church critics fear that mega churches can more easily lose sight of their calling and become entertainment centers rather than centers for congregations to come together and worship God. Offering too much of the secular world, they say, detracts

from the solemnity of going to church. Critics want to know how the mega church plans to keep the congregation from merely becoming an audience.

*In defense of the mega church.* On the opposite end of the spectrum, Scott Endicott, an instructor for Willow Creek Community Church, represents a different take on traditional churches. “Over the last 10 years, the churches that are growing are the ones that are culturally relevant, and the ones that are having the difficult time are the ones that are trying to hold on to a particular tradition. Those churches are filled with turmoil because they want to grow but they can’t because people are kind of holding it back” (Ray 2000).

*Against the mega church.* However, these are the words of the moderates. For others the perceived loss of sacredness in America’s churches is an all out war that has broken out. Reverend Jack Cascione of the Lutheran church is one leader of this faction. He refers to mega churches as “Willow Creek/ Baptist clones” and predicts significant defaults on Lutheran mega church investments. He is especially critical of Lutheran churches that have opted for new and different styles of worship. Cascione claims “crowds keep following the style because they don’t care about the substance. It’s all about marketing instead of doctrine” (1999b).

Rev. Cascione is so adamant about the traditional use of hymn books, liturgy, and catechisms that he has written his own book, Reclaiming the Gospel in the LCMS: How to Keep Your Congregation Lutheran. Cascione claims that the LCMS leadership ignores successful Lutheran mission starts if they employ traditional worship and architectural styles. He uses Advent Lutheran church of Zionsville, Indiana, as his example. Advent in a little over 8 years has transformed from 25 members meeting in a

dental lab to a 700-member church with a new building on 22 acres. The congregation's pastor, Rev. John Fiene, uses an LCMS hymnbook, Martin Luther's catechism in confirmation instruction, and the Lutheran Agenda. Cascione alleges that because of his church's traditional practices, the denominational leaders give his church less attention and publicity. Cascione claims that the LCMS religious establishment cares more about its image than what is actually effectual for churches (2000).

Among other findings, Hendricks (1993) found from interviewing 12 young couples who had left the mega church that those he interviewed experienced boredom with church services, a longing for community, a need for psychological services, growing resentment among women, and a craving for truth and reality. While this is by no means his comprehensive list, it is clear that the mega church approach counteracts many of these complaints.

However, Hendricks cautions the reader not to assume the mega church is a catchall answer for preventing the steady stream of the "churched" that is "flowing quietly out the back" door of the church. Rather, he suggests that a craving for spirituality leads people outside the programs and away from the structures. Therefore, the current structures of all churches need some readjusting to meet the needs of the people and regain their sacredness (1993).

While the debate ensues, answers seem to be elusive. Suggested solutions lurk under the surface of a yet to be fully realized struggle among and within the Protestant denominations. The solution, one youth pastor suggests, lies not in the comparison of the two approaches, but in separating them. Rich Grassel suggests that comparing traditional



and usually small churches to contemporary mega churches is similar to comparing “green apples to bell peppers.”

*Different but equal.* Grassel proposes that the organizational features of the two types of churches are so different that each approach has its appropriate time and place. Neither is more valid or more sacred than another is, but each is more effective in certain situations. In agreement with this author, Grassel upholds that the mega church is a corporation with certain features: (a) emphasis on outreach and evangelism; (b) less dogma and few denominational ties; (c) well-developed hierarchy; (d) purpose driven; (e) suburban or high growth locale; (f) mosaic ministry approach; (g) stable finances. (2000).

The small church, on the other hand, is a family. A small congregation, therefore, has different organizational features, which are: (a) inward focused (b) loyal to a denomination; (c) lacking a hierarchy (d.) not purpose driven; (e) low growth locale; (f) ministry to a select few; (g) unstable finances. Grassel, like Hendricks, believes that both of these approaches are valid and useful, but are always in need of improvement in order to meet the needs of the surrounding population (2000).

All in all, some claim mega churches are watering down the sacred qualities of religion making it no more special than an episode of Saturday Night Live. Others say that traditional approaches to church are antiquated and boring, making it impossible to appeal to the Baby Boomer generation and beyond. No matter which side of the fence, no one can deny that mega churches are growing and taking the forefront in the way church is “done” in America. If mega churches are dooming the American church to

become no more sacred than a “YMCA with a rock concert” will have to wait to be seen (Cascione 2000).

## THE POSTMODERN CHURCH

As history has taught time and again, no movement is complete until a new one looms on the horizon. For the modernity of the mega church, the counter movement is the postmodern church. Mega churches are obviously still on the rise. However, slowly and steadily, the postmodern church is developing in response to the mega church.

It has been referred to as “fundamentalism’s answer to MTV” (Leibovich 1998). From the outside, it may even look like a mega church with displays of books, videos, and CDs amidst snacks and drinks for visitors. The postmodern church, nonetheless, is very different on some fundamental issues. Primarily, the goal of these leaders is to avoid marketing religion, which they say is the “domain of baby boomer mega churches.” In fact, these churches do not even advertise, growing strictly by word of mouth (Leibovich 1998).

Nancy Ammerman, in reference to the Southern Baptist Convention in particular, points out four areas in which the postmodern church is breaking away from the mega church mold. While mega church organizations focus on mass production, postmoderns encourage members to define their own role. Assuming diversity, the postmodern church strives to include all populations by using multiple publishing resources, avoiding denominational seminaries, and linking with outside organizations. Technology is also implemented in new ways. Instead of furthering technology, postmoderns capitalize on

its flexibility. Computers make it easy to constantly revise and refit their publications as the congregation has the need for it (Ammerman 1993).

### *Organizational Structure*

The business-like hierarchical structure of mega churches results in high specialization. Postmoderns, instead, concentrate on generalized jobs, making lay workers “jacks of all trades.” Instead of specialized ministers, these churches set up departments to make decisions without a large amount of direction. Mega churches require someone higher in the hierarchy to provide direction because jobs have become so specialized that members cannot truly see the bigger picture. Forming generalized departments puts workers in the position to make decisions that affect the entire congregation and makes decision-making more democratic.

Likewise, relationships develop differently in the two frameworks. Modern mega churches are large and centralized, but postmodern organizations are “decentralized, flexible, relying on subcontracting and networks” (Ammerman 1993). The shift from modern to postmodern, Ammerman likens to “downsizing” in the corporate world. This downsizing will make several of the boutique services offered by churches to become extinct. Ammerman predicts that this will make churches form links with outside organizations from publishing houses to missions and parachurch organizations in order to provide for the needs of attendees (1993).

### *Audience*

Postmodern churches, too, know their audience. Generation X, the college students, and the young adults of the United States pack up the tenets of “ennui, skepticism, and cynicism” and take them to church. Therefore, it makes sense that these churches are usually based near universities (Leibovich 1998).

One such church is Mars Hill Fellowship in Seattle, Washington. Young pastor Mark Driscoll describes his church as the result of a recipe of “fundamentalist Christian liturgy, Catholicism’s appreciation for art, and mainline Protestantism’s general cultural tolerance.” His church also concentrates on the tragedies of the baby boom generation such as high divorce and abortion rates, blaming the self centered focus of the Enlightenment (Leibovich 1998).

### *Strange Bedfellows*

Postmoderns do add an ingredient of anti-establishment: “I really preach; it’s not just three points to better self-esteem,” Driscoll says. “Mega churches have perfect service with perfect lighting. We’re a friggin’ mess.” However, they are still largely dependent on funding from affluent mega churches. Organizations such as the Leadership Network provide seed money and financial backing for conferences that bring together postmodern religious leaders. Mega churches see contributing as an opportunity to reach younger generations (Leibovich 1998).

Keeping in mind that many mega churches started in the same manner, the postmodern church may be the next movement to take the religious world by storm. Just as Mars Hill Fellowship started with 12 and has grown to over 800, Willow Creek Community Church started with a small group in a movie theatre. As Gen Xers grow up

and get jobs, the finances may very well come about to make postmodern churches independent not only in thought, but in monetary support, as well.

## CONCLUSION

The mega church is obviously on the rise within Protestant churches in the United States of America. While the movement may be much to the joy of some and the chagrin of others, it has arrived and is playing itself out before the eyes of church members everywhere.

This movement is unlike any large American church movement that has been seen before. The suburbanites, despite their affluence, are choosing church-based services over their secular counterparts. This has led to the ever-growing church populations and expanding ministries, as the Willow Creek Community Church model is adopted by congregations across the nation. Music, sermons, architecture, types of ministries, and even the type of staff that are necessary have all been transformed in the name of attracting more people.

As churches have grown so large, it has become necessary for them to be operated much like a business. Complete with a mission statement, the mall approach to ministry is the calling card of the mega church. The product of worship is being done in new and innovative ways to effectively compete with other churches. Using such tactics as advertisement, minimalizing denominational ties, and shedding much of the traditional aspects of worship, the mega church comes to its peak under the leadership of the pastor, acting as CEO.

Because the church is operated like a business, it has not been spared from the process of McDonaldization. The church is exposed the effects of predictability, calculability, efficiency, the use of non human technology, and the irrationality of rationality as it attempts to appeal to its consumerist suburban members. Dealing with such large numbers of people almost require that every move be planned, every person counted, and every dime accounted for. In order to complete these tasks on such a large scale, non-human technology must be implemented. It must also be used in order to reach the visually saturated middle class. Reconciling all of these actions with Protestant doctrine often leads to some irrational results such as Christian rave or any number of other examples.

McDonaldization effectively encapsulates much, but not all, of the mega church movement. Mega churches become large systems. As with any system of such magnitude the tenets of a single theory are not sufficient to explain every phenomenon. There are always exceptions to the rule. There is a clear need for further research on the mega church as well as the postmodern church in order to see where these trends are headed.

The cyclical nature of church membership alone makes churches not necessarily more difficult, but moreso, different, in the way they are studied. Membership patterns among the mega churches are not clear. Mega church members are being drawn from small churches as well as other mega churches, but in what ratios and why certain populations attend a particular mega church are not known and need to be further studied. There must clearly be some markers that set certain mega churches apart from one another, or else there would be no need for competition. Because these markers are not

clearly evident from initial encounters, then it needs to be determined where and how these differences get communicated to churchgoers.

Additionally, mega churches have been largely unsuccessful at drawing in the segment of the affluent American middle class that has never been familiar with church attendance. Therefore, while the mega church might be different, something about its structures are not different enough to incite interest from those unaccustomed to attending church in the past. The reasons as to why the mega church is not drawing in this population is another potential area for further research.

With all of the changes the mega church is bringing about, many argue that church is being dumbed down to a level that abandons any sacredness. Church leaders argue over ways of “doing church.” Meanwhile, all church leaders are trying to avoid becoming just an accepted and unremarkable piece of the barrage of other cultural aspects.

Some fear the mega church will die, others are praying that is exactly what happens. Regardless of the mega church and its unforeseen fate, it remains to be seen if it will be the churches biggest social change or merely a church fad. Will Protestant mega churches die, shrink, or give way to the postmodern movement?

#### A PERSONAL RESPONSE

As a Christian, I know the time has come to explain myself. Nearly fifty pages of research detailing the evils of the largest church movement of my lifetime demands a response. I have had fellow students accuse me of being anti-church and anti-Christian.

I even have friends who just “don’t get it.” They believe that every church is a church, so “what’s the fuss about?”

For a moment, take my perspective. I grew up in a family where I was never neglected. My parents had a strong marriage. My church valued my opinions. I was the honor student Valedictorian that saw every issue in black and white, wrong and right. I failed to realize that many of my friends had become victims of parents who were not around because they were too busy making money to give their families everything they wanted, everything except their time.

Enter college. For some reason, God sent me to a public state University. I met homosexuals that I liked as friends. I know chronic drug users with hearts of gold. I learned the philosophies of Aristotle, Plato, and Luther. I grew to love Botticelli, Michelangelo, and Klimt alongside Red Grooms, Escher, and Warhol. The theories of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mills, Dubois, and Foucault made me take new perspectives on old problems. I began to see, however, a growing cynicism and prejudice against Christianity. Christ’s followers have been explained away as the root of the ecological crisis, the oppressors of the working class, the founders of evil capitalism, and crazy schizophrenic control freaks in some of my courses. I have even sat in classes where professors referred to Creationism as unimportant because “no intelligent person could believe that anyway.” My world was no longer black and white; the gray had crept in.

I had to find equilibrium. I picked up the works of Schaeffer, Chesterton, and Lewis to supplement the Bible. In those texts, I have found something liberating and refreshing. I discovered what bothered me about my new church home, a mega church in



the suburbs of Knoxville. I felt pretension and pretending. I felt an atmosphere judgmental of my shortcomings. I began to see through the eyes of the nonbeliever.

I sat all week long in classes that challenged me mentally and philosophically. But when I went to church on Sunday, I was “fed” with PowerPoint sermons no deeper than a Frisbee that left me bored, agitated, and ill equipped to deal with the intellectuals of academia. The fragmented pieces given to me in church were impossible to put together into the beautiful narrative that God has created. I felt like I was getting a Wal-Mart version of spirituality. It looked like the real thing most of the time, and it required much less of an investment of myself. However, when it came time to pass what I had down to my children and grandchildren, I knew they would see my life and my church were a cheap imitation.

I am still vigilantly anti-abortion. I recognize the call for premarital sexual purity. I know that my homosexual friends are wrong. But, I don't believe in picketing abortion clinics, campus evangelists calling scantily clad sorority women whores in public, or banning “those people” from attending my church. I am much more concerned about reconciling capitalism and Christianity, serving those in need in my community, and reducing air pollution. I would much rather see my church provide meals for the homeless population than a new aerobics class for middle-aged moms.

It was only after I took a course in social theory that I had a name for all the processes I saw occurring at my church. It was then I knew that I wanted to take a hard-core look at the mega church for my senior project. I wanted to show that I could believe in the Meta narrative of the Bible and still critically evaluate what is occurring my

religious tradition today. I know that not every church is called to the same niche in ministering in God's kingdom. We are all very distinct parts of the Body of Christ that work beautifully together. I also wanted to show my brothers and sisters in Christ what my fellow non-believing students see when they walk through the doors of a mega church. God has called some churches to be large in numbers. The early church grew by the thousands daily in many cases. It is a glorious work to be involved in a church where God's kingdom is multiplying infinitesimally.

There are mega churches that are doing much to combat the "sweeping judgments on mega churches and the church-growth movement" (Wilson 2000). Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, is one of those. They have managed to build an involved church body that has shed the narcissism often associated with the mega church. I do not want to judge any church or individual. However, I feel called as a Christian to use my God-given intelligence to critically evaluate and discern what is going on in my world in my day, and to decide where I stand on an issue.

I want a church that does not concentrate on the surface sins of smoking, drinking, dancing, bad movies, and loud music. Instead, the underlying causes of those bad habits like debt, greed, adultery, and gluttony should be addressed. Like Driscoll and Seay ask, "Why do so many Christians overeat, overwork, worship athletic teams, run their credit cards into massive debt, throw their kids in daycare, and chase the American dream?" (Driscoll and Seay 2000)

I also admit that I am not supportive of the "protecting, insulating, and inoculating" of our children and families via a mega church that provides a ministry for

every one of their desires (Driscoll and Seay 2000). I want to see Christians that “engage this real world” (Driscoll and Seay 2000). Christians need the interpretive lenses to understand the Bible and convert people to Christianity and not to Western culture. I have seen what compartmentalizing your life has done to my friends, and it makes me desire to strive to understand a God that wants all of my life. He also wants me to be the salt and the light of the world. I find that hard to do if I never leave the campus of my church. I will spend the rest of my life reconciling the contradictory tenets of my culture and my religion. This thesis has been my first step on that journey.

If this paper angers people, it should. If it depresses people, it should. Above all, I hope it inspires every Christian to look at his or her ministry large or small and adapt it better to fit the call of Christ and the needs of those around him or her. We are here to serve the world, not to serve ourselves.

## REFERENCES

- Ammerman, Nancy T. 1993. "SBC Moderates and the making of a Postmodern Denomination." *Christian Century*, September 22-23.
- Bedell, Ken. 2001. "The Church's Struggle to be Faithful." *Religion Online*. Retrieved February 11, 2001 (<http://religion-online.org>).
- Burling, Lori. 2001. "No Overflowing, No Spills." *The Knoxville News Sentinel*, March 31, p.B1
- Byrne, Maureen. 2000. "'Mega' Church Nurtures Thousands." *St. Petersburg Times*, September 1, p.6.
- Cascione, Jack. 1999a. "Dallas Paper Reports as LCMS Mega Church Competes Against New Giant Baptist Mega Church." Redeemer Lutheran Church. Retrieved January 21, 2001 (<http://www.reclaimingwalther.com>).
- , 1999b. "Texas Mega Church Monopoly Risks 10's of LCEF Millions." Redeemer Lutheran Church, March 24. Retrieved November 6, 2000 (<http://www.reclaimingwalther.com/articles>).
- , 2000. "'Traditional' LCMS Mission Congregations Keeps Growing." Redeemer Lutheran Church, June 12. Retrieved January 21, 2001 (<http://www.reclaimingwalther.com>).
- Conklin, J. C. "On The Rise." *The Dallas Morning News*, March 16, p. 28A.
- Crystal Cathedral International Ministries. 2002. "History of the Crystal Cathedral." Retrieved March 12, 2002 (<http://www.crystalcathedral.org/about/history.html>).
- Cutshaw, Suzie. 2000. *Living Power*, Winter, pp. 6-7.
- Delgado, Berta. 1999. "In the Shadow of Prestonwood." *The Dallas Morning News*, March 16, p. 30B

- Driscoll, Mark and Chris Seay. 2000. "A Second Reformation is at Hand." *Youthworker Journal for Youth Ministry*, January/February. Retrieved January 2, 2002 (<http://www.YouthSpecialties.com/ywj/articles/culture/reformation.html>).
- Garner, Roberta. 2000. *Social Theory: Continuity and Confrontation, A Reader*. Calgary: Broadview Press.
- Gillmor, Verla. 2000. "Community is Their Middle Name." *Christianity Today*, November 13, pp. 48-55.
- Grassel, Rich. 2000. "The Purple Zero Syndrome." *Youthworker: Journal for Youth Ministry*, May/June. Retrieved September 9, 2001 (<http://www.youthspecialites.com/youj/articles/results/purple.htm>).
- Green, Mister. 1999. "Local Mega-church Gets 'Nearer My God' with Sponsored Skyboxes." *The Weird Harold*. Retrieved December 3, 2000 (<http://weirdharold.com/church.htm>)
- Hacker, Tom. 1999. "Mega Church Plans Move Ahead." *Norther Colorado Business Report*, October 22. Retrieved November 6, 2000 (<http://www.ncbr.com/oct2299/new.mega.htm>).
- Hamilton, Michael S. 2000. "Willow Creek's Place in History." *Christianity Today*, November 13 pp. 62-68.
- Hendricks, William. 1993. *Exit Interviews*. Chicago, Illinois: Moody Bible Press.
- Henslin, James M. 2001. *Essentials of Sociology*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kapp, Lauren. 2001. "God on a Grand Scale." *ABCnews.com*. Retrieved December 3, 2001 (<http://my.abcnews.go.com>).
- Kouzes, James M. and Barry Z. Posner. 1996. *The Leadership Challenge*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Incorporated.

- Leibovich, Lori. 1998. "Generation: A look inside fundamentalism's answer to MTV." *Mother Jones*, July/August. Retrieved October 7 (<http://www.motherjones.com>).
- Lukens, Alice. 1999. "Church Focus of Land Debate; Neighbors question motives of pastor as plans expand." *The Baltimore Sun*, August 5 pp.1B.
- Mellado, James. 1991. "Willow Creek Community Church." Harvard Business School case study No. 9-691-102.
- Neff, David. 2001a. "Going to the Movies." *Christianity Today*, February 19, p. 16.
- . 2001b. "Not Just for Visitors." *Christianity Today*, February 19, p. 17.
- Pryne, Eric. 2001a. "Church, county dispute: Large facility in rural area spurred move to limit sizes." *Seattle Times*, April 22. Retrieved December 3, 2001 (<http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/>)
- . 2001b. "Federal Way wary of mega church." *Seattle Times*, July 2. Retrieved December 3, 2001 ([http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/134313066\\_caseytreat02m0.html](http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/134313066_caseytreat02m0.html)).
- "Racial Shift Causes Parish to Disband." 2002. *The Knoxville News Sentinel*, April 7, p.23.
- Ray, Diana. 2000. "High Tech Enhances That Old-time Religion." *Insight on the News*, July 31 p. 26.
- Redding, Rick. 1998. "Mega Church Prepares to Cope with Rush of Attendees, Traffic." *Louisville Business Journal*, October 16.
- Reinolds, Chris. 2000. "A Leap of Faith." *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, September 21, p. 1JQ.
- Ritzer, George. 2000. *The McDonaldization of Society. 3d ed. Thousand Oaks, CA : Pine Forge Press.*

- Siegel, Robert. 2000. "Christ Announces Hiring of Associate Christ." *The Onion*, November. Retrieved December 3, 2000 (<http://www.theonion.com>).
- Spohn, Gustav. 1992. "Church Growth Movement Gains Favor." *Dallas Morning News*, April 18 pp.30A.
- Strobel, Lee. 1993. *Inside the Mind of the Unchurched Harry and Mary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
- Sweeney, Paul. 1999. "Lenders Become Church Disciples." *U.S. Banker*, April. Retrieved March 30, 2001 (<http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe>).
- Thumma, Scott L. 1996. *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: The Megachurch in Modern American Society*. Ph. D. dissertation, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.
- Walter, Scott. 2000. "Land of Big Religion." *The American Enterprise*, Oct./Nov.
- Wilson, John. 2000. "Not Just Another Mega Church." *Christianity Today*, December 4, pp.62-65.