

Mega-churches: A Manifestation of the Spirit of the Age (1)

There was in the February 12, 2005 edition of *The Grand Rapids Press* an interesting article on the front page of the Religion section with the title, "Do Mega-churches Bring Thousands To God, Or Let Worshipers Get Lost In A Crowd?" In the article, three Grand Rapid's area mega- churches were referred to, Calvary Church, which draws 6,000 to Sunday morning services, Resurrection Life which draws nearly 8,000, and Mars Hill with an attendance of 10,000. The article pointed out several characteristics of mega-churches in general and showed how Grand Rapid's three largest mega-churches exhibited these characteristics to one degree or another. Referred to in the article was a study on mega-churches done by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

A look at the study reveals much about the recent explosion in growth of mega-churches across America. In 1970, there were about 10 mega-churches in America. By 1990, there were 250. By 2003, there were approximately 740.¹ A mega-church is defined as a "congregation with an average weekly worship attendance of 2000 or more."² Some narrow the definition by adding non-Catholic congregations, or more accurately non-Roman Catholic, with weekly attendance of 2000 or more. Notice the definition's use of the word "attendance" and not "membership." This distinction is important as we will see later. While many of the mega-church congregations have existed for nearly 50 years, most of the "tremendous growth has taken place in the past 25 years."³

The study reveals many interesting things about the worship services of those churches that participated in the study. Among the nondenominational churches in the study, "75-80 percent" of them use "electronic keyboards and guitars, and drums" in their worship. "Forty-three percent include recorded music in the service" and "22 percent report they use dance or drama always or quite often" in their worship services. As to the elements of the worship services, the study reports that "worship always or often includes: "

- Sermons (100%)
- Organ and/or piano music (92%)
- String or wind instruments (79%)

- Time for people to greet each other (93%)
- Altar call for salvation (60%)
- Prayers for healing (45%)
- Speaking in tongues (17%)

While 67 percent of the churches in the study belong to a denomination, “only 37 percent thought the statement ‘Our congregation clearly expresses its denominational (or nondenominational stance) heritage’ described them very or quite well.”⁴ The study also points out that these churches are more likely to participate in joint worship services and social outreach with churches outside of their denomination than they are with churches within their own denomination. More than 10 percent of them report holding joint worship services and conducting social outreach with, as the study terms, “other faith traditions.”

It is important to remember when analyzing mega-churches as a group that we do not apply to individual churches characteristics which belong to the group as a whole. Individual mega-churches vary greatly. While some churches in the group may resemble the group as a whole, others may be quite different and not really fit the pattern for what a mega-church generally looks like. This rule will guide us in the rest of our analysis.

Having looked at some of the facts about mega-churches in general, let us look at some of the traits, which, to one degree or another, characterize mega-churches.

There are seven characteristics of mega-churches as a group which we will notice, some of them overlapping each other. These traits relate to mega-church 1) theology, 2) style of worship, 3) organization, 4) leadership, 5) membership, 6) outreach and evangelism, and 7) vision and purpose. As we look at each one of these items, we will evaluate them in the light of God’s Word and our Reformed Creeds, particularly the Belgic Confession.

The first characteristic of mega-churches is the lack of a clearly defined system of doctrine. Many mega-churches advertise themselves as such. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, founded his church upon what people

wanted in a church. In 1975, he, his wife, and others surveyed the neighborhood to see what people would like church to be. The answers he received—“shorter and more practical sermons, upbeat music, use of the contemporary arts and lots of classes on how to live the Christian life.”⁵ Today, more than 17,000 worshippers a week pack Willow Creek to hear “practical sermons” on how to live the Christian life.

While it may be the case that a church has an official “Statement of Faith,” it is also true that a document like this is meaningless unless its contents are consistently taught to the congregation and violations of it by members disciplined. In his analysis of mega-church members’ beliefs, Dr. Scott Thumma writes,

These congregations and their ministries exhibit considerable pluralism. Although the official theology espoused may be orthodox conservative Christianity, a variety of opinions and practices are tolerated in relation to women’s roles, sexuality, abortion, and political persuasions. In a cultural climate which emphasizes the self-construction of beliefs and spirituality, tolerance of a diversity of possible alternatives, unified under a common vision, is an asset.⁶

When one takes the time to examine a few mega-church websites, one is struck by the fact that it can be difficult to find exactly what doctrinal stances the churches take. The typical website is often elaborate, flashy, and loaded with information about church leaders, opportunities, programs, activities, events, and music performed during the worship services. If one finds a “Statement of Faith” or description of “beliefs”, it is usually very brief and vague. There is a noticeable effort to push any kind of doctrinal affirmation into the background.

There is a reason for this. Doctrine is not appealing to the natural man. Sound doctrine is offensive. When the goal of a church is numerical growth, which many mega-churches freely admit, then every obstacle to that growth must be removed. The church must become an inviting, non-offensive, and casual place to meet in order to attract as many people as possible from the surrounding neighborhood. There will not be very many repeat visitors if the minister spends a considerable amount of time explaining doctrine, especially if he preaches sound doctrine.

Yet, it is exactly the preaching of the “pure doctrine of the gospel” which is the chief mark and calling of the true church in the world (Article 29, Belgic Confession). It is this kind of preaching which causes the most important kind of growth, spiritual growth among God’s people. It is a manifestation of the spirit of the age when churches, leaders and members (attendees) alike, reject sound doctrine and replace it with whatever the man on the street wants to hear. This is exactly what Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote to Timothy in [II Timothy 4:3, 4](#), “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

Those who attend and become members of churches where sound doctrine is cast aside show that they do not really know what it is to “join” a church. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, which sets forth the believer’s duty “to join himself to the true Church,” points out that one of the reasons one joins himself to a church is in order to submit himself to “*the doctrine and discipline thereof.*” Jesus Christ is pleased to rule His people in this way. To look for or join a church which willingly rejects God’s ordained way of ruling His people is sin.

The second trait of mega-churches which we will examine is their contemporary style of worship. It is a style of worship which flows directly out of their rejection of doctrinal preaching and their emphasis upon being a non-offensive and inviting community. This is where we will begin next time, Lord willing.

Footnotes

¹ Luisa Kroll. (2003, September 17). Megachurches, Megabusinesses. *Forbes.com*, Retrieved March 5, 2005, from http://www.forbes.com/2003/09/17/cz_lk_0917megachurch.html.

² Scott Thumma, PhD. (2000). Megachurches Today: Summary of the Faith Communities Today material on Megachurches, Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from Hartford Seminary website: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACT_summary.html.

³ Megachurches Today.

⁴ Megachurches Today.

⁵ Chris Meehan. “Vibrant leader puts old message in new form.” *The Grand Rapids Press*, (March 5, 2005), Sec. E, pp. 1, 2.

⁶ Scott Thumma, PhD. (2000). Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: their characteristics and cultural context, Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Retrieved February 28, 2005 from the Hartford Seminary website: http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html.

Mega-churches: A Manifestation of the Spirit of the Age (2)

In the last article we noticed the mega-church characteristic of a lack of clearly defined doctrine. In this article we intend to examine another characteristic which mega-churches in general possess a contemporary style of worship.

The following excerpts have been taken from an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*. The lifted quotes detail the style of worship found at Lakewood Church, America's largest mega-church in Houston, Texas.

After a rousing live performance of "Jesus is better than life," broadcast over three Jumbotrons in the Compaq Center, Victoria Osteen steps to the podium in front of 16,000 cheering Sunday worshipers and proclaims: "We're going to rock today. This place has been rocked a lot of times, but it's never been rocked for Jesus."

At Lakewood's recent groundbreaking services, Pastor Joel Osteen's sermon—given like a motivation speech—included phrases like: "Keep a good attitude. Don't get negative or bitter. Be determined. Shake it off and step up."

Worked into a frenzy by the 10-piece band and 300-member choir, dozens of slick music videos and, yes, the wave, congregants were enraptured. "We love it. We don't miss a Sunday," says Annette Ramirez, sitting in the arena's front row with her husband Joe. "The message is always very positive and the music is great."¹

Another article, found in *Forbes.com*, examines the marketing aspect of services at Lakewood Church. One paragraph reads,

As for the services themselves, Lakewood makes sure to put on a grand show. It has a 12-piece stage band, a lighting designer to set the mood and three large projection screens. The technology will be even more spectacular when it moves into its new home in the former Houston Rocket's stadium. "We really want it to feel like a concert," says Duncan Dodds, Lakewood's executive director. Something is working: Church attendance has grown from 6,000 in 1999 when Osteen became pastor to 25,060 today.²

The same article also refers to the founding of Willow Creek Community Church in 1975 in South Barrington, Illinois. As mentioned in the first article, founder and current pastor Bill Hybels went door to door asking people what kept them away from church. Using the answers, "Hybels then crafted his services to address their concerns, becoming one of the first pastors to use video, drama and contemporary music in church and encouraging a more casual dress code."³ Today, Willow Creek has 500 part and full-time employees. Through the sponsoring of conferences and seminars and the publishing of literature, the Willow Creek Association teaches other churches how to market themselves in their communities. Thousands of churches belong to this association and put into practice, to one degree or another, the techniques used at Willow Creek.

There are two things which we must notice about the contemporary style of worship which characterizes the services of many mega-churches. First, these services are said to be "seeker sensitive." A "seeker" is supposedly one with little or no church up-bringing, yet is seeking fulfillment in his life and has come to feel needs that must be satisfied and certain questions about life that must be answered. Not finding fulfillment or the answers to his questions anywhere else in the world, he looks to the church to address his needs. That a service is "sensitive" to the needs of the "seeker" means that the worship service must be as attractive as possible to the non-churched "seeker" who walks into the church for the first time. In other words, the atmosphere of the service must be "as un-churchlike as possible."⁴ That which is church-like is done away with and is replaced with as much of popular culture as possible, including contemporary music, drama, and theater-like surroundings. Because the atmosphere of the service so closely resembles the experiences which the "seeker" has in the world, he does not find his visit to church intimidating or

offensive and is willing to listen to the message offered by the pastor. Perhaps, because of the emotional fulfillment he experiences during the service, he will return and over time be attracted more to the messages he hears and become involved in the church.

The second thing we must notice about this contemporary style of worship is its purpose. One may think that the purpose of a worship service is to worship God. Yet, it becomes very evident as one examines contemporary worship that its proponents see church growth as the primary purpose of gathering on the Lord's Day. Man, not God, is the object of the service. The worship service is not a gathering of God's people assembled to have covenant fellowship with Him, but a grand theatrical production designed to entertain the audience and get as many newcomers as possible to come through the doors.

Prof. Barry Gritters explains this error of contemporary worship as its failure to distinguish between mission work and worship. He writes,

A third error is that these contemporary services do not distinguish between mission work and worship. Mission work and trying to preach to unbelievers is one thing. Public worship is quite another. Those who advocate contemporary worship, appealing to the example of Jesus on the seaside and Philip in a chariot, are making a simple but fundamental mistake; they confuse evangelism with public worship of the gathered people of God.⁵

The gravest error of contemporary worship is that preaching is pushed into the background. The fact that many mega-churches lack clearly defined doctrine is no surprise. They do not intend to preach doctrine. Their attendees do not want to hear it, and so the worship consists of what the people want to see and hear. How God is worshipped and what the elements of that worship are to be are determined by the desires of the people.

As Reformed believers, we are familiar with the regulative principle of worship. This principle states that God is the one who sets forth in His Word how He will be worshipped by His church in public worship. Prof. David Engelsma defines the regulative principle as follows:

God regulates worship by clearly prescribing in his Word what his worship must consist of. God himself tells us *how* to worship him. This *how* refers to the inner, spiritual disposition of the worshipers: “in spirit and in truth” ([John 4:24](#)). It also refers to the elements of the service of worship: the preaching of the gospel; the two sacraments, rightly administered; prayers and congregational singing; and the offerings, especially for the poor.⁶

Any worship which sets aside elements commanded in God’s Word and substitutes in their place elements which men find pleasing is despised by God. The Heidelberg Catechism, in its explanation of the second commandment, states that we may not “worship him [God] in any other way than he has commanded in his word” (Q & A 96). Those who disobey this command must answer to, “a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate” Him.” Those who rightly worship God and keep His commandments experience His mercy (2nd commandment).

We must not be ignorant about what is going on in the church world regarding contemporary and “seeker sensitive” worship. In many ways, this kind of worship is calculated to draw young people out of the true church and into apostatizing churches. For those who are not firmly grounded in the truth, the lure can be very strong. It can seem that the excitement found in these churches is an indication that God is at work in them. Can 10,000 people be that mistaken about how to worship God? Is the truth purely preached that important? These people are excited; they are living for the Lord; they’re out making a difference in the world.

Yet, the truth of God’s Word opposes contemporary worship and its shunning of preaching. God is pleased to save His people by the preaching of the gospel ([Rom. 10: 14](#) , 15; [1 Cor. 1: 17-31](#)). He does not use drama, worldly-wise messages, or praise songs as means of grace. There ought to be no doubt that drama, contemporary music, and relevant messages are effective tools in “growing” a church, but they certainly are not used by God in the gathering of *His* people into the *true* church. Neither do they serve to strengthen the faith of those already members of the church. Excitement in these churches is not an indication of the work of the Holy Spirit. God’s Spirit is present only where His Word is faithfully preached. The child of

God must not be tempted to leave a church where the truth is preached and where God is rightly worshipped and join another where the marks of the true church are not found. As our Belgic Confession states, our duty is to join ourselves to or remain members of the true church. That church is known by the preaching of the "pure doctrine of the gospel," the "pure administration of the sacraments," and the exercise of church discipline (Art. 29).

Having considered these two primary characteristics of mega-churches, next time, Lord willing, we hope to look at mega-church organization, leadership, and membership.

Footnotes

¹ Kris Axtman. (2003, December 30). The rise of the American megachurch. Csmonitor.com, Retrieved March 15, 2005, from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1230/p01s04-ussc.html>.

² Luisa Kroll. (2003, September 17). Megachurches, Megabusinesses. *Forbes.com*, Retrieved March 5, 2005, from http://www.forbes.com/2003/09/17/cz_1k_0917megachurch.html.

³ Luisa Kroll. Megachurches, Megabusinesses.

⁴ Barry Gritters, David J. Engelsma, and Charles Terpstra, *Reformed Worship*, (Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grandville, MI, 2004) p. 29.

⁵ Barry Gritters, p. 37.

⁶ David Engelsma, p. 2.

Mega-churches: A Manifestation of the Spirit of the Age (3)

So far in our examination of mega-churches we have noticed that in general they manifest the spirit of the age in their lack of clearly defined doctrine and their contemporary, seeker sensitive worship. Their doctrine and worship are calculated to attract as many as possible through the doors so that they continue to grow in numbers. As a result of this emphasis on growth in attendance, mega-churches are rarely organized and governed according to the pattern set forth in God's Word

concerning the governing of the church. Neither do those who attend or become members of these massive churches understand what it is to join a church and belong to the body of Christ.

Southland Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky is an example of the structure of a typical mega-church. One paragraph in the Owensboro, Kentucky, Messenger-Inquirer describes Southland Christian Church as follows:

But Southland isn't just a place for singing and preaching on Sunday mornings. It's a teeming, nonstop center of community life in suburban Lexington, an enormous business enterprise, an engine for volunteerism and a potent social and spiritual force with a multimedia message.¹

The phrase "an enormous business enterprise" accurately describes many mega-churches. Many of these churches operate music studios, publish books, magazines and other religious materials. Some churches have their own record labels, while others produce television and radio talk shows.² Lakewood Church, in Houston, Texas, has a media strategy which it analyzes every quarter.³ In 1999, the typical income of mega-churches averaged 4.8 million dollars, with average expenditures of 4.4 million dollars.⁴

The manpower needed to keep these enterprises operating is also enormous. The study performed by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (referred to in the 1st article) indicated that the typical mega-church "averaged 13 full time paid ministerial staff persons, and 25 full time paid program staff persons. The average number of volunteer workers (giving 5 or more hours a week to the church) was 297."⁵

It is not unusual for these churches to resemble a shopping mall more than a church in their appearance and layout. Take, for example, the 140 acre campus of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas. "Prestonwood has sports fields, an arcade, small Bible-study groups and a bookstore on what is called Main Street. There is even a food court... complete with a Starbucks."⁶ Before a Sunday morning service at Southland Christian Church, one can sip on Starbucks coffee at the café, or browse the CD selection in the bookstore.⁷

Because mega-churches are large operations, they need many volunteers in order to function smoothly. Volunteers are needed to maintain church grounds, organize and staff various church programs, lead Bible studies, direct traffic and usher at worship services, and contribute to the worship service itself. Leading this army of volunteers are scores of paid, full and part time staff members who typically report to a board of directors, often made up of church elders and ministers.

Consider the number of volunteers it takes just to conduct the service at Southland Christian Church.

“It takes hundreds of people to pull off a service,” Weece [senior minister of Southland, AJC] said. “People can’t even begin to fathom how this place operates. I don’t even know all the detail.”

Five camera operators caught the action onstage from every angle.

Upstairs, in what looks like a tiny television station, five people controlled the shots that appeared on the worship center’s four big screens and taped the service for broadcast on cable television later. A producer, stage manager and assistant stage manager were stationed downstairs.

“We all have different roles,” said Dave Welch, who was working as director.

The service was timed to the minute.

The first 14 minutes were spent in worship and the welcome. One minute for a prayer before communion, five minutes for communion itself, four minutes for baptisms.

As the band played “Sing to the King”—allotted four minutes—for the last time that day, “decision ministry” volunteers waited at the side of the room to meet with people who came forward in response to the sermon.

Those who came forward are taken to one of five small decision rooms equipped with a box of tissues, a Bible and a few wing-backed chairs.

“We always try to make people feel as welcome as possible,” said Katie Bodager, the decision ministry team leader that day.

The volunteers determine what the person’s needs are and direct them to the part of the church that can help. If they wish to be baptized, it can be done immediately or scheduled for a later time.⁸

That the worship service is flawlessly executed according to a set schedule is no accident. Just as most entertainers practice their routines before their performance, so the staff at Southland carefully plans and practices for all worship services. The Messenger-Inquirer reports,

An hour before the children arrived on Saturday evening, Jason Byerly, the children’s minister, and his wife, Christy, practiced teaching the concept of salvation—“God’s Big Gift,” illustrated by a large gift-wrapped box positioned on a small stage.

“God loves you more than anyone in the whole world,” Christy Byerly said. “God loves you so much that he wants to be your forever friend. He wants you to live with him in heaven.”

The lesson incorporated props, such as a large cross, and a video clip from “The Parent Trap.”

Out in the main worship center, which can seat as many as 3,000, Weece, only the third senior pastor in Southland’s 49-year history, and Jim Burgen, the church’s executive director of ministry, were onstage practicing the sermon they were about to preach together.

It was the third week in the month long sermon series “The Gospel According to Bass Pro,” which focused on Jesus’ instruction to the disciples on becoming “fishers of men.”

The stage—which gets a new look for each sermon series—was decked out with wooden boat docks, a fishing boat and fishing gear. Boats were parked in the concourse and on the sidewalks outside.

Weece and Burgen lounged on stools made of boat seats, with a big green cooler between them.

“At the end of the invitation, I’ll pray,” Weece said.

On cue, soft piano notes began to play.

“If you need to talk with someone, Jim and I’ll be down front,” Weece said, as the overhead lights dimmed and lights projecting onto the back wall of the stage changed from blue to red.

Although it’s scripted, Southland’s worship style is fluid, casual and ever-changing. It’s all part of the church’s effort to attract and keep worshippers. Greg Corona, who is in charge of worship, said “the element of surprise” is a key in keeping people engaged in services.⁹

With all of this attention to detail, massive budgets, scores of employees, throngs of volunteers, large campuses, and various business endeavors, it is no wonder that many mega-churches are managed more like a business than a church. And just as businesses are profitable by producing and marketing a product which the consumer desires, so do these churches seek to lure potential customer-worshippers by producing and marketing carefully developed products, such as their entertaining worship services, religious music and literature, and various family activities.

Articles 27–35 of the Belgic Confession show us not only how the true church in this world is known from the false, but also how the true church is governed. We have already noticed how mega-churches in general reject sound doctrinal preaching, which is the first mark of the true church. Because of their large attendance and casual attitude toward membership, they also fail to manifest the third mark of the true church, the exercise of church discipline in the punishing of sin (Art. 29). Southland Christian Church, for example, averages 8,000 worshippers on a weekend. Of those, only 2,500 to 3,000 “attend worship regularly.”¹⁰ Even if these churches have a council, composed of many ministers, elders, and deacons, how are they to properly take oversight of thousands of individuals, many of whom are only casual attendees? Christian discipline becomes nearly impossible in a situation like this. Further, because of this lack of supervision, the proper administration of the sacraments, the second mark of the true church, becomes impossible. Yet, because

these churches reject sound doctrinal preaching, which is where discipline begins, and because their goal is to attract as many attendees as possible, they show that they are not interested in church discipline and even reject it. For this reason, just about anybody feels comfortable coming to one of these churches.

This comfortable feeling along with the anonymity of being one among thousands attracts people to mega-churches. This question was posed recently in a Grand Rapids Press religion article with the title, "Do mega-churches bring thousands to God, or let worshippers get lost in a crowd?"¹¹ The article, which summarized a study done by Calvin College students on three Grand Rapids area mega-churches, noted that the "students said it is easy to slip in and out of Sunday morning services without getting noticed, and that anonymity may be part of the mega-church attraction."

One who is an anonymous attendee of a church, and who refuses to become a member and join himself to a true church, goes to church for the wrong reasons. One is living in the sin of refusing to submit to the "doctrine and discipline" of the church and is refusing to bow his neck "under the yoke of Jesus Christ" (Belgic Confession, Art. 28). Further, he shows that he does not want to use his gifts for the edification of the members of the body of Christ (Art. 28). Yes, one can say that he is "going to church" and come away with an emotional boost from the entertaining service, but all of this is in disobedience to God's command to believers to join a local congregation which manifests the marks of the true church.

Another attraction and characteristic of mega-churches is that frequently they are lead by dynamic pastors. Kevin Dougherty, a Calvin College sociology professor, notes that often pastors are the main attraction at mega-churches. The Grand Rapids Press reports:

A survey by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research shows 70 percent of churches with at least 2,000 participants boomed into a mega-church during the tenure of their current pastor. That's because those pastors "have their fingers on the pulse of the culture and are able to put together a product that people understand," Dougherty said.

While only two-thirds of senior pastors have seminary training, Dougherty suggests all of them “are highly entrepreneurial individuals.”

As a result, mega-churches resemble “complex corporations” in the way they operate. And their growth attracts more growth, to a point where “their reach is comparable to small denominations,” Dougherty said.

“People want to associate with a winner,” he said. “These churches are winners.”

But are there too many people riding the bench in championship churches? Students wondered if those players will stay on the team when a coaching change occurs.¹²

While it is sometimes the case that God raises up energetic and gifted men to positions of leadership in His church, these men do not have their “fingers on the pulse of culture,” nor are they interested in creating a culturally relevant product which the masses will flock to. No, God uses them to preach the truth and deliver His church from error and departure. Quite often it is the case that many are offended by the doctrinal truths they preach and leave. Only a remnant is left to follow their leadership. Those who follow today’s “dynamic” pastors remind us of the multitude that followed Jesus when He gave them “to eat of the loaves, and they were filled” ([John 6:26](#)). As soon as they discovered that His kingdom was not of this world, with earthly health, wealth, and dominion, they left Him. Only those who desired the “true bread from heaven” ([John 6:32](#)) and a spiritual kingdom remained His disciples.

Next article, Lord willing, we will continue with this idea as it relates to the vision and purpose of mega-churches. We will also take a look at mega-church evangelism and outreach.

Footnotes

¹ Karla Ward and Lu-Ann Farrar. (2005, April 16). Megachurch Connection, Thousands worship at centers for community life. *Messenger-inquirer.com, Knight Ridder Newspapers*, Retrieved April 22, 2005, from <http://www.Messenger-inquirer.com/features/religionvalues/8330085.htm>.

² Luisa Kroll. (2003, September 17). Megachurches, Megabusinesses. *Forbes.com*, Retrieved March 5, 2005, from http://www.forbes.com/2003/09/17/cz_ik_0917megachurch.html.

³ Luisa Kroll. Megachurches, Megabusinesses.

⁴ Scott Thumma, PhD. (2000). Megachurches Today: Summary of the Faith Communities Today material on Megachurches, Hartford Institute For Religion Research. Retrieved February 28, 2005, from Hartford Seminary Web site: http://www.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches_FACTsummary.html.

⁵ Scott Thumma, Hartford Study.

⁶ ABC News. (2005, March 27). Mega-Churches Offer Prayer, Play, and Shopping. Retrieved April 22, 2005, from <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/print?id=617341>.

⁷ Karla Ward and Lu-Ann Farrar, *Messenger-inquirer.com*.

⁸ Karla Ward and Lu-Ann Farrar, *Messenger-inquirer.com*.

⁹ Karla Ward and Lu-Ann Farrar, *Messenger-inquirer.com*.

¹⁰ Karla Ward and Lu-Ann Farrar, *Messenger-inquirer.com*.

¹¹ Matt Vandebunte. Do Mega-churches Bring Thousands To God, Or Let Worshipers Get Lost In A Crowd?, *The Grand Rapids Press*, (February 12, 2005), Sec. D, pp. 1, 3.

¹² Matt Vandebunte, p. 3.

Mega-churches: A Manifestation of the Spirit of the Age (4)

In our last article we noticed how many mega-churches tend to be structured and operated more like businesses than churches. We also observed the casual attitude that these churches have towards membership. We ended with a look at the average mega-church pastor who has his "fingers on the pulse of the culture."

In this article we will conclude our look at mega-churches by examining their "vision" and "purpose" and how this relates to their outreach and evangelism. One can get a good grasp of the "mission" of mega-churches in general by looking at a sample of their websites. Nearly all mega-church websites contain a "mission statement" or some kind of statement expressing a "vision" or "purpose." When one takes the time to examine a number of websites, one is struck by the similarities among the sites

and how little they differ from church to church. This is also true with the mission statements of various mega-churches. Many of them are merely variations on one general theme.

Let us take a look at a few mission and vision statements taken from various mega-church websites. The website of a South Barrington, Illinois church and trend leader among mega-churches, states that: "The mission of Willow Creek Community Church is to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ."¹ A few paragraphs later, we read that they believe the role of the church "is to glorify God and serve those in need."

The mission of Northwoods Community Church of Peoria, Illinois is "to make fully devoted followers of Christ out of unchurched people in the Peoria, Illinois area." Next, we read that their vision is "to build a community of contagious Christ-followers out of unchurched people in the Peoria area by attracting them to the life of Christ, introducing them to Christ, and maturing them in Christ."² The mission of Kensington Community Church of Troy, Michigan is "To turn people who think God is irrelevant into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ through high-impact churches."³

A central theme found in many of the mission statements is a desire on the part of mega-churches to "impact" and "make a difference" in their surrounding communities and even the world. This theme can be found in the vision statement of Point of Grace Church of Des Moines, Iowa. It reads:

Equipping people to impact their world, by providing an innovative, grace-filled, people-empowered church, located in the western suburbs of Des Moines, focusing on the real needs of people, introducing them to an authentic growing relationship with Jesus Christ in a casual environment of love and acceptance.⁴

Calvary (undenominational) Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan states that their mission "is to equip followers of Jesus to impact their world to the delight of God."⁵ If a church views its mission as making a difference in the surrounding community then the kind of outreach they conduct will reflect this mission. Mariners Church of Irvine, California makes the connection between their mission and outreach in one

paragraph found on their website. Under the heading of “Innovative in our ministry and relevant to our community,” the paragraph reads:

We want to make a difference in our community by being aware of and sensitive to current situations within our neighborhood. In doing so, we challenge ourselves to stretch outside our “comfort zones.” Our goal is to be innovative in the ministries of music, teaching, drama, art, and multimedia, as well as other ways that may capture the attention of those in our community who don’t know Christ.”⁶

Under the title of “Citywide Ministry,” New Life Church of Colorado Springs, Colorado declares that:

No city in the United States has been measurably impacted by the success of one church. However, cities can be forcefully impacted by the success of networks of churches. At New Life, one of our main functions is to organize and coordinate with the hundreds of churches in our area. Together, we can strategize and utilize each other’s distinctives to strengthen us all in the goal of reaching and serving more people for Christ.⁷

Perhaps the mega-church which serves as the best example of how mega-churches view themselves and their mission in the world is NorthRidge Church of Plymouth, Michigan. The first two sentences and a few excerpts of their vision states:

Our vision is most clearly understood when pictured as a spiritual shopping mall. The shopping mall seeks to provide availability and easy access to most everything a person needs or wants in an attractive, convenient and desirable setting....

We see NorthRidge as that kind of place, only for the purpose of meeting spiritual needs. It is our desire to provide availability and easy access to ministries designed for every spiritual need and want a person has at every stage of spiritual development, from unbelieving to mature believer. As well, we want to have

something for every kind of person God has placed in our surrounding communities...

We see ourselves as a church that, through diversity, innovation, size, total member involvement, flexibility, understanding of present cultural and community needs, love and acceptance, concern for quality and excellence, and commitment to truth, can meet the spiritual needs of people in all of life's varying circumstances in an exciting, relevant and enjoyable way.⁸

In order for us to properly evaluate the various mission and vision statements of these mega-churches, it is necessary for us to know from God's Word exactly what the church is, who the members of the church are, and the reason for the existence of the church in the world. Rev. Ronald Hanks, deals with the topic of the church in his book *Doctrine According To Godliness* on pages 219-279. Pages 219 and 220 are very helpful in defining the church and God's purpose for it in the world.

Rev. Hanks defines the word church as follows.

The Greek word translated church means "called out." The name church in the highest and best sense refers to those who are saved and to them only. The name reminds us that the true members of the church are those who are "called... out of darkness into his marvelous light." ([1 Peter 2:9](#)). It reminds us, too, that their place in the church is of grace. They are not members by their choice or works, but by God's calling.⁹

One sees immediately that this definition of the church does not square with the various mission statements which we have just read. No doubt average unchurched, irreligious mega-church attendees would feel very uncomfortable being told that they were a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that they should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" ([1 Peter 2:9](#)). They would feel much more comfortable being told that they were gathered together for the purpose of improving themselves so that they could go out and make a difference in the world. Mega-churches do their best to blur the distinction between the church and the world, between those "called

out” and those not. Their very appeal is that they are as close to the world as possible, yet still calling themselves the church.

We must notice also how mega-churches put emphasis upon their own innovation and techniques in “reaching” and “equipping” people “for” Christ. There is much talk about “love and acceptance,” “flexibility,” “innovation,” and “understanding.” Many mega-churches are careful to advertise their “ministries” of music, drama, teaching, and multimedia. Bringing people into the church is seen as nothing more than a human endeavor. It is up to the church to become as creative as possible to draw people through the doors. God is not extolled as the One who powerfully calls His people out of darkness and into the light of His truth through the preaching of the Word.

Also missing in the various mega-church mission statements is the reality of the spiritual separation that exists between the members of the church and the world with all its wickedness. Rev. Hanko points this out as he continues to define what it means to be “called out.” He writes:

That members of the church are called out refers not only to their salvation from sin (they are called out of darkness), but also to their spiritual separation from the world and its wickedness ([2 Cor. 6:14-18](#)). Implied in the name church, therefore, is the holiness and obedience of the church’s members. A church whose members are not holy does not deserve the name church.¹⁰

Churches which incorporate as much of popular culture into their worship as possible, in order to appeal to those in the community around them, are not living out this spiritual separation. Churches which reject sound doctrine, which overlook sin in the lives of their members, and which have a “come as you are” attitude about attendance, are guilty of violating the command of [2 Corinthians 6:14-18](#). The “impact” of all of this behavior is that the church becomes more and more like the world. Instead of the church “making a difference” (the vision of many mega-churches) in the world, the world floods into the church, drowning the witness of the church and its members.

That the church and its members live in spiritual separation from the world and in dedication to the service of God is very important. Writes Rev. Hanko,

Holiness is essential to the very existence of the church. Unto holiness the members are called, chosen ([Eph. 1:4](#)), and redeemed ([Col. 1:21, 22](#)). Church holiness is important because it has to do with God's purpose in the church. The reason for the church's existence is the glory of God ([Eph. 1:6, 12](#)). It is in the holiness of the church and its members that this purpose is reached. An unholy church, a church whose members are not holy, cannot and does not glorify God. In the holiness of the church, most of all, God's glory shines out.¹¹

Notice how the glorifying of God is missing from nearly all of the mega-church mission, purpose, and vision statements. They see meeting the "needs" of the community and "impacting" the world as their main reason for existence. The typical mega-church resembles more a social service agency existing for the service of man than a church living in holiness for the glory of God.

Because they see their purpose in this way, their witness in the world is ineffective. Writes Rev. Hanko,

It is to the shame and hurt of the church today that its members do not live as those who are called out. If the church itself is not any different from the world in its teaching, in the conduct of its members, and in its practices, its witness will be ineffective. The church's glory, and the glory of its witness to this lost world, lies in its being called out, separate, and holy—different from the wicked world.¹²

Perhaps mega-churches most clearly manifest the spirit of the age in their endeavors of trying to make this world a better place to live. Ultimately, their goal is an earthly kingdom brought about by the efforts of man. This goal brings them into close contact and cooperation with the world. We see this cooperation between apostatizing churches and the world and the attempt to establish an earthly kingdom as one of the signs of the return of our Lord.

May we be those who watch and are aware of the signs of Christ's coming, not fooled by the false doctrines and practices which surround us. May we also be careful to remain members of a true church (or join it, if necessary) where the marks of the true church are found: the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" ([1 Peter 5:8](#)).

Endnotes

¹ http://www.willowcreek.org/what_we_believe.asp (retrieved 6/11/2005)

² <http://www.nwoods.org/?section=76> (retrieved 6/11/2005)

³ <http://kensingtonchurch.org/aboutus/missionstatement.php> (retrieved 6/11/2005)

⁴ <http://www.pointofgrace.com/about/purpose/index.php> (retrieved 6/11/2005)

⁵ <http://calvarychurch.gospelcom.net/purpose.htm> (retrieved 6/11/2005)

⁶ <http://www.marinerschurch.org/pages/values.html> (retrieved 6/11/2005)

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<http://www.newlifechurch.org/whatwebelieve/index.cfm?FUSEACTION=citywideMIistry> (retrieved 6/11/2005)

⁸ <http://www.northridgechurch.com/About/Vision.asp>

⁹ Ronald Hanko, *Doctrine According To Godliness*, (Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grandville, MI, 2004) p. 219.

¹⁰ Ronald Hanko, p. 219.

¹¹ Ronald Hanko, p. 219

¹² Ronald Hanko, pp. 219, 220.