MEGACHURCHES AS SPECTATOR RELIGION:
USING SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY AND FREE-RIDER THEORY
TO UNDERSTAND THE SPIRITUAL VITALITY
OF AMERICA'S LARGEST-ATTENDANCE CHURCHES

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PREFACE

To introduce the topic of study, this preface offers a participant-observer snapshot of worship at two different megachurches. Then the researcher's biases are voiced and acknowledged, along with perspective on how these biases might affect the analysis and interpretations offered in the dissertation.

Ethnography of Two Megachurches

Traffic was quite thin in Richmond, Virginia, on Sunday morning February 12, 2006, until my colleague and I drove within a few hundred yards of St. Paul's Baptist Church. At that point cars began to queue up to use the main entrance of the well-marked church facility. The church's 47-acre campus, situated along a two-lane secondary road, forms a buffer between a large wetlands area on one side and a mix of modest suburbs and retail businesses on the other side. My colleague that day for visits to two different megachurches was Scott Thumma, Ph.D., principal megachurch researcher for the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and author of the chapter titled "Methods for Congregational Study" in the book, *Studying Congregations* (Ammerman 1998).

The parking lot was clearly painted and well marked. It was readily apparent to us which entrance of the sizable church building to use, and the people flow in that direction confirmed our interpretation. Many were walking from the parking lot toward the church building, while others had attended the previous church service and were coming back to

their cars. The only background sounds were those of people chatting with each other as they walked.

We felt somewhat self-conscious as the only two white-skinned people present that morning, but we received the same energetic series of greetings as all other worshipers we observed. We were warmly welcomed as we entered the building, again in the hallway, and again as we entered the room known as the sanctuary–the main area for worship. The smartly dressed men and women serving as greeters and ushers all wore dark-colored dressy clothes and white gloves. A conspicuous information booth was staffed by two people who readily answered our question about where we should meet the senior pastor after the service (he had invited us to join him for breakfast in his office between the second and third services that morning).

All aspects of the facility were clean, fresh, bright, well lit, and with clear signage for restrooms and the like. As we entered the sanctuary, we were each handed a bulletin containing the order of service, sermon notes, and various church-related announcements. A robed choir in the choir loft behind the pulpit was singing and swaying in energetic manner. The worship service formally began with opening words and prayer from a woman who we later learned was a volunteer in her role of calling the congregation to worship. Her leadership during those opening moments was her primary activity, although she remained on the platform throughout the service. (Perhaps on other weeks she has additional responsibilities.)

In terms of religious symbols, the church facility was consistent with Baptist tradition. High-church standards, such as stained-glass windows, statues, ornate carvings, or paintings, were totally absent. Common Christian symbols, such as a large prominent

cross, were also absent. Yet the sanctuary clearly had the feel of a church, from the presence of pulpit, baptistery, and other architectural décor such as a lofty ceiling that subtly communicated a feel for the transcendent, at least to this observer.

The church, founded in 1909, had moved to this new campus in 2004. Rev. Dr. Lance Watson, senior pastor, is the sixth senior pastor, and most of the church's growth has occurred under his leadership. He was called as pastor in 1985, and is widely referred to as "Rev." The church is dually affiliated with the National Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

The service was carefully planned and sequenced, led primarily by the senior pastor whose role involved announcements, explanation of the financial offering, two prayers and a sermon; and a worship leader who guided most musical segues. The service elements prior to the sermon were prayer, congregational singing, announcements, greeting one another, offering, more singing, and a vocal soloist. The music had a contemporary feel, although not overly so, and was supported by live band with guitar, bass, keyboard and percussion.

The sermon went for 52 minutes. The pastor made constant reference to Bible verses and stories. Many of the Bible verses he used were listed in the sermon outline that was printed in bulletin. He concluded with a repeat-after-me prayer of response. Throughout the discourse, people gave constant feedback, far more than the responses one might see in any gathering, religious or not, such as laughter at jokes. Instead many spontaneously stood up and clapped when they agreed with the pastor. They and others also talked back to him as he spoke, saying things like "preach it" and "tell us, Rev."

The environment was bright, warm and cheery. The congregation was about 30 percent male and 70 percent female. It was almost entirely adults, presumably because there was children's programming (equivalent to Sunday school or children's church) offered during each worship service.

Worshipers were highly participative–singing enthusiastically, holding hands for prayer as instructed from the pulpit, and hugging freely during the time of greeting (including hugs to us two white strangers). During the sermon there were 27 different instances where the pastor asked hearers to "poke your neighbor and say, 'you need to hear what's next'" and similar instructions to dialogue momentarily with fellow worshipers. Even by the twenty-seventh time, most of the congregation still participated!

Camera-driven video projection occurred during the entire service. There were constant broadcast-style camera shots (speaker or singer interspersed with audience cutaways) on two large side screens, but the audience mainly looked at the stage, rather than the screens–perhaps because the screens were not big enough to draw everyone's attention away from the main platform, and because the camera shots did not magnify the size of the speaker.

The service ended somewhat abruptly, with the pastor ending his message with a comment that he was out of time. After prayer, one quick song, and a final "Amen," we began to exit while the crowd in queue for the next service began to filter in.

The service had lasted one hour and 45 minutes. I had counted about 2,200 people in the 3,000 seats (padded theater-style seats), including the 100-seat choir loft. Total attendance on a typical early-2006 week for the three services combined (8:00 a.m.,

10:00 a.m., and 12:00 p.m.) is 6,500 adults and children, according to interviews I conducted the next day with church officials.

To accommodate and augment its growth, the church is preparing to launch a second campus later in 2006 on the south side of Richmond. The initial strategy will be for the preaching pastor to shuttle back and forth between campuses, with service times appropriately staggered between the two locations.

Second Stop: Washington DC

Departing from Richmond, we drove 122 miles to a western suburb of Washington D.C. near Dulles Airport. McLean Bible Church began near there with five families in 1961. The church has not affiliated with any denomination. In 1964 the young congregation bought five acres and self-funded their first facility, known by long-timers in the congregation as "the little yellow brick building." They called the Rev. Dr. Lon Solomon as pastor in 1969, when weekly attendance was 300-400. By early 2006 attendance had grown thirty-fold to a weekly average total of 11,000. During this era, the congregation relocated three times – to a high school, to a church facility they built, and to where they are based today.

Like the Richmond Church, McLean Bible Church has accommodated and facilitated its growth by offering multiple services: Saturdays at 6:30 p.m., and Sundays at 9:00 a.m., 10:45 a.m., and 12:30 p.m. These typically feature Rev. Dr. Solomon, who is widely called "Pastor Solomon" and sometimes teased as "Rabbi Solomon" due to his Jewish birth and religious heritage.

On Sunday evenings at 5:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., McLean sponsors a generationally targeted service known as Frontline. It focuses on young adults from college graduates through age 35. (Thus Dr. Thumma and I were easily among the oldest people present for either service that evening.) The idea is that Frontline attendees will become involved in small caring groups with each other, and otherwise participate in ministries and service opportunities alongside the rest of the greater church.

Lon Solomon occasionally preaches at Frontline, but they have their own preaching pastor and preaching rotation of associate teaching pastors. Ken Baugh led this "church within a church" from its founding in 1994 through 2004. In 2005 Todd Phillips, then age 36, became the second pastor of Frontline – and an associate pastor of the overall McLean Bible congregation. He is widely referred to simply as "Todd."

All worship services currently meet in the 2,500-seat sanctuary. Their present facility is the former 52-acre campus of the National Wildlife Federation. Although the parking was ample, refurbishments were extensive before the congregation could move there in 2004. So both St. Paul's and McLean/Frontline moved into their respective latest facilities in 2004. Like St. Paul's, the facilities for McLean/Frontline were clean, fresh, bright, well lit, and marked with clear signage. Like St. Paul's the worship room was visually austere and devoid of overt religious symbols. The McLean/Frontline worship center seemed to this observer that it was trying to be closer to a theologically neutral performing arts theater than to anyone's stereotype of a church.

We attended the 5:30 p.m. service, which we understood to draw a bigger crowd than the 7:30 p.m. service. I counted roughly 1,600 in attendance. Seating consisted of padded chairs similar to those at St. Paul's, plus a few padded pews.

Whereas St. Paul's was 99 percent African American, the Frontline service was perhaps 80 percent Anglo, 10 percent Asian, 8 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent African American. Whereas St. Paul's service drew in all adult ages with 30s-40s most common, Frontline was heavily dominated by people in their 20s and 30s. Whereas the male-female ratio at St. Paul's was 30 percent male, 70 percent female, at Frontline it was easily 50:50. And whereas St. Paul's had very few children in the service due to concurrent children's programming, Frontline does have a few children—mostly babies and small children—presumably because so many of its congregants are single or in the early years of their marriage, due to the target age of this church.

In sharp contrast to the smartly dressed style at St. Paul's, both for those on stage and the support personnel, the Frontline leadership team members were noticeably casual. They were also fewer in number. The entire welcome process at Frontline consisted of one group of greeters at the door of the sanctuary, who seemed to be friends with each other. They smiled as they handed me a bulletin (worship folder); all four wore casual clothing such as jeans. Rev. Watson at St. Paul's wore a designer outfit, which was steam pressed between services. At Frontline, Todd wore casual slacks and an untucked collared shirt.

In another sharp contrast between the two congregations, the lighting at Frontline was dark, subdued, and club-like. Upon entering what is called the main auditorium (the worship center) a giant video countdown timer "played" on all three huge screens, with taped contemporary music played in background. During the service, the screens featured image magnification of musicians and speakers, plus relevant words such as song lyrics, Bible verses, and the like. Sometimes all three screens showed the same content (as the

pre-service countdown timer) and sometimes they differed (image magnification on the outer screens and text on the center screen). The low-light environment made it hard for me to observe where people's eyes were focused, but the majority near me (I was seated midway back) seemed to watch the screens much more than the live people on stage.

Much like at St. Paul's, the service was carefully planned and sequenced, led primarily by the pastor and worship leader. The opening elements contained prayer, congregational singing, announcements, greeting one another, financial offering, and more singing–but no vocal soloist. At St. Paul's the offering was received by the congregation all coming forward to the front row, similar to how Holy Communion is served in many liturgical churches. At Frontline, offering plates were passed with minimal fanfare. The music at Frontline was contemporary, fresh, and electric, supported by live band, with guitars, bass and percussion, much like at St. Paul's, but louder and more pulsating.

Almost all levels of congregational participation seemed lower at Frontline than at St. Paul's. People gave minimal feedback, laughing at jokes, but otherwise being only minimally responsive. The only physical interaction was a during-service time of greeting one's neighbor which included unsolicited handshakes and hugs by some. During that time, three people welcomed me at Frontline, all with handshakes (whereas at St. Paul's I received numerous handshakes and three hugs).

As at St. Paul's, the sermon drew heavily from the Bible, and the preacher's challenges were constant to obey God in every area of life. The Frontline message stayed with just one biblical narrative, and Todd made constant reference to it (a story from

Exodus 17) with the verses under discussion being projected on the center screen. The sermon concluded by a prayer led by pastor, with no audience response requested.

The service had lasted one hour and 15 minutes. Afterwards people lingered for some while in the huge atrium area to talk casually with one another. Others arrived for the next service, and began filtering into the auditorium. Much more so than at St. Paul's, people seemed to arrive in pairs, trios, and handfuls, and also to depart as small clusters together, perhaps because they were members of the same small group or friends who had carpooled together. Given the high percentage of single adults present, it makes sense to speculate that the "marriage market factor" is an important draw for the church, partially explaining the rapid and sizable attendance growth.

For both churches, the worship services are one of the most visible aspects of what the church does. But both churches made it very clear that a fully committed disciple of Jesus Christ will do far more than participate in a worship service. From announcements during the service, to literature handed out after the service, to follow-up emails I received from both churches, the need was stressed to be involved in the ministries of the church, both those inside and outside the building, and to build relationships ("community") with the people of the church, such as through involvement in small groups.

Both congregations, compared and contrasted in the table that follows, represent current examples of Protestant megachurches in the United States. In recent years this researcher has been on the campus of almost 200 megachurches, including all 10 of the 10 largest, either to attend a worship service, attend a seminar, or meet individually with

church staff. Each congregation has been different, and yet each demonstrates characteristics in common with other megachurches.

TABLE 0.1
COMPARISON OF TWO MEGACHURCHES AT WORSHIP †

Aspects of the Worship Service	St. Paul's Baptist Church Richmond, VA	Frontline at McLean Bible Church, Vienna, VA
Ethnicity of Congregation	99% African American	80% Anglo 10% Asian 8% Hispanic 2% African American
Age of Congregation	All Adult Ages, 30s-40s most common	All Adult Ages, 20s-30s most common
Male-Female Ratio	30% male 70% female	50% male 50% female
Presence of Children	Very few (due to concurrent children's programming)	Mostly babies (due to target age of this church)
Facility Readiness	Clean, fresh, bright, well lit, clear signage	-- same –
Entrance Greeters	Many greeters; posted at three different places (front entrance, hallway, doorway to sanctuary); most wore white gloves and dressy clothing	One group of greeters at door of the sanctuary; smiled as they handed me a bulletin (worship folder); all four wore casual clothing such as jeans
Pre-Service Visual Background	A robed choir in the choir loft behind the pulpit was singing as people entered	A giant countdown timer "played" on all three screens with taped contemporary music played in background
Service Elements Before The Sermon	Prayer, congregational singing, announcements, greeting one another, offering, more singing, vocal soloist	-same, except no soloist-

Professionalism of Service Planning	Carefully planned and sequenced, led primarily by pastor and worship leader	-- same –
Lighting	Bright, warm, cheery	Dark, subdued, club-like
Pastor's Clothing	Pressed designer outfit (which attendants steam cleaned between services)	Casual slacks, untucked collared shirt
What Others Called the Preacher	"Rev." (short for "Reverend); they do not call him "Pastor" or "Dr.," even though he earned a doctorate	"Todd" (his first name). He too is an ordained minister, though he has not earned a doctorate
Sermon Length	52 minutes	42 minutes
Use of Scripture	Constant reference to Bible verses and stories; many verses listed in sermon outline that was printed in bulletin	Constant reference to today's teaching story from Exodus 17 with verses under discussion projected on center screen
Sermon Conclusion	Repeat-after-me prayer of response	Prayer led by pastor with no audience response
Congregational Responsiveness	People gave constant feedback, far more than laughing at jokes, even standing and clapping when they agreed with the pastor, and saying things like "preach it" or "tell us, Rev."	People gave minimal feedback, laughing at jokes, but otherwise being only minimally responsive
Physical Contact During the Worship Service	Entering the sanctuary, I received handshakes from several greeters. During the service we were to greet our neighbor, during which 6 people welcomed me. Also during the service we were to "hold hands with a neighbor" twice, and "greet and hug your neighbor" once; some 27 times during	The only physical interaction was a during-service time of greeting one's neighbor which included unsolicited handshakes and hugs by some. Three people welcomed me, all with handshakes.

	the sermon we were told to "tap," "touch," or "look at your neighbor" and repeat something the preacher had just said.	
Graphic Projection	Camera projection occurred during the entire service; broadcast-style camera shots (speaker or singer interspersed with audience cutaways) on two side screens	The huge center screen showed song lyrics or a preaching outline; the two huge side screens showed image magnification of the speaker
Service Length	One hour, 45 minutes	One hour, 15 minutes
Sr. Pastor (Pastor Number Since Church's Founding)	Lance Watson (6^{th})	Todd Phillips (2^{nd})
Type of Seating	Padded chairs	Padded chairs, plus a handful of padded pews
Sanctuary Seating Capacity	3,000 including 100-seat choir loft	2,500
Actual Attendance for That Service	2,200	1,600
Total Weekly Attendance of Church, As Reported by Church Office	6,500	2,200 for Frontline 11,000 for the entire church
Greatest Period of Growth	Under the present Sr. Pastor	-- same –
Age of the Congregation	Founded 1909	Founded 1961
Acreage of Current Site	47 acres	52 acres
Year Moved to Current Site	2004	2004
Website	www.myspbc.org	www.frontline.to
Denominational Affiliation	Dual: National Baptist and Southern Baptist	Non-denominational

Date of Visit	Sun. 2/12/06, 10:00 a.m. (second morning service)	Sun. 2/12/06, 5:30 p.m. (first evening service)

† Categories in this table were inspired by the chart "Observation Protocol" in Ammerman, Nancy, et al. 1998. *Studying Congregations*, 200-201.

The comparisons summarized in Table 0.1 illustrate that megachurches are not a monolithic, look-alike group. By definition, size is the primary common denominator of megachurches. They may have much in common, but each one also has its own distinctiveness. Therefore, as this study explores the role played by U.S. Protestant megachurches, it will question assumptions at every realistic juncture, with a goal to expand knowledge rather than to unintentionally reinforce preconceived notions.

Insider's Approach to Megachurch Study

Scholarly study of megachurches, as in studying any size of church, involves disciplined, systematic description and analysis of dynamics that take place in a social setting. Can these investigation be conducted in a value-free environment? *Should* an unbiased approach even be attempted?

This researcher's answer to both questions is no, although paradoxically every effort will be made to try.

"We begin with the acknowledgement that we are neither neutral nor value free in our approach to congregations" (Carroll 1986:18). So states the Introduction to one of earliest manuals on studying congregations, *Handbook for Congregational Studies*, published in 1986. The Introduction further asserts that it is possible for credible scientific analysis to be done by those who acknowledge a personal ethic in favor of what they are studying.

The quote in the previous paragraph represents the approach taken by this dissertation: it is not attempting a "methodological Gnosticism" nor will it be reductionistic. Rather, the researcher is a religiously committed person, whose values include a favorable bias toward healthy, growing local congregations as vital to the Christian faith. This value comes, in part, from one of Jesus' frequently-quoted statements which speaks of the Church: ". . . I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (*New Revised Standard Version*, Matthew 16:18-19). The Book of Acts, as the story of the early church, speaks affirmingly of the growth of the church at least six different times (mentioning the word *church* 23 times). The rest of the New Testament makes 88 more direct references to churches and hundreds of indirect allusions, such as the numerous references to participation in the Body of Christ. This researcher has been deeply shaped by the Bible's statements on the Church; as a result, he wants to see churches grow and be healthy, and he also believes they have supernatural help in accomplishing their mission.

My theology and personal familiarity with "insider" language have made a noticeable difference as I pursued my megachurch research. They enabled me to build trust quickly with both parishioners and pastors. I suspect they were more frank and forthright in their answers to my questions, feeling that I share their values and support their mission. My insider role perhaps helped me gain access to church leaders who might otherwise decide they are too busy to speak to an "outside" researcher or reporter.

For St. Paul's Baptist Church in particular, the senior pastor and I had chatted on other previous occasions and arranged for him to speak at a conference I facilitated. For this and other reasons, I had established a prior credibility with him. I also had his private

email, which got me immediately through several layers of protective staff. This resulted in an invitation for Dr. Thumma and me to have breakfast with him in his office between services. Likewise at Frontline, I had previously worked with the church's leadership on an editorial project. This insider relational capital led to the ministry supervisor of campus pastor Todd Phillips emailing me, prior to the visit, with a carte blanche statement of "you're welcome to come and to talk with anyone you see."

Being an insider has both disadvantages as well as advantages. "Insiders know enough to ask key questions. Outsiders, on the other hand, sometimes provide a clarity of insight by their very naiveté, but they may also miss the importance of a story or gesture because they do not know enough to 'read between the lines.' Insiders, however, can sometimes miss just as much because they do not notice the things they take for granted" (Ammerman 1998:199).

In addition to the faith commitments that form me, I have also been formed by academic study of research methodology. From graduate classes and readings I have learned and internalized not only respect for appropriately conducted research but also the need to consciously look for evidence that is counter to my hypotheses and, indeed, even to my treasured ways of thinking about churchly matters. This quality might be termed the secular holiness of the researcher. The overlap between these formations is the primacy of integrity, which is certainly at the heart of Max Weber's challenges in his classic and oft-cited *Science As A Vocation* essay, originally published in 1918, which concludes that "no science is absolutely free from presuppositions" (Gerth and Mills 1946:153). After all, vocation—*beruf*—itself comes from religious experience.

Therefore, as this dissertation addresses religious phenomena, it does so with both the rigors of a disciplined researcher and the unavoidable biases of an insider's perspective. It acknowledges the researcher's biases as early as possible (hence this Preface), and then it seeks to walk as much as possible in the steps of Max Weber. Objectivity does not require total value freedom, but it does require the researcher's efforts to be value-aware and then to be committed to a rigorous academic process. As Weber states: "There is no absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis of culture or of 'social phenomena' independent of special and 'one-sided' viewpoints to which--expressedly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously--they are selected, analysed and organised for expository purposes" (Weber 1949: 67).

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide historical context to the emergence of U.S. Protestant megachurches as a social phenomenon. It will be followed by a statement of the problem to be researched, with accompanying comments on the significance of the problem. It will conclude with an overview of the material in all succeeding chapters and appendices.

Megachurches as a Rising Social Phenomenon

A megachurch is widely defined as a church with weekly worship attendance exceeding 2,000 adults and children (Vaughan 1993: 53; Thumma 2000). The term is one their leaders don't particularly like, according to sociologist Robert Putnam (2003:119).[1]

Social observers are beginning to comment on the increasing presence of Protestant[2] megachurches in the United States. Management expert Peter Drucker, noting

[1] It should be noted, however, that there is not yet a universally-accepted definition of the megachurch concept. Scholars who specialize in megachurch research tend to identify certain characteristics that set megachurches apart from their smaller counterparts. The most obvious defining characteristic is size. While there is some disagreement about the cut-off point, 2,000 or more attendees (sum of all weekend services) is becoming an increasingly accepted standard (see Tucker-Worgs 2002; Thumma 1996). Note that this is not a membership standard. Many churches, especially megachurches, usually have attendance figures that dwarf their membership numbers.

[2] If attendance alone is the defining criteria, then Roman Catholic megachurches exist in the United States as well. While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops advises parishes to avoid "any semblance of a theater or an arena" in worship settings, a handful of Catholic churches draw weekly attendances in excess of 2,000. (Levy, Abe.. "Megachurch Phenomenon Spreading." 10 Dec. 2005.) *San Antonio Daily News*. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (www.dailynews.com/news/ci_3295672). Further, additional large-seating Catholic sanctuaries are being built, such as the Oratory of Ave Maria, near Naples, Florida, which will seat at least 3,300 worshipers. Megachurch definition reflects attendance on a typical weekend, not parish size. As

the social role megachurches play as a new community center, calls the rise of Protestant megachurches an "important social phenomenon" (1998:169).[3] A cover story in *The New York Times* magazine describes exurban megachurches as a supplier of the social

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sociologist Mark Chaves noted at the H. Paul Douglass lecture of the 2005 meeting of the Religion Research Association, if parish size were the defining criteria, up to half of U.S. Roman Catholic parishes could be considered megachurches. See also Appendix D for an example of a Catholic megachurch.

Further, according to a 6/9/06 personal email from megachurch researcher Scott Thumma:

"There are several reasons I have chosen not to include Catholic churches [in my studies of U.S. megachurches].

First, we do not just use the 2000 in attendance as the only characteristic to define a megachurch—rather, it is a host of characteristics that create a distinctive worship style and congregational dynamic. My brief studies and readings of worship and the congregational life of Catholic churches has not convinced me that most very large Catholic churches really function like the Protestant megachurches. There are a few that I have come across that do, but most don't have strong charismatic senior minister, many associate pastors, large staff, robust congregational identity that empowers 100s to 1000s of weekly volunteers, an identity that draws people from a very large area (sometimes an hour or more) and across parish boundaries, a multitude of programs and ministries organized and maintained by members, high levels of commitment and giving by members, seven-day-a-week activities at the church, contemporary worship, state of the art sound and projection systems, auxiliary support systems such as bookstores, coffee shops, huge campuses of 30-100 acres, etc.

The U.S. Congregations Study (large national study from a few years ago) had a number of very large Catholic churches in it and when compared to the few Protestant megachurches in that study - the results looked very different—they don't seem to have the same internal dynamics at all.

Second, when I did try to get lists of churches with attendance figures I found it nearly impossible to get any diocese or national office to confirm the numbers I heard.

Third, I am not really an expert on Catholicism so I have avoided including them in my work."

[3] In the full quote Drucker says the rise of megachurches in the United States (which he calls the "pastoral church") is "surely the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years." In Drucker's writings on the rise of a new social sector required by today's knowledge society, he emphasizes the non-profit sector, especially its churches, as "those organizations that increasingly take care of the social challenges of a modern society" (Drucker 1994:53-70). What social challenges do churches, especially megachurches, address? According to Drucker, "Social-sector institutions aim at changing the human being. The 'product' of a hospital is a cured patient. The 'product' of a church is a churchgoer whose life is being changed. The task of social-sector organizations is to create human health and well-being" (Drucker 1994:53). Thus Drucker welcomes the kind of churches "which focus on the spiritual needs of individuals, especially educated knowledge workers, and then put the spiritual energies of their members to work on the social challenges and social problems of the community" (Drucker 1994:53). According to Drucker, the purpose of pastoral churches (megachurches) is not to perpetuate a particular liturgy or maintain an existing institutional form. Instead, they're asking what my business friends would call the marketing question: "Who are the customers, and what's of value to them?" They're more interested in the pastoral question ("What do these people need that we can supply?") than in the theological nuances ("How can we preserve our distinctive doctrines?"). "Managing to Minister: An Interview with Peter Drucker." *Leadership Journal* 1 April 1989. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.ctlibrary.com/13607.)

infrastructure otherwise lacking in the developing communities of the rural West (Mahler 2005). From exurbia to urban centers, megachurches are "really one of the most influential factors of American religion at this point in time," says Scott Thumma, principal megachurch researcher at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research (www.hartfordinstitute.org).[4] "These large churches have figured out how to address the needs of people in a relevant, engaging way that is actually making a difference in their lives," adds Dave Travis (2006), vice president for innovative churches with the Dallas-based Leadership Network, which did a major research project on megachurches in 2005-2006.

News articles abound on the recent proliferation of Protestant megachurches. The megachurch phenomenon has received cover-story attention in major papers like *The New York Times*[5], cultural magazines like *Harpers*[6], business publications like *Forbes,*[7] *Black Enterprise*[8] and *Business Week*[9], religious periodicals and academic journals[10], and

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[4] Thumma's (2003) complete statement is "When you add up all that megachurches are doing from books to video to the network of connection across the nation, you can't say this phenomenon of more than 1,200 megachurches is anything but one of the most influential factors of American religion at this point in time."

[5] Niebuhr, Gustav and Paul Goldberger. "Megachurches." (4 parts), *New York Times*. 6 April 1995; 18 April 1995; 20 April 1995; 29 April 1995.

[6] Sharlet, Jeff. "Soldiers of the Cross: Inside America's Most Powerful Megachurches." *Harpers*. May 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://harpers.org/SoldiersOfChrist.html).

[7] Kroll, Lisa. "Christian Capitalism: Megachurches, Megabusinesses." *Forbes*. 17 Sept. 2003. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.forbes.com/2003/09/17/cz_lk_0917megachurch.html).

[8] Richardson, Nicole Marie, Krissah Williams & Hamil R. Harris. "The Business of Faith: Black Megachurches Are Turning Pastors into CEOs of Multimillion-Dollar Enterprises." *Black Enterprise*, 6 May. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.blackenterprise.com/Archiveopen.asp?Source=/archive2006/05/0506-39.htm).

[9]William C. Symonds, "Earthly Empires" 23 May. 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_21/b3934001_mz001.htm).

[10] See the bibliography at the end of this dissertation.

even popular television shows like The Simpsons[11] and King of the Hill.[12] As *Dallas Morning News* said in a 2006 article, "Megachurches seemed so 1990s. But it turns out that the phenomenon of American congregations swelling to unprecedented sizes is still hot news in the twenty-first century."[13]

Academia is likewise showing increased interest in megachurch study. Almost every scholarly book or peer-reviewed journal article that deals with megachurches has been published in the last ten years (see bibliography).

The cover story in the 2003 *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches* addresses the subject of megachurches, observing that megachurches "are woefully understudied as a phenomenon" (Linder 2003:16). The 2005 H. Paul Douglass lecture for the combined annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and

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[11] The Simpsons attend a church that, by the size of its vast parking lot, has megachurch proportions. "The Simpsons" is the most religious show on television, according to Mark Pinsky, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002). The Simpsons go to church, pray before meals, and talk about religion. At least 1 out of every 3 shows features a clear religious reference. Of those, 1 out of 10 is completely constructed around a religious theme. For example, in "Homer v. Lisa and the Eighth Commandment," Homer has to learn that God does not approve of stealing cable TV. In "Homer the Heretic," he tries to start his own religion, until Ned Flanders saves his life.

In the world of cyberspace, a computer programmer created a megachurch built out of Legos. Built from more than 75,000 Lego pieces, it seats 1,372 people (thus needing two services to pass the 2,000-attendance mark). It features 3,976 windows, a balcony, a narthex, stairs to the balcony, restrooms, coat rooms, several mosaics a nave, a baptistry, an altar, a crucifix, a pulpit and an elaborate pipe organ. The finished product is 7 feet by 5 1/2 feet by 30 inches (2.2 m x 1.7 m x .76 m). It took the creator a year and a half of planning, building and photographing. See www.amyhughes.org.

[12] "King of the Hill: Church Hopping." Episode 197, first aired 9 April 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtI2pa2m5cg or http://www.tv.com/king-of-the-hill/church-hopping/episode/408488/recap.html).

[13] Weiss, Jeffrey. "New Church Study Adjusts 'Big' Picture." *The Dallas Morning News*. 11 Feb. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/religion/stories/DN-megachurch_11rel.ART.State.Edition1.16ac3865.html).

Religious Research Association[14] featured sociologist Mark Chaves speaking on the topic of megachurches, the first time megachurches had received plenary session attention by that academic society. Although no academic writer has devoted an entire book to megachurches to date, the topic has received major treatment in a wide range of fields—church architecture (Loveland 2003), business marketing (Twitchell 2004), popular culture (Sosnik 2006), an examination of seeker-style churches (Sargent 2000), the rise of fast-growing religious denominations (Miller 1997).

The word *megachurch* is of twentieth-century origin, first written as "mega church," and then as "mega-church," following the evolutionary pattern of most compound words. Yet the practice of forming very large-attendance churches goes back many centuries. The New Testament refers to certain banner-attendance days, such as Pentecost when "about 3,000" were converted (Acts 2:41). The overall church continued to grow to 5,000 (Acts 4:4) and beyond (Acts 21:20). But the weekly meetings were not akin to today's megachurch because the earliest Christian communities generally met as smaller groups in homes, according to New Testament record. The first known church building was not built until 201 A.D., and many churches continued to convene in homes even after the Roman Empire legalized Christianity in 313.

Yet over the centuries occasional large-attendance churches developed including the great Abbey of Cluny, the great cathedrals of Constantinople and Europe, and the tabernacles build around the ministries of such evangelists and teachers as Charles Spurgeon in England. As a case in point, Spurgeon preached regularly, often 10 times in

[14] http://RRA.hartsem.edu. See also the brief news report on the lecture in the e-newsletter, *Leadership Network Advance*, ("American Churchgoers Want Programming and Quality" *Leadership Network Advance,* issue #14, 8 Nov. 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.leadnet.org/LNAdvance.asp).

a week to audiences of 6,000 and more. He once addressed an audience of 23,654 (without aid of amplification). He grew the congregation of New Park Street Church from 232 in 1854 to 5,311 in 1892, making it the largest independent congregation in the world. Prime Ministers, presidents, and other notables flocked to hear him.[15]

Today the world's largest-attendance churches are in Korea, Africa, and South America—symbolic of the geographical shift in Christianity noted by historian Philip Jenkins (2002). The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul (www.yfgc.org), for example, has been recognized as the largest-attendance congregation in Christendom.[16] It started in 1958 with 5 people and today regularly draws well over 100,000 weekly to its primary campus, which consists of a large sanctuary that seats 10,000 plus 22 on-premises overflow chapels that hold another 20,000 and receive the service by live video projection. There are currently seven service times each Sunday.

Interestingly, the claim to be Europe's largest-attendance church is made by a congregation with non-European origins: Kingsway International Christian Centre in Hackney, East London, England, where Matthew Ashimolowo, a native of Nigeria and former Muslim, is senior pastor. It draws 10,000 people weekly between its three Sunday services. Its 4,000-seat auditorium holds more people than any other worship facility in England—Westminster Abbey seats 2,000, and St. Paul's Cathedral, the British capital's biggest traditional church, has a capacity of 2,400.[17] Interestingly, Europe's second-largest attendance church is also heavily non-European. Born in Nigeria to Presbyterian

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[15] Armstrong, Chris. "Spurgeon on Jabez" *Christian History Magazine Newsletter*, available online only. 23 Aug. 2002. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2002/aug23.html).

[16] http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/history2.asp

[17] http://www.kicc.org.uk

parents, Sunday Adelaja started a church in 1994 in Kiev, Ukraine, named Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations.[18] According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the "church has grown beyond its core clientele of substance abusers and petty criminals to include the mayor of Kiev and several members of Parliament."[19] Attendance is approaching 10,000.[20]

In the United States, churches were started in the 1600s immediately after each new European settlement was formed. None were megachurches for at least two reasons: first, even if the whole town went to church, and all to the same church at that (which actually happened quite often because of the religious identity of many towns), few settlements had the 2,000 inhabitants necessary to be classified as a megachurch; further, neither the architectural style in vogue nor the technology involving wooden structures would allow a facility sizable enough to accommodate great crowds. Typical was the "Old Ship" Meeting House, erected in 1681 in Hingham, Massachusetts. One of the largest of the Puritan meeting houses, it was 55 by 45 feet (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:7)—hardly big enough to reach an attendance of 2,000 even with several services each weekend. Interestingly, that church is still active today—claiming to meet in one of

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[18] http://www.godembassy.org

[19] Cullison, Alan. "Man With a Mission: A Nigerian Minister Sets Out to Save Kiev; Sunday Adelaja Promotes God And Democracy in a Land Suspicious of Evangelism." *Wall Street Journal*, 21 July 2006. A-1.

[20] Jewell, Dawn Herzog. "Eastern Europe's Most Influential Pastor Is a Nigerian Who Wants to Reach the World through his Ukranian Congregation." *Today's Christian* magazine. November/December 2005, Vol. 43, No. 6, 42.

America's oldest, continual-use facilities. It averages 175 in attendance with 350 its maximum for holiday services.[21]

Despite the initial large number of religiously motivated immigrants coming to what became the United States, the embryo country's religiosity waned, and many later immigrants did not become involved with a church. The early history of New York City, for example, is argued to be marked by minimal church attendance according to *Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America* (Shorto 2004). By 1776, only 17%—fewer than one in five Americans—across the 13 colonies were active in church affairs, according to sociology professors Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1992: 15).

Scholars Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler (2003) have traced the cultural history of Protestant American church buildings from the earliest European colonists to today (see also Vaughan 1995:39-64). They conclude that "commitment to evangelism exerted the greatest influence on building design" (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:2). They later expand that idea:

> Just as the Puritans developed a 'new architectural creation' to reflect their religious beliefs and worship practices, the revivalists of the Second Great Awakening introduced new structures for religious gatherings that helped them accomplish their main objective–converting sinners to Protestant Christianity and persuading them to become church members. Their structures constituted an important link in the evolution of the late twentieth-century megachurches because they incorporated evangelistic strategies used by later generations of evangelicals, including those associated with megachurches. (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:14)
>
> Beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century, auditorium churches gain increasing popularity among the evangelical denominations of the United States…. Like the meetinghouses and revival

[21] Personal email from the Pastor of the Old Ship Congregation dated 12 April, 2006. See also www.hingham-ma.com/about_history.html. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006.

> structures …, the auditorium church represented an important innovation in religious architecture that contributed to the development of the late-twentieth-century megachurches. Virtually all of the megachurches adopted some of its features, especially the arrangement of the worship space. (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:33)

While the "gospel tents and tabernacles recall the revival structures of the early-nineteenth-century evangelists, the large auditorium churches and temples they erected in Chicago, Fort Worth, Detroit and Los Angeles were quite innovative" (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:3). The innovations especially related to acoustics and sight lines. Loveland and Wheeler's chronicle names several large buildings that held considerably-sized congregations:

TABLE 1.1
LARGE CHURCHES OF THE 1800s[†]

Church Name, Location	Denomination/ Church Leader	Built or Opened	Approximate Seating
Sansom Street Church, Philadelphia	Baptist	1812	4,000
Chatham Street Chapel, Philadelphia	Charles G. Finney	1832	2,500
Bethany Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia (a four-story Sabbath School with bell tower and spire)	James Russell Miller	1866	3,000
Broadway Tabernacle, in the Bowery section of lower Manhattan	Charles G. Finney	1836	2,500 comfortably 4,000 total
First Free Baptist Church, Boston	African-American congregation	1840s Rebuilt 1852 after a fire	2,000 3,000
First Baptist Church, Baltimore	Baptist	1818	4,000
Plymouth Church, Brooklyn	Henry Ward Beecher	1850	2,000

[†]Loveland and Wheeler 2003:28-30, 34, 28, 70

Meanwhile, many evangelists built temporary structures that were far larger than any known house of worship to date in that era. Some of Billy Sunday's temporary tabernacles, for example, "accommodated at least 10,000, and the Pittsburg Tabernacle seated 15,000" (Loveland and Wheeler 2003:72) These ranged from tents to converted secular buildings, such as renovated tobacco or cotton warehouses, large halls, and municipal auditoriums. This era also marked a change in church architecture. According to Jeanne Halgren Kilde's *When Church Becomes Theatre* (2002:20, cf 132, 216-220): "The story of the transformation of Protestant churches from the axial-plan Federalist church to the neomedieval auditorium church begins with the urban revivals of the Second Great Awakening. It was during these revivals, specifically those of Charles Grandison Finney in New York City, that religious space became significantly influenced by theatre space, perhaps for the first time in history."

During this era in which Protestant Christian leaders were experimenting with the largest-ever church buildings, and still larger temporary tabernacles, D. L. Moody both constructed and filled a permanent church facility that became the largest-attendance congregation of his day. It can be explained best by a confluence of his unique personality, his revivalist emphasis, the public response, the urbanization that brought so many people together in one geographic area, and the technology[22] that allowed such a large building to be constructed.

[22] The skyscraper era (10 stories and higher), which began in the 1870s, required a coming together of numerous technologies: wind bracing, fireproofing, heading, ventilation, plumbing, elevators, and lighting—all of which informed architects who designed the massive structures that housed megachurches. Landau, Sarah and Carl W. Condit. 1996. *Rise of the New York Skyscraper 1965-1913*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The church facility, built in 1876 and known as Chicago Avenue Church, "could hold 10,000 people."[23] It was founded and led by the famous evangelist D.L. Moody. The church was filled to overflowing many times before Moody's death in 1899 (Moody 1930:56). The church today, now known as Moody Church and moved in 1915 to a nearby location, has an auditorium seating capacity of 4,000, and its current facility currently draws some 3,000 people in weekly attendance.[24]

The first female-led megachurch developed near Azuza Street in Los Angeles, site of the 1906 revival that sparked the worldwide Pentecostal movement. Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944) was one of the most famous early Pentecostal preachers. In the 1920s, she became the first woman to preach on radio; and in Hollywood, California, she led three services a day seven days a week at the Angelus Temple, built in 1923. During the Great Depression, the church fed 30,000 people a week. The sanctuary seated 5,300 and was often filled for weekend services, making it one of the country's largest-attendance megachurches at that point in history.[25]

Nor were early American megachurches exclusively Caucasian. Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago was so popular that its African American membership in the 1930s and 1940s had to show up an hour early to find a seat. The church played an integral role in the development of gospel music. In 2006 fire destroyed the 115-year-old church facility. Thomas A. Dorsey—considered the father of gospel music—was Pilgrim's music director from 1932 until the late 1970s. His greatest hit, "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," was

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[23] See also http://www.moodychurch.org/information/history.html

[24] "Tradition and Technology: How the Two Go Hand-in-Hand at The Moody Church." *Vision Magazine*, February 2.1 (2004) 9. (www.vision-mag.com). See also www.moodychurch.org

[25] "Our Founder" (Official History Page of the Foursquare Church Denomination) Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 http://www.foursquare.org/landing_pages/8,3.html

popularized by Mahalia Jackson and became a favorite of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. It had been "the quintessential black megachurch," said the Rev. Hycel B. Taylor, the church's former pastor, in an interview with the Associated Press on January 7, 2006. "The congregation recently numbered about 300, but in its heyday in the 1940s it had about 10,000 members," said Taylor. (The building that burned was built as a synagogue between 1890 and 1891, but it housed the Pilgrim congregation from 1922 to 2006. The surrounding Bronzeville neighborhood was a vibrant hub for African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century.)

Yet until recent years, Protestant megachurches in the United States were by far the exception, emerging only rarely and led by evangelists or preachers of considerable renown. In fact, the word *megachurch*, still not in any major dictionary as of this writing, showed up on occasion in various news media beginning in the 1970s[26], according to a Lexus-Nexus search. The more commonly used term was "large church" as in 1988 Ph.D. dissertation by Richard Olson titled *The Largest Churches in the United States*. The entire dissertation makes no mention of the term *megachurch*. Another early term was "superchurch" as in "some churches will develop into 'superchurches'" (Jenson 1981:11-12)[27] In the 1981 primary text, *Complete Book of Church Growth*, co-authors Elmer Towns, David Seifert, and John N. Vaughan use the terms *large church* and *superlarge church* but not *megachurch*. The terms "large church" and "super church" were dominant

[26] The word *megachurch* seems to have been coined in several places independent of each other, similar to how Robert Putnam notes that "the term *social capital* itself turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties" (Putnam 2000:19).

[27] See also Vaughan 1984, page 261 for another example: "Several observable patterns surface as a result of the superchurches' survey." See also the subtitle of *Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church* (Joel Gregory. 1984. Fort Worth, TX: Summit Group). The book is about First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, which at the time was one of the largest-attendance churches in America.

for at least a decade as illustrated by Richard Ostling, long-time religion writer for *Time* magazine, who wrote a 1991 *Time* article titled "Superchurches and How They Grew" (*Time:* 62-63). It uses the term *superchurch*, but not *megachurch*.

Elmer Towns was initially the most widely known name in large-church research because of the "100 Largest Churches" and "100 Largest Sunday School" lists he compiled for a 1972 book (Towns 1972). In 1973 he began publishing the lists annually in *Sword of the Lord* (a religious newspaper) and *Christian Life* (a magazine). He compiled both tallies because during the 1960s and 1970s:

> . . . church attendance has been climbing faster than Sunday school attendance. The year 1971 seems to have been the tipping point. Before 1971 Sunday school attendance in America was generally larger than church worship attendance, especially among evangelical and fundamental churches. After that year, church attendance grew but Sunday school attendance did not keep up. . . . In 1984 the list of 100 churches reveals that Sunday school attendance is 24 percent smaller than church attendance. (Towns 1984: 44)

In 1984 Towns published what he claimed to be "the most exhaustive list that has ever been compiled" (Towns 1984:44), comprised of top-100 rosters for Sunday school attendance, worship service attendance, membership, conversions, and baptisms. But the word *megachurch* did not appear in his writings until the 1990s.[28] Megachurch researcher John Vaughan did use the word in 1986 in the opening issues of his *Church Growth Today* newsletter, and also in a 1990 self-published book that focused on the world's largest Baptist church—which was in Korea. Indeed, initial uses of the term *megachurch* tended to be associated with newly discovered churches in other countries that had grown to tens of thousands in attendance.

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[28] By far, Towns uses the term "largest church" or "biggest church." His 1991 book entitled *10 of Today's Most Innovative Churches* uses "high-visibility church" (page 10), but does not employ the word *megachurch*. Not until his 2000 title co-authored with Warren Bird, *Into the Future* (Revell), does he devote a major section on megachurches in one of his books.

Thus the word *megachurch* was quite rare on the American scene until 1991 when several major media put the concept under the spotlight. Its use seems to have started with a widely reprinted January 1 newspaper article by the Associated Press's dean of religion journalists, George W. Cornell. The article primarily includes quotes from Lyle Schaller (to be mentioned later in this paragraph). A few months later Gustav Niebuhr, staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, and later the religion reporter for *The New York Times*, wrote an article, "Mighty Fortresses: Megachurches Strive to Be All Things to All Parishioners." He included quotes from both Elmer Towns and Lyle Schaller about the term. In mid-1991 the evangelical stalwart *Christianity Today* did a cover story on church growth, which included an article with *megachurches* in its title (Sidey 1991). That same year a book by Carl George, which sold more than 100,000 copies, introduced the word *megachurch* in its opening chapter.[29] Likewise a 1992 book by Lyle Schaller, one of the most prolific and widely read church consultants, introduced the term in its opening chapter.[30] A more specialized book in 1993 by John Vaughan, which put *megachurch* in the title (arguably the first such book to do so), gave the word further visibility—*Megachurches and America's Cities: How Churches Grow*—as did the megachurch research center he ran through Southwest Baptist University, Bolivar, Missouri.

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[29] When introducing the term *megachurch,* George's wording implies that it is a new word for many people: "Christian strategists have pegged these assemblies with a new name taken from *mega-*, a prefix that means 'huge.' If a sports star makes a megabuck salary, and an arsenal of TNT explosives comprises a megaton, then a gigantic church is appropriately called a *megachurch*" (199:50).

[30] A search of Lyle Schaller's works shows his first use of megachurch is in his 1992 book, *The Seven-Day-A-Week Church*, which introduces the term in a opening chapter subsection called "New Player on the Block," and then he uses *megachurch* dozens of times in the book. His subsequent books, starting with his next publication—1993's *Center City Churches* use the term in the text, especially his 2000 title, *The Very Large Church*.

All these publishing efforts together added *megachurch* to many people's vocabulary, pushing aside and replacing terms like *superchurch*. Media attention grew further, with 2005 marking a year when it seemed like everyone knew the word megachurch. A Lexus-Nexus search of popular media indicates that far more megachurch-titled articles appeared in 2005 than in any previous year, including non-religious articles that used phrases like "as big as a megachurch." During that year, article titles such as "When Christmas Falls on Sunday, Megachurches Take the Day Off,"[31] made the front page of the *New York Times*, and were widely reprinted in other newspapers.

Meanwhile the scholarly community began to show interest as various research fields began to mention megachurches, although no journal article has used the term in an article title even to this day in *American Journal of Sociology, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Religion Research Review* or *Sociology of Religion*. However, the text of articles in all these publications has used the word *megachurch*.

In terms of how many actual megachurches have existed, as defined by an attendance of 2,000 or higher, there were roughly a half dozen such churches at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1960, 16 megachurches had a worship attendance over 2,000 with the highest attendance being 5,762 (Towns 1969:11).[32] In 1984 that

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[31] Goodstein, Laurie. "When Christmas Falls on Sunday, Megachurches Take the Day Off." *New York Times*. 9 Dec. 2005. 155 (53423), A1-A21.

[32] Predictably, many claim to be the founder of the megachurch movement. Robert Schuler, for example, said "I launched the megachurch movement through the Institute for Successful Church Leadership in 1970," referring to his annual pastors conference at the Garden Grove church. "There were no megachurches 32 years ago—we were the closest thing to it." But veteran author and consultant Lyle Schaller disagrees. "Historically, that's simply not true," he says. If the megachurch started anywhere, he argues, it was in Akron, Ohio, "where in the early 1960s there were at least three of the largest Protestant churches in America": Akron Baptist Temple, the Chapel and Rex Humbard's Cathedral of Tomorrow. In addition, downtown Dallas of the 1960s with First Baptist, First Presbyterian, First Methodist and First

number had grown to 70, with the highest attendance being 18,607—and of those 70, only 14 were 5,000 or higher in attendance. (Towns and Parkins, 1984:3-4.)[33] In 1990, that number had grown to 250, with the highest attendance being 20,000—and of those 250, only 43 were 5,000 or higher in attendance. (Draper 1993:361-362).

These megachurches were known locally and in select church circles, but they rarely hit national awareness. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s with the rapid increase of churches this large that they began to capture the attention of the public media, with the most media attention coming in the 1990s and 2000s. As *Time* magazine notes, "Since the 1990s, the ascendant mode of conservative American faith has been the megachurch."[34]

Christian "were among the largest churches in their denominations" and typically drew 2,000 or more attendance at worship, he said. Quotes come from Dart, John. "Schuller's Glass Art," *Christian Century*. 10 April 2002. 119 (8):24. It is also common to find, but inaccurate, public media claims that Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, Calif., pastored by best-selling author Rick Warren, is "America's original megachurch." This statement is patently false since Saddleback started in 1980 and did not cross the 2,000-attendance mark until sometime in the 1990s.

[33] In 1979 the 100 largest churches, by attendance were 2000 and higher, including these top ten, according to *The Complete Book of Church Growth (349-353)*:

13,000 First Baptist Church, Hammond, IN
8,000 Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA
7,000 Highland Park Baptist Church, Chattanooga, TN
6,000 First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX
6,000 The Chapel in University Park, Akron, OH
5,800 Garden Grove Community Church, Garden Grove, CA
5,610 Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN
5,200 First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, FL
5,000 Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Fort Lauderdale, FL
4,700 Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, TN

[34] Rita Healy, David Van Biema. "There's No Pulpit Like Home: Some Evangelicals Are Abandoning Megachurches for Minichurches--Based in Their Own Living Rooms." *Time*. 27 Feb. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1167737,00.html).

Today more than 1,200 churches have weekly attendances of 2,000 or more, around double the number reported just 5 years ago.[35] The top 100 today all exceed 5,000 in weekly attendance.[36] The top 30 exceed 10,000 worshipers weekly,[37] and the largest church regularly ranges between 30,000 and 40,000 in weekly attendance.[38] The implications of this growth affect communities on many levels. As congregations move into warehouses, movie theaters, high-school auditoriums, giant commercial spaces, and even nationally known sports complexes, their presence affects everything from traffic and noise pollution to increased levels of local revenue as worshipers shop and eat after church services. Finding land to accommodate church growth is not an easy matter. More communities oppose megachurch growth than welcome it, according to content analysis of all 2000-2005 *New York Times* stories about megachurches. During 2006, legislators in Florida and Arizona debated whether to impose zoning limitations on church sizes, such as limiting church facilities in rural locations to 250 seats, suburban locations to 500 seats, and urban locations to 750 seats.[39]

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[35] "News Release: The United States Has More Megachurches Than Previously Thought." distributed by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, April 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.hartsem.edu/events/news_mega.htm).

[36] "Top 100 Largest U.S. Churches." *Outreach* magazine. July/August 2005, 64-65. (www.outreachmagazine.com)

[37] "Top 100 Largest U.S. Churches." 64.

[38] Vaughan, John N. "Growth Report." *Church Report*. May 2006. Available online only. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.thechurchreport.com/content/view/1377/32).

[39] Alter, Alexandra. "Megachurches: Battle over Bigness." *Miami Herald*. 27 April 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/living/religion/14438116.htm). See also O'Connor, Lona. ""Churches Contend Palm Beach County Proposal to Limit Sizes Bullies Pulpits." *Palm Beach Post*. 24 April, 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.palmbeachpost.com/localnews/content/local_news/epaper/2006/04/24/c1a_megachurch_0424.html)

Megachurches can be found in urban, suburban, and even rural locations. According to a 2005 research project by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, "megachurches are concentrated around the largest cities, and within those cities most megachurches are located in the newer suburbs (45%) or the older suburbs (29%)."[40]

Megachurches are represented among multi-ethnic churches—in fact, disproportionately so[41], as well as among churches that are predominantly white, black, Asian and Hispanic. Between 35 percent and 40 percent of megachurches claim to be nondenominational and the balance find representation in every major denomination, although some disproportionately more so than others—the lion's share representing evangelical (including charismatic) theology.[42]

Today for the first time in U.S. history, the vast majority of people in the United States have the opportunity to attend a nearby megachurch or large church approaching megachurch size, and a growing number choose to do so. "Ten percent of U.S. congregations draw 50 percent of all worshipers each week. Another 40 percent of congregations have 39 percent of worshipers attending services that week. The remaining 50 percent of all congregations have only 11 percent of the total number of worshipers in a given week" (Woolever and Bruce 2002:22). Stated another way, sociologist Mark Chaves observes, "the largest 10 percent of congregations contain about half of all churchgoers" (Chaves 2004:18-19). The largest churches among that group—megachurches—account for only 0.4 percent of U.S. Protestant churches, but draw just

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[40] Thumma, Scott. "Megachurches Today 2005" available online only, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/faith_megachurches.html

[41] ibid.

[42] ibid.

shy of 10 percent of Protestant churchgoers on a given week, roughly 3 to 5 million people.[43] Thus if all U.S. megachurches together formed a denomination, it would be the fifth-largest Protestant body.[44]

Further, megachurches are growing in size and number while overall churchgoing population in the United States is declining, especially in mainline churches (Roozen and Hadaway 1994). According to Robert Putnam:

> The general pattern is clear: The 1960s witnessed a significant drop in reported weekly churchgoing--from roughly 48 percent in the late 1950s to roughly 41 percent in the early 1970s. Since then, it has stagnated or according to some surveys declined still further. Meanwhile, data from the General Social Survey show a modest decline in membership in all "church-related groups" over the last 20 years. It would seem, then, that net participation by Americans, both in religious services and in church-related groups, has declined modestly (by perhaps a sixth) since the 1960s. (Putnam 1995:69)

Yet megachurches are finding a receptive niche. "We have a market economy of religion," says Paul Harvey, American history professor at the University of Colorado who specializes in U.S. religious history. "Megachurches . . . show the instant adaptability of religious institutions. They reflect how Americans have morphed their religious institutions into the way they want them to be." According to Harvey, the growth of megachurches in recent decades has come about because of a common historic

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[43] Ted Olsen, "Go Figure." *Christianity Today*. 20 July 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/008/11.22.html)

[44] Calculation made by comparing the size of Protestant bodies as listed in Lindner 2005:365-377, which lists the following churches as having the largest inclusive memberships (in millions):

16.4	Southern Baptist Convention
8.3	United Methodist Church
5.5	Church of God in Christ
5.0	National Baptist Convention, USA

cycle in U.S. religion: faith institutions reinventing themselves to meet the consumer-like demands of worshippers.[45]

The emergence of megachurches has not come without criticism. Outsiders to the movement have raised many serious questions (detailed below). Insiders to the movement likewise raise concerns. Schaller's article, *Megachurch!* devotes more than half its content to criticisms:

> The rapid growth of the megachurches has aroused a host of critics. Most of their criticisms center on problems generally associated with size. The most repeated -- and misunderstood -- criticism is obvious: the megachurch is a more-expensive operation. In most very large congregations, annual expenditures run between $1,000 to $1,500 per person (average worship attendance). In a few, expenses run as high as $2,000 to $4,000 per person when the costs of a pay-as-you-go building program are included. By contrast, in most small churches, annual expenditures average out to between $400 and $600 per person, while in middle-size congregations that average usually is between $700 and $1,500. . . .
>
> Another problem for megachurches is that anonymity and complexity go up as size increases. Those who prefer an intimate and friendly atmosphere in which everyone can call every other member by name often find the megachurch overwhelming. Most megachurches try to compensate for this by structuring themselves as a congregation of congregations, classes, groups, cells, and fellowships. Most of the caring is carried out in and through these smaller clusters of people. Apparently the majority of the adults in megachurches are willing to accept anonymity and complexity in exchange for choices and quality. . . . (Schaller 1990:21-22)

For other internal critics, the crucial issue facing the megachurch is surrender to popular culture. In *Left Behind in a Megachurch World* (2006), evangelical seminary professor Ruth Tucker writes about small, "left-behind" churches quietly doing Christlike ministry. She has nothing good to say about megachurches. "Evangelicals have been swept away by culture—and megachurches are leading the way," she claims. She says megachurches follow the Wal-Mart model, betraying the gospel and sucking the life out

[45] Associated Press, "Megachurches Growing in Number and Size." 4 Feb. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/02/04/ap/national/mainD8FHVDR00.shtml.

of smaller churches. She asserts that "seeker-sensitive" and "purpose-driven" churches redefine the church by consumerist American values and "do not reflect the theological underpinnings of the Cross and of failure." Tucker emphasizes that "marketing is not a neutral formula that leaves substance untouched."

Another concern voiced by internal critics is the subject of accountability for megachurch pastors. Ben Witherington, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., says many megachurch leaders have little accountability to a denomination or their own members. That, he says, sets up a "cult of personality" that can lead to scandal, as in the 2006 case of Ted Haggard, whose involvement with a gay escort led to his highly publicized resignation as pastor of a Colorado megachurch and president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Witherington also sees megachurches as focused on entertaining what he calls couch potatoes for Jesus. "People can go there and just hide out," says Witherington, a frequent religious commentator on popular culture. "They don't really have to respond to any rigorous call to discipleship."[46]

Statement of the Research Problem

The rapid growth of megachurches, in both size and number, has surfaced several issues of interest to sociologists. “Megachurches have exploded,” Drucker says, “because they asked, ‘What is value?’ to a nonchurchgoer and came up with answers the older churches had neglected” (Drucker 1998:169-170). What value are megachurches supplying that other churches are not? “The greatest value to the thousands who now

[46] Smith, Peter. “Supersized Worship: Megachurches Hit Growth Spurt and Spin off Campuses across the Region” The Courier-Journal (Louisville, Kentucky). 26 Nov. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 http://www.courier-journal.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061126/NEWS01/611260399/1008.

throng the megachurches—both weekdays and Sundays—is a *spiritual experience* rather than a ritual [emphasis added]" (Drucker 1998:170).

Drucker's praise of megachurches seems to represent a minority view. Many academics raise questions about the quality of "spiritual experience" experienced in megachurches. Consider:

• Randall Balmer, professor of religion from Columbia University, describes megachurches as "consumerism run amok." He says large venues and auditorium-style presentations water down the message. "I don't care for them," he admits. "I'm not sure how any real community can be sustained in such a large setting. At the same time, a lot of people claim to have found spiritual sustenance in that type of setting. But is that the best use of resources? Is that how a church should be run? Is that what Jesus intended?"[47]

• Professor Alan Wolfe of Boston College likewise indicts megachurches for "dumbing down" the faith: "I think the whole megachurch phenomenon is premised upon the idea that we can't do anything with people unless we get them to church first, so the priority is to get them in there. But to get them in there, you downplay the Christian symbolism, you take the crosses off the church, you make the pews as comfortable as you possibly can, you put McDonald's franchises in the lobby. Sometimes you don't even know you're in church when you go to church, because the church doesn't look like a church."[48]

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[47] Frye, Cathy. "Houston Church Fills Former Rockets Arena." 31 July 2005. *San Antonio Express-News*. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA073105.1A.bigchurch.3908fbb.html).

[48] "Interview with Alan Wolfe" *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. 30 April 2004. Episode #735. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week735/interview.html).

• Lynn Mitchell, resident scholar of religion at the University of Houston, commented on the recent national trend is for a megachurch to rent such huge venues as stadiums, fairgrounds or civic centers to hold services for their high-attendance weekends of Christmas and Easter. The motivation, he notes, is to produce meetings that "attract seekers and young people" who like both the "anonymity and the spectacular productions" that a megachurch is capable of creating.[49]

• Renowned theologian Harvey Cox, professor at Harvard Divinity School, criticizes some megachurches for being "evangelical light." In an interview about a new church near Harvard, Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Cambridge, he commented on the entire Vineyard movement (which has a disproportionate number of megachurches): "The impression I have is that they package a kind of worship that is very attractive and not very demanding," he says.[50] "Vineyard churches don't push rigid rules or doctrinal requirements, which is part of what makes them appealing."[51]

• "The tragedy is that Christianity has become a yes-man for the culture," says Boston University's Stephen Prothero, chairman of the religion department at Boston University,

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[49] Vara, Richard. "Together for Easter" *Houston Chronicle*. 14 April 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/front/3793565.html)

[50] Tania Ralli, "A Church Takes Root in Unlikely Lefty Soil." *Boston Globe*. 4 Dec. 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2005/12/04/a_church_takes_root_in_unlikely_lefty_soil).

[51] ibid.

referring to “comfortable megachurches” like Joel Osteen's Lakewood and Rick Warren's Saddleback, with their “pumped-up day-care centers and high-tech amenities.”[52]

• Robert Wuthnow, a renowned sociologist of religion and public intellectual at Princeton University, suggests that in contemporary America, the idea of God has been molded to satisfy people’s needs: “God has, in a sense, become ‘subjectivized’ rather than existing as a metaphysical, transcendent, or omnipotent being. . . . God is relevant to contemporary Americans mainly because the sense of God’s presence is subjectively comforting; that is, religion solves personal problems rather than addressing broader questions” (Wuthnow 1988:123)

• The head of the World Council of Churches is concerned about the spread of megachurches, saying they could lead to a Christianity that is "two miles long and one inch deep." Samuel Kobia, the organization's General Secretary, says megachurches mostly run on a business model to make worshippers feel good and are shallow in their theology. “Megachurches simply want individuals to feel good about themselves,” he says. A megachurch "has no depth, in most cases, theologically speaking, and has no appeal for any commitment," he says. The Kenyan Methodist made these comments at the February 2006 WCC world assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil.[53] The 350 member denominations of the World Council of Churches included 34 U.S.-based church denominations at the time.

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[52] Biema, David Van., Chu, Jeff. “Does God Want You To Be Rich?” *Time*. 18 Sept. 168.12 (2006) 49 Pg.

[53] "Megachurches 'Shallow in Theology.'" *Herald Sun* [Melbourne, Australia]. 22 Feb. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 http://www.heraldsun.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5478,18234100%255E1702,00.html.

These attitudes toward megachurches are reflected in a *Time* magazine generalization that spirituality in megachurches represents a watered-down Christianity, describing "megacongregations as devotion lite, delivering plenty of entertainment but asking for little commitment"[54] and elsewhere describing megachurch worship services as "entertaining if sometimes undemanding."[55] Likewise *The Economist* implies that megachurches face insurmountable odds:

> [H]ow do you speak directly to individual parishioners when you have a church the size of a stadium? Some mega-churches have begun to see members drift away in search of more intimate organisations [sic]. And many mega-preachers worry that they are producing a flock who regard religion as nothing more than spectacle. So they have begun to adopt techniques that allow churches to be both big and small at once.[56]

One news article likewise summarizes many of the popular stereotypes, saying:

> Wealthy megachurches, derided as "religion-lite" and "Disney-Jesus," are becoming the scourge not just of the secular world but also the traditional church. … They are disparaged as narcissistic and corporate. … Megachurches regularly provide fodder for critics. (*Religion Today Summaries*, February 24, 2006)[57]

But are these criticisms really valid? If yes, why? If no, why not? In particular, can megachurches be fairly characterized as "religion lite"? This is the research problem to be addressed in this dissertation.

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[54] *Time* magazine. 7 Feb. 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (www.time.com/time/covers/1101050207/photoessay/12.html).

[55] Healy, Biema. 2006. "There's No Pulpit Like Home."

[56] "Jesus, CEO: America's Most Successful Churches Are Modelling Themselves on Businesses." *The Economist*. 20 Dec, 2005. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.economist.com/world/na/displaystory.cfm?story_id=5323597&no_na_tran=1).

[57] *Religion Today Summaries*. 24 Feb. 2006, compiled and edited by Crosswalk Editorial Staff. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.crosswalk.com/news/religiontoday/1380332.html#lite).

Interestingly, none of the social critics cited above have done any published research on megachurches. Many of their statements, as several of the quotes themselves evidence, are based on personal observations, perhaps reinforced by public stereotype. Hence the need for rigorous fresh research and analysis embodied in this dissertation.

Importance of the Problem

Timely. Church historian Bill Leonard has said that megachurches are "setting the agenda for every religious community in the country" (Niebuhr 1995). Indeed, the emergence of the U.S. Protestant megachurch is reshaping the face of today's church. With so much realignment toward larger churches, it is essential to ask what is happening to the typical churchgoer. Is the movement more toward someone becoming an anonymous spectator or a more active, more committed participant? Is this person more likely or less likely to evidence spiritual commitment and growth in a megachurch than in a non-megachurch? As a church grows bigger, are the people of that church more likely or less likely to become involved in the common good of the community?

Social implications. As churches grow into megachurch status, they also become more influential. According to Dave Travis, executive vice president of an organization that networks megachurches together, "All megachurches have a high degree of influence in their local communities. In some suburbs, it would take 30 smaller churches to make one megachurch. The sheer number of people they touch and influence is huge."[58] One

[58] Useem, Andrea. "Megachurch Leadership: An Interview with Leadership Network's Dave Travis," *Wharton Leadership Digest*. February 10.5 (2006). Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://leadership.wharton.upenn.edu). The stated mission of Leadership Network, www.leadnet.org, is "to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact" which regularly matches them with innovative and larger churches, the vast majority of whom are megachurches.

newspaper article pointed out that the megachurch in its town has far more employees than does the entire town's municipal government. From traffic issues to zoning challenges, megachurches make many negative headlines in their communities. But they also have considerable leverage for social good. In the wake of the 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Rita, large churches became hubs for dispensing volunteer labor, feeding displaced persons, helping with resettlement, and otherwise contributing significantly to the common good. In other contexts, large churches have been the only volunteer social organizations large enough to adopt blocks and even entire sections of an under-resourced city, providing everything from after-school tutoring to free parenting classes to refurbishment of a community center. For example, the largest-attendance Methodist church in the country, Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston, has sponsored the largest affordable housing effort launched by an American nonprofit, a $173 million commitment.[59] Further, many larger megachurches position themselves as teaching churches, hosting seminars and authoring books designed to help other churches find ministry breakthroughs. Willow Creek Community Church (www.WillowCreek.org) in greater Chicago, for example, annually trains more than 200,000 pastors and lay leaders from other churches. The increasing influence of megachurches over other churches is perhaps also aided by the "bigness means success" and "bigger is better" values prevalent within American culture.

Political implications. It takes little political savvy to view megachurches as places of potential political influence. As Mark Chaves comments, "Since one 2,000-person church is easier to mobilize for social or political action than ten 200-person

[59] "Neighborhood Mission" *Houston Chronicle* Editorial. 26 April 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/editorial/3822746.html).

churches, a politician is more likely to address one 2,000-person church than ten 200-person churches, and the pastor of one 2,000-person church probably gets an appointment with the mayor more easily than any of the ten pastors of the ten 200-person churches" (2006:22). Indeed some megachurches have been centers of political activism, starting with one of the earliest American megachurches, Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., which Henry Ward Beecher pastored from 1847 until his death in 1887. Both his sermons and most congregants were firmly allied with the Republican Party (2006 Applegate: 464, 523-524).

However, while megachurches have been documented to be predominantly conservative politically (2005 Thumma) they are largely inactive politically. As Jeffery L. Sheler, longtime religion editor at *U.S. News & World Report*, explains in an interview about his 2006 book *Believers: A Journey into Evangelical America*: "Someone who votes every two years is not a political activist. That's just being a good citizen. Evangelicals vote, and they vote predominantly Republican. But that's not volunteering in campaigns or sending money to candidates."[60] Further, in common stereotype, Sheler says megachurches "are perceived to be motivated by a primarily political agenda, which is not the case."[61]

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[60] Brown, Sarah Price. "Evangelicals: Your Next-Door Neighbor, An Interview with Jeffery L. Sheler." *Dallas Morning News*, 2 Dec. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/religion/stories/DN-Q&ASheler_02rel.ART.State.Edition1.3eb98d0.html).

[61] *ibid*. For the political involvement levels of Protestant churches in general, see http://www.ellisonresearch.com/releases/20060905.htm and for political involvement of Protestant megachurches in particular see http://hirr.hartsem.edu/org/megastoday2005detaileddata.pdf (Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006).
It contains only one relevant question: C4. Which label is the closest description of the political outlook of the majority of your congregation's regularly participating adults (check one only):
51% predominantly conservative
33% somewhat on the conservative side
11% right in the middle

Yet some level of political pull seems unavoidable as marketers of all stripes target megachurches. As a publication of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania notes:

> Advertising has begun to seep into churches, and the phenomenon shows no signs of slowing down, say academic, religious and marketing experts. Among the wave of early adopters: the Republican Party, which successfully sold its platform to church-goers in the 2000 and 2004 elections; Hollywood, which discovered the economic power of faith when Mel Gibson's church-marketed film "The Passion of the Christ" became a blockbuster; and publishing, with Rick Warren's best-selling *The Purpose-Driven Life*, heavily marketed by a Christian publishing house.
>
> These products -- a conservative political agenda, a film about Jesus and an evangelical book -- all had at least some religious connection to Christian consumers.

Describing megachurches as "consumer aggregators," Wharton marketing professor Patti Williams notes that megachurches offer a particularly tantalizing opportunity for those intent on network or "word-of-mouth" marketing, a strategy that capitalizes on social relationships to spread product information and influence purchasing. "Megachurch members are drawn together by a strong common bond. Networks that exist naturally facilitate word-of-mouth marketing, because people tend to share information with those they are close to," she says.[62]

Another prominent example is Chrysler's 2006 effort to market its vehicles at twelve U.S. megachurches in conjunction with a gospel concert tour by singer Patti LaBelle. Two or three days before each of the concerts, Chrysler hosted one-day vehicle

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4% somewhat on the liberal side
2% predominantly liberal

[62] "Product Placement in the Pews? Microtargeting Meets Megachurches." *Knowledge@Wharton.* 15 Nov. 2006. http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1605.

ride-and-drives at the churches. Participants received concert tickets. The venues included Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal and nondenominational megachurches.[63]

Research gap. The rapid rise and influence of megachurches is also important to research from an academic perspective. The interpretive theories proposed by this dissertation will add knowledge to a field in which hard research is desperately needed. As megachurch researcher Scott Thumma affirms in the cover story featured in *2003 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, "Much more research needs to be undertaken on this very prominent, but understudied, segment of American religion" (Lindner 2003:18).

Publishing implications. Today one out of every ten Protestant churchgoers worships in a megachurch, and yet there are only 14 books *directly and entirely* about megachurches, according to a September 2006 search of titles in the U.S. Library of Congress catalog. None are published by an academic press, most are anecdotal in nature, and many are outdated. (In fact, the most comprehensive academic bibliography available on the Internet is one this writer assisted in the compilation. It's sponsored by Connecticut's Hartford Institute for Religion Research, www.hartfordinstitute.org/org/megachurchesBibliography.html). Well-done, relevant research and interpretation on megachurches has huge potential for academic publication, either by this writer or others.

The research question of this dissertation—to what extent do megachurches foster spectator religion, as compared to smaller churches?—is both timely and crucial. It

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[63] Connelly, Mary. "Preaching to the Choir: Chrysler to market vehicles at churches, gospel concerts." *AutoWeek*, 5 Oct. 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.autoweek.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061006/FREE/61005002/1041/PROMOBLOG01 See also http://www.caranddriver.com/dailyautoinsider/11919/chrysler-looks-heavenward-for-sales.html).

relates to a practical problem. It relates to an influential population. It identifies a theoretical research gap. It invites discussion of important concepts. It has many implications for the social life of millions of American churchgoers.

The following comment comes from Saddleback Church's Rick Warren, a megachurch pastor much in the news for his campaigns to minister to AIDS victims in Africa and for his best-selling *Purpose-Driven Life* book (with circulation over 30 million, it's "the best-selling hardcover non-fiction book in U.S. history"[64]). Warren illustrates that there are differing points of view on the research question of this dissertation. As he told a Pew Forum-sponsored conference involving many of the nation's leading journalists:

> Another myth is that megachurches require little or no commitment. What I mean by that is that people think if you're big, you must be shallow. And I would just say to that—the reality is that most members of typical churches could not join Saddleback because they would not be willing to meet the requirements. We have very strong standards for requirements. They're pretty tough, and we're not interested in the big membership; we're interested in turning an audience into an army and mobilizing it for good.[65]

Indeed, Saddleback does hold a comparatively high standard of membership. While Saddleback warmly welcomes everyone to its services, from skeptic to seeker, and invites them to attend as often as desired at no cost or obligation, it sets out these requirements for those who wish to become official members: a faith commitment to Jesus Christ, baptism, and a covenant to be a regular participant in worship and part of a small group. These matters are explained in a four-session class covering salvation,

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[64] In March 2005, *Publishers Weekly* said the 24 million copies in print at the time had made it the best-selling hardcover non-fiction book in U.S. history, and noted that it has also been translated into 309 languages.

[65] "Myths of the Modern Megachurch." Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Event Transcript, Monday, 23 May 2005. Rick Warren, David Brooks, Michael Cromartie. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=80).

statements, strategy and structure ("what we believe, how we operate, and the history of our church)."[66] Other megachurches have similar standards which are higher than the widespread Protestant membership norm of merely attending a one-session membership class. Willow Creek, for example, has popularized what they call the "five G's" as a membership standard: evidence of receiving God's **g**race through salvation, **g**rowing in faith by active participation, joining a small **g**roup to develop as a disciple, developing **g**ood stewardship by putting God first in one's finances, and putting one's spiritual **g**ifts to work in ministry to others.[67]

Dissertation Overview

The question of whether megachurches encourage spectator religion can be addressed from many perspectives. The approach of this dissertation will be: first, the proposal of an answer (namely that the data do not support the view of megachurches as spectator religion); secondly, the presentation of social theory that might support that answer; and third, the testing of the social theory presented through quantitative analysis supported by qualitative interviews. The outcome, if the hypotheses are well constructed, if they are reliably and validly tested, and then if the findings are cogently presented, might contribute to the increase of knowledge and ultimately to the sway of public opinion.

Succeeding chapters in this study will clarify the question to be asked and elucidate the means by which the posed question can be answered. The overall approach is that of a deductive research project involving analysis of secondary data.

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[66] See http://www.saddlebackfamily.com/membership

[67] See www.willowcreek.org and then search for "frequently asked questions about membership"

Chapter Two (the next chapter) will cover a review of the relevant knowledge, research, and theory associated with understanding participation levels in megachurches. The discussion will lead to the development of hypotheses designed to test the expected relationship between the selected concepts. The progression in the chapter will be: theoretical framework, theoretical convergence, review and evaluation of past research on topic, development of the hypotheses, and expectations for the findings.

Chapter Three will describe in detail the methodology used to address the research question. It will present research design, instrumentation, and administration of data collection and analysis. A discussion of the methods of achieving validity and reliability will also include comments on the general limitations of the study.

Chapter Four will present the findings and implications of the quantitative portions of the study. Chapter Five will present the findings and implications of the qualitative portions of the study.

Chapter Six will outline the major conclusions and recommendations to come from this study, and the relationship of the knowledge gained to literature, theory, and practice.

A list of references will catalog all works cited, thereby covering all significant writings in the field.

An appendix will include a copy of the FACT2000 survey used for quantitative analysis. A second appendix will deal with human subjects protocol, specifically the Institutional Review Board process followed for this the qualitative portions of this research. A third appendix will list the specific questions asked during the qualitative interviews. A fourth appendix will present a pictorial overview of some of the most

prominent and influential megachurches. A fifth appendix will excerpt from some of the earliest-published lists of megachurches.

A vita and abstract will be added to the very end of this document.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORY

The study of sociology has deep roots in the study of religion. Most of the leading classic sociologists were fascinated with religion and indeed most came from strongly religious homes. Many sought to understand and to explain—or explain away—the phenomena of religious belief and religious institutions.

August Comte (1798-1857), a French thinker who coined the term *sociology*, is regarded as the first sociologist and grandparent of sociology. He initially argued that science would replace religion, but toward the end of his life said religion is inevitable. Emile Durkheim (1857-1917), one of the originators of modern sociology, viewed religion as something that holds society together. Karl Marx (1818-1883), an immensely influential German philosopher and political economist most famous for his analysis of history in terms of class struggles, saw religion, defined as any belief in a transcendent realm, as the product of social alienation. Max Weber (1864-1920), a German political economist, sociologist, and comparative religionist, and credited by many as being the first sociologist of religion, wrote such influential and enduring texts as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), an Austrian neurologist and the founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychology, compared religion to a childhood neurosis. He argued that religious ideas sprang from the same need as all other

achievements of culture: from the necessity for defending itself from the crushing supremacy of nature.

Social Explanations

From this diverse foundational stream of social theory about religion have developed the specialized fields this study will address: social network theory, rational choice theory, and congregational studies. Each of these three areas will be described separately, each including conceptual links from the field of sociology's early seminal writers to the present.

Each discussion in this chapter will form a theoretical foundation for the research question of whether megachurches encourage spectator religion. Thus the focus of this chapter will bypass explanations that have been advanced for the emergence and growth of megachurches. Such theories cover a wide variety of ideas such as the decline of denominational loyalty (Schaller 1995:56), the willingness of people to commute many miles to attend a high-quality church, megachurches' willingness to respond to the needs of the religious "market," and the trend in the greater culture toward larger institutions that provide one-stop "shopping" (Schaller 1990:20-21). Much cheerleading of megachurch development has also come from the evangelical church growth movement which emphasizes evangelism and visionary pastoral leadership as the primary way for churches and denominations to grow numerically (George 1991, 1993). A more academic approach to the issue of how churches grow occurred 1976-1978. During those years a group of social scientists, historians, theologians, and denominational statisticians met at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research to examine the significant membership

decline in most of the mainline denominations. Participants developed a typology of factors to use in studying the complex issue of church growth and decline (Hoge and Roozen 1979).

Rather, this chapter will assume the existence of megachurches and will focus on the issues surrounding the idea of *participation in a megachurch*: social theories that might explain how those who attend a worship service at a megachurch move toward or away from a greater level of participation. It will also profile the handful of congregational studies that have been done which included megachurches.

Social Network Theory

Social network theory suggests that the attributes of individuals are less important than their relationships and ties with other actors within the network. A social network is a social structure made of nodes—often defined as individuals. It indicates the ways in which they are connected through various social familiarities ranging from casual acquaintance to close familial bonds. The term was first coined in 1954 by J. A. Barnes in a study of class and committees in a Norwegian island church parish.

Robert D. Putnam, political-science professor at Harvard University, who has directed interviews with nearly 500,000 people over the past 25 years, has concluded that Americans are increasingly distancing themselves from each other. The fabric of our social connections has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and our communities. According to Putnam, people today know their neighbors less, socialize with friends less often and even grow distant from their immediate families.

In popular terms they're cocooning, they 're iPodding, and they're bowling alone (league bowling has been replaced by individual bowling). Putnam's *Bowling Alone* presents the demise of bowling leagues as symbolic of the rise in social fragmentation. The book claims a decline of generalized reciprocity—"the practice of helping others with no expectation of gain" (2000:504). As a result, "Americans today feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected [because] . . . the bonds of our communities have withered" (2000:402). The conclusion of the book is that "Americans need to reconnect with one another" (2000:28).

Churches are not exempt from this precipitous decline in community life over the last half of the twentieth century, according to Putnam. "As the twenty-first century opens, Americans are going to church less often than we did three or four decades ago, and the churches we go to are less engaged with the wider community. Trends in religious life reinforce rather than counterbalance the ominous plunge in social connectedness in the secular community" (2000:79).

Putnam introduced the concept of *social capital* as a way of understanding the kind of bonds that develop—or disappear—in various social settings. The origins of Putnam's concept of social capital lie in the nineteenth-century classics of sociology, particularly Emile Durkheim's landmark book *Suicide,* published in 1897. Defining the concept scholars today call social capital as a measure of people's participation in their community, Durkheim linked the idea of social capital to health. For Durkheim, increasing suicide rates were a marker for decreasing social capital.

As Putnam defines social capital*,* it refers to "social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness. The central insight of this approach is

that social networks have real value both for the people in those networks . . . as well as for bystanders" (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:2). Putnam writes:

> The benefits of social capital spill beyond the people immediately involved in the network and can be used for many other purposes. The more neighbors who know one another by name, the fewer crimes a neighborhood as a whole will suffer. A child born in a state whose residents volunteer, vote, and spend time with friends is less likely to be born underweight, less likely to drop out of school, and less likely to kill or be killed than the same child—no richer or poorer—born in another state whose residents do not. Society as a whole benefits enormously from the social ties forged by those who choose connective strategies in pursuit of their particular goals. (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:269)

Putnam developed his idea further by distinguishing between bridging (or inclusive) capital and bonding (or exclusive) capital. Both bonding and bridging social networks have their uses. "Bonding social capital is a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40," he explained (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:2), referring to a popular brand of commercial lubricant. Restated, bonded capital is the strength *within* a social segment of society, whereas bridging capital is the strength *between* the segments of society.

If someone becomes ill, the people who bring the chicken soup are likely to represent a bonding social capital. Bonding capital is also measured by the number of neighbors who know each other by name, and by how many vote, volunteer, or shovel a neighbor's walk. It is a value deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as Judges 1:3, "Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, 'Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." It is also in the Golden Rule of Jesus, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

However, a society built with *only* bonding social capital will "look like Belfast or Bosnia—segregated into mutually hostile camps" (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:3). "Bonding social capital is good for undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity. . . . Bridging networks, by contrast, are better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion," he says (Putnam 2000:22). As Xavier de Souza Briggs puts it, bonding social capital is good for "getting by" but bridging social capital is crucial for "getting ahead" (quoted in Putnam 2000:23).

The challenge is that "bridging social capital is harder to create than bonding social capital—after all, birds of a feather flock together" (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:3). A church, as a community of belonging, is an excellent context for developing bridging capital. Churches can provide what Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place* describes as a "third place"—"a place that is neither work nor home, where people can spend time together" (Oldenburg 1997:2). Putnam writes, "Historically, the black church has been the most bounteous treasure-house of social capital for African Americans" (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:7). He says the same of other types of churches: "Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America" (Putnam 2000:66). He also notes that half of all associational memberships in America are church-related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteer efforts occurs in a religious context. "So how involved we are in religion today matters a lot for America's social capital" (Putnam 2000:66).

Yet for the Baby Boomer generation born 1946-1964, "institutionalized religion is less central to their lives than it was to their parents' lives" (Putnam 2000:74). Their

religion, like their bowling, is now focused more individually than in groups. And "privatized religion … embodies less social capital" (Putnam 2000:74).

Putnam's argument is not without its holes, as his critics have pointed out. Most critics imply that his line of thinking confuses cause and effect and that it neglects obvious alternative explanations. Two economists, Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn, used much the same measures as Putnam, supplementing with improved data sources, and concluded that the decline of social capital in American life has been dramatically overstated.[68] In a biting review, Nicholas Lemann[69] argues that Putnam's results are an artifact of the kinds of organizations he observes: Putnam is right that participation has fallen off in old-style organizations like Elks Lodges, but new-style organizations continue to come on the scene, such as youth soccer leagues for children. Also, people may not be bowling alone as much as we used to. A 2006 *New York Times* article, "Making Varsity, With a Ball That Has Holes in It,"[70] claimed that the fastest growing high school varsity sport today is bowling.

Strong and Weak Ties. Even with its weaknesses, Putnam's notions of bonding social capital and bridging social capital have been applied by other scholars to a wide variety of contexts. Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter, for example, has pointed out that when seeking jobs, "weak" ties that link a person to distant acquaintances who move in different circles are actually more valuable than the "strong" ties that link one to

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[68] Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn. "Understanding the Decline in Social Capital, 1952-1998." Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 8295, 2001.

[69] Nicholas Lemann. "Kicking in Groups." *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1996; also available online at www.theatlanticmonthly.com/issues/96apr/kicking/kicking.htm.

[70] 9 Feb. 2006, page A20.

relatives and intimate friends. For Granovetter, weak ties are akin to Putnam's bridging social capital and strong ties are similar to bonding social capital.

Granovetter's core argument "asserts that our acquaintances (weak ties) are less likely to be socially involved with one another than are our close friends (strong ties)" (Granovetter 1983:201). Thus any given person plus his or her acquaintances comprise a low-density network; that same individual plus his or her close friends make a densely knit network. In the former, many potential relational lines are absent, and in the latter many of the possible lines are already present.

The overall social structure suggested by this argument is one of densely-knit clusters of people who know each other well, who are connected to other densely-knit clusters by weak ties, which "become not merely a trivial acquaintance but rather a crucial bridge between any two densely knit clumps of close friends" (Granovetter 1983:202). Weak ties thus "provide people with access to information and resources available in their own social circle" (Granovetter 1983:209). A social system lacking in weak ties will be fragmented and incoherent. Weak ties, according to theorist Peter Blau, "establish the intergroup connections on which macrosocial integration rests" (Blau 1974:623).

The more weak ties, the fewer cliques are present, the higher the morale, and the greater efficiency of social organization (Granovetter 1983:223). By contrast, those individuals who have comparatively few weak ties are unlikely to mobilize effectively for collective action within their communities.

Some people today prefer having more weak ties than strong ties. Richard Florida, an economics professor who wrote *Rise of the Creative Class*, says, "where strong ties

among people were once important, weak ties are now more effective. . . . People want diversity, low entry barriers and the ability to be themselves. This is also what the statistics seem to bear out" (Florida 2002:269). He says of focus groups he has convened, "Sure, they wanted community" but they also desired "quasi-anonymity. In terms of sociology, these people prefer weak ties to strong" (Florida 2002:269).

Other scholars have written on the concept of strong and weak ties without using the terms. George Simmel (1955) and such others as Elizabeth Bott (1957) have shown that friendship ties are important to the social life of the individual. Such relationships may involve a relative, a close friend, a neighbor, or a co-worker with whom the individual has had significant interaction. Richard H. White (1981) developed a religious influence model indicating that religious commitment develops primarily through group context. Kevin Welch (1981) developed it further to purport that the more one is integrated into a religious group via friendship ties, and the greater the intensity of those ties, the greater the individual's commitment to the norms of the group.

Ray Dalton found that friends in the church are not a significant source of initial attraction but the number of friends and the number of potential interactions do contribute to the continuing attraction to the megachurch (Dalton:138). More specifically, the quality of friends made since the person began attending is the strongest predictor of time spent in weekly church activities and the second-strongest predictor of satisfaction. He concluded that "it is very important that the megachurch provide opportunities for making friends and interacting with others in the context of the church" (Dalton:152).

Granovetter's arguments about the role of strong and weak ties can readily be applied to megachurches, especially as he makes statements that the larger the organization, the greater the influence of weak ties (Granovetter 1983:220).

Toward a Hypothesis. From Granovetter's theory, some might conclude that an abundance of weak ties leads to shallow relationships—or even no relationships—in a church. This interpretation would be consistent with critics who describe megachurches as gatherings marked by anonymity and non-commitment.

Other interpretations are possible, however. This dissertation proposes the perspective that in larger organizations commitment is influenced heavily by the subgroups within it, and by the ties developed through those groups. In popular terms, an abundance of weak ties become a bridge by which people become connected in a meaningful smaller group in which they, in turn, develop new strong ties. That is, weak ties are essential for bringing the large group (worshipers) into subunits (smaller groups).

This is exactly Robert Putnam's point in his ethnography about Saddleback Church, one of the largest of today's megachurches (pictured in Appendix D). Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback, says, "People are not looking for a friendly *church* as much as they are looking for *friends*" (Warren 1995:312). He also says, "The average church member knows 67 people in the congregation, whether the church has 200 or 2,000 attending. A member does not have to know everyone in the church in order to feel like it's their church, but he or she does have to know *some* people" (Warren 1995:324, emphasis his).

Putnam states the same issue in sociological terms:

> The larger challenge Saddleback and other megachurches face—and the key social-capital issue—is how to turn the "crowd" into a "congregation," to use

> Saddleback terms for distinguishing between the visitors, the consumers of comfort and entertainment, and the committed members of the church community. The answer is small groups. (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:126)

Lyle Schaller, dean of American church consultants, who has written two books on the phenomenon of very large churches, agrees: "Most very large congregations affirm the fact that they are a congregation of congregations, of choirs, circles, cells, classes, fellowships, groups, and organizations or a congregation of communities" (Schaller 2000:214).

According to Putnam, this is what happens at Saddleback, and intentionally so:

> The structures of small-group education and spiritual development at Saddleback are designed to help people move from "the crowd" of weekend attenders to "the congregation" of those who are actual members of the church to "the committed," who are committed to spiritual maturity, to "the core" of those active in lay ministry. It is a progression, as church staff also say, from "attendees to army" (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:132).

This framework, as Putnam notes, is theologically driven by the biblical imperative to make disciples of all the world (Matthew 28:19-20 and elsewhere). "Behind all the market research and pop music, the videos and contemporary language, and the care and feeding of small groups," says Putnam, "evangelism is, finally, the engine that drives the very large church" (Putnam and Feldstein 2003:135).

Thus social network theory (also called social network analysis) can be used to suggest that people find in megachurches a desirable relational network, one that consists of both strong ties and weak ties. The presence of subgroups within the church, and in particular the opportunities to bridge into those groups, provide the function of weak links that lead to new strong links. The greater the size of the overall church, the more weak-link opportunities to participate, it would seem.

Thus in certain ways, size is a predictor of participation. Stated in testable format, the theoretical prediction is that there will be a statistically significant positive relationship between a church's size and the proportional number of opportunities to participate outside of the worship service. This theory is in contradiction to social critics who say that megachurches are places where people stay anonymous and fail to establish meaningful relationships.

Rational Choice Theory

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) was both a social scientist and theologian. His 1912 book, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches,* offered an analysis of early Protestantism. It proposed that Christianity has its four main organizational forms embodied in types: church (institution), denomination (national but less than universal), sect (voluntary society composed of believers bound to each other), and mysticism (purely personal and inner experience). Troeltsch's use of ideal-type methodology had been previously pioneered by Max Weber, who popularized such distinctions as *zweckrational* (rational means to rational ends), *wertrational* (rational means to "arational" ends), *affektual* (guided by emotion) and *traditional* (guided by custom or habit), and by Ferdinand Toennies, who popularized such distinctions as *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society).

H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), one of America's most influential Protestant theologians and a student of the social sciences, authored his first book in 1929, and it is widely read to this day. Named *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, it tried to explain why Protestant Christianity was fractured into so many competing

denominations. Niebuhr's basic idea, drawn from Troeltsch and to a lesser degree Weber, is that *churches* are religious bodies in a relatively low state of tension with their environments. *Sects* are religious bodies in a relatively high state of tension with their environments.

Niebuhr gave theoretical life to the terms *sect* and *church* by linking them in a process. His explanation of the social sources of denominationalism was that churches and sects differ greatly in their ability to satisfy human need: churches serve the segment of the market with less need for a strict and otherworldly faith; sects serve the segment seeking those features. Niebuhr noted that the sect-church process involves new religious bodies nearly always beginning as sects. If they achieve success in attracting a substantial following, they will, over time, almost inevitably be gradually transformed into churches, moving from high tension with the environment toward increasingly lower levels of tension. This situation creates a discontent by some who complain that the group is abandoning its original positions and practices. A split occurs, with the faction desiring a return to higher tension leaving to found a new sect. Over time the same thing occurs again, resulting in an endless cycle of sect formation, transformation, schism, and rebirth. "As generation succeeds generation, the isolation of the [sect] from the world becomes more difficult," he wrote (Niebuhr 1929:20). Niebuhr also noted that sects arise to satisfy the needs of those less fortunate in pursuit of the world's goods: "In Protestant history the sect has ever been the child of an outcast minority, taking its rise in the religious revolts of the poor" (Niebuhr 1929:19).

Niebuhr was a highly visible social scientist commenting on the relationship between the small fellowships and high membership demands of Protestant sects, but he

was certainly not the only one, nor the first. Prior to Niebuhr, Adam Smith (1723-1790) reported that in little religious sects, the morals of common people are almost always remarkably regular and orderly. Weber (1946:316) argued that "in principle, only relatively small congregations" can enforce strict standards for membership. Troeltsch wrote that because the sects "aspire after personal inward perfection, and they aim at direct personal fellowship between the members of each group. . . . they are forced to organize themselves in small groups" (Troeltsch 1911,I:331).

Another high-visibility theory book is *A Theory of Religion* (1987) by Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge. As a seminal work with 344 propositions, it contributes to church-sect theory by offering a process model for how sects came to break away from churches, describing how the increased secularization through accommodation with society will lead people to leave a church and form a new religious body. In addition, impetus was given to "shifting the scope of church-sect theory from religious organizations per se to whole societies" (1985:139f). This in turn led to a logical next development: the religious economies—or rational choice—approach to the scientific study of religion. The book's foreword, written by sociologist Jeffrey K. Hadden, sums up the theory: "Religious economies consist of firms, products, consumers, market share and penetration, competition, regulated and unregulated economies, monopolies, and so on. Anchored in rational choice, participation in religion is a voluntary activity. Religious organizations compete for members, albeit under different conditions in different cultures and historical periods" (Stark and Bainbridge 1987:7).

While the concepts behind rational choice theory can be traced back to Adam Smith, particularly his essay *On the Wealth of Nations* (1776), and even before that to the

writing of David Hume (1711-1776) on public goods vs. national goods, the construct did not begin to emerge as a field until the 1960s, as U.S. sociologists George C. Homans and Peter Blau popularized rational choice theory in the social sciences in such writings as Blau's *Formal Organizations* (1962) and Homans' *The Nature of Social Science* (1967). Likewise Gary S. Becker applied methods of economics to aspects of human behavior previously considered the domain of sociology and demography. *In Human Capital (*1964) and *A Treatise on the Family* (1981), he advanced the theory that rational economic choices, based on self-interest, govern most human activities, even apparently non-economic activities such as the formation of families.

It was Becker, an economist, who introduced the term *rational choice theory*, but since the 1970s, rational choice theory has broadened to include psychologists, sociologists, game theorists, and students of collective action and of public choice--such as Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). In 1989, the rational choice community launched a scientific journal, *Rationality and Society*. James S. Coleman's *The Foundations of Social Theory* (1990) represented a major step in the further development of the rational choice paradigm for the social sciences.

Rational choice theory (sometimes called supply side theory or marketplace theory) is therefore a way of looking at deliberations between a number of potential courses of action, in which "rationality" of one form or another is used either to decide which course of action would be the best to take, or to predict which course of action actually will be taken. The application of this perspective ranges from models for human behavior to models of such potentially rational entities as corporations or nation-states.

All variations subscribe to a methodological individualism in which “macroproblems” are seen to be solved at the level of individuals acting purposively.

Thus rational choice theory attempts to provide a deductive and comprehensive theory on how religious people act purposively. Accordingly, people seek rewards and try to acquire them at low costs. As individuals choose the most efficient means toward the attainment of their goals, they make a rational trade-off between costs and profits. Costs and rewards are both material and immaterial, and also are personal and situational. Some rewards are more scarce than others, and some seem to be attainable only in the distant future or in an "other world," such as life eternal. As a result, substitutes or compensators have been invented for these otherworldly rewards, and they are treated as if they were rewards.

According to Stark, the concept of compensators is key to the theory of religion (thus he ironically aligns himself with a major component of Freud's debunking of religion). A compensator is the promise of a future reward that cannot be tested by empirical means. A major proposition is that when humans cannot achieve a desired reward, they will accept a compensator instead, and will even treat the compensator as if it were a tangible reward.

Stark, presuming the religious mind is rational, says that "it makes sense to model religion as the behavior of rational, well-informed actors who choose to 'consume' secular commodities" (1994:2). Thus the choice of religious affiliation is made in a rational way, with the potential member weighing costs and benefits of each possible choice before choosing the one that maximizes rewards, although not necessarily the one that minimizes costs. “The more individuals sacrifice on behalf of their religion, the more

benefits they receive in return" (Finke and Stark 1992:252). As such, rational choice theory challenges the conventional thought that the religious mind is either irrational or, at least, non-rational.

A second postulate in the rational choice theory of religious commitment says that religion is a collectively produced commodity. Yes, a person can sing a hymn alone and enjoy it, but the experience feels far short of singing along with others. More important, a person's confidence in the promises of religion—such as eternal afterlife in God's presence—represents an emotional and psychic reward of religion that increases with the degree it is "socially generated and experienced . . . . To the extent that others with whom an individual interacts display confidence in the value of future religious rewards, that individual will gain greater confidence in them too" (Finke and Stark 1992:252).

In this environment of collective action, religious groups are potentially subject to exploitation. *Free rider*, a term coined in 1965 by Mancur Olson, is used for those who do not contribute in the provision of a public good, but enjoy these goods anyway.[71] In churches, these are the individuals who come and benefit, but do not yet commit. Finke and Stark describe "members" who "draw upon the group for weddings, funerals, and perhaps holiday celebrations, but who provide little or nothing in return. Even if they do make substantial financial contributions, they weaken the group's ability to create collective religious goods because their inactivity devalues the compensators and reduces the 'average' level of commitment" (Finke and Stark, 1993:252-53). In other words, if any organization has too many "free riders," churches included, the organization will fail.

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[71] Olson's exact statement is: "Unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest" (Olson 1965:2), there will be substantial free-riding and that "the larger the group, the farther it will fall short of providing an optimal amount of a collective good" (Olson 1965:34).

Free riding poses a special challenge to such voluntary organizations as churches. As Finke and Stark explain:

> On the one hand, a congregational structure that relies on the collective action of numerous volunteers is needed to make the religion credible and potent. On the other hand, unless these volunteers are mobilized to a high level of participation, that same congregational structure threatens to undermine the level of commitment and contributions needed to make a religion viable (Finke and Stark, 1993:253).

High-tension religion. For Stark and Finke, costly demands offer a solution to the dilemma of the free rider. These create a barrier to entry into the group and tend to increase the participation of those who do join. In other words, sectarian religions which operate at higher levels of tension with the general culture deliver more religious satisfaction to their members by making their participants sacrifice more and endure more stigma, all of which, by discouraging free-riding, raises the intensity of the group's commitment and group's *esprit de corps*.

In *The Churching of America, 1776-1990,* Finke and Stark link free riding to the tensions represented in church-sect typology. The authors state that since 1776 "the upstart sects have grown as the mainline American denominations have declined" (Finke and Stark 1992:237). They then hypothesize that successful religions are those that are in tension with society. In fact, religious organizations mainly originate through sect formation, they say. Therefore, following Niebuhr, they posit that religious growth at any given moment will be limited primarily to somewhat higher-tension bodies. Strict groups are strong because only they can inspire very high levels of commitment in their followers.

Following Troeltsch, Stark and Bainbridge argue that any church goes through a life cycle of growth and decline, which they tie closely to free-market economic analysis:

churches grow when they compete, and thus a free-market religious situation is better for religion because it forces churches and sects to compete and find a niche. After competing religious enterprises have "niched," some will adapt to the culture (as in transforming from sect to church) and in time have little to offer to new and demanding religious "consumers." But others will continue to market well and flourish. Strictness differentiates and thus corners markets. The strength of rational choice in general and its free rider derivative resides in its comprehensiveness, its promise to be a "grand" theory, its sharp critique of secularism, its use of the non-pejorative word "rational" to religious believers, and its fit with the premises of capitalism, which most Americans support.

Stated in terms of megachurches, the free rider notion says that megachurches, given the opportunity they present for widespread anonymity and non-participation, will be more likely than smaller churches to permit people to “consume” religious goods without paying a “price.” This outcome is rational because people in general like to receive without spending. But scarce goods are the most desirable, and they require sacrifice. Thus successful megachurches have high expectations. Consequently free riding is lower in megachurches when their expectations are high—but higher when their expectations are low.

Another leading theorist of rational choice, and especially of its free rider component, is economist Laurence R. Iannaccone. In a widely cited *American Journal of Sociology* article, Iannaccone offers evidence that the strength of strict churches is neither a historical coincidence nor a statistical artifact. He concludes from his research that strictness makes organizations stronger and more attractive because it screens out members who lack commitment and stimulates participation among those who remain.

He uses rational choice theory to explain the success of sects, cults, and conservative denominations without recourse to assumptions of irrationality, abnormality, or misinformation. According to Iannaccone, the theory also predicts differences between strict and lenient groups, distinguishes between effective and counterproductive demands, and demonstrates the need to adapt strict demands in response to social change (Iannaccone 1994:1180-1211; see also Iannaccone 1992, 1997).

Sociologist Dean Kelley argued in his landmark book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972), that religious groups that demand higher sacrifices are more successful than those who do not. Declining churches are not simply victims of changing times, he said, but of failing to provide a needed product (1972:17)—namely, meaning in life (1972:38ff)—which involves proclaiming an exclusive truth, demanding adherence to a distinctive belief system, and rejecting certain lifestyles and values of the outside world (1972:78-81). In church-sect terminology, declining churches had become so accommodated to the secular culture that they no longer satisfied people's need for the sacred. In Kelley's words, "A strong organization that loses its strictness will also lose its strength" (1972:96).

By contrast, churches with a high strictness of expectation are seen to increase commitment, raise current levels of participation, and offer more benefits to current and potential members, giving such groups a competitive advantage over their opposites. Iannacconne concluded that Kelley was right: denominational growth rates correlate strongly with "strictness." As Iannaccone observed, "Potential members are forced to choose: participate fully or not at all. The seductive middle-ground of free riding and low participation is eliminated" (1989:9). As he says elsewhere, "These costs screen out

people [free riders] whose participation would otherwise be low, while at the same time they increase participation among those who do join. . . . . Strictness works" (Iannaccone 1994:1183). Elsewhere in the same article he says that "strictness" can also be called distinctiveness or costliness. (Iannaccone 1994:1197) Then after examining various data he states an important sociological finding:

> The character of the group—its distinctiveness, costliness or strictness—does more to explain individual rates of religious participation than does any standard, individual-level characteristic, such as age, sex, race, region, income, education or marital status. (Iannaccone 1994:1200)

In an attempt to counter Kelley's arguments, a large body of research was developed, much of which was initially presented in the title *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978* (Hoge and Roozen 1979). Representing the majority, they argued:

> Local contextual factors are more powerful than local institutional factors. The contextual factors explain about 50 to 70 percent, as an estimate, while the institutional factors explain 30 to 50 percent. (1979:326)

Kelley responded to their findings in a 1986 preface to his *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. He agreed with the two strongest correlation coefficients: (1) +.97 emphasis on distinctive lifestyle and morality, and (2) +.93 Emphasis on local and community evangelism (Kelley 1986:ix). He then noted "that the ambitious Hartford Project confirmed the *correlation* between church growth and the variables I had identified, but did not prove or disprove the *causes* I had suggested" (Kelley 1986:x, italics his).

Other studies of American's attitudes toward strict religion produced a variety of results. Although many Americans say they are attracted to strict religious groups, others indicate they are repelled by such qualities (Tamney and Johnson 1998:211). Proponents of rational choice theory agreed with Kelley that institutional factors are most important

in attracting people to religious organizations (Iannaccone 1994). Strict churches are strong because they discourage free riders within the congregation—converting them to participants or excluding them. The result is an increase in the average level of commitment represented in the congregation. This increased commitment permits the congregation to produce higher collective rewards which are the basis for being a strong church (Iannaccone 1994).

Strictness supposedly solves the free-rider problem by functioning as a high-level entry "fee." It discourages all but the most motivated or dedicated.

A problem occurs in applying this theory to certain types of churches, especially growing megachurches, because they welcome free riders, which they often describe as seekers (Roof 1993, Sargent 2000, Miller 1997). Free riders, rather than being a problem to a megachurch, are considered essential, especially as a source of future contributors.

Objections to Rational Choice. Rational choice is not without its critics. The most common negative appraisal is that rational choice takes an *a priori* deductive approach. It looks back to what happened and then fits the circumstances into rational choice categories. Rational choice theory also radically departs both from Weber's emphasis on culture and also from Durkheim's emphasis on social structure. The theory also does not allow for changing personal preferences to account for individual choices. Representative criticisms can be found in a special 1995 issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

The free riding camp in particular receives criticisms for not clearly stating how free riding is measured beyond financial giving, and thus it is difficult to gauge how

much free riding actually takes place. Typical of those who raise concerns are Olson and Perl (2005:133):

> Iannaccone claims that strict rules reduce free riding by screening out the least committed potential members, those who are most likely to free ride. Only those committed enough to put up with strict rules end up becoming members, and these more committed members are less likely to free ride. Although such a mechanism appears plausible, it is not clear whether there actually is less free riding in strict churches. *The issue remains unstudied primarily because it has not been obvious how to measure free riding in religious organizations* (italics added).

Looking beyond its weaknesses, rational choice theory can be used to explain participation levels in megachurches, whose worship services involve both insiders and "free riders" who are deciding whether to become an insider. Rational choice theory would suggest that a megachurch has fewer free riders when high strictness of expectation is conveyed. Accordingly, an environment with high strictness of expectation both attracts and retains people who are less likely to free ride. This theory is in contradiction to those social critics who claim that megachurches have a disproportionate number of non-participants (free riders).

Thus in certain ways, size is a cause of participation—at least when high expectations are present. The more strict the expectations of a church (loyalty, belief, lifestyle, etc), the fewer free riders. Stated in testable format, the prediction is that there will be a statistically significant positive relationship between church size and proportional number of opportunities to participate outside of the worship service, especially when the level of expectation within a church is high.

Congregational Studies

The field of congregational studies traces its origins to church-sect theory, described earlier in this chapter, which defines sect as a "type" of religion that separates itself from society, maintains high levels of participation, and often draws its membership from society's poor. The seminal 1935 book by H. Paul Douglass and Edmund de Brunner, *The Protestant Church as a Social Institution,* is a notable development in the field, but it was not until the 1980s that the bookshelf for this emerging discipline began to need much space. Dean Kelley's landmark book in 1972, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing,* cited earlier in this chapter, also helped trigger the development of the field of congregational studies.

Perhaps the two most-cited current researchers and academic theorists in the field of congregational studies are Princeton University's Robert Wuthnow and Boston University's Nancy Ammerman. Wuthnow's titles range from the role of small groups (Wuthnow 1984, 1994) to the impact of politics on American religion (Wuthnow 1988). Ammerman's titles range from a definitive handbook on studying congregations (Ammerman *et al* 1998) to an exploration of ways churches partner with other community-based groups (Ammerman 2005). Scholars in congregational studies address issues that range from organizational ecology (ways organizations adapt to their environment) to subculture theory (such as Christian Smith's writings on how some Christians groups feel embattled and how they respond).

Theology is an inescapable aspect of congregational studies, as can be confirmed by a perusal of most issues of *Sociology of Religion*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, or *Review of Religious Research*. Academics who write about church growth

regularly address the implications of theological belief and theological style. Examples would include authors introduced in Chapter One of this dissertation in the section on the history of the megachurch: Lyle Schaller, Elmer Towns, John Vaughan, Scott Thumma, and Carl George.

In terms of published quantitative research specifically on megachurches, the primary (and virtually only) clearinghouse is the website of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, associated with Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. In particular, Scott Thumma's analysis is summarized on the Hartford Institute's Internet site, www.hartfordinstitute.org, and is only now beginning to appear in printed publications (Thumma has a forthcoming book on megachurches, slated for late 2007 publication, with Jossey-Bass), although a few other sociologists like Mark Chaves have published academic works on the topic.

Actual research on megachurches in general is extremely limited.

• The Megachurch Research Center is part of Church Growth Today, http://www.churchgrowthtoday.com, which John Vaughan started in 1985. A small-office, largely self-funded operation, it specializes in research related to the growth, plateau, and decline of both new churches and established churches through two divisions: Center for the Study of Growing Churches and Megachurch Research Center. It publishes occasional lists of the “100 largest” and “100 fastest growing” churches, which often draws national media attention to Vaughan and his organization. Vaughan is one of the earliest and longest-standing pioneers in megachurch research. Over the years, he has been widely quoted by the public media. Unfortunately he does not share

information with other scholars and his occasional publications do not draw upon the work of others.

• National Congregations Study was directed by Mark Chaves in 1998. Its approach was pioneering in that it sought to create the first comprehensive nationally representative sample of U.S. congregations. It took the innovative approach of using hypernetwork sampling: respondents of the 1998 General Social Survey (N=2,862) who said that they attended religious services at least once a year were asked to report the name and location of their congregation, as well as an informed contact person. These congregations comprised the sample for the current study.

According to the published summary (Chaves *et al* 1999), interviews with congregational informants took place via telephone (92 percent), or in person if necessary. Most of the informants were clergy. Respondents were asked to describe their position, the year the congregation had been founded, when it began worshipping in its current location, and whether it was formally affiliated with a denomination or a local association of congregations. Informants also described the type of building the congregation met in, whether it belonged to the congregation, and whether visitors came just to view the building's architecture or artwork. Respondents were asked for the number of the congregation's members and participating nonmembers and full- and part-time staff, how many participated regularly, the number of worship services, and the demographic characteristics of members and the congregation's head or senior leader. Respondents described the worship service, including the length, languages used, and attendance, and whether the congregation sang, engaged in silent prayer or meditation, applauded, used incense in the services, or worshipped jointly with another congregation,

among other activities. Informants listed and described programs sponsored by the congregation other than the main worship services, including religious education classes, musical groups, groups meeting around social justice, neighborhood, or community issues, vacation or summer religious schools, and groups to help people with substance abuse problems. Informants indicated whether meetings for purposes such as discussing people's problems or concerns at work, praying or meditating, discussing race relations, or taking an overnight trip had occurred in the past 12 months. Respondents also described the congregation's participation in social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects such as disaster relief programs, programs for victims of rape or domestic violence, cleaning highways or parks, programs focused on physical health needs, and recreational programs. Informants described the congregation's budget, the source of its funding, and recipients of the congregation's funds. In addition, informants were asked to describe the congregation's political and theological leanings from "more on the conservative side" to "more on the liberal side," and whether the congregation had rules or norms governing certain behaviors. Nearly all congregations were placed within a census tract, enabling the inclusion of selected census variables in the data file. Two weights are also included in this study: one that gives a greater weight to congregations that received multiple nominations from GSS respondents, and one that adjusts for over-representation of larger congregations.

Unfortunately, the resultant N of 1,236 contained only 17 Protestant megachurches largely because the sample included people of all major U.S. faith groups (Protestant, Catholic, non-Christian). It also asked about membership size and number of regularly participating adults, but not average attendance at worship services nor actual

participation in the subunit (small group) life of the church. Chaves' 2004 book developed from the study, *Congregations in America,* adds immensely to the understanding of U.S. congregations, but it affords little to no insight on megachurches in particular.

• ARDA -- The American Religion Data Archive, renamed in 2005 as the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.thearda.org, went online in 1998 and is funded largely by the Lilly Endowment. It started with 33 data collections, and by 2005 had 340. In addition, the Templeton Foundation also supports an international collection of church data being added to the site in 2006. It is housed on computers at Pennsylvania State University where sociologist Roger Finke and others are involved with its development and support. It contains the NCS data, and during late 2006 will add data from the next two research projects listed: U.S. Congregations and Faith Communities Today.

• U.S. Congregations Study, coordinated by Cynthia Woolever. The 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Study, funded by the Lilly Endowment, surveyed congregations from some 50 faith groups. More than one million church attendees completed the 56-item questionnaire. The findings were published in *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations* (Woolever and Bruce 2002). Two years later the same authors published a second book, which was a re-analysis of the original data at the aggregated congregational level. Following their subtitle, *Beyond the Ordinary: 10 Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Woolever and Bruce 2004), the authors identified ten qualities of congregations "beyond the ordinary." For each strength, appropriate questions were chosen from the survey, and

a scale was constructed and submitted to a reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha. The ten qualities follow:

1. Growing spiritually (5 questions)
2. Meaningful worship (8 questions)
3. Participating in the congregation (5 questions)
4. Having a sense of belonging (3 questions)
5. Caring for children and youth (3 questions)
6. Focusing on the community (7 questions)
7. Sharing faith (4 questions)
8. Welcoming new people (1 question)
9. Empowering leadership (4 questions)
10. Looking to the future (4 questions)

The research was both quantitative and qualitative, but unfortunately it provided very little information on megachurches. Only 3 churches with attendances greater than 2,000 completed the survey. According to personal interviews with Cynthia Woolever, it seems that the larger the church the less willing it was to devote an entire weekend of worship service primarily to filling out the survey, which was the collection methodology used.

• Faith Communities Today 2000 (FACT2000), coordinated by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, contains the largest database in existence of information about megachurches and will be posted in late 2006 on ARDA. In many cases it contains parallel information for non-megachurches—i.e., churches smaller than megachurches. It

will be used for the research in this dissertation, and thus most of the next two chapters will be devoted to profiling it.

Summary of What Is Known and Unknown about the Topic

Megachurches, as an emerging phenomenon, have received little scholarly attention to date. Few social theorists have made direct, data-informed comments about megachurches.

One of the unaddressed issues in megachurch study is the relationship between church size and church participation, and whether those two variables are influenced by a church's strictness of expectation. Two social theories that lend themselves to explaining megachurch participation are the "weak ties" aspect of social capital theory and the "free rider" aspect of rational choice theory. To date, no formal writing has applied either theory to megachurch issues. This dissertation will attempt to fill that gap.

Megachurches, by definition, are churches with weekly worship attendances of 2,000 or more. Such churches are increasing in number, average size, and public visibility, but such churches represent less than 1 percent of the total number of Protestant churches in the United States. With only 600 known megachurches in 2000, a sizable number of then needed to participate in any given research project in order to have a sample of usable size.

Among the research options available for secondary analysis, the FACT2000 survey is by far the most viable choice. The next chapter will elaborate on the advantages of the FACT2000 survey, as well as its liabilities, and will propose a detailed

methodology for how the FACT2000 data will be used—and how its analysis will be framed to test the two above-mentioned social theories.

CHAPTER THREE

HYPOTHESES AND METHODOLOGY

The following material begins by reviewing the research question and resultant hypotheses for this dissertation. A lengthy section follows which examines the research instrument and methodology to be used. The next section discusses the reliability, validity, and anticipated limitations of the survey instrument, including a summary of the statistical analysis that is planned. A final section discusses the role of qualitative research, both the proposed interview content and its application to the research hypotheses.

Research Questions, Population, and Hypotheses

As framed in the Introduction (Chapter One), the research interest motivating this dissertation has been to learn about the kind of spiritual fruit produced in megachurches. In particular, the research interest sought to explore certain criticisms that have been voiced against megachurches. What relationships can be identified and measured between church size and the various expectation levels evidenced at megachurches or the various opportunities to participate available at megachurches? Based on those findings, to what extent is a "megachurches as spectator religion" identity justified? To what extent is it consistent with social theory?

To address questions of how megachurches fare, a standard of comparison is necessary. One approach is to find an objective standard, such as a widely accepted

measure of participation in churches. Megachurches could then be scored against that scale, if megachurch data existed to do so. As the previous chapter indicated, no such scale exists and very minimal participation data exists. (As a future comment will explain, megachurches are an extremely difficult group to obtain data from or about.)

Another approach is to establish a comparison group. In this case, the most logical group is non-megachurches—all churches that are *below* the weekly worship attendance level of megachurches. If megachurches are congregations of 2,000 and higher in weekly worship attendance (adults and children), then non-megachurches have attendances of 1 to 1,999.

Based on this comparison-group approach, the research question becomes: how do megachurches compare to non-megachurches in terms of participation levels? Among the social theories introduced in Chapter Two (Review of Literature and Theory), two were explored for their implications of how church size might affect participation levels:

"Free rider" theory, an aspect of rational choice theory, refers to people who consume more than their fair share of a resource or shoulder less than a fair share of the costs of production. The problem involves how to prevent free riding from taking place, or at least how to limit its negative effects. Applied to churches, free rider theory would posit that free riders are non-participants and also that in most cases, the larger the group, the more free riding occurs–unless expectation levels are high, which free rider theory predicts will be the case as detailed in Chapter Two. Thus expectation levels are predicted to be *higher* in megachurches than in non-megachurches, and thus the percentage of potential free riders present is predicted to be *lower* in megachurches than in non-megachurches. Free rider theory therefore does not support the "critics"

hypothesis that megachurches invite a spectator Christianity with correspondingly low levels of participation.

"Weak ties" theory, an aspect of social network theory, also known as social network analysis, distinguishes between a person's acquaintances (weak ties), which are less likely to be socially involved with one another, and close friends (strong ties). Weak ties are like a social bridge that can reduce the number of cliques present, raise the morale, and increase the social efficiency of the overall group. The theory can be used to suggest that the larger the church, the larger the influence of weak ties. Applying the theory to megachurches, it can be argued that people find in megachurches a desirable network for relationships and for volunteer activities. Restated in more general terms, larger size provides more opportunities for social networking, which implies greater participation. Weak ties theory is thus in contradiction to social critics who imply that megachurches are organizations in which people remain anonymous and fail to establish meaningful relationships.

In order to test these social theories, two hypotheses will be used:

H1: "Free rider" theory predicts size and participation will be *positively* related under conditions of high expectations for participation, and conversely, size and participation will be *negatively* related under conditions of low expectations for participation.

H2: "Weak ties" theory predicts that participation beyond worship attendance will be comparatively *higher* in megachurches than in non-megachurches.

Quantitative Research Instrument and Methodology

Secondary analysis is a type of research in which data collected by others are reanalyzed. It involves using existing data, collected for the purposes of a prior study, to pursue research which is distinct from that of the original work.

Secondary analysis has several advantages. It is efficient in that it makes use of data already collected by someone else. It also can allow researchers to extend the scope of their study considerably, such as leveraging a relatively small budget into a much broader study by using someone else's national sample.

Secondary analysis will be made with quantitative data from the Faith Communities Today 2000 (FACT2000) study, the largest survey to date of congregations conducted in the United States. FACT2000 represents the first systematic study undertaken of the full range of megachurches, with the intent to map their characteristics, growth patterns, and programmatic efforts. It measured 280 variables, many of which follow a five-level Likert scale[72] for each of 11,301 Protestant congregations that responded. The study was coordinated by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, an organization that was introduced briefly in the previous chapter.

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[72] A Likert scale is a type of multi-point rating scale used in surveys that measures the strength of a subject's agreement with a clear statement. It was developed by Rensis Likert. Likert items have responses on a continuum and response categories such as "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." The most common scale is 1 to 5. The result is obtained by calculating the mean of all the results added together.

According to the project history report,[73] the organizing impetus came from the Cooperative Congregational Studies Partnership (CCSP), which began during the October 1995 meeting of the Religious Research Association. The organizational structure and continuing work of the group was carried by Carl S. Dudley and David A. Roozen, Co-Directors of the Center for Social and Religious Research, Hartford Seminary. The project received the generous financial support of the Lilly Endowment, the world's largest benefactor of religious research, with matching funding from the participant groups.

As a cooperative effort, FACT2000 grew to include 26 agencies and organizations representing 41 denominations and faith groups–including Southern Baptist, Bahai,,Methodist, Muslim, Mormon, Assemblies of God, Unitarian Universalist, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and others. The category of megachurch was counted as one of the 41 groups. Together the 41 groups represent an estimated 90 percent of all U.S. congregations of all faiths.

Representatives from the groups worked together to develop a common questionnaire containing 280 variables. Groups then adapted wordings to their respective traditions and conducted their own survey, almost all of which were mailed to a stratified random sample of a group's congregations. Return rates averaged over 50 percent "with independent congregations proving their independence with the lowest rate of return and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints demonstrating one of the virtues of hierarchy with a 98 percent return rate."[74]

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[73] http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/method_history.html

[74] This quote comes directly from FACT2000 Read Me First.doc, available at www.thearda.com. Most of the material in this section has been adapted from that document.

The megachurch group was comprised of pastors from all 600 known megachurches. The roster of 600 churches came from numerous sources: a list begun in 1992 by Scott Thumma (which was updated regularly) using numerous sources including denominational reports, personal site visits by Scott Thumma, a database provided by Thomas Zook (1993) from his Ph.D. dissertation, emails from numerous researchers and other users of the megachurch section of the Hartford Institute website, John N. Vaughan, and Leadership Network. These 600 churches were mailed the FACT2000 questionnaire, along with a follow-up email. A handful of additional megachurches received the survey from some of the other participating groups. The total of 205 usable megachurch responses represented a response rate of approximately 33 percent.

Data from the total of 14,301 returns from the various group samples were returned to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research coordinating office for aggregation. Zip code level census data was added to each congregational case.

As its name suggests, the FACT2000 study was fielded in 2000, with findings released in 2001. It was envisioned to serve as a baseline for replication and, in fact, the CCSP fielded another national survey of congregations in summer 2005, appropriately named FACT2005, with plans to release the findings during 2006. The CCSP is also planning a 2008 and a 2010 survey.

Questionnaire.[75] The FACT2000 questionnaire was collaboratively designed by the research and program staff representatives from the 26 agencies and organizations that ultimately used it to survey their constituent congregations. Several general principles framed the process: (1) A broad coverage of areas of congregational life was

[75] Much of the material in this section is adapted from the document, FACT2000 Read Me First.doc, available at www.thearda.com.

preferable to a narrowly focused survey. (2) Any specific item included in the core questions should be directly identifiable as of high interest to one or more of the project's target user constituencies, which included congregational leaders, denominational/group resourcers of congregations, the general public through the media, and academic researchers. (3) Questions in the common core questionnaire would focus on items that were applicable to the vast majority of participating groups to maximize the comparative perspective of the project. (4) The length of the questionnaire would be affordable and not overly detrimental to a reasonable return rate—10 pages and/or about 20 minutes.

The survey design group then identified seven areas of congregational life to cover in the core questions. These areas included:

1. Spiritual and organizational vitality;
2. The variety and style of worship as the foundational act of religious gathering;
3. The variety of congregational activities/programs which nurture faith or provide opportunities for the expression of faith;
4. Levels of participation and the characteristics of participants;
5. Strategies congregations use to reach new members and raise financial resources;
6. Characteristics of clergy and lay leadership;
7. Perspectives on how congregations relate to other congregations, to denominational structures and to other institutions in their communities; and,
8. Characteristics of the widely different ways that congregations support and strengthen the social and material well being of their communities.

The result was the 280 variable "common core" questionnaire reprinted (and annotated) as an appendix in this dissertation.

Using the common core questionnaire as a baseline, each group was encouraged to adapt the questionnaire to the language and traditions of its constituent congregations. Three guidelines directed the adaptation process:

1. All participating groups would use all the core items, except those items for which a group could articulate a compelling reason to omit;
2. Each group needed to adapt the wording of core items to their respective traditions; and
3. Each group was free to supplement the core with questions of unique interest for the group.

In most cases "adaptation" involved changing an occasional word or phrase—e.g., pastor, rabbi, imam, priest; congregation, church, synagogue, mosque; etc. However, in a few instances a common question was deleted by a particular group, or was so changed that it was incompatible with what other groups asked in their questionnaires.[76]

While it appears fair to say that the adaptation guidelines were followed in the vast majority of instances, exceptions are also evident. It is also true that the circumstances of a few participating groups dictated a relatively radical adaptation process, this arguably being most true for the Historic Black denominations, Muslim, Bahai and Roman Catholic. One consequence is that the data from a particular denomination or group may be missing for some variables. It is also the case that the data for a few questions in the common core, primarily the specific financial questions, appeared so uneven that the entire question was deleted from the dataset.

[76] Copies of the adapted questionnaires used in most of the surveys can be viewed in the "Partner" section of the FACT website, http://fact.hartsem.edu/partners/index.html.

The decision to use a mailed questionnaire as the preferred option was primarily driven by cost factors, although anonymity was also noted as a plus for some denominations/groups. Low response rates can be a downside of such a decision, but the experience of CCSP participants suggested that with appropriate follow-up efforts, an acceptable return could be obtained. Options included a pre-questionnaire post-card, a cover letter endorsement from a credible denominational/group leader, a follow-up reminder post-card, a second mailing of the questionnaire to non-respondents, and reminder phone calls.

Key Informant. The survey followed a key informant approach. The key informant was not identified by name in the research instrument, nor did any questions in the survey ask generic information about the informant (age, race, gender, role, etc.). Each denomination or faith tradition was free to choose the best "key informant" who would be invited to complete the questionnaire. In all cases this was the primary leader such as the senior pastor, rabbi, imam, priest, etc., or in their absence, the senior "lay" leader (e.g., president of a Muslim Center or Mormon Ward). There is no guarantee, however, that the returned surveys had been completed by the person invited. Someone else could easily have been delegated to reply.

As presented in the project history, during the first year of project planning, CCSP representatives articulated and debated five possible approaches to an anticipated cooperative study of congregations. The alternatives included: (1) a key-informant survey of congregations; (2) a survey of members through a sizable sample of congregations, (3) the development and common archiving of surveys that denominations conduct for individual congregations (annual reports and other occasions), (4) ethnographic studies of

congregations, and (5) the development of a limited set of questions that all denominations would include in their annual requests for information from congregations (the "yearbook" option).

> After careful consideration the decision was made to pursue the key-informant survey as the major thrust of our cooperative effort, with the other alternatives left for various sub-groups to pursue as interest dictated or for the total group to pick up at a future date. Both practical and substantive reasons guided this decision, especially after the yearbook option proved unworkable. Practically, it provides the broadest coverage of congregations per dollar cost and it is the least complex methodological and interpretive challenge for those denominations/groups with little or no experience with congregational research. Substantively, it provides a baseline that can inform studies using the other alternatives. For example, the key-informant survey could be used to identify a highly targeted group of congregations for ethnographic study (e.g., congregations that successfully resolved major conflicts). Additionally, member surveys that are aggregated to produce organizational measures are typically supplemented by a single informant, fact-sheet questionnaire and the CCSP key-informant questionnaire could serve as this fact sheet questionnaire.
>
> This is not to minimize the limitations of a key-informant, closed-ended question survey. It obviously provides, for instance, a less nuanced probing of issues and responses than either open-ended questions or ethnographies. Additionally, it is highly dependent on the knowledge and subjectivity of the "key-informant." To mitigate possible biases related to the latter we will keep questions that call for a subjective evaluation of the congregation to a minimum (e.g., “does the congregation offer a quality worship service?”). But even "factual" questions can be problematic if it cannot be reasonably assumed that the key informant has the requested "facts." For example, while it may be reasonable to assume that a pastor or senior lay leader will know (or be able to provide a reasonable estimate of) how many "members" tithe, most participants in the CCSP feel that this is not a reasonable assumption in regard to how many members say grace before meals at home. Still further, a key-informant questionnaire does not provide the double-bang that a survey of congregational members could provide (i.e., individual member responses plus the potential to aggregate these individual responses to construct an organizational characteristic). Without minimizing these and other limitations of key-informant surveys, and when balanced against the pluses and minuses of all the alternatives, the key-informant survey proved to be the most viable approach for the CCSP effort.[77]
>
> Further limitations of a key-informant approach will be discussed below under “Validity and Reliability.”

[77] http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/method_history.html

Sample, Response Rates, and Weighting. The sampling guidelines developed for the FACT2000 project encouraged each denomination or faith group to use a stratified random sample of congregations with a sampling error of, at minimum, plus or minus 4 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. More specifically, groups for whom it was possible were encouraged to stratify by region and size of congregation. Groups that did not have population data on size of congregation were encouraged to, nevertheless, stratify by region.

These guidelines were followed with only a few exceptions. All but one of the exceptions drew straight or systematic random samples from their population lists. The sample for the Historic Black Denominations was drawn by the Gallup Organization, and the specific methodology is not known. The Gallup organization was used because the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) which represented the Historic Black Denominations in the project felt a telephone survey conducted by a nationally prominent organization would maximize responses from black congregations. Thus ITC and Gallup worked collaboratively to develop as inclusive a list as possible of telephone numbers for black congregations. Gallup sampled randomly from this list until it had reached its targeted number of returns.

In terms of the total number of congregations represented by all the denominations/groups participating in FACT2000, the approach taken to sampling amounted to stratifying by denomination/group and then sampling disproportionate to denomination/group strata size. This is unproblematic for the analysis of any given denomination/group's data. However, for the all-group-aggregate data set it required the calculation and inclusion of weights to adjust for the otherwise disproportionate-to-

denomination/group-strata size. Such weighting procedures for disproportionate-to-size strata are common statistical practice.

Known or estimated total number of congregations in a denomination or faith group, sample sizes and response rates can be found in the "FACT2000ArchiveWeights" file at The Association of Religion Data Archives www.theARDA.com (ARDA), an ongoing project that "strives to democratize access to the best data on religion" supported by the Lilly Endowment, the John Templeton Foundation, and Penn State University (department of sociology). The dataset default was set to weight the data to the actual proportion of a denomination or faith group's congregations in the United States. According to the project history report, "We have every reason to believe that the weighted dataset represents a reasonable national sample of congregations in the United States of the 41 denominations/faith groups involved in CCSP. We estimate that these groups represent just over 90 percent of congregational members in the U.S."[78]

In the archived dataset the coding for some questions was reversed from that found in the questionnaire, typically so that the highest numerical code represented the most positive response. This recoding is reflected in the variable and response labels in the dataset's systems file which was created using a program called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Zip Code Level Census Data. There is a near consensus among sociology of religion scholars that the life and mission of congregations cannot be adequately understood apart from the social context within which a congregation is embedded. To provide both a reminder of the importance of the social context and concrete data on the most geographically immediate social context of congregations, U.S. Census data for the

[78] http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/method_history.html

zip code in which a congregation is located was merged with each congregation's questionnaire data in the archived dataset. However, merged zip-code level census data was only a projection because the 2000 U.S. census data was not available at the time the aggregated, FACT2000 dataset was created. A list of merged census variables is contained in the "Fact2000ZipAggVars" file found at ARDA.

To protect participant anonymity, however, the ZIP code data in the dataset was stripped out of anything released to the public, including to this researcher. As the project history notes, "A major substantive and political issue related to the production and use of the aggregate data set is the use of denomination/group identifiers in the publicly distributed data set and/or public publications based on it. Politically, it is unlikely that several denominations/groups would participate if their congregations' could be identified as belonging to their denomination/group in the aggregated data set or was identified as belonging to their denomination/group in public reports."[79] Thus the data in the FACT2000 study has been de-identified in order to assure respondent anonymity.

Additionally, it is important to note that a congregation's specific denomination or faith group is not contained in the archive dataset, only a six-category, denominational family variable (which will be discussed later in further detail). Specific denomination/group was omitted to help protect the anonymity of individual congregations.

Why FACT2000 Was Best for This Research

There are several advantages to using the FACT2000 study:

[79] http://fact.hartsem.edu/research/fact2000/method_history.html

1. Large megachurch database. In 2000 megachurches represent less than 0.2 percent of the Protestant church population in the United States, immediately presenting researchers with a major hardship: how to find a suitable sample group. This challenge seems even more dramatic when stated in numerical terms: In the year 2000 there were approximately 320,000 Protestant churches in the United States (Lindner, 2001, 332-350). That number included only 600 known megachurches according to Hartford Institute estimates. A sample group of at least 200 megachurches is desirable for drawing meaningful comparisons. But in order to have a sample of 200, roughly a 33% response rate will be required (200 out of 600 known megachurches). Fortunately, the FACT2000 study drew that respectable level of participation,[80] as arguably the largest survey of megachurches to be conducted at that time–to be exceeded in scope only by a Hartford-coordinated survey conducted five years later, known as FACT2005, but whose complete results were not yet public at the time this dissertation was written.

2. Size-comparison possibilities. In order to compare megachurches with non-megachurches, all sizes of churches need to be included in the survey, and the same question needs to be asked of everyone. The FACT2000 survey meets this qualification, although the survey had slight variations, as will be discussed in the section below on validity and reliability.

3. Appropriate questions. Church surveys are by no means monolithic. Many focus on a single issue such as worship-style preferences, political involvement, or

[80] The official FACT2000 report uses N = 153 for megachurches primarily because interpreters defined megachurches as having 1,800 or more participating adults, assuming that any congregation of 1,800 adults would have at least 200 children. This dissertation likewise defined megachurches as having 2,000 participants, but determined qualifying churches in a slightly different manner. It calculated church size by adding together both the number of the adult participants variable and the number of the children participants variable. FACT2000 tabulators also accidentally omitted a few churches which had responded to the survey, and thus were not included in the FACT2000 tally, but which were included in the analysis for this dissertation.

handicap accessibility of facilities. Among multiple-topic surveys, which includes FACT2000, few ask as many questions as does FACT2000. Further, not all identify which respondents meet the 2,000-attendance requirement of megachurches. The reasons are understandable: Since megachurches are so few in number, and comprise such a tiny slice of the church-landscape pie, even such major surveys as National Congregations and U.S. Congregations define their highest attendance category as "1,000 and higher." Yet using even the lower cutoff of "1,000 and higher" (as compared to "2,000 and higher") neither National Congregations nor U.S. Congregations came up with an N of 200 or higher as did FACT2000.

4. Cross-denominational data. Numerous surveys are done within the same denomination (Southern Baptists, United Methodists, etc.), within a defined geographic area (city limits of Atlanta or state of Arkansas), or a certain race (Korean-language churches in California). These lack the cross-denominational data that would enable control variables to be tested for such issues as theology, geography, and race. Further, none asked as many questions related to participation as did the FACT2000 survey. Finally none were anywhere near the size and scope of FACT2000.

5. Willingness to share the data. This researcher is indebted to the kindness of Dr. David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, principal compiler of the overall FACT2000 report, for providing an electronic copy of the survey-response database (as an SPSS file), the survey instrument which is reprinted as an appendix in this dissertation, and help via several emails and phone interviews. Dr. Scott R. Thumma, megachurch specialist at the Hartford Institute and contributor to the FACT2000 report, also provided invaluable cooperation and insight. The only other researcher who has

conducted megachurches surveys in recent years is Dr. John N. Vaughan, who directs the Center for the Study of Growing Churches: America's Megachurch Research Center (www.churchgrowthtoday.com) in Bolivar, Missouri. He published a listing of the nation's 100 largest-attendance churches in 1990, 2004, and 2005, but none of these versions covered all known megachurches, since he covered only the 100 largest. Further, he does not have comparative data on non-megachurches in a balanced sample group. He has also historically declined to share or make public any of his data beyond his published lists. This researcher could not persuade him to make an exception for the task of this dissertation.

6. Replicability of the survey analysis. The FACT2000 report is slated to be posted sometime during 2006 online for public access through ARDA. The research done for this dissertation can be duplicated and hopefully furthered by other scholars. The FACT survey is actually part of an envisioned series (2005, 2008, 2010), and so use of the FACT2000 invites and enables comparison as the data from future years is collected and released.

The following FACT2000 materials are on ARDA for public use:

1. FACT2000Archive: An SPSS system file containing the aggregated congregational and related zip-code census data for the 14,301 responding congregations in FACT2000 (14,301 total congregations with 11,301 of them being Protestant Christian groups)
2. FACT2000ArchiveQuestionnaire
3. FACT2000QuestionOutline
4. FACT2000ArchiveCodebook

5. FACT2000ArchiveWeights
6. FACT2000ZipAggVars
7. AGS2000MethodolgyGuide
8. AGS Terminology Guide

Reliability, Validity and Limits of FACT2000 and Sample Groups Drawn from It

In order to minimize measurement error, issues of validity and reliability must be reviewed. First the FACT2000 survey itself will be reviewed. Then comments will be made about the ways this dissertation adapted it through secondary analysis.

Validity. Discussions of validity address whether the survey is actually measuring the concepts in question (and not some other concept). They also explore whether those concepts are being measured accurately. Several types of validity are commonly examined in social research:

• Face validation asks whether the instrument is really measuring the kind of behavior the investigator assumes it is, and whether it provides an adequate sample of that kind of behavior. For FACT2000, any such problems were likely to be flagged during the numerous preparatory discussions and reviews, as survey development took five years from initial concept to hypothesis construction to survey development to actual survey launch. At various points the process drew on the expertise from social researchers in 41 different denominations or faith groups. This broad level of participation implies a strong sense of scholarly consensus that the scores obtained were likely to represent true differences in the characteristics the survey planners were trying to measure.

The secondary analysis of FACT2000 will ride on the coattails of that face validation. The biggest challenge will be in how to operationalize the social theories to be tested for this dissertation, since they were likely not in the minds of those who designed the original survey. Those definitions will be discussed later in this chapter under "Further Adaptations."

• Likewise issues of external validity were highly likely to be considered and corrected as up to 41 different denominations or faith groups reviewed drafts of the survey, anticipating whether the findings could be generalized in a way that meaningfully applies to their own context. External validity was no doubt improved through the efforts to weight the survey in a manner designed to adjust for the representation by denominations that otherwise would be disproportionately represented. Thus the likelihood of sampling error was no doubt reduced and minimized.

The secondary analysis of FACT2000 will give careful attention to the ability of the findings that surface to be generalized. The likely problem to surface is that the survey doesn't offer any variables that directly and convincingly measure "free-riderness." Instead, it offers only rough measures of opportunities for participation. Hypothesis testing will also be limited to indirect variables of "structural availability" as opposed to the measure wanted and needed: actual participation rates. Thus this obvious variable was unfortunately not included in the original data. It is hard to imagine why it was omitted; perhaps with 41 different groups vying to have their questions included in the targeted goal of a "reasonable return rate—10 pages and/or about 20 minutes," it simply didn't make 280-variable final cut.

• Criterion validity, also called predictive validity, involves multiple measurements of the same concept. This was built into the survey instrument in several locations, such as one series of questions asking about attendance at various worship services and other questions asking how many "actively participating" adults and children in the church; elsewhere one question asked about whether the congregation "is working for social justice" while another section asked about the church's "community service" while yet another set of questions asked about specific expressions of justice and compassion by which the congregation served the community. The rigorous work of the review team would likely have flagged any validity problems here as well.

The secondary analysis of FACT2000 will likewise utilize multiple measurements of the same concepts wherever possible.

• Internal validity asks whether a difference exists at all in a given comparison, and whether any apparent differences can be explained away as some measurement artifact. Internal validity is relevant only in studies that try to establish a causal relationship. FACT2000 is a descriptive study.

However, the secondary analysis will be a comparative study involving one or more hypotheses, and tests of internal validity will be applied to ask whether the findings can be attributed to the manipulation of the independent variable rather than to some other confounding variable.

Reliability. The reliability of a measure is simply its consistency or repeatability: does the measurement change over time? Although a test-retest (repeat-application) approach was not taken, the wording of questions went through numerous revisions in order to minimize the likelihood of faulty or ambiguous wording. Further, reliability can

be estimated by the groupings of question sets that measure roughly the same concept. The correlation values among the questions can then be computed by using Cronbach's alpha.[81] On a March 22, 2006, telephone interview with Dr. David Roozen, principal compiler of the overall FACT2000 report, he affirmed that Cronbach's alpha was calculated and found to be at an acceptable level.

The secondary analysis of FACT2000 will likewise run Cronbach's alpha on each cluster of variables it uses.

Further, in the data-gathering stage of FACT2000, the choice of printing and mailing the survey increased consistency that might have been lost through an in-person survey environment such as errors caused by the relationship between respondent and researcher, a faulty sound recording, etc. But the nature of a survey sent by postal mail meant that the researcher has no control over whether the recipient is overly fatigued when completing the survey, misreads a survey question, and the like. However in the data entry stage, incorrect information could have been recorded due to missing data, illegible data, or other coding error. Reliability may also be compromised by misuse of statistics or faulty interpretation of data due to honest mistakes, bias, poor training, etc.

The use of a key-informant approach often raises issues of validity: did the person filling out the survey provide as accurate a response as an actual participant would have? That information would be nearly impossible to determine. It could be argued, however, that if key informants brought bias into their survey responses, then the distribution of those biases would not follow a pattern that would skew the comparisons that will be

[81] Cronbach's alpha is a test for a model or survey's internal consistency. It indicates the extent to which a set of test items can be treated as measuring a single latent variable. It is sometimes called a "scale reliability coefficient." Index reliability is measured between 0.0 and 1.0 as a positive value, with the higher the alpha value, the greater the reliability of the instrument measurement. An alpha near or above 0.7 provides acceptable evidence of reliability.

made through the secondary analysis. The argument might conclude that larger-church pastors filling out the survey have no greater or lesser likelihood of misrepresenting their church profile than would smaller-church pastors.

Even so, a key-informant approach invites cautions about being too confident in the data out of concerns for the limited perspective of a single key informant in a congregation of 2000 or more people. The tradeoff of FACT2000 organizers using this method (whose primary advantages are that it's cheaper and makes data easier to collect) are that some will find the data practically unusable for rigorous analysis in trying to explain individual-level outcomes such as levels of participation. In addition, there can be wide variation in estimation styles of various key informants; perhaps the estimator at "Church A" was more meticulous in tracking down data than the estimator at "Church B." This could be problematic.

It should be noted that some scholars have argued that key-informant data is more accurate than participant-supplied data. Sociologist Rodney Stark comments on the national religious census conducted by the Bureau of the Census from 1890 to 1936 (Finke and Stark, 1992: 6-12). It took a key-informant approach by asking the pastor, head of the church board, or head of the elders to complete the survey for each church. Stark then concludes and argues that "strong grounds" exist that "the census statistics are relatively accurate," more so even than if congregants had filled out the census data (1992: 8). That analogy may hold for the FACT2000 data as well.

In addition to possibly being more accurate, key-informant data might also be more balanced than a congregation-wide approach. Regular attendees who agree to complete a survey could be predicted to be ones who feel strongly about their church, and

strongly in favor of it at that. (In voluntary organizations, those who feel strongly *against* the organization have the option of leaving, and often do.) A high satisfaction bias could lead to a misleading lack of variance in the various responses.

Limitations Due to "Membership" Terminology. The analysis for this dissertation focuses on church participation (or opportunities for participation), not membership. The definition of a megachurch, for example, is based on how many people regularly attend, not how many people are on the membership rolls, nor even how many of the participants are official members. This distinction makes a huge difference, as the occasional list of "largest churches" varies greatly between largest-*attendance* churches and largest-*membership* churches.[82] A specific example comes from the largest U.S. Protestant denomination. In 1997 the Southern Baptist Convention had 835 churches that reported 2,000 or more *members*, but only 79 churches that reported 2,000 or more regular *attendees* (Dalton 2002:34-36).

A small problem occurs in the FACT2000 survey in that it focuses primarily on attendance and participation, and yet it also uses the terms *members* and *membership*. Sometimes it clearly means a more restrictive definition, such as a question that refers to a membership class for formally joining the church. Sometimes the survey adds clarification, such as a question which speaks of "registered members and also participating nonmembers." But of the 30 total usages of *members* or *membership*, perhaps only 6 literally mean "official members only." The analysis for this dissertation will interpret the other 24 occurrences to mean active participants, such as the question,

[82] E. Brooks Holifield argues that the meaning of church "membership" has become less stringent over time in "Toward a History of American Congregations," in *American Congregations, Volume 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 23-53.

"Overall, to what extent are your church members involved in recruiting new members?" or "Our congregation's programs and activities strengthen personal relationships among our members."

Further Adaptations for This Dissertation. In order to increase the validity and reliability of the secondary analysis in this study, the FACT2000 database itself will be adjusted as follows:

1. All responses from non-Protestant churches will be deleted, since this study is limited by definition to Protestant churches. A "six-category, denominational family variable" (mentioned two paragraphs previously) was added to each congregation's questionnaire data in the archived dataset. There was a 100 percent response rate to this variable with values 1-4 representing Protestants and values 5-6 representing non-Protestants. The variable is named DENFAM (for "denominational family"), and only those replying 1, 2, 3 and 4 will be kept. This will reduce the number of completed surveys from 14,301 to 11,301.

2. Megachurches, defined as having 2,000 or more regularly participating adults and children, will be identified by the sum of two variables. Thus a church will be identified as a megachurch if its variables REGADULT (for "regularly attending adults") plus REGKIDS (for "regularly attending children") are greater than or equal to 2,000.

3. In terms of operationalizing the social theories to be tested for this dissertation, the concept of megachurch, defined earlier as a church with average weekend worship attendance of 2,000 or more adults and children, will be easy to extract from the FACT2000 survey. Likewise it is simple to identify churches considered to be non-megachurches, which have attendances of fewer than 2,000. More challenging is the

concept of “free riders” from rational choice theory. Free riding will be defined as non-participation beyond attendance at the workshop service. Two composite variables (each a combination of five scaled variables) will be used to test for free riding. Each will be related to various aspects of participation opportunities—thus structural availability will serve as a possible indicator of participation. Expectations will be defined as “expectations to participate” as scored by yet another composite variable (again, a combination of five scaled variables).

4. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the FACT2000 survey does not ask for percentages of the church that participate in various activities. Instead, it asks only about how many groups are available, a measure which this dissertation will use as a proxy for participation itself (often voiced in this dissertation as “opportunities to participate” or “participation opportunities”). Thus hypothesis testing will also be limited to indirect variables of structural availability to participate.

5. As observed earlier, megachurches represent only 0.3 percent of the church universe in terms of Protestant congregations in the United States. It is advisable to include every megachurch for which data is reported, lest the sample size be too small. However the FACT2000 data also incorporates returns from more than 10,000 churches. With that many churches, virtually every association will show up as statistically significant. It is therefore advisable to downweight or sample the non-megachurch responses.

For the data analysis of this dissertation, the weighting system in the dataset will first be disregarded so that all churches will be identified. The rationale is to achieve the highest possible N for megachurches. In this case the self-weighting N = 205 Protestant

megachurches. Using SPSS software, a random sample of the 11,096 non-megachurches will then be drawn with N = 205. The sample of 205 non-megachurches will be tested on several variables against the group from which it was drawn to verify that the sample is closely representative of the non-megachurch population.

The objective is to establish two parallel groups. As a fundamentally comparative study (how do megachurches compare to non-megachurches in variables that might describe "spectator religion"?), there will be no need for a total-sample analysis which would have been allowed best by equally down-weighting the entire sample.

In summary, 205 of the survey's 11,301 Protestant respondents will be identified as megachurches, as defined by a reported attendance of 2,000 or more adults and children. All 205 megachurches will be included in the data analysis. The remaining 11,096 Protestant congregations will be non-megachurches. A randomly selected group of 205 churches will be created from this group. Tests will be made to verify that the 205 are statistically similar to the group of 11,096 from which it is drawn.

Qualitative Research Instrument and Methodology

The FACT2000 survey, as a quantitative instrument, is suitable for testing the hypotheses for this dissertation. Qualitative interviews can informally test the same hypotheses, adding illustrative examples as well.

Qualitative interviews can also go farther by filling in missing information. They can help the researcher discover and understand issues related to the hypotheses which secondary analysis of the quantitative survey does not clearly reveal. More specifically in the case of this dissertation, the qualitative interviews will look at the quantitative

findings and ask “how?” That is, they will help in describing the various mechanisms through which individuals move from one level of commitment to another (mechanisms will include strong ties, weak ties, and independent individual initiative). They will draw from each person’s oral history to revisit the process they followed in a move from “free rider” to fully involved and committed participant, if true. It could be imagined that newcomers might have some or all of the following unspoken questions in mind before committing to engage or join a church:

- Do I fit here? (a question of acceptance and affinity)
- Does anyone want to know me? (a question of friendship and individual attention)
- Am I needed? (a question of value and purpose)
- What is the advantage of joining? (a question of reasons and benefits)
- What is required of members? (a question of expectations and responsibilities)

The interview group will be people who attend megachurch worship services. Subjects will be recruited and selected through a direct request to the church's pastor or his representative, asking them to suggest names of people who this researcher might invite to be part of a focus group. Ideally, the names provided will represent a healthy cross-section of the church: new attendees and longtime attendees, men and women of many ages (but all over 18), and no one from same biological family.

One limitation of asking the pastor, who serves as a gatekeeping permission giver, is that his recommendations could well bias the research. The focus groups will therefore not be random samples.

After people have agreed to participate in the project, they will meet together somewhere on church premises—a classroom or similar environment conducive to focused discussion. The group interview session will begin with an orientation. This involves a verbal welcome, a review of how participant names were obtained, how long the interview will last, a request to tape record the interview, an explanation of what will be done with the data, and comments about how everyone's confidentiality will be protected. An affirmation will be made that participation is voluntary, and that anyone may discontinue participation at any time during the meeting. This is also a time to answer any questions participants may have.

Finally, everyone will be asked to sign an informed consent letter. It will restate the conditions and confidentialities that have been mapped out. The letter includes a promise that if participants are quoted in the dissertation or in a subsequent publication, a pseudonym will be used for their name.

The total array of questions used appears in an appendix to this dissertation. In general they include a section that asks participants to recall their initial impressions of the church, how long they've been attending, their present level of participation, if any, how they may have become involved, and why they left their former church, if indeed they had a previous church. Other question groups ask whether the church has assisted them in deepening their relationship with God, what level of expectation to participate they sense from the church, how they would define a few religious expressions (such as "participation" and "spiritual growth"), the level of friendships and relationships they have developed at church, if any, their comfort with the church's large size, whether they know anyone who left this church, if they would do anything if they knew someone

attending but contributing nothing, and whether there is “anything else you’d like to tell me in regard to the topics we’ve been discussing.”

There will be at least three such interviews, each from a different megachurch. Each different interview group will require different follow-up questions and will likely take on a different character based on the personal backgrounds and personalities of the participants.

This researcher will review and reflect upon the interview notes, perhaps listening to audio recordings of the session. He will try to detect patterns of common response and other insights of relevance to the dissertation hypotheses.

CHAPTER FOUR

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The following material reviews the research hypotheses. Then, after presenting a general summary of the FACT2000 data, it offers a detailed analysis and interpretation for the various statistical tests made with the data against the hypotheses.

Summary of Topic and Hypotheses

As Chapter One noted, critics of Protestant megachurches in the United States have described megachurches (defined as having 2,000 or more in average weekly worship attendance) as “religion lite,” “undemanding,” and as using a “dumbing down” approach that makes the Christian faith "two miles long and one inch deep" as worshipers follow an approach of “spectator religion” more than of active participation. These claims are testable by examining the behavior of those who attend megachurches, and in particular the level of participation opportunities beyond attendance at the worship service in these congregations. The level of participation opportunities within megachurches can then be compared to the same measure in smaller churches.

Two different social theories were advanced and described in detail in previous chapters, each of which leads to a different hypothesis.

“Weak ties” theory was used to predict that church size will positively affect levels of participation opportunities. The postulation, in contrast to what the critics say, is

that megachurches will tend to be organizations marked by relatively high participation opportunities. Formally stated:

> **Hypothesis 1: "Weak ties" theory predicts that participation opportunities (beyond worship attendance) will be relatively *higher* in megachurches than in non-megachurches. Assuming this prediction to be true, the theory offers large size per se as the presumptive explanation, with greater opportunities for social networking perceived as an inherent function of size.**

"Free rider" theory likewise predicts a relationship between church size and church participation opportunities, the direction of which will depend on the strength of the church's expectations of participation by its members. Free rider theory was used to predict, in contrast to what the critics say, that "spectator religion" will be less prevalent in megachurches, due to levels of expectation being high, than in non-megachurches. Formally stated:

> **Hypothesis 2: "Free rider" theory is hypothesized, using a three-variable statistical interaction, that participation opportunities (beyond worship attendance) will be higher in megachurches than in non-megachurches when expectations are low, but lower when expectations are higher.**

Both hypotheses propose that size is a cause of a church's level of participation opportunities. Thus for H1, size is the independent variable X (cause) and opportunity for participation is the dependent variable Y (result or effect). H1 indicates that as size grows, participation increases. For H2, size is again the independent variable X, but the dependent variables Y are both expectations and participation. H2 indicates that as size

grows, participation increases when expectations are high but decreases when expectations are low.

Four tests of the hypothesis will be made for H1. Two tests of the hypothesis will be made for H2. Several control measures will also be tested.

Source of the Data

Secondary analysis was made with data from the Faith Communities Today 2000 (FACT2000) study, the largest survey to date of congregations conducted in the United States. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research coordinated the survey, which followed a key informant approach. It measured roughly 280 variables for each of Protestant congregations that responded. Since the FACT2000 survey was administered through approximately 41 different religious entities—Lutherans, United Methodists, Episcopalians, etc.—the surveys were slightly different, as each administrating body was allowed to adjust or substitute certain questions. Megachurches were treated as one of the 41 groups and their survey form was adjusted slightly, as indicated in an appendix to this dissertation. (The previous chapter discussed issues related to validating the data.)

Of the 11,301 Protestant church respondents, 205 were megachurches as defined by a reported attendance of 2,000 or more adults and children. All 205 megachurches were included in the data analysis.

The remaining 11,096 congregations were non-megachurches. For reasons explained in the previous chapter, a randomly selected group of 205 churches was created from this group.

Thus the total sample used for this dissertation involved 410 churches. The 205 megachurches are a 100 percent unweighted sample and the 205 non-megachurches represent 1.90 percent of the unweighted sample of non-megachurches.

Qualitative interviews, conducted during April and May 2006, supplemented the interpretation of the data, and receive discussion in the next chapter.

General Description of the Data

Sociology, as the study and classification of various groups of human beings, tends to look at such social attributes as age, gender, marital status, family dynamics, education, income, race, locale (section of town), and size represented by the social group under consideration. The following overview provides a demographic description of the two sample church-size strata, comparing them to each other.

Running frequencies and T-tests of several ordinal variables, a general overall profile emerges of congregational participants as more likely to be female, married, college graduates, and in households with children at home. They are quite likely to be under 60 years old and are often under 35 years old. A good many of them are new to the congregation in the previous 5 years and large numbers live within the immediate vicinity of the church. Quite a few participate in small groups and some are new converts to the faith. The church itself is often multi-racial.

Detailed Megachurch Profile. As the official summary of the FACT2000 megachurch data predictably notes, the most obvious characteristic of megachurches is their size. The average weekly worship attendance was 3,857 persons. Roughly 50 percent of the reporting megachurches had between 2,000 and 4,000 in attendance, with

roughly 35 percent between 4,000 and 6,000 in attendance, and only 15 percent reporting 6,000 or more attendees.

Megachurches in this survey report that their attendance has increased by an average rate of 90 percent over the past 20 years. In the last 5 years, weekly worship attendance for three-quarters of these congregations grew by 10 percent or more. During that same period, 12 percent of surveyed churches lost members.

Two-thirds of the responding megachurches planted "daughter churches," with the majority parenting 5 or fewer new congregations. Slightly less than a fourth have satellite worship sites, but nearly all of these "branch campuses" offer distinctively different worship styles from the main church.

Forty percent of megachurches are found in the South, 32 percent in the West, and 21 percent in the Midwest, but only 6 percent in the Northeast. States with the greatest concentration include California, Texas, Florida, and Georgia.

Megachurches are predominantly a phenomenon of the suburbs of large cities, with 63 percent located in or around cities of 250,000 or more, and 23 percent in cities between 50,000 and 250,000. Nearly three quarters of megachurches are situated in the suburbs (older or newer) of these large cities.

Megachurches are both an old and new phenomenon, with 57 percent of these churches being founded before 1961, while roughly 15 percent are less than 20 years old. By comparison nearly two-thirds of the congregations moved into their current locations after 1970, with 20 percent moving in the last decade.

The majority of these large congregations report that their tremendous growth took place in the past 25 years. Seventy percent of these churches report that they

experienced their rapid growth within the tenure of their current pastor, with 1987 as the average year the current pastor began at each church.

The median seating capacity in the sanctuaries of the surveyed megachurches is 1,700 persons. This range varies considerably: 18 percent have sanctuaries that seat 1,000 or less, 25 percent seat more than 2,500 people, and only 5 percent have seating for 5,000 or more. As large as they are, a majority of the megachurches feel they have insufficient space for their ministry, and 15 percent of megachurches allow other congregations to use their worship space. (Note: The seating-capacity question was asked only of megachurches.)

All megachurches offer an opportunity for worship on Sunday mornings (93% offer two or more services on Sunday morning, and 48% have three or more), 20 percent also offer a Friday service, and nearly half offer a Saturday-evening service. A Sunday-evening service, offered by 65 percent of megachurches may be a repeat crowd from other services or a distinctly different service. The average attendance on Sunday mornings is 2,913 people.

The worship and music style in megachurches features a contemporary and electronic component in the service always or quite often, with 75-80 percent of churches use electronic keyboards and guitars, and drums. In addition, 72 percent use visual projection equipment. Dance or drama is featured always or quite often in 22 percent of the churches.

Nearly a quarter (21%) of congregations report that their primary worship service has changed a lot in the last five years, with the same percent (21%) reporting that

worship has changed somewhat during that time. The rest of the churches report that worship is either basically the same (22%) or has changed only a little (37%).

Among the following options offered, respondents say that sermons during the worship service most often always focus on God's love and care (44%), personal salvation (42%), personal spiritual growth (38%), and practical advice for daily living (34%).

Nearly all the congregations have some minority racial presence. Nearly 50 percent of the white congregations have 10 percent or more regular minority adult participants. Some 16 percent of churches without a Hispanic majority have significant (10-49%) Hispanic presence among their regular attendees. Likewise 12 percent of churches without a black majority have significant (10-49%) black presence among their regular attendees.

Most megachurches offer a wide range of programs and ministries for members to choose from. For example, 95 percent offer a weekly Sunday school program. The average total weekly adult Sunday school attendance is 856 plus an average of 788 children under 18 years of age. Over 70 percent said their teenagers were involved in the life of the church to a very great or large extent.

In addition to the regular Sunday school programs, megachurches offered other programs as ongoing events throughout the year, on average, by the following percentages: youth/teen activities (94%), men's/women's ministries (86%), choirs (85%), young adult activities (83%), prayer groups (83%), senior adult activities (82%), Bible studies (78%), community service programs (65%), sports/fitness teams (59%), self-help

groups (57%), national parachurch programs (53%), parenting/marriage classes (52%), and spiritual retreats (34%).

Churches do not grow to become megachurches without an active evangelism emphasis. Thus 29 percent of megachurches reported extensive recruitment involvement on the part of their members, 38 percent said their current members are involved in recruiting new members at moderate levels, 30 percent reported minimal recruitment, and only 4 percent saying their members are not at all involved in evangelistic efforts.

An emphasis on volunteering is also present, with 96 percent of megachurches strongly encouraging their new members to volunteer in church ministries. Nearly 50 percent thought the statement that their church feels like a close-knit family described them very or quite well. This response level is in part due to the extensive use of small group fellowship in megachurches, 50 percent of which say their use of small groups is central to their strategy for Christian nurture and spiritual formation. Another 44 percent have such groups but say they are not central to the church's program. Over 80 percent say they have an organized program for keeping up with members' needs and providing ministry at the neighborhood level. (Note: Small group data was asked only in the megachurch version of the survey.)

A third of the megachurches surveyed said they assign a pastor or lay leader to mentor new members into becoming incorporated members of the church. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of megachurches thought that new members were very or quite easily incorporated into the life of their church. Over three quarters of megachurches (76%) required new members to take an informational class prior to or after joining.

Slightly over 50 percent provided special parking for visitors, and around 40 percent acknowledged them in a demonstrative manner such as asking them to stand, raise their hand, receive an information packet, or receive a visitor label.

A strong majority--96 percent of respondents--thought church members were very or quite excited about the future of their church and 90 percent thought the statement that the congregation was spiritually vital and alive described them very or quite well.

Further, 86 percent of the surveyed megachurches felt the statement that they had a clear sense of mission and purpose described their church very or quite well.

Social assistance. Almost all megachurches (99%) provide some sort of food assistance to the needy in their communities, either through a food pantry or soup kitchen. Defining "support" as material or financial contribution, member volunteer time, or space in their church building, other service programs that megachurches said they provided or supported independently included: programs for youth and teens (99%), counseling services or support groups (95%), cash or vouchers given to families or individuals (91%), prison ministries (91%), substance abuse and twelve-step programs (85%), senior citizen programs (84%), hospitals and nursing homes (80%), thrift store or thrift store donations (78%), and temporary or permanent housing/shelter (78%),.

In terms of finances, 54 percent of megachurch respondents describe the current financial health of their congregation as excellent, and another third say it is good. The average total annual income of the megachurches in the study was $4.8 million (in 1999). The average expenditures for these same churches totaled $4.4 million (again in 1999).

In terms of leadership, 98 percent of the congregations report they currently have a full-time senior pastor. On average the senior pastor is 52 years of age and has been at

the congregation over 12 years. Less than 1 percent of megachurch senior pastors are female; 88 percent are white, 6 percent are African American, and 6 percent were of other racial and ethnic backgrounds including Hispanic, American Indian, and "other."

These megachurch pastors are generally well educated with 97 percent having secular college degree or higher. In terms of ministerial education, 5 percent had no training or a certificate, 22 percent went to Bible college or had some seminary training and 73 percent had a seminary degree or better.

Each megachurch 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.

Even given these numbers, 72 percent said that recruiting volunteer leaders is a continual challenge, but that they eventually find enough willing people. Only 27 percent said they did not have any problem getting volunteer leaders.

Theological connections. Among megachurches, 92 percent stated that the Bible is absolutely foundational as a source of authority, 88 percent of respondents name the Bible as the one most important authority for their congregation's worship and teaching, 8 percent cited historic creeds, doctrines, and tradition, 6 percent named the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and 6 percent said the one source of authority is the congregation vision and purpose.

In terms of affiliations, 67 percent of megachurches in this survey belong to an organized denomination. However, other questions in the survey indicated the megachurches ties to their denominations were tenuous at best. Only 37 percent thought the statement "Our congregation clearly expresses its denominational (or

nondenominational stance) heritage" described them very or quite well. Likewise, the authority of the denominational leaders was rated foundational or very important for just 29 percent of churches. Only 27 percent of these megachurches purchased worship, educational and other programmatic supplies and resources exclusively or primarily from sources within their denomination. On the other hand, 43 percent created their own, or bought exclusively or primarily from sources outside their denomination. Roughly 30 percent said they were independent or nondenominational; and 20 percent of the respondents belonged to a belonged to a Network, Fellowship or Association of churches. These networks ranged anywhere from 15 members to several thousand. The median network size was 600 churches.

Megachurches were also involved with churches in other ways. Many participated in doing the social ministries listed above, although at only one third the level they were active by themselves. They also participated in activities with other congregations within their respective denominations (or if independent, with other independent churches) and with congregations from other Christian bodies. Interestingly, they participated in activities with congregations of other denominations at higher rates than they did with churches within their denominations. However, slightly over one in ten megachurches reported any kind of interfaith activity with congregations from other faith traditions.

Many megachurches (47%) sponsored conferences designed to train other pastors and church leaders. Nearly 42 percent operated their own Christian school, and 30 percent had a Bible school or Institute. Forty-four percent had a radio ministry and almost the same number (38%) ran a television ministry. The Internet was another way these congregations were present within the larger Christian community. Nearly 100 percent

had a church email address. In early 2000, 99 percent of these congregations also had a web site.

It is possible to explore the web sites of these and other megachurches at the online megachurch database maintained by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. (Thumma 2001).

Comparison with smaller churches. Table 4.1 summarizes the following comparison of megachurches to non-megachurches on various scaled variables that were asked on both the megachurch and non-megachurch surveys. (See Appendix A for a comparison of survey questions on the two versions of the survey.)

- Megachurches have slightly *fewer* females than do non-megachurches, a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches have *fewer* married participants than do non-megachurches, a difference which is significant.
- The level between megachurches and non-megachurches of those lacking a high school diploma is so *close* that the difference is not significant.
- However, megachurches have *more* college graduates than do non-megachurches, a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches have *more* children under age 18 present at home than do non-megachurches, a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches have slightly *fewer* households with incomes below $20,000 than do non-megachurches, a difference which is significant. (The survey instrument offers only one choice of financial range: “below $20,000.”)

• Megachurches have *more* people under age 35 than do non-megachurches, a difference which is significant.

TABLE 4.1
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO NON-MEGACHURCHES FOR SELECT DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic	Megachurch mean	Valid N	Non-megachurch mean	Valid N	Significance level
female	4.9	160	5.2	173	.000***
married	5.1	158	5.3	169	.025**
less than high school diploma	2.6	179	2.6	196	.042**
at least a college graduate	4.8	176	3.9	198	.000***
in household with children under 18 present	4.5	151	3.6	161	.001**
in household with incomes below $20,000	2.7	176	3.2	194	.008**
age 35 or younger	4.5	178	3.7	200	.000***

Total sample N = 410
*significant at p < 0.10, **significant at p < 0.05, ***significant at p < 0.01
Mean of 2 = 1-10%; mean of 3 = 11-20%; 4 = 21-40%; mean of 5 = 41-60%; and mean of 6 = 61-80%

With regard to race, findings were calculated by examining responses to the question "Of your total number of regularly participating adults, what percent would you estimate are . . .?" Respondents were asked to enter a percentage for numerous open-ended blanks for White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, etc., with a total to equal 100% (N = 327).

Setting up a cross tabulation with the race variable, as reported in Table 4.2, megachurches are *less* likely to be majority white (white >50%) than are non-megachurches (82% vs. 92%), a difference which is significant. Recalculated for *large* majority white (white >80%), megachurches are still *less* likely to be large-majority white than are non-megachurches (71% vs. 88%), a difference which is significant.

Setting up a cross tabulation for locale (section of town), as also indicated in Table 4.2, all the following findings are statistically significant: non-megachurches exist in rural areas and towns of less than 10,000 population, whereas megachurches are all but absent in both locales–16 percent vs. 0 percent for rural areas, and 33 percent vs. 2 percent for towns of less than 10,000. Instead, megachurches are overwhelmingly in the suburbs–69 percent of megachurches vs. 20 percent of non-megachurches. Finally, roughly the same percentage of non-megachurches as megachurches are based in the inner city, 31 percent vs. 30 percent.

TABLE 4.2
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO NON-MEGACHURCHES FOR RACE AND GEOGRAPHIC REGION

Demographic	Mega-churches	Non-megachurches	Significance level
Race[a]			
majority white (>=50%)	82%	92%	.006***
large majority white (>=80%)	71%	88%	.000***
Region[b]			
rural areas	0%	16%	.000***
towns of less than 10,000 population	2%	33%	.000***
suburban	69%	20%	.000***
inner city	30%	31%	.000***

Total sample N = 410
[a]Valid N = 168 for megachurches and 159 for non-megachurches
[b]Valid N = 164 for megachurches and 172 for non-megachurches
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$

Summary of Findings

The first hypothesis explores the relationship between participation and size. Drawing upon "weak ties" theory, it predicts that opportunities for participation (beyond

worship attendance) will be relatively *higher* in megachurches than in non-megachurches.

This hypothesis was tested in the following ways, each of which favored the hypothesis.

Test #1—Church Focused Groups. Comparing megachurches with non-megachurches on a group-by-group basis, the finding is that megachurches have participation opportunities equal to or in some cases better than non-megachurches for church focused groups. Likewise when a composite score is created, megachurches clearly fare better.

To be more specific, the FACT2000 survey asked, "During the past 12 months, did your congregation have any of the following programs or activities?" For clarity, this dissertation is labeling the various response options to this question as "church focused groups" to indicate that each involves a group that serves others within the church body—church people serving other people inside the same church.

The survey then lists up to 14 possible programs and activities. The previous sentence stated "up to 14" rather than "14" for this reason: the FACT2000 survey instrument differed slightly from denomination to denomination, with the result that some variables lacked a sufficient number of responses for meaningful comparison to be made. This approach to survey construction received further explanation in Chapter 3.

The survey instrument, in asking about the subgroup life of the church, does not ask for a percentage of involvement. Instead it asks only whether a particular program or activity was offered.

The 14 or so possible responses were each interpreted to represent evidence of participation beyond the worship service. The presumption is that when a church, as a voluntary organization, offers programs or activities, these programs or activities are indeed populated with volunteer participants. Logically, if no one joins a program or activity, then it is no longer offered—a group wouldn't exist if people didn't participate in it. In fact, in many churches a program is offered only because sufficient interest has been expressed by potential participants. Thus the emphasis is on structural availability, not the number of participants, but it is reasonable to conclude that the group's existence represents a reasonable proxy for actual participation.

Among the 14 options, this researcher selected 5 that unambiguously require participation and that could be argued as likely to be found in any church, regardless of theological denomination, dominant race, or geographical location. These 5 were then clustered together for analysis.

The FACT2000 survey offered four options for the existence of each type of group: (1) "no," (2) "yes: one-time, short-term, or occasional," (3) "yes: ongoing during a particular season," or (4) "yes: ongoing throughout the year." In the following analysis, all "yes" replies were combined. The rationale was to give maximum benefit of the doubt to smaller churches. The logic was that someone critiquing this analysis might say, "This question is inherently biased toward megachurches. It's easier for them, due to their size, to offer many types of groups, whereas a smaller church doesn't have the same ease of resource allocation." In response, the approach of combining all "yes" answers into a single variable is intentioned to say, "If a smaller church offers the group just *once* during the year, it will count as an area of beyond-worship participation for that church."

The five selected programs or activities are:

• Prayer or meditation groups. Among megachurches, a full 100 percent report having prayer or meditation groups, while 73 percent of non-megachurches have prayer or meditation groups, a difference which is statistically significant.

• Bible study groups other than Sunday school. Among megachurches, 99 percent report having Bible study groups, while 91 percent of non-megachurches have Bible study groups, a difference which is significant.

• Self-help or personal growth groups. Among megachurches, 96 percent report having self-help or personal growth groups, while a dramatically lower 46 percent of non-megachurches provide self-help or personal growth groups, a difference which is significant. One speculation for the dramatic difference is that megachurches can offer a level of specialization that smaller churches cannot. A megachurch, for example, has enough people to offer a support group for adults whose parents suffer from Alzheimer's or for people in the technology field who have recently lost their jobs.

• Youth/teen activities and programs. Among megachurches, 99 percent report having youth/teen activities and programs, while 84 percent of non-megachurches have youth/teen activities and programs, a difference which is significant.

• Choirs. Among megachurches, 99 percent report having choirs, while 76 percent of non-megachurches have choirs, a difference which is significant.

Of the five types of groups described above that serve beyond the church, the average megachurch offers 4.9 types, while non-megachurches offer only 3.6 types, a difference which is statistically significant.

Table 4.3 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 4.3
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO *ALL* NON-MEGACHURCHES FOR *CHURCH*-FOCUSED GROUPS

Type of Group	Megachurch	Non-Megachurch	Valid N	Significance Level
Prayer or meditation groups	100%	73%	334	.000***
Bible study groups	99%	91%	332	.000***
Self-help groups	96%	46%	326	.000***
Youth groups	99%	84%	330	.000***
Choir	99%	76%	329	.000***
COMPOSITE of all five variables	mean of 4.9	mean of 3.6	340	.000***

Total sample N = 410
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$

Test #2—Omitting the Smallest Churches. Some might argue that the above approach to structural analysis does not represent a level playing field between megachurches and non-megachurches, even with the above-mentioned adjustments. They might point out that 67 percent of the non-megachurch sample group is comprised by churches with attendances of 200 and fewer people, 43 percent of the non-megachurch sample group is comprised by churches with attendances of 100 and fewer people, and 19 percent of the non-megachurch sample group have attendances of 50 and fewer. If, for example, *all* adults in a church of 50 belonged to a group, the church *might* have trouble saying ‘yes’ to all five variables, even once a year. Yet, the argument would continue, a megachurch could conceivably say ‘yes’ to all five variables if only 200 of its 2,000-plus

people are involved in a group. In theory that's 100 percent participation in a non-megachurch against only 10 percent-or-less participation in a megachurch.

For that reason, the non-megachurch group was subdivided to isolate those churches with attendances between 200 and 1,999. The same comparisons were then generated.

The findings indicate that the non-megachurch percentages are now improved, but they are still not superior to the reported megachurch participation percentages, as follows. Thus the hypothesis that megachurches have higher participation levels than non-megachurches is still affirmed.

- For prayer or meditation groups, the 100 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 84 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference which is statistically significant. (The 84 percent rate in *larger* non-megachurches is higher than the 73 percent rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).
- For Bible study groups other than Sunday school, the 99 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 98 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference which is *no longer* statistically significant. However, it is still not higher than the score for megachurches. (The 98 percent rate in *larger* non-megachurches is higher than the 91 percent rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).
- For self-help or personal growth groups, the 96 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 62 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference

which is statistically significant. (The 62% rate in *larger* non-megachurches is higher than the 46% rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).

• For youth/teen activities and programs, the 99 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 97 percent in *larger* non-megachurches a difference which is *no longer* statistically significant. However, it is still not higher than the score for megachurches. (The 97 percent rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 84 percent rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).

• For choirs, the 99 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 84 percent in *larger* non-megachurches, a difference which is statistically significant. (The 84% rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 76% rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).

Of the five types of groups described above that serve beyond the church, the average megachurch offers 4.9 types, while non-megachurches offer only 4.2 types, a difference which is statistically significant.

Table 4.4 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 4.4
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO *LARGER* NON-MEGACHURCHES^ FOR *CHURCH*-FOCUSED GROUPS

Type of Group	Megachurch	Non-Megachurch	Valid N	Significance Level
Prayer or meditation groups	100%	84%	225	.000***
Bible study groups	99%	98%	223	.493
Self-help groups	96%	62%	220	.000***
Youth groups	99%	97%	222	.333
Choir	99%	89%	222	.001***
COMPOSITE of all five variables	mean of 4.9	mean of 4.2	226	.000***

^ = churches with attendances between 200 and 1,999
Total sample N = 410
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$

Test #3—Community Focused Groups. Looking next at five examples of church groups that serve beyond the church (church-related activities representing what may be described as social involvement), megachurches again have participation opportunities equal to or in most cases considerably better than non-megachurches. Likewise when a composite score is created, megachurches again fare better. In fact, the hypothesis of megachurches having higher participation than in non-megachurches finds greater support in these externally focused social involvement measures of participation than in internally focused member-support measures.

Several questions in the FACT2000 survey asked about areas of potential participation in church-sponsored activities that reach beyond the church body itself. As with the above-described internal-support cluster of groups, the variables below all involve a response to one general framing question: “In the past 12 months, did your congregation directly provide, or cooperate in providing, any of the following services . . . ?” As discussed earlier, the presumption is that when a church, as a voluntary organization, offers programs or activities, these programs or activities are indeed

populated with volunteer participants. As stated earlier: logically, if no one joins a program or activity, then it is no longer offered—a group wouldn't exist if people didn't participate in it. Thus the emphasis is on structural availability, not the number of participants.

Up to 16 possible service areas were then listed, with 5 of the variables being selected for comparison between megachurches and non-megachurches. The 5 selected were the ones that are extremely likely to involve volunteer time by congregational participants, as compared to an outside group running the service, with the churches limited to donating funds or space in its church facility. The 5 sentence-completion variables selected are:

- Food pantry or soup kitchen. Among megachurches, 95 percent report having a food pantry or soup kitchen, while 89 percent of non-megachurches have a food pantry or soup kitchen, a difference which is statistically significant.
- Cash assistance to families or individuals. Among megachurches, 91 percent report offering cash assistance, while 88 percent of non-megachurches offer cash assistance, a difference which is *not* statistically significant.
- Counseling services or phone hotline. Among megachurches, 91 percent report having counseling services or a phone hotline, while only 46 percent of non-megachurches have counseling services or a phone hotline, a difference which is statistically significant.
- Youth tutoring or literacy programs. Among megachurches, 85 percent report having youth tutoring or literacy programs, while only 18 percent of non-

megachurches have youth tutoring or literacy programs, a difference which is statistically significant.

• Prison or jail ministry. Among megachurches, 86 percent report having prison or jail ministry, while only 31 percent of non-megachurches have youth tutoring or literacy programs, a difference which is statistically significant.

By these five individual standards of participation opportunities in church activities marked by social involvement, megachurches have participation opportunities equal to or in most cases considerably better than non-megachurches.

Likewise when a composite score is created, megachurches clearly fare better than non-megachurches. Of the five types of groups described above that serve beyond the church, the average megachurch offers 4.3 types, while non-megachurches offer only 2.5 types, a difference which is statistically significant.

Table 4.5 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 4.5
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO *ALL*
NON-MEGACHURCHES FOR *COMMUNITY*-FOCUSED GROUPS

Type of Group	Megachurch	Non-Megachurch	Valid N	Significance Level
Food pantry or soup kitchen	95%	89%	348	.042**
Cash assistance to families or individuals	91%	88%	339	.258
Counseling services or phone hotline	91%	46%	349	.000***
Youth tutoring or literacy programs	85%	18%	352	.000***
Prison or jail ministry	86%	31%	355	.000***
COMPOSITE of all five variables	mean of 4.3	mean of 2.5	370	.000***

Total sample N = 410
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$

Test #4—Omitting the Smallest Churches. Some might again argue that the above approach to structural analysis does not represent a level playing field between megachurches and non-megachurches, even with the above-mentioned adjustments. As before, they might point out that more than 80 percent of the non-megachurch sample group is comprised by churches with attendances of fewer than 100 people, many with attendances of fewer than 50. If *all* adults in a church of 50 belonged to a group, the church *might* have trouble saying 'yes' to all five variables, even once a year. Yet, the argument would continue, a megachurch could conceivably say 'yes' to all five variables if only 200 of its 2,000-plus people are involved in a group. In theory that's 100 percent participation in a non-megachurch against only 10 percent or less participation in a megachurch.

For that reason, the non-megachurch group was again subdivided into churches with attendances between 200 and 1,999. The findings show that the non-megachurch percentages improved, but are still not superior to the reported megachurch participation percentages, as follows. Thus the hypothesis that megachurches have higher participation levels than non-megachurches continues to hold.

- For churches offering a food pantry or soup kitchen, the 95 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 94 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference which is *no longer* statistically significant. (The 94 percent rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 89 percent rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).
- For churches offering cash assistance to families or individuals, the 91 percent participation level in megachurches compares 97 percent in larger non-megachurches – the only one of these 5 variables in which non-megachurches now score higher – but the difference is *not* statistically significant. (The 97 percent rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 88 percent rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).
- For churches offering counseling services or phone hotline, the 91 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 63 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference which is statistically significant. (The 63% rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 46% rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).

• For churches offering youth tutoring or literacy programs, the 85 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 27 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference which is statistically significant. (The 27% rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 18% rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).

• For churches offering prison or jail ministry, the 86 percent participation level in megachurches compares to 43 percent in larger non-megachurches, a difference which is statistically significant. (The 43% rate in larger non-megachurches is higher than the 31% rate cited above for *all* non-megachurches).

Of the five types of groups described above that serve beyond the church, the average megachurch offers 4.3 types, while non-megachurches offer only 3.0 types, a difference which is statistically significant.

Table 4.6 summarizes these findings.

TABLE 4.6
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO *LARGER* NON-MEGACHURCHES^ FOR *COMMUNITY*-FOCUSED GROUPS

Type of Group	Megachurch	Non-Megachurch	Valid N	Significance Level
Food pantry or soup kitchen	95%	94%	277	.849
Cash assistance to families or individuals	91%	97%	277	.152
Counseling services or phone hotline	91%	63%	277	.000***
Youth tutoring or literacy programs	85%	27%	277	.000***
Prison or jail ministry	86%	43%	277	.000***
COMPOSITE of all five variables	mean of 4.3	mean of 3.0	244	.000***

^ = churches with attendances between 200 and 1,999
Total sample N = 410
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$

Thus megachurches in general offer more types of groups than do non-megachurches. The gap between megachurches and non-megachurches is larger for community-focused groups than for church-focused groups (the means for community-focused groups are 4.3 in megachurches and 2.5 in non-megachurches, a difference of 1.8, whereas the means for church -focused groups are 4.9 in megachurches and 3.6 in non-megachurches, a difference of 1.3). Thus it seems that social involvement occurs proportionately more in megachurches than in non-megachurches. Apparently megachurches do a better job of reaching out beyond the walls of the church than do non-megachurches.

As a further confirmation of these findings, a comparison was made between megachurches and non-megachurches for the survey statement, “Our congregation is working for social justice.” Table 4.7 shows that the mean for megachurches is 3.4

compared to the mean of 3.0 both for *all* non-megachurches as well for larger non-megachurches (attendance of 200 to 1,999). Both differences are statistically significant.

TABLE 4.7
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO NON-MEGACHURCHES ON STATEMENT "OUR CONGREGATION IS WORKING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE"

Type of Group	Mean	Valid N	Significance Level of non-megachurches compared to megachurches
All non-megachurches (attendance of 1-1,999)	3.0	204	.001**
Larger non-megachurches (attendance of 200-1,999)	3.0	72	.001**
Megachurches (attendance of 2,000 and higher)	3.4	185	

Total sample N = 410
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$

Hypothesis 2: The second hypothesis also proposes that there will be a statistically significant relationship between church size and church participation. The direction of this relationship will depend on the strength of the church's expectations of participation by its members. More specifically, size and participation will be *positively* related under conditions of high expectations for participation. Conversely, size and participation will be *negatively* related under conditions of low expectations for participation.

This hypothesis implies the existence of a statistical interaction. Simply stated, the relationship between participation and size is expected to depend upon or differ according to the level of expectation for participation which churches communicate to their members. This hypothesis can be restated in terms of free riders as follows: Free riding is

defined as non-participation beyond the worship service. Free riding is hypothesized to be higher in megachurches than in non-megachurches when expectations are low, but lower when expectations are higher.

In order to test this hypothesis two regression analyses were conducted (listwise). The independent variables in both analyses are: (1) church "size" as operationalized by the distinction between non-megachurches and megachurches, (2) the strictness of their expectations, and (3) a crossproduct term carrying information about the possible existence of an interaction between these two variables. In the first regression model the number of church groups that serve fellow church participants, labeled as "church focused groups," is the dependent variable. In the second regression model the dependent variable is the number church groups that serve beyond the church, labeled as "community focused groups."

Defining Expectations Statistically. The primary theoretical idea behind the free rider argument is that the larger the group, the lower the level of expectations that are conveyed. Therefore a measure of testing the hypothesis was devised that examines the expectations conveyed at each church. The FACT2000 survey instrument asked, "How much does your congregation, in its worship and education, emphasize the following home and personal practices?" The replies indicate a strictness of expectation—the higher the score, the higher the level of expectation that is conveyed. Five variables were selected, all of which could be strongly argued as evidencing participation:

- Personal prayer, Scripture study, devotions, and other spiritual practices.
- Family devotions
- Fasting

- Keeping the Sabbath or other holy day
- Abstaining from premarital sex

These variables were first tested for reliability using a correlation matrix. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .745 (N=324) is between acceptable and good, affirming that the variables are internally consistent with each other.

Next T-test statistical analysis was applied to measure the difference in the mean for each variable. The findings that follow show that the expectations conveyed in megachurches exceeded those conveyed in non-megachurches in all examples. All were rated on a scale of 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "a great deal."

- Megachurches (mean of 4.7) convey a *higher* expectation for personal prayer and other spiritual practices than do non-megachurches (mean of 4.2), a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches (mean of 4.0) convey a *higher* expectation for people to have family devotions than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.5), a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches (mean of 2.9) convey a *higher* expectation for people to fast than do non-megachurches (mean of 1.9), a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches (mean of 2.8) convey a *lower* expectation for people to keep the Sabbath or other holy day than do non-megachurches (mean of 2.9), but the difference is *not* statistically significant. What reason might explain the lack of difference here? Perhaps Sabbath keeping is less emphasized in a megachurch that offers ministry seven days a week, and indeed provides worship services not only on Sunday mornings, but often Saturday night as well, and in many places

Friday night or Sunday night too. (Interestingly, Lyle Schaller's first book on megachurches used the *seven-day-a-week* phrase as its title [Schaller 1992]).

• Megachurches (mean of 4.0) convey a *higher* expectation for people to abstain from premarital sex than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.3), a difference which is significant.

The composite group totals likewise confirm a statistically significant difference between megachurches and non-megachurches. The mean for megachurches is 3.7 on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), while the mean for non-megachurches is 3.2, a difference which is significant.

The statistics are summarized in Table 4.8.

TABLE 4.8
MEGACHURCHES COMPARED TO NON-MEGACHURCHES FOR EMPHASIS ON EXPECTED PARTICIPATION

Practice	Megachurch mean	Non-Megachurch mean	Significance Level
Personal prayer, personal Scripture study, etc.	3.7	4.2	.000***
Family devotions	4.0	3.5	.000***
Fasting	2.9	1.9	.000***
Keeping the Sabbath or other holy day	2.8	2.9	.420
Abstaining from premarital sex	4.0	3.3	.000***
COMPOSITE of all five variables[a]	3.7	3.2	.000***

Total sample N = 410; valid N = 324
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$
a = Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .745

Defining "Free Riders" Statistically. To test the hypothesis, there also needs to be a way to ask whether people who come to the church's worship services are free riders in the sense that they are "takers" only – what percentage sit in the pews (or equivalent)

but do nothing to contribute in return? In short, do people who attend the worship services participate in any other activities of the church? If so, what percentage do so?

As stated earlier, free riders are people who attend the worship service but do not participate in any other way. Therefore free riders are non-participants. It is possible to assess the degree to which people are free riders by testing for levels of participation.

Verifying by Level of Emotional Agreement. The data analysis above assumes that a person's increase in church participation is linked to a religious motivation. This assumption is relevant for both hypotheses that were tested. If a church's number of social ties help attendees develop greater participation (H1), are they doing so for religious motives? Or if attendees opt to become less of a free rider (H2), are they doing so out of a religious motivation?

Conceivably, a person who chooses to participate in the group life of the church might do so for reasons other than a religious motivation. For example, what if those who attend worship services join one of the church's subunits, but do so solely for motives of social networking, such as developing new business contacts or desiring to be seen with the "right" people for purposes of increased social status or social advancement. It is also conceivable that a person who attends the worship services and joins a church group that will be rebuilding a house for an economically disadvantaged family such as the victim of a tornado or flood, but does so solely because his or her teenage children are participating—thus not for religious motives.

Participation is more than behaviors of the body; it is also an engagement of the mind and heart—something a person believes and affirms. To that end, a measure of putting the hypothesis in context was devised. The FACT2000 survey instrument asked,

"How well does each of the following statements describe your congregation?" The replies indicate an engagement at the emotional level. The reply variables were scaled. Thus the higher the number, the higher the level of emotional-level participation that is scored. Five variables were selected, all of which could be strongly argued as having a measurable participation response:

- Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive
- Our congregation helps members deepen their relationships with God
- Our congregation is a moral beacon in the community
- Members are excited about the future of our congregation
- Our congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose

First the cluster of variables was tested for reliability using a correlation matrix. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .844 is at a good level, affirming that the variables are internally consistent with each other.

Next T-test statistical analysis was applied to measure the difference in the mean for each variable. The findings that follow show that the emotional-level engagement reported in megachurches exceeded those conveyed in non-megachurches in all five examples. All were rated on a scale of 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "a great deal."

- Megachurches (mean of 4.4) report a *higher* sense of their church being spiritually vital and alive than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.8), a difference which is significant.
- Megachurches (mean of 4.4) report a *higher* sense of helping members deepen their relationships with God than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.9), a difference which is significant.

• Megachurches (mean of 4.0) report a *higher* sense of their people being a moral beacon in the community than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.6), a difference which is significant.

• Megachurches (mean of 4.6) report a *higher* sense of their people being excited about the future of their congregation than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.8), a difference which is statistically significant.

• Megachurches (mean of 4.4) report a *higher* sense of having a clear sense of mission and purpose than do non-megachurches (mean of 3.5), a difference which is significant.

The composite group totals for the five variables likewise confirm a statistically significant difference between megachurches and non-megachurches. The mean for megachurches is 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), while the mean for non-megachurches is 3.8, a difference which is statistically significant.

Table 4.9 summarizes the findings:

TABLE 4.9
LEVEL OF STATED EMOTIONAL AGREEMENT FOR ATTENDEES OF MEGACHURCHES VS. NON-MEGACHURCHES

Statement about the congregation	Megachurch mean	Non-Megachurch mean	Valid N	Significance Level
Is spiritually vital and alive	4.4	3.8	390	.000***
Helps members deepen their relationships with God	4.4	3.9	389	.000***
Is a moral beacon in the community	4.0	3.6	326	.000***
Reflects excitement about the future of our congregation	4.6	3.8	389	.000***
Has a clear sense of mission and purpose	4.4	3.5	329	.000***
COMPOSITE of all five variables[a]	4.4	3.8	391	.000***

Total sample N = 410
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$
a = Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .844

Findings. The findings of the first regression analysis indicated that there is evidence of a statistically significant interaction between size and expectations in terms of their effects on participation ($F = 6.36$, df=(1,328), $p = .012$). The fact of a statistically significant interaction is necessary but not sufficient evidence to claim support for this hypothesis since any number of patterns of interaction could have occurred.

In order to determine whether the form of the interaction is that predicted by the hypothesis, four predicted mean participation scores were generated for: (1) a hypothetical non-megachurch operating at *low* level of expectation, defined as one standard deviation below the mean expectation score, (2) a hypothetical megachurch operating at the *same* level of expectation, (3) a hypothetical non-megachurch operating a *high* level of expectation, defined as one standard deviation above the mean expectation

score, and finally, (4) a hypothetical megachurch operating at this same *high* level of expectation. Table 4.10 presents the predicted mean participation scores:

TABLE 4.10
MODEL-BASED, PREDICTED MEAN PARTICIPATION SCORES

	Predicted Mean Participation	Significance Level
Low Expectations		.000***
- Non-megachurches	3.46	
- Megachurches	4.90	
High Expectations		.000***
- Non-megachurches	3.98	
- Megachurches	4.89	

*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$
Participation scores represent counts for the combined number of church-focused groups and community-focused groups offered by each church.

Consistent with the claims made by the hypothesis, under conditions of high expectations, megachurch size does, in fact, display a significantly higher level of participation opportunity than does a smaller non-megachurch counterpart (4.89 vs. 3.98, $p< .001$). However, contrary to the claim made by the hypothesis, there is a positive relationship between size and participation under conditions of low expectations. That is, size and participation are positively related (non-megachurch participation mean of 3.46 vs. megachurch participation mean of 4.90, $p<.001$).

Turning to a second measure of church participation—the number of externally focused social involvement groups—the data failed to support the existence of an interaction between size and expectations of participation ($F = 0.86$, $df = (1,329)$, $p = .36$). Given this finding, no table of predicted participation means is necessary.

Summary. Taken together, these two regression analyses offer limited support for "free rider" theory. Of the four possible tests of this theory only one is consistent with the claims made by the theory. Given that finding, it seems fair to state that free rider theory

does not satisfactorily explain or predict the relationship between church size and the level of participation in the life of the church.

Alternate Explanations

The findings summarized above are designed to test the idea, consistent with social network theory and free rider theory, that size and high expectations can predict participation. What if other variables do so as well? Someone might argue that it is not size per se that explains the higher levels of participation in megachurches (especially when high expectations are present), but other variables in which size and participation are both correlates, and when considered they would appear to be alternative explanations.

Thus in order to test hypotheses further, several control measures were then introduced. They attempt to explore whether the reason megachurches have equal or better participation than non-megachurches is primarily due to their size. Is size indeed the main explanation? In order to address this question, it is necessary to explore whether other variables are involved. Tests of covariance are needed in order to detect whether confounding variables are present, and if so to what level they influence levels of participation.

1. Theology—denomination (beliefs), liturgy (style), and practice. Is there something about belonging to a certain denominational group that makes size attractive, and explains size better than does participation? Could it be that differing standards of theology have a direct bearing on levels of participation, and are correlated both with

participation *and* size? In short, might theological belief, as evidenced in theology group, be more significant as a variable in megachurches and non-megachurches than size?

According to the Gallup organization, denomination strongly influences how often people attend church (or at least whether they *say* they do so). The Princeton, N.J.-based research organization's 2006 ranking of 11,000 people by denomination clearly puts theologically conservative church denominations (Church of Christ, Pentecostal, Southern Baptist, and also the Mormon faith) ahead of others denominations in terms of people who said they attend services "at least once a week" or "almost every week." Table 4.11 offers a breakdown for several denominations:

TABLE 4.11
CHURCH ATTENDANCE BY DENOMINATION, ACCORDING TO 2006 GALLUP RESEARCH[83]

Church of Christ	68 %
Latter Day Saints (Mormon)	67 %
Pentecostal	65 %
Southern Baptist	60 %
Nondenominational Protestant	54 %
Catholic	45 %
Methodist	44 %
Presbyterian	44 %
Lutheran	43 %
Episcopal	32 %

However, does theology group also influence whether church attendees are equally as likely to *participate*? Also, only in extremely rare cases does a megachurch come into existence as an instant megachurch. Instead it starts small and grows to become a megachurch. After reaching megachurch size, it must then maintain a certain growth momentum in order not to decline in size. Might it happen that those theological

[83] Adelle M. Banks. 2006. "Mormons Go to Church More Often Than Most." Religion News Service. April 24. (http://www.sltrib.com/faith/ci_3746550).

traditions that emphasize outreach, sharing one's faith, and inviting friends to church tend to grow into megachurches far more so than churches in denominations with less evangelistic theology? And if so, would theology—as expressed by denominational group—offer a better explanation for size than participation does?

Likewise, does the role of ritual and liturgy (as theological style) influence whether church attendees are equally as likely to participate? It could be imagined, for example, that the more ritualistic churches, such as Lutheran and Episcopal congregations, which typically follow a more prescribed order of service and include more clearly defined roles for congregational response, perhaps generate a lower level of overall congregation beyond the worship service itself. If true, would these more highly ritualistic churches support values of "spectator Christianity" more than lower-ritual churches?

As noted in the data overview section of this chapter, and illustrated in Tables 4.12 and 4:13, megachurches span a wide range of denominations. Two thirds are part of a denomination with the remaining third being independent and non-denominational. The megachurch denominational roster includes such high-liturgy groups as Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians and others, but a far larger percentage of megachurches are part of low-church denominations such as Baptist, Assemblies of God, and Seventh-Day Adventists. The approach taken in this dissertation of using two different types of participation (church-focused groups and community-focused groups) was designed, in part, to compensate for denominational differences in emphasis. The rationale is to have two different ways to test for participation opportunities.

The theology groups were identified by using the one variable in the FACT2000 survey that deals with theology. It was added by those who keyed in the survey responses and so every survey response was coded for this variable. (The survey was administered through 41 denominational groups, and it therefore made sense to add the denominational coding at the point of data entry rather than on the survey itself.) Denominations were pre-assigned to one of four options: liberal (Episcopal, United Church of Christ, United Presbyterian, Unitarian-Universalist), moderate (American Baptist, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran, Mennonite, Reformed Church, United Methodist), evangelical (Assemblies of God, Christian Reformed, Nazarene, Seventh-Day Adventist, Southern Baptist, Church of Christ), and historic black (AME Zion, Baptist, Church of God in Christ, select United Methodist, and select Presbyterian).

For purposes of regression analysis, two new "theology" variables were created from this information. They were developed through a recoding of the “weight” variable that survey coders had added to each of the 41 groups (Lutheran, Episcopal, etc.) in order to approximate each group's placement in the universe of churches (weight times returned percentage equals actual percentage of the overall church population). The lists of weights with their corresponding denominations are publicly available (or will be shortly) in the support files for FACT2000 on www.thearda.com. Since almost all of the weights are unique, it was possible to work backwards to identify the denominational group represented by each weight, ultimately with 100 percent success. Having done so, the following new variables were developed, which are featured in Tables 4:12 and 4.13:

• "Denominational Group" uses the survey variable “denominational family” and recodes it to represent three Protestant theology groups: evangelical, moderate, and

liberal. Historic black churches, previously a separate variable, were recoded to join the other three—African-American Methodist churches were put with all other Methodists, African-American Presbyterians with all other Presbyterians, etc.

• "Ritual" is a new variable to distinguish between high church and low church. A denomination was considered high church if it tends to have a formal liturgy in worship and a strongly hierarchical approach to church governance, as identified in such resources as the *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Mead 2005). Ritual was scaled as 1 for yes (high church ritualistic) and 0 for no (not high church or ritualistic). Thus the control for the effect of liturgy (high or low) involves high ritual as the reference category and low ritual as the explicitly represented dummy variable.

Table 4.12 shows the recoding sequence. Table 4.13 presents the three theology groups (evangelical, moderate, liberal), and then identifies the percentage of each group that is high ritual and low ritual.

TABLE 4.12
THEOLOGY AS INDICATED BY LEVEL OF RITUAL^ AND DENOMINATIONAL GROUP†

Denomination name	High or Low Ritual	Theology Group (recoded)	Original Theology Group
American Baptist, Central	Low	MP	MP
American Baptist, CT	Low	MP	MP
American Baptist, OH	Low	MP	MP
American Baptist, other	Low	MP	MP
Assemblies of God	Low	EP	EP
Christian Reformed	High	EP	EP
Church of Christ	Low	EP	EP
Disciples of Christ	Low	MP	MP
Episcopalian	High	LP	LP
Historic Black: Baptist	Low	MP	HBC
Historic Black: Church of God	Low	EP	HBC
Historic Black: Other Methodist	High	MP	HBC

Historic Black: Presbyterian	High	MP	HBC
Historic Black: United Methodist	High	MP	HBC
Independent Christian	Low	EP	EP
Lutheran (ELCA)	High	MP	MP
Megachurch	Low	EP	EP
Mennonite	Low	MP	MP
Nazarene	Low	EP	EP
Non-denominational	Low	EP	EP
Presbyterian	High	MP	LB
Reformed Church in America	High	MP	MP
Seventh Day Adventist	Low	EP	EP
Southern Baptist	Low	EP	EP
Unitarian Universalist	Low	LP	LP
United Church of Christ	High	LP	LP
United Methodist	High	MP	MP

Theology Group Codes: EP = Evangelical Protestant; MP = Moderate Protestant; LP = Liberal Protestant; HBC = Historic Black Churches

†Adapted from the document FACT2000ArchiveWeights.xls, available at www.thearda.com

^Liturgy categories created based on description in *Handbook of Denominations in America* (Mead 2005)

TABLE 4.13
RITUAL IN MEGACHURCHES BY DENOMINATIONAL CLUSTER

Theology Group (recoded)	% of Strata[†]	% High Ritual	% Low Ritual
Evangelical Protestant	78% (N=159)	15% (N=15)	59% (N=62)
Moderate Protestant	18% (N=36)	56% (N=55)	37% (N=39)
Liberal Protestant	5% (N=10)	29% (N=29)	5% (N=5)
Totals	100% (N=205)	100% (N=99)	100% (N=106)

N = 205

[†]By comparison, non-megachurches are 38% evangelical, 46% moderate, and 17% liberal

The data introduced above and summarized in Tables 4.12 and 4.13 were then used to create Table 4.14. Various regressions (checking each for multicolinearity) found that controlling for ritual (high church liturgy vs. low church liturgy) has a weak-to-modest effect on participation opportunities (betas[84] between .14 and .19). Likewise

[84] "Beta" is a statistical term that calibrates the unique effect of the focal predictor, controlling for all other effects in the model. A beta of 0 means this particular predictor has no impact. Scores of .10 through .29 are considered to be a weak influence, .30 through .59 are moderate, .60 and higher are strong. The maximum possible beta score is +1 and the minimum beta score is -1.

controlling for theological group has a weak-to-modest effect on participation opportunities (betas between .14 and .20). These findings represent tests conducted with two participation-opportunity variables: the cluster of church-focused groups and the cluster of community-focused groups. By contrast, church size had a moderate effect on participation opportunities (betas between .53 and .56) when controlling for ritual and theological group. Stated more precisely, controlling for the variables ritual and theological group, a one-standard deviation increase in church size is associated with .531 of a standard deviation increase in church-focused groups. The relationship is positive and has statistical significance. This is a moderate-size effect. In the community-focused group, the rank order is basically the same, but the strength of the relationship changes, becoming slightly stronger at .555.

The R^2 of size alone is .29 (p=.000) when the dependent variable is the number of church-focused groups offered and .31 (p=.000) when the dependent variable is the number of community-focused groups offered. Upon adding the two control variables – ritual and theological group – the R^2 is either .31 (p=.001) or .33 (p=.001) as Table 4.14 shows, indicating that these variables together account for roughly one third of the variation in number of participation opportunities (the dependent variable). The more R^2 increases, the more the model fits the data better in most cases.

Thus according to Table 4.14, controlling for theology did not alter the relationship between size and participation. That is, it does not eviscerate the effect of size on participation opportunities. This finding was the greatest surprise of the dissertation to this researcher, who strongly suspected that either denominational group

(theological beliefs) or liturgy (theological style) would merit a larger theological influence between size and participation.

TABLE 4.14
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES ON CHURCH SIZE CONTROLLING FOR RITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL GROUP

Control Variable	Beta in *church-focused* groups	Significance level	Beta in *community-focused* groups	Significance level
Ritual	.192	.002***	.141	.014**
Theological group	.202	.001***	.143	.014**
Church size	.531	.000***	.555	.000***
MODEL SUMMARY	R^2 for these three control variables in *church-focused* groups is .312 (p=.001***)		R^2 for these three control variables in *community-focused* groups is .326 (p=.001***)	

N=340 for church-focused groups; N=370 for community-focused groups.
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$
The dependent variable is participation opportunities.

One more theological angle was also able to be explored within the limits of the FACT2000 data. Would it be possible to differentiate people who adhere to a certain set of religious values or behaviors from those who do not? As Robert Wuthnow points out throughout *Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), for example, it may be increasingly helpful in this modern era to explain theology as practice: to identify churches not by their name brand (Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) nor by their name brand's theological camp (evangelical, moderate, liberal), but by their practices such as an emphasis on daily Bible reading, political advocacy, etc. And if such a distinction could be made, how would such a variable influence participation?

The FACT2000 survey (reproduced in Appendix A) contains a very limited number of statements about theological practice. The ones that are arguably the most

specific have been introduced earlier in this dissertation under the rubric of "strictness of expectation." At least three of these could also illustrate theology as practice:

- Personal prayer, Scripture study, devotions, and other spiritual practices.
- Family devotions
- Abstaining from premarital sex

These variables were first tested for reliability using a correlation matrix. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .766 (N=330) is between acceptable and good, affirming that the variables are internally consistent with each other.

Various regressions (checking each for multicolinearity) found that controlling for theology as practice has a weak, albeit statistically significant, effect on participation opportunities (betas between .18 and .24), as summarized in Table 4.15. These findings represent tests conducted with two participation-opportunity variables: the cluster of church-focused groups and the cluster of community-focused groups.

Thus controlling for theology as practice did not meaningfully reduce the relationship between size and participation. Size is still the much stronger effect. The R^2, representing the amount of variance explained by these two combined variables, is either .36 (p=.001) or .50 (p=.001), indicating that these two independent variables together account for between one third and one half of the variation in participation opportunities (the dependent variable).

TABLE 4.15
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES ON CHURCH SIZE CONTROLLING FOR THEOLOGY AS DEFINED BY PRACTICE

Control Variable	Beta in *church-focused* groups	Significance level	Beta in *community-focused* groups	Significance level
Theology as practice	.235	.000***	.178	.000***
Church size	.474	.000***	.623	.000***
MODEL SUMMARY	R^2 for these two control variables in *church-focused* groups is .359 (p=.001***)		R^2 for these two control variables in *community-focused* groups is .497 (p=.001***)	

N=332 for church-focused groups; N=333 for community-focused groups.
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$
The dependent variable is participation opportunities

Table 4.16 lists all previously mentioned control variables (all related to theology), as well as three additional variables: region of country, section of town, and race.

2. Region of country. It might also be argued that geographic region is a confounding variable. Suppose Southern hospitality, for example, with its values of friendliness and relational warmth, could explain participation levels better than size could. People have more "weak ties" because the culture invites a larger network of friendships, thereby explaining higher participation levels at church. It could be suggested further that the Southern region of the United States, as the country's historical Bible belt with high levels church attendance, is also a place where people go to church to socialize and make business contacts. An environment of social acceptability becomes an environment in which people more naturally develop weak ties.

The concept of region was operationalized as a collection of dummy variables since the region variable has multiple categories: northeast, northcentral, west, and south.

The variable “south” served as the omitted or reference category. The idea is to learn whether region as a construct is statistically significant in predicting the number of church-focused or community-focused groups.

Regression analysis calculated betas only in the -.06 to .07 range, none with statistical significance when controlling for all the other variables in the model. Thus the analysis does not support the argument that geographic region explains the relationship between size and participation. Geographic region therefore does not prove to be a significant explanation of why megachurches offer more internally focused member-support groups or more externally focused social-involvement groups than do their non-megachurch counterparts. Table 4.16 summarizes these findings, demonstrating again that by far the strongest effect in this model is size.

3. Section of town. Developing the geographic argument from a different angle, one might argue that the difference in participation between megachurches and non-megachurches is really a function of the section of town in which a church it is based. It might be argued that a church in a newer suburb might explain its size primarily by the growth inherent in a new community with the accompanying desire by new residents to make relational connections. Chapter One of this dissertation, for example, cites a cover story in the *New York Times* Magazine which describes some megachurches "as a supplier of the social infrastructure otherwise lacking in ... the rural West." Perhaps controls for section of the city will reveal some of these "social infrastructure" provisions that some megachurches create. Perhaps section of town can explain size more than participation does.

Regression analysis shows a weak, albeit statistically significant, effect on how size relates to participation opportunities (betas of .17 and .18), when controlling for section of town. Table 4.16 summarizes these findings, putting them in context to demonstrate again that size still holds the lion's share of the predictive power of this model.

4. Race. Finally, race of the congregation is another possible alternate explanation for the difference in participation between megachurches and non-megachurches. Conceivably, churches that are more racially homogeneous might be a more comfortable context for inviting participation: people feel more at home in their respective cultural identity, perhaps know each other better, and thus are more comfortable in participation and more likely to do so. Regression analysis, however, shows race to be of minimal import, with betas in the very low range of .03 to .07, neither of which was statistically significant. In the regression analysis, a scale was created with 0 representing majority nonwhite and 1 representing majority white, as defined by 80 percent or higher.

To summarize Table 4.16 from an interpretive point of view, church size is overwhelmingly the strongest predictor of the number of groups of any type, regardless of the particular dependent variable under investigation. The larger the church, the more opportunities are being offered to participate in groups. The second strongest predictor is theology as practice, which is noticeably weaker than church size, but is uniformly ranked second.

TABLE 4.16
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES ON CHURCH SIZE CONTROLLING FOR REGION OF COUNTRY, SECTION OF TOWN, RACE, AND THEOLOGY

Control Variable	Beta in church-focused groups	Significance level	Beta in community-focused groups	Significance level
Ritual	.140	.030**	.042	.456
Theological group	.161	.018**	.012	.835
Theology as practice	.256	.000***	.185	.000***
Region of country**				
- northeast	.073	.154	.035	.428
- northcentral	.066	.227	.039	.411
-west	.040	.454	-.061	.184
Section of town	.173	.001***	.177	.000***
Race	.065	.183	.028	.508
Church size	.408	.000***	.619	.000***
MODEL SUMMARY	R^2 for these seven control variables in *church-focused* groups is .406		R^2 for these seven control variables in *community-focused* groups is .555	

N=293 for church-focused groups; N=294 for community-focused groups.
*significant at $p < 0.10$, **significant at $p < 0.05$, ***significant at $p < 0.01$
The dependent variable is participation opportunities
**south as reference category

CHAPTER FIVE

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Quantitative surveys can provide researchers with insights on a wide range of questions, but not every imaginable question. New questions can arise after survey data has been captured and analyzed, and one method of dealing with follow-up questions is to conduct qualitative interviews. Contexts with unanswered questions are especially likely when doing secondary analysis of someone else's survey, as is the case with this dissertation, which has used the Hartford Institute for Religion Research Faith Communities Today 2000 (FACT2000) survey.

The research question behind this dissertation explores whether megachurches can fairly be characterized as "spectator Christianity." In order to fill in some of the informational gaps about megachurches that remain unaddressed by the FACT2000 survey, a plan was envisioned to gather megachurch participants in different focus-group settings. The idea was to ask them a series of questions about their connection points (strong ties/weak ties) and their responses to various expectations of participation conveyed by their church (free rider issues).

Initial efforts at gathering an interview group were unsuccessful when the researcher visited a megachurch, met people on his own, struck up a conversation, introduced his Fordham dissertation topic and accompanying Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements, and tried to conduct independent interviews. The unwillingness of people to participate in an interview with a total stranger, either individually or as a small

group, blocked all prospects of holding a lengthy or in-depth interview. "I'm just not comfortable enough to participate in your survey,"[85] one woman said bluntly.

In order to communicate a sense of legitimacy and credibility with parishioners, it became necessary to ask the church office (usually the senior pastor directly) to identify and recommend worship attendees who might be asked to participate in a focus group. This approach, while opening the door to making an interview possible, was also likely to increase the group's bias in favor of the church. The church office could be predicted to select people who are already connected within the church and whom the office thinks has had a positive experience with the church. However, a potentially biased interview group is arguably better than no group at all. On the positive side, such groups also create benefits that come from each person being interested, cooperative, informed, and well experienced in the life of the church.

Four different megachurches were contacted and asked for permission and help in setting up focus-group style interviews. The range of questions from which each interview was adapted can be found in the appendix to this dissertation along with the IRB approval letter. Among the bank of possible questions that could be asked of focus groups, each interview began with initial questions of social context. Examples include "What first brought you to this church?" and "How long have you been attending?" These questions established the respondent's context and credibility. Likewise it was important to include questions that might confirm or challenge the FACT2000 survey analysis as related to this dissertation's hypotheses. Examples include weak ties-related (H1) questions like "How does the number of acquaintances you have or have not

[85] All quotes are accurate representations of what was said, but the grammar has been smoothed in many cases.

developed at this church affect your level of participation beyond attending the worship service?" and free rider-related (H2) questions like "In what ways does a sense of expectation of participation conveyed by this church help or hinder your involvement level beyond attending the worship service?"

One of the interview sessions (in a fifth megachurch) was so dismally unsuccessful that it was not used or counted among the interviews that follow. It was the only one in which a staff pastor asked to sit in on the interview. Unfortunately he dominated the group, offering long-winded commentary on almost every question. Techniques such as "let's hear now from someone who hasn't spoken" didn't work. Lack of direct eye contact didn't faze him either. Perhaps participants were intimated by his presence, or perhaps they were simply deferring to him. People seemed reluctant to offer their oral history, and instead became more focused on giving the "right" answer to each question. The overall experience was so odd that no useful information was obtained.

Four other interview groups achieved just the opposite outcome. They led to very open dialogue, with several offers for the researcher to email or phone for follow-up detail, if desired.

Since the researcher has attended the worship service at each of the megachurches in which he conducted the focus group, a general introduction can be made for each of the four:

1. Frontline, a megachurch-within-a-megachurch just outside Washington, D.C., was profiled in the Introduction to this dissertation.

2. Hawthorne Gospel Church traces its roots to 1915, when evangelist Billy Sunday conducted a campaign in Paterson, New Jersey. As a result, a "ladies' Bible class

for converts" was begun, according to the church's website.[86] This led to an ongoing Sunday-afternoon Bible classes for men and women held in the fire hall of Hawthorne, a few miles north of Paterson. In 1925 the group, which by then involved people from various area churches, added a Sunday school with 24 children initially attending. In 1930 it was formally organized as Hawthorne Gospel Mission, and renamed in 1932 as Hawthorne Gospel Church. From the beginning, according to the church's website, emphasis was placed on "steady Bible teaching and evangelistic messages." It has never been affiliated with a denomination.

The small congregation kept growing and in 1934, Herrmann G. Braunlin, who had served since the beginning as a leader while working as a businessperson in New York City, was invited by the congregation's board to serve as their full-time pastor, a post he held for 61 years until his retirement in 1986. The church board then invited the youth pastor, Rev. John Minnema, to become senior pastor, a post he holds through the present.

Major ongoing ministries include the following, with year of origin in parenthesis: Hawthorne Evening Bible School (1935); Vacation Bible School (1937); radio broadcast of the Sunday morning worship service (1943); young married couples' fellowship (1953); senior citizens' ministry (1972); Hawthorne Christian Academy (1981); Signed with Love ministry to the deaf (1982); Backyard Bible Clubs (1985); and New Beginnings recovery ministry (1990). Missionary support has been constant, and by 2006 the church was supporting over 60 missionary families around the world.

During Braunlin's time, attendance grew from under 100 in 1935 to over 500 in 1954, when the church went to two morning worship services plus two Sunday school

[86] Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.hgcusa.org/index.php?pageID=21&history_list=305,15).

sessions to accommodate those who came. In 1999, three morning services were instituted in addition to the evening service with an average total attendance of 2,600 adults and children each Sunday. At the same time, attendance at the Sunday school grew to an average of 900.

During the 1930s, property was bought along Route 208, then an unpaved road and today a major six-lane artery between New York and New Jersey. Buildings were added and enlarged as the church grew, as was additional acreage. Today the church facility sits on 22 acres. The sanctuary is its most prominent building. Most visible of all is a cross, with the accompanying saying, "To know Christ and make Him known."

The worship facility is somewhat simple in layout. The large foyer (equivalent to a narthex or vestibule in more formal churches), decorated plainly and featuring missionary photos on the walls, offers several clear-glass doors into the sanctuary. The sanctuary itself is a semi-circular room with a balcony ringing the rear of the room. The main floor seats 800 and the balcony 300. Padded pews are all angled toward a platform area which contains a large pulpit at center, with a 50-seat ascending-level choir loft behind it. On the wall behind the choir is a map of the world with a cross prominent as well as the statement, "Go ye into all the world and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)." There are no stained glass, statues, and other religious accoutrements. Nor did any of the leaders dress in clerical garb, except the choir which was robed. The preacher wore a conservative suit, white shirt, and tie.

The worship service attended by this researcher lasted 75 minutes and consisted largely of worship songs (mainly classic hymns accompanied only by organ and piano), a sermon, and a call for a response at the conclusion of the sermon—an opportunity for

anyone strongly moved by the service to go forward to talk with a prayer counselor while the congregation sang its concluding song. One large, central projection screen was used for song lyrics, but the screen was rolled up during the rest of the service. The church presents itself as conservative both in theology and worship style, and an usher said that the service time I attended had the most conservative musical style.

The dominant ethnic group is white at perhaps 70 percent. The second-largest group, which comprises a minority of perhaps 25 percent, is Asian. The remaining 5 percent seemed Hispanic and African American.

3. Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, New York, was started in 1989 by its denomination, The Presbyterian Church in America, an evangelical breakaway from the mainline Presbyterian body (Mead, 1995, 252). The congregation's website describes the church's origin as a "response to a work of God already in progress."[87] New believers were finding it difficult to locate a church which they could attend and to which they could bring their skeptical friends. The denomination assigned Dr. Tim Keller, a professor at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, to head the work. In 1989 Tim and his wife Kathy began meeting with a group of about 15 people interested in praying about planting a new church for professional New Yorkers in the heart of Manhattan. They began meeting in April 1989 in a facility owned by a Seventh Day Adventist congregation. By Christmas, attendance was numbering approximately 250 and by the first anniversary Redeemer Presbyterian had added three pastoral staff to work in administration, small groups, and Christian education.

By early spring of 1993 Redeemer had outgrown the Adventist church, even though it was holding four services a Sunday in a building that seated nearly 400.

[87] Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.redeemer2.com/about/values/index.cfm?fuseaction=history).

Services then moved to Hunter College Auditorium on the east side of Manhattan. Today Redeemer has four worship services meeting in three locations each Sunday. There is a morning and evening service on the east and west side of Central Park. The church's website gives attendances, as of September 2005, as follows:

> The West side morning service which meets at 9:15 AM, averages between 500 and 600 people in attendance. The West side evening service which meets at 7:00 PM, averages about 950 people in attendance. The East side morning service which meets at 10:30 AM, averages between 1,800 and 2,000 people in attendance. And the East side evening service which meets at 5:45 PM, averages between 900 and 1,000 people in attendance.[88]

Thus Redeemer's average Sunday attendance, combining all four worship services, has grown to approximately 4,200 as of September 2005, and to 4,500 by May 2006, according to a May 2, 2006, personal email from one of the pastors. Further, the worshipping congregation is 80 percent young, single adults, reflecting the demographics of Manhattan. The dominant ethnic group is white, and a sizable percentage is Asian.

Worship is done in three different styles, according to the church's website[89]: traditional, eclectic, and jazz. The Sunday-morning services at Hunter College's 2,000-seat Assembly Hall (69th Street and Park Ave.) are the traditional-style services. The stage area is marked by a mammoth wood-framed organ, a small pulpit, and a thick stage curtain across the back of the stage. An illuminated cross, created by an artist in the congregation, hangs each week in front of the curtain, suspended from the ceiling. The padded theater seats are arranged in a slight arc. The floor is pitched at a slight decline, amphitheater style. A balcony runs across the rear of the room. The preacher wears a suit.

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[88] Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.redeemer2.com/about/values/index.cfm?fuseaction=history).

[89] Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.redeemer2.com/about/services).

The worship leader, who may be male or female, is in business attire. No overhead screen is used for song lyrics, Scripture, sermon illustrations or the like.

The worship service on the day this researcher visited was formal and liturgical, marked by hymns, responsive readings from Scripture, unison recitations of creed, a formal confession of sins, and a sermon. The sermon, which made many references to Scripture, examined a thought-provoking idea, and then challenged hearers to make a decision of action in response. The service concluded with a hymn, a prayer, and a benediction.

Reference was made during the service to church-planting efforts spearheaded by Redeemer Presbyterian, which has begun to ring metropolitan New York City with congregations it has parented: two in 1994, one in 1995, one in 1999, one in 2001, and one in 2005. All share a highly positive view of the city as the strategic center for ministry. According to the Redeemer Presbyterian website, churches in the “Redeemer movement” share the distinctives of intelligent teaching, thoughtful engagement with culture, excellence in music, worship that draws on a variety of both traditional and contemporary sources, a non-condemning evangelistic heart for those who don’t believe, and a balanced concern for ministry both in word and deed. "The implications of the Gospel must be recognized and lived out in every area of life, whether private or public,” says Keller.

Reference was also made during the service to Hope for New York (HFNY), which is Redeemer’s mercy arm, a separately incorporated organization that is thoroughly involved in and supported by the life of the church. HFNY equips and mobilizes Redeemer’s congregation, friends and partner churches to contribute their

resources so that mercy and justice ministries will flourish in New York. HFNY partners with carefully chosen affiliate ministries that have holistic (restoration of mind, body, soul) programs. Started in 1992, HFNY's core values reflect Redeemer's focus on connecting word and deed in ministry, offering the whole gospel to the city, understanding the strategic importance of the city to God, and emphasizing the prophetic, priestly, and kingly aspects of leadership in ministry. Working from a mission to "help others help others," HFNY helps the congregation respond to the Gospel call to care for the poor. HFNY bridges the gap between potential volunteers or donors in the church, and the hard-working urban ministries that need their help.[90]

4. The Father's House, Rochester, NY, was founded in 1979 as New Creation Fellowship under the leadership of Tom Peers. Peers had graduated from high school and a community college in Rochester. He worked as a hospital emergency room technician, and then entered the United States Air Force in 1976 during which time he experienced a life-changing religious conversion and vocational call to ministry. After leaving the service, he attended Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he met and married his wife Debby.

After starting the church in their home in 1979, the Peers found a civic association hall on the northwest edge of Rochester which the young church rented for their worship services. In 1982 the growing church relocated to an old furniture warehouse building in Rochester. In 1985 the church outgrew the warehouse and purchased an unused church facility on the southwest side of Rochester. The location was at the intersection of two streets, a mile from the expressway, and on the border of where residential housing ended and farmland began.

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[90] Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.redeemer2.com/about/hfny/index.cfm).

According to the church's website[91], in the early 1990s the church embraced a stronger personal evangelism focus reaching out to non-believers. The elements of drama and multi-media, theater lighting, and teachings based on life issues were incorporated into the weekend services.

The Peers moved to another ministry, and in 1998 the church called Rev. Ron Langford and his wife Mary Langford as their pastoral family. The church continued to grow, and in 2001 a second Sunday service was added.

In 2002, the Langfords had moved on and Rev. Pierre du Plessis and his wife Marlize were called. In late 2002 the church added a third service, by the end of 2002 the church had doubled in size.

In 2003 the name was changed "as we sensed God changing the character of the church,"[92] according to the church's website. As attendance continued to grow, building expansions continued until 2005 when the property was stretched to the maximum. Cars were having to park across the street in an open field, roadside police were needed weekly to reduce traffic congestion, and most worship services filled to a standing-room-only capacity in the church facility, whose interior walls had been creatively modified to cram up to 400 people legally into the room, with dozens of others in various overflow hallways and rooms, plus children meeting simultaneously for children's church in their own room downstairs. By this point the church had gone to four weekly services (one Saturday evening targeted to young single adults, plus three Sunday morning—8:00, 10:00, and 11:45). Total weekend attendance—adults and children—was bumping the 2,000 mark. In a one-on-one conversation with this researcher, the senior pastor

[91] http://www.tfhny.org

[92] http://www.tfhny.org

acknowledged that he fears he will need to go to six weekly services during fall 2006, in order to accommodate the ongoing growth, and this indeed happened in September 2006.

The church then voted to relocate completely, purchased a large farmland tract of land across the street (where most people currently park their cars) for a new 1,200-seat worship facility with accompanying classrooms. A $7 million capital campaign began that continues as this dissertation is being written. As a humorous sidenote, this researcher was present on the day the new facility plan was unveiled, and one of the biggest and most spontaneous moments of congregational applause occurred with Pastor du Plessis explained that whereas the current building has only 4 women's toilets the new building will have 38!

Worship services are marked by high energy and creativity through the 90-minute gathering. The service attended by this researcher began with upbeat, praise music with song lyrics projected on up to a dozen flat-screen television monitors (the gerrymander-style room configuration does not allow direct line of sight for perhaps one third of the worshipers). The band of guitarists, bass, percussionist, and vocalists made generous use of the subwoofers in the speaker system. The congregation, generously represented by people in their 20s and 30s, immediately began singing and clapping with the music. The worship was interspersed by a couple of prayer times led by people who appeared to be lay leaders in the congregation. Then a poignant drama dealt with a real-life issue (fear of taking a risk for God) followed by a sermon that drew generously from Scripture and contemporary examples, including the drama, to illustrate how God might change the hearers.

After the sermon, the worship band led the congregation in one more song. The pastor gave a prayer of benediction, and then said, “Now get out of here!” This was his not-so-gentle reminder that another crowd was beginning to gather for the next service, and so worshipers should visit with each other anywhere other than this room.

The dominant ethnic group is white, but a sizable minority presence is evident at every level, from staff to congregation. The second-largest group is African-American followed by Hispanic.

Of the four megachurches profiled in this chapter, The Father’s House is the most multi-ethnic, followed by Frontline and Redeemer Presbyterian. The only strongly homogeneous church racially was Hawthorne Gospel.

Comparison to FACT2000

It should be observed that this sampling of four megachurches does not represent the full spectrum of megachurches in such important areas as theology, denomination, clergy age, geographical region, church age, or attendance, as Table 5.1 indicates. The sample interview churches are solidly evangelical (more so than the overall average), non-denominational (whereas most FACT2000 churches are denominational), with a younger senior pastor (age 44 vs. age 52 for FACT20000), from the Northeast (which is only 6 percent of the FACT2000 response group), younger in church age (33 years old compared to 50 years old for the FACT2000 response group), and with slightly lower attendance (2,800 vs. 3,392 for the FACT2000 response group).

TABLE 5.1
PROFILE COMPARISON OF FACT2000 MEGACHURCHES TO INTERVIEW MEGACHURCHES

Church	Theology Group	Denomi-national	Age of Clergy	Geographic region	Yr. Church Began	Atten-dance
FACT2000 megachurches (medians)	78% EP* 18% MP 5% LP	33% no 67% yes	52	6% NE^ 21% NC 40% S 33% W	1956 (50 years old)	3,392
Four-church sample below (medians)	100% EP	75% no 25% yes	44	100% Northeast	1973 (33 years old)	2,800
1. Father's House	EP	No	41	Northeast	1979	2,000
2. Frontline	EP	No	36	Northeast	1994	2,200
3. Haw-thorne Gospel Church	EP	No	44	Northeast	1930	2,500
4. Redeemer Presbyterian	EP	Yes	56	Northeast	1989	4,500

*EP = Evangelical Protestant, MP = moderate Protestant, LP = liberal Protestant
^NE = Northeast, NC = North Central, S = South, W = West

General Observations

Rochester. The responses were very confirming of what this dissertation found in regard to its two hypotheses. The following poignant dialogue serves as an illustration. One woman, single and age 25, came by herself to The Father's House—as a young, fast-growing megachurch in Rochester, New York, and has been visiting it approximately every other week for several months. When asked, "Do you participate in any of the church's activities beyond the worship service?" she indicated that she has tried to

without success. “I don’t know how to get connected here,” Giselle said (all names have been changed, but genders, ages, and geographic locations are accurate). She then related a story of checking a box in the worship folder to indicate her interest in joining one of the church’s small groups, receiving a phone call a week later from the church office with suggestion of two groups she might contact, and doing so, but not actually visiting either group because “the church’s approach felt a little strange.” She explained that she didn’t feel that she would fit into either group, without even phoning either group. (This researcher later discovered that the pastor overseeing the church’s small group ministry had in previous months misused his authority, attempting to lead many of the small groups to start a separate church, which indeed happened. When Giselle contacted the church, it was in the middle of recovering from this schism and so its small group organization was in disarray.)

“Why do you feel a need to get involved beyond attending the worship?” I asked Giselle. She explained that she wants to participate further as she applies to heart the challenges she receives during the worship service, especially the sermon, such as when the pastor talks of praying daily to cultivate a faith relationship with God and doing good to others. “I guess it’s important to be accountable,” she said. But she seems stymied for how to build relationships with other people at the church.

When asked, “Why did you leave your previous church to come to this one?” Giselle explained that she had been very active in a smaller church, which her boyfriend also attended, and likewise had taken leadership roles in that church. When they broke up, Giselle found it extremely awkward to continue attending the same church, since she

saw him everywhere there. The 8-10 person young adult group she had been part of had been dwindling in attendance, and so these circumstances all triggered a move.

She smiled in agreement when asked if she was influenced to visit The Father's House by the knowledge that a large number of single, young males would be present. "That's definitely a plus," she said, "but what got me to visit was not the guys but the reputation this church had as being very 'with it' spiritually. The old college friend who invited me had moved away by the time I was ready to visit the church, but I looked at the website and that was enough to get me to visit alone. I'm a bit unusual in that I came alone—and then I found a new boyfriend through another connection, not the church."

"Are you meeting new people at The Father's House?" I asked. "No, and it's very frustrating," she said. "The place is so packed out that you can never sit in the same place, and no one else can either. It's so crowded. You don't even meet the same people in the parking lot because everything is so random there too." As a result, Giselle has attended every two or three weeks for several months, but still doesn't know anyone by name. When her boyfriend is in town (his work involves a lot of weekend travel), he comes with her. Ironically, Giselle's old boyfriend now comes to this church, as Giselle heard through a mutual friend, but she's never seen him there, presumably because there are so many crowds and services.

On the one hand Giselle doesn't want to be a free rider (H2). When asked if she considers herself a free rider she said no. "I give a tithe of my income to this church, even mailing it to the church when I miss," she says. "And I plan to get more involved one day, probably in the greeter ministry to because seating is so random and chaotic."

On the other hand, she hasn't yet gotten involved in a group of the church—is it perhaps because she has no social bridges through which to do so (H1)? "I know how to get to know people here," she said, apparently correcting her earlier statement that "I don't know how to get connected here." How? She explained that the church offers a Saturday-evening Access meeting for young adults, leadership training class on Wednesday nights, and a one-time New Connection class for anyone who wants to formally join the membership.

What keeps her from participating? "I guess I'm not really committed enough to make it a priority," she said. "I know I could if I wanted to do so." Is it that she lacks the commitment, as she says? Or perhaps a contributing obstacle is that she lacks having a face she recognizes—a "weak tie"—who would make it less formidable for her to show up alone at one of these smaller groups. After all, she bailed on her initial idea of attending a small group, perhaps because it was too big of a social bridge for her to travel alone. Time will tell.

Blake, age 55, goes to the same church but had a very different experience in terms of participation. Unlike Giselle, he first came to the church with a friend who had invited him. That friend introduced him to others, and he soon felt at home in his new church. A recovering alcoholic, Blake has a heart for those who have reached bottom in various life situations. "I have a gift of working with prison inmates," he explained, and soon enough he heard through his growing friendship network about a group that went weekly to the local jail to conduct a Bible study and prayer time with inmates. One week when one of the regulars canceled, he got invited, liked it, and began going regularly. Soon he became the assistant leader. When the team leader died of cancer two years later,

Blake took over the prison ministry group. “Getting involved in ministry is one of the biggest reasons why I’ve grown,” he said. “It stretches, tests, and proves my faith.”

Blake had previously attended another church, closer to where he lived. Why drive further to go to this church? As Blake explained, he was reluctant to leave his original church. “My friend began to phone me on many Sundays, reporting on the pastor’s sermon. I wasn’t learning anything at my church, so eventually I came with her. I still remember the sermon from the first Sunday I came.”

Blake’s story illustrates that even in a large-group setting he was not content to remain as a free rider (H2). He then became involved through a social network of weak ties—that is, through a series of casual and new acquaintances (H1).

Hawthorne. A focus group at another congregation—an 80-year-old church in an established northern suburb in New Jersey—was more blunt about the temptations of anonymity. A woman summarized the dissertation issues quite concisely: “You *can* get lost in a large church, which is why they say you *have* to get involved,” she said. “My networking grew as I got involved in the church’s small groups. I didn’t want to be a stale Christian, and if you don’t get involved in ministry, you will be!”

“Sometimes the reason you come to a megachurch is to be anonymous, where you can get lost,” said Andy, age 52, who had come with his wife to this church feeling burnt out and disillusioned by his previous church. “We were in the ‘hangers on’ crowd for awhile, but then somebody asked me to be involved in a committee, a planning team for the 1991 Billy Graham crusade in Central Park.” He said yes. From that point he and his wife both became more and more involved with the ministries of the church.

Another man, Barry, age 58, had a similar experience at that same church. He, his wife, and their two daughters came to the church as a family, based on someone at his wife's work who had invited them to visit. Then through a friend of that friend, Barry and his wife got invited to a home Bible study group. Barry also began helping out with tenth graders and eventually volunteered to be the teacher. "To get involved at this church," he summarized, "all you need is a personal contact who invites you to do something." Andy's and Barry's experiences illustrate that dynamics which reduce free riders (H2) work in tandem with a social network of weak links (H1).

Some people are naturally drawn to a large-church setting. That's their preferred environment. Igor, age 57, is part of the same northern New Jersey megachurch. "I went because of the singles group," he says. "I had heard about the singles group here while attending another [smaller] church. It made sense that a big church would have a big singles group, and I enjoy big things and chances to meet new people." He came to the church 20 years ago, met his present wife there, and together they are involved in a variety of the church's ministries, particularly ones described in this dissertation as externally focused groups—in their case, tutoring underprivileged children through one church-sponsored ministry and building homes for economically challenged families through the church's Habitat for Humanity chapter.

Igor still drives by his old church in order to come to his present church. He and his wife are no longer involved in the singles ministry, but they know of many people who came to that singles group because of the potential marriage market that it represents.

Theology matters. For all of these interviewees, the church's theological belief system is clearly important. It matters to them what a church teaches and models about the path of Christian discipleship. They have all come to value the Bible as the Word of God which is to inform and guide actions and attitudes, both as a church and as individuals. Various theological imperatives clearly bore some level of influence on their decision to increase their participation level at the megachurch they attend. Interviewees consistently reported that the expectations to participate generated by each church were linked to various theological imperatives that were taught.

Yet for none of the focus-group interviewees did church size preclude their decision to participate beyond worship attendance. And for all of the focus-group interviewees, relational networks (social ties) proved to be an important bridge for becoming involved. For most, weak ties were more of a factor than strong ties in helping people find a smaller context (small fellowship group, Bible study, prayer group, service team, etc.) where they found a good fit for themselves.

If anything new was gleaned from the focus-group interviews in general, it was an understanding of how weak ties lead to participation beyond the worship service. People seem much more comfortable to try a new subgroup within the church if they are accompanied by an acquaintance or if they are aware that an acquaintance will be part of the group. A variation is the prospect of finding romance: single adults showed a willingness to visit a group solely on the prospect that they might make an acquaintance of a single person of the opposite sex.

Typology for Involvement

Across the usable interviews, which totaled 16 people from four different megachurches (and some of the people were asked follow-up questions by phone), a pattern emerged regarding how people develop in their level of participation and relationships as they shift from crowd to congregation to core members. The progression can be summarized as three stages, which will then be illustrated by two interviewees:

- Free riders (no participation)
- Easy riders (subsidized participation)
- Full-fare riders (participating, contributing core)

Redeemer Presbyterian. At age 30, Tom hadn't been to church in years. Newly married, he was a writer for The Associated Press in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. His new wife Suzee was a schoolteacher. They had recently bought their first house in a small suburb north of the city. In order to get their mail, residents had to go to the local post office, one of the handful of non-residential buildings in their bucolic village. As Tom recalls, there were only 37 families—about 60 mailboxes total—including local businesses.

Tom and Suzee are both chatty people, and they regularly greeted their new neighbors who were also picking up mail. One of the conversations, with a man named Dennis who lived across the street from the post office, resulted in an invitation for Tom and Suzee to come to a neighborhood Bible study group. Tom said no, but the invitation came again. "I remember many times when I would pull up to the post office, and Dennis, a supermarket butcher who lived across the street, would race over and say, 'We're still having that Bible study; I'd love to have you come.'" Tom continued to

decline, not having much interest in spiritual things. But he didn't push Dennis away. "I was very impressed with his character," Tom says.

At one point Tom learned that Dennis had cancer and the prospects weren't bright. The following week, Tom saw Dennis mowing his yard, and was confused, thinking that Dennis was supposed to be in the hospital. For the first time Tom walked over to Dennis' place. "I was very sick, but people were praying for me," Dennis explained.

This reply confused Tom further. "I walked away having no means to process it," he says.

Meanwhile Dennis' wife Kim had struck up a casual friendship with Suzee, and invited her to the Bible study. Sue presented the idea to Tom, and the two agreed to try it.

The home group followed a simple format: socializing, a discussion of a passage from the Gospel of John (progressively going through major blocks of the entire gospel), voluntary prayer for personal needs, and then further socializing.

"I remember being irritated that the theme kept coming back to the need for me to be born again," said Tom. "I don't know why it bothered me, though." Each week the discussion centered around two questions: (1) who does this passage say Jesus is? and (2) who is Jesus to you? "After a year," said Tom, "it dawned on me that I didn't know Jesus the way they did: these people really try to live what Jesus is talking about."

Both Tom and Suzee decided to become followers of Christ, as did others in the group. "After I came to faith my first involvement was with someone who became a good friend," Tom recalls. "Mitch had gifts of hospitality, and invited us regularly to his house for lunch on the weekend. He informally discipled me in my faith. He was involved with

the youth, so I became involved too." They had already become friends with others in the group, so as fellow participants invited them to help with the children's backyard Bible club program or food drive for the Harrisburg rescue mission, they were glad to say yes.

When the Bible study reached a certain size and cohesiveness, Dennis helped it became a church, akin to a move from a being mission outpost to an actual congregation. Tom explains, "I knew nothing about Christianity, so I figured that was the way it was done!" Tom and Suzee became pillars in the church, carrying major responsibilities and taking others under wing, just as they too had been sponsored.

Many years later, motivated by a job change, Tom and Suzee said farewell to the church they loved, which by now had grown to 100 weekly participants and had bought its first permanent facility, and they moved to Manhattan. After visiting around to several small churches, and unsuccessfully trying to replicate their Pennsylvania experience by starting their own home Bible study, they visited Redeemer Presbyterian Church. They had heard about it from a friend of a friend.

For several weeks they attended and did nothing to participate or otherwise contribute. By this stage in their Christian growth they didn't have to be persuaded to become involved. All they had to do was figure out how, which they soon accomplished by taking the initiative to try different mixer-events, programs and groups. Through these they made many new friendships. Tom eventually was asked to become an elder in the church, which matched his personality strengths, and Suzee also took on major roles in her areas of giftedness. Eventually their most meaningfully ministry became a Bible study and prayer group they hold at their home, which involves some of the people they've gotten to know best in the church.

In both churches, Tom began as a *free rider*—someone who received benefits but at no personal cost beyond attendance. In the smaller church he was a free rider far longer than at the larger church, not because of size but because by the time he came to Redeemer Presbyterian he had more confidence and motivation. He then became an *easy rider* at each church, as other more core members carried the larger responsibilities and he helped when asked. He then became a *full-fare rider* at each church as a participating, well-connected relationally, contributing core member. In the smaller church, a series of weak ties (post-office chats) led Tom to develop a whole new set of strong ties (deep friendships with fellow Bible study members). In the megachurch the same progression happened: as Tom got to know people through various ministries (weak ties) he eventually developed a series of strong friendships (strong ties).

According to Tom, his acquaintance network (H1) grew more quickly in the smaller church, but then it maxed out because he knew everyone. His social network expanded only as he got to know each new person who was gradually added to the young church. By contrast, at Redeemer, "everywhere we turned we met someone new. We had so many opportunities for involvement, it was hard to pick where to start" (a statement that supports this dissertations findings that large churches offer many involvement opportunities). However, Tom reports that the expectation of participation was stronger in the smaller church than in the megachurch (H2).

Frontline. Julio Miller describes himself as "kind of a nominal Christian" until recent years. He held a steady job, but regularly used illegal drugs. He also didn't handle his alcohol well. "My wife thought I was becoming an alcoholic and was hooked on drugs," he says. His wife had been going to Frontline with some girlfriends, and one

week came home with information about a retreat for married couples. “I wasn’t interest, but my wife dragged me there anyway,” Julio says.

Good things happened over the getaway, held at a Catholic retreat center in northern Virginia. “I started connecting with several of the guys there,” Julio explains. “Most important, I saw Christ deliver me out of my alcohol and drugs. It was a real turning point for me.”

Julio started coming to church services, irregularly at first. Some of the men he had met at the retreat asked him to help out with the men’s ministry at the church, which they were all involved with.

Julio still feels “so-so” about the weekend worship services, although his wife gets a lot out of them. Julio much prefers to put his energy with whatever his friends in the men’s ministry are doing. The ministry includes everything from ongoing support groups for men who struggle with sexual lust to one-time service projects. Julio doesn’t seem anchored to any particular aspect of the men’s ministry so much as to tag along with whatever his friends are doing.

Julio is quick to note that all his participation decisions occurred outside the weekend services. “Those connections would never have happened in the big group,” he said. “I’m not outgoing enough just to join a group or to go up and meet someone.” So his main connections with the church have occurred as his new church friends invited him to be part of whatever they’re doing. This seems to fit Julio’s personality as more of a follower than as a leader. Thus Julio has made a progression from *free rider* (no participation) to *easy rider* (subsidized participation) to *full-fare rider* (fully committed participation), but he would comfortably drop back to easy rider status without the

prompting of his new friends. For him the strong tie at home (his wife) led to the weak ties at the retreat (acquaintances) which led to new strong ties (developing meaningful friendships) which leads to new weak ties (more acquaintances). It seems like an ongoing cycle with Julio. He does not seem lost in the crowd of a megachurch since he has a smaller-group network as his ongoing base.

Reflections

Few hard and fast conclusions can be reached from a non-random interview group of 16 people, even though several of the interviews could be considered in-depth due to follow-up phone calls. (As described earlier, a fifth interview group at a fifth church was so unsuccessful that I did not include it.) However two issues stood out strongly:

1. Social ties seem of vital importance. They may be weak or strong, but few individuals come initially to a church or participate in any way without doing so over some form of relational bridge. Strong ties seem to develop more quickly in non-megachurches, but they are just as desired by people in megachurches. Weak ties consistently lead to new strong ties, and more weak ties seem available in megachurches than in non-megachurches, consistent with H1.

2. Expectations to participate were noted by all interviewees, but contrary to H2 no one commented that their present megachurches seem to convey greater or more frequent expectations than in non-megachurches, for those who were previously part of a non-megachurch (a finding strikingly consistent with the quantitative analysis). All interviewees agreed that participation only in the worship service would be somewhat hollow, and even hypocritical. Though all could relate to the idea of free riding, no one

endorsed it as a spiritually healthy or advisable plan. Perhaps they were influenced by theology, but virtually everyone voiced that in a church their size (2,000 and above), the church's leadership expected them to become involved–which this sociological analysis would describe as involving a pathway that moved them from free rider to easy rider to full-fare rider.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Prestonwood Baptist Church, a member of the Southern Baptist denomination, was started 1977 as a mission church. It met for its first two years of life in a community recreational center before constructing a facility of its own.

Today, as it approaches its thirtieth birthday, Prestonwood is one of the United States's 1,210 megachurches--a thriving congregation with a weekly attendance of more than 10,000 adults and children. According to the church's website, www.prestonwood.org, the church's campus in Plano, Texas, a fast-growing suburb north of Dallas, sits on 140 acres and occupies 800,000 square feet of buildings. Its largest facility, the worship center, seats 7,000. It has 33 ministers and many more who serve as support staff.

The church announced in March of 2006 that it plans to open a second campus near Prosper, a rapidly growing "exurb" in western Collin County, 25 miles north of Plano. Prestonwood North, as it is known, opened August 27, 2006, with hundreds in attendance, making it a multiple-site congregation—"one church in two locations" with intentions that the newer campus could eventually be larger than the existing one.

Dr. Jack Graham has been senior pastor of Prestonwood Baptist since 1989. In a 2006 newspaper interview, he was asked about the pros and cons of megachurches:

> I don't even like the term "megachurch" because I believe it puts the emphasis on the wrong place. It puts it on the size of the church. What I prefer is "multi-

> service church." I think churches like ours and lots of others in this whole phenomena ... provide many ministries and services and doors of opportunity for people.
>
> Many of the megachurches are accused of compromising the message or the ministry for the sake of just building crowds. I think one of the biggest things we have to overcome is people driving by and saying, "I would never go to a church like that." We have to overcome our size in one sense and get people connected to some of our members or in the doors to sense the contagious spirit that is here.[93]

In many ways, Jack Graham's comments represent the plight of today's megachurch: negatively stereotyped and viewed with suspicion by outsiders, and yet growing at amazing speed, with prospects of being even larger in the future. Indeed, the emergence and mainstreaming of the Protestant megachurch in the United States is one of the most significant developments on the religious landscape in recent years.

Megachurches are less than half a percent of all congregations, yet they seem to attract as much attention as all other religious communities in the nation. The rapid growth of these congregations, both in quantity and size of attendance, is changing the way American Protestants perceive church and do church. As sociologist Donald Miller observed, writing about megachurches and other emerging Protestant church types, "I believe we are witnessing a second reformation that is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium" (Miller 1997:11). It is a "revolution" capable of "transforming American Protestantism" (Miller 1997:1). "These churches can do a ton of things that smaller churches can't," said Nancy Ammerman, professor of the sociology of religion at the Boston University School of Theology, referring to megachurches. "They have the resources to produce a professional-quality production every weekend, with music (often specially composed for the occasion and backed by a professional

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[93] Housewright, Ed. "Q&A: Jack Graham, Prestonwood Baptist. *Dallas Morning News*.27 May 2006. Retrieved 27 Sep. 2006 (http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/religion/stories/052706dnrelq&a.542f2da.html).

ensemble) and video and lighting and computer graphics and a preacher who knows how to work a crowd."

But megachurches also support "dozens or even hundreds of specialized opportunities for people to get involved in doing things with a small group of others," said Ammerman, as reported by Reuters. "It's just that there are so many paths into involvement that a smaller church just can't match," she added. [94]

Summary of Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to ask explore whether megachurches foster spectator religion, especially as compared to smaller churches. The primary approach was to examine, through both theory and data analysis, the social factors that contribute to participation levels in megachurches.

Many weaknesses are inherent in this research (and are acknowledged throughout in this dissertation, including later in this chapter). Nonetheless, many fascinating observations were made along the way, including the following which are of greatest personal interest to this writer:

1. In areas this dissertation tested, the evidence does not justify the generalization that megachurches are "spectator religion" as compared to other churches. Instead, megachurches seem to compare favorably to smaller churches in measures of participation opportunities.

[94] Alvarez, Joseph. "Megachurches Attract Crowds, Link Individuals." *Christian Post*. 26 Nov. 2005.

2. Megachurches excel in the proportion of community-focused groups they sponsor as compared to non-megachurches. The bigger the church, the greater the percentage of its groups are community-focused rather than member-focused. Thus megachurches do a better job, proportionally speaking, of reaching out beyond the walls of the church than do non-megachurches. Therefore it seems that neighborhood concern, compassion for the disadvantaged, and advocacy for social justice is greater in megachurches than in non-megachurches.

3. Megachurches are strict in the sense of expressing a high level of expectation to participate. They make it clear that church is far more than a "Sunday thing." They provide continual opportunities to participate further, and the encouragement to do so.

4. Megachurches have learned how to be both easy and difficult at the same time: they make it easy to attend and they make it difficult to meet all the expectations of a committed participant. While working hard to be an inviting, welcoming, comfortable environment for newcomers, allowing anonymity as desired, megachurches don't leave them at the spectator stage. Megachurches create intentional ways to integrate newcomers into the active life of the church and to develop new friendships along the way.

5. Although megachurches are disproportionately evangelical, theology only modestly influences the number of participation opportunities. Limited controls available for denominational family, high-liturgy vs. low-liturgy, and theology as expressed by certain practices (such as an emphasis on daily Bible reading or family devotions) demonstrated only a modest degree of influence on the number or type of participation opportunities, with "theology as practice" showing the greatest degree of influence.

6. In terms of social theory, the "strength of weak ties" argument finds confirmation in megachurches but the "big churches are stricter than smaller churches" argument of rationale choice theory does not seem to hold.

Review of Hypotheses and Findings

Based on the analysis performed from the data analysis, the following results were achieved.

For Hypothesis 1, the data are fairly consistent with the prediction made by social network theory: megachurches tend to have higher levels of participation opportunities than do their non-megachurch counterparts. The word "fairly" is used because the difference is not dramatic, but in many tests it is statistically significant. That finding in and of itself does not confirm social network theory. Of the variables considered as possible confounding variables, none explained participation better than size did.

For Hypothesis 2, the evidence gives only limited support to the idea that levels of participation opportunities in megachurches change when levels of expectations change. The only supported finding is this: Under conditions of high expectations, megachurch size does, in fact, display a significantly higher level of participation opportunities than does a smaller non-megachurch counterpart.

Overall, in contrast to the critics cited in the opening chapter, megachurches offer the same levels of participation opportunities, and in most cases better levels than are present in non-megachurches. Further, it seems that social involvement occurs proportionately more in megachurches than in non-megachurches. Thus the hypothesis of megachurches having higher participation than non-megachurches finds more support in

community-focused measures of participation than in the more internal church-focused measures of participation.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Limitations of the Study

The greatest strength of the study is that it provides the first reputable and adequately sampled set of data that enables researchers to gather detailed information about a group that represents 0.3 percent of the total universe of U.S. Protestant congregations. The sample group of 205 is large enough that statistically meaningful conclusions can be developed. The presence of parallel questions asked about churches of other sizes makes it possible for megachurches to be compared with their lesser-sized counterparts. This dissertation has only touched the tip of the iceberg of possible learnings that could be extracted from the FACT2000 database.

The greatest limitation of this study is that it attempted to answer a question—how does size impact participation, and why—that the survey itself does not contain the data to address, nor apparently did its designers have that question in mind. The nature of secondary analysis is that the researcher is working with someone else's data—others determined the questions and the response options that were offered. Thus the researcher must work within the parameters of what the data will allow.

The most glaring problem with the study involved the lack of hard data in terms of percentage of those who participate in groups. The analysis is wholly on the structural availability level and not on the individual participant.

There are also serious inherent limitations in a key-informant approach, in which one presumably biased insider seeks to generalize the attitudes and actions of 2,000 or more people.

Another weakness involves the issue of process: how churches become large, or what happens as a large church begins to collapse in size. The primary way this dissertation identifies a church is by size in terms of worship attendance, implying somewhat of a static, consistent environment for each church of that size. In fact, the dynamics might differ according to growth rate. For a church at the 2,000 mark, for example, many different processes could be at work: (1) it might be wildly growing, shooting from 1,000 to 1,500 to 2,000—for which the infrastructure is seriously behind, and the small group opportunities not proportional to its present size; (2) it might be on a long-time plateau at 2,000 with all internal systems working smoothly, but lacking a sense of vitality and passion compared to other churches; (3) it might be a church that the year before was at 4,000 but due to a moral failure by the senior leader, attendance might be plummeting weekly with many groups on record, but soon to close due to lack of adequate participation.

Another weakness involves the assumption that structural availability is a good proxy for actual participation. The logic is that in a voluntary organization, if no one joins a program, then it is no longer offered. Perhaps that is not the case. The church might keep the activity on the books, as a school listing all the courses it offers, including ones that won't cycle around again for several years.

What would happen through a comparison of the dynamics of "large-sanctuary" megachurches to "small-sanctuary" churches? For example, the Father's House church

(profiled in the qualitative interviews) seats 400 maximum and conveys none of the "coliseum" effect that may be present in the 7,000-seat Prestonwood Baptist Church (profiled in the final chapter). This issue could be addressed by the addition of a "total seating capacity" question to future editions of the survey that goes to all sizes of church.

Recommendations

In terms of megachurch studies, a fascinating topic for researchers might involve efforts (say, exit interviews) at finding out why people drop out of megachurches and whether this differs from dropping out of church in general. Also, what are the denominational backgrounds of megachurch participants? Are they more or less likely to be denominational "switchers"? Relevant literature on the subject could be used to learn more, especially with the current interest in "church shopping" as contrasted to "denominational brand loyalty."

In terms of the Faith Communities Today 2000 (FACT2000) report, the team at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research plans to repeat the FACT survey every few years. For future editions, it might be helpful to ask something about the role of the person filling out the survey (senior pastor, church administrator, volunteer, etc.) and then analyze whether any parallels can be identified based on who filled out the survey. For example it might be learned that volunteers tend to do best at answering a greater number of survey questions. Or it may be discovered that senior pastors generally use round numbers on fill-in questions ("what percent of the congregation is Asian?") whereas administrators are more exacting in their replies.

In terms of new questions to ask, it would be extremely helpful not merely to know the types of subgroups in each church (about which the current version of the survey already asks) but also the percentage of the congregation that is involved in these subgroups, how strong an emphasis small groups are from a leadership perspective, and how people most typically become successfully lodged in a small group. If a major growth and health principle for larger churches is that they "grow bigger by becoming smaller"—a slogan often heard from church consultants—then more attention needs to be given to the small-group dynamics of all churches, and especially the larger ones.

Also the issue of leadership development is largely absent in the survey; generally this is a significant and vital issue for any growing church, and it would be helpful for any researcher to have data available in that area.

It would also be most helpful to secondary analysis researchers if the same questions could be more consistently asked, or at least if certain questions could be designated as core questions to be included without exception in every survey version. The idea of allowing each of the 41 co-sponsoring groups to modify some of the questions was perhaps a winning approach in terms of obtaining a broad level of participation and a high response rate. Several of the key questions that this dissertation hoped to analyze were not included in the version of the survey that went to megachurches or to historic black churches, which prevented this researcher from going into even more depth.

While the survey data amounts to a treasure trove of information, much of which is yet to be mined, a few of the questions could have been worded in a way that would provide a more helpful data for analysis. For example, the primary question about the

church's growth asks, in effect, "In the last 5 years has the number of regularly participating adults increased by more than 10 percent, increased 5 to 9 percent, stayed about the same (+ or – 4%), decreased 5 to 9 percent, or decreased by more than 10 percent"? This range seems far too narrow for meaningful comparison. A church that increases by a mere 2 percent a year (from 100 people to 102) for 5 years (resulting in 110 or 111) qualifies for the maximum end of the so-called growth range. Most church consultants would identify such as church as plateaued, not growing. Further, the narrow range of options does not offer meaningful statistical comparison between churches growing at 2 percent a year and churches growing at 10 percent or 20 percent a year. Both would check the same response box, yet the social dynamics between the growth implications for these two churches might be drastically different.

Likewise future versions of the Faith Communities Today (FACT) studies might change the term "member" to "participant" in several instances, since "participant" is a much broader term, and often seems to be what is meant by the term "member," as the methodology chapter of this dissertation noted in greater detail.

Also, since megachurches are disproportionately evangelical in theology, more variables could be introduced to help explain why or to examine ways theology influences the development and character of megachurches.

In terms of the social theory proposed for this dissertation, new questions could be formulated in order to conduct a more thorough test. The free rider aspect of rational choice theory leads to new questions about process: how do churches go about decreasing their percentage of free riders? Such thinking prompts questions about how people move from the fringes of a church to its mainstream, from visitor or inquirer to fully committed

member. The strength-of-weak-ties argument taken from social network analysis leads to new questions about relationships: how might church attendees distinguish between their strong ties and weak ties at church, how might they cultivate more weak ties, how might they then utilize these weak ties to increase their level of participation in the life and mission of the church, and how important are strong ties compared to weak ties for the typical active participant in a church?

Finally, when the data from the FACT2005 surveys are made public, the analysis done in this dissertation (based on FACT2000) could be repeated and compared. Doing so would lead, no doubt, to insightful analysis and many discoveries.

Contributions to the Literature

This dissertation, if refined, adapted, and excerpted for publication in a sociological journal, will represent the first attempt to apply both social theory and specific data analysis to the claims made by popular media and academics which imply that megachurches have lower levels participation than do other churches.

In terms of social theory, the finding seem to challenge the notion that the "strict church" values of free rider can explain or predict the relationship between church size and the level of participation in the life of the church. This initial finding invites further study and more in-depth analysis by others.

This dissertation further brings to attention all major cross-denominational studies that have been done on megachurches (chapter 2), and then it models how secondary analysis can be done on what is arguably the leading body of data, the FACT2000 survey

(soon to become the first in a series of similar surveys) coordinated by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

Finally, this research represents a modest attempt to give visibility to an admittedly understudied religious phenomenon, assisting other scholars as they carry their own research momentum further. It is in many ways an exploratory study since little has appeared in scholarly works about the megachurch—even though a great deal has been written in the popular press about megachurches.

Hopefully this dissertation will also serve as an invitation to a new generation of scholars, spurring them to contribute to the emerging field of congregational studies, especially its emerging branch of megachurch studies. At the least, perhaps this dissertation's provocative series of findings will inspire some to develop stronger datasets and others to apply thorough and rigorous statistical analysis to each piece of information that is captured.

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APPENDIX A
QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Editorial Notes:
All questions below are common for both megachurch and non-megachurch surveys except those with an asterisk (*) or in *italics (and indented).*
1. Questions including an asterisk (*) were on the non-megachurch survey but *not* the megachurch survey.
2. Questions in *italics* (and indented where possible) were on the megachurch survey but *not* the version that went to most non-megachurches.

FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY 2000 (FACT2000)

Final Fielded Version

I. Congregational Identity and Worship

1. How well does each of the following statements describe your congregation? (✓ one on each line)

	Very Well	*Quite Well*	*Some-What*	*Slightly*	*Not At All*
A. Our congregation feels like a [large,] close-knit family	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Our congregation is working for social justice	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. Our congregation helps members deepen their relationships with God	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
E. Our congregation is trying to increase its racial/ethnic diversity	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
F. Our congregation clearly expresses its [denominational] heritage	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
G. Our congregation is a moral beacon in the community	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
H. Our congregation welcomes innovation and change	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
A. Our congregation deals openly with disagreements and conflicts	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
J. Our congregation encourages the public expression of speaking in tongues	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
K. Our congregation has a strong racial/ethnic or national heritage that it is trying to preserve	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
L. Members are excited about the future of our congregation	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
M. New people are easily [assimilated/incorporated] into the life of our congregation	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
N. Our congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
O. *Our congregation's worship services are [spiritually uplifting and inspirational	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
P. *Our congregation's programs and activities are well organized	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
Q. *Our congregation's programs and activities strengthen					

personal relationships among our members ❒1 ❒2 ❒3 ❒4 ❒5

2. **Worship Services**. [Note: If your congregation holds worship services *less than once a week*, please check here ❒ and answer for a typical weekend on which you do hold services.]

	Friday	*Saturday*	*Sunday AM*	*Sunday PM*
A. How many worship services does your congregation have on each of the following days/times on a ***typical*** weekend?	_____	_____	_____	_____
B. What is the total attendance for all services held on this day/time on a ***typical*** weekend?	_____	_____	_____	_____

C. If you typically hold more than one service on the weekend, are these services: (✓ one)

❒1 Very similar in style (other than the language used)
❒2 One or more is *somewhat different* in style from the rest
❒3 One or more is *very different* in style from the rest

D. *Please list all the languages in which your congregation conducts worship services on a typical weekend:
_____

3. How often does the [sermon/homily/lesson] in your worship ***focus*** on: (✓ one on each line)

	Always	*Often*	*Sometimes*	*Seldom*	*Never*
A. God's love and care	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Practical advice for daily living	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Personal spiritual growth	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. Social justice or social action	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
E. Gifts/power of the Holy Spirit	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
F. Personal salvation	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
G. Struggling with faith and belief	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
H. Living a moral life	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
I. Stewardship of time and money	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
J. End-times and/or the second coming	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

4. How often does the [sermon/homily/lesson] include ***a lot of***: (✓ one on each line)

	Always	*Often*	*Sometimes*	*Seldom*	*Never*
A. Personal stories or first-hand experiences	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Literary or scholarly references	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Illustrations from contemporary media (e.g., magazines, newspapers, television, movies, etc)	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. Detailed explanations of scripture or doctrine	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

5. How often are the following included as part of your congregation's [regular weekend] worship services(s)? (✓ one on each line)

	Always	*Often*	*Sometimes*	*Seldom*	*Never*
A. Reading/recitation of creeds or statements of faith	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. A time for [lay persons] to testify about their faith	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. A time during worship for people to greet each other [or pass the peace]	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. The use of visual projection equipment	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
E. *Incense or candles	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
F. Dance or drama	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
G. *Kneeling [or prostration] by the congregation	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
H. Alter Call for Salvation	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
I. Speaking in tongues	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

J. Prayers for Healing	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
K. Prophecy, word of knowledge	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

6. How often are the following included as part of your congregation's [regular weekend] worship services(s)?
   [If you do not use instrumental music in worship, please check here ❒1 and skip to the next question.] (✓ one on each line)

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
A. Organ and/or piano	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Electronic keyboard or synthesizer	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Electric guitar/bass	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. Non-electronic string or wind instruments (e.g., harp, violin, guitar, flute, brass, etc.)	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
E. Drums or other percussion instruments	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
F. Recorded music (tapes, cd's, etc)	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

7. In comparison to the style of your congregation's primary worship service 5 years ago, would you say the style of your current primary worship service:

   ❒1 Is basically the same ❒2 Changed a little ❒3 Changed somewhat ❒4 Changed a great deal
   ❒5 Our congregation did not exist in 1995

8. How important are the following sources of authority in the worship and teaching of your congregation?

(✓ one on each line)	Absolutely Foundational	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Little Or No Importance
A. Sacred Scripture	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
B. Historic creeds, doctrines & tradition	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
C. The Holy Spirit	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
D. Human reason and understanding	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
E. Personal experience	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
F. The authority of denominational leaders or If nondenominational, your spiritual head, Network overseer or elder	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
G. Congregational Vision and purpose	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4

F. Now please write the letter of the ***one*** source of authority that is ***most important*** in your congregation's worship and teaching, as difficult a choice as this may be, in this box➔ ➔ ❒

II. History, Location and Building

1. In approximately what year was this congregation officially founded? _____

2. In what ZIP code area is this congregation's primary worship building located? Zip _____

3. In approximately what year did this congregation begin worshiping at its current location? _____

4. How would you describe the place where your congregation's primary worship building is located?

Rural or open country . . . . . ❒1
Town or village of less than 10,000 . . ❒2
In or around a city of:
10,000 - 49,999 . . . . ❒3
50,000-249,999 . . . . . ❒4
250,000+ . . . . . ❒5

A. If in or around a city, is your building located:

In the central or downtown area of the city . . . . . ❒1
In another area of the city . . . . . ❒2
In an older suburb around the city . . . . . ❒3
In a newer suburb around the city . . . . . ❒4

B. If in or around a city, is your building located in a:

Residential area . . . . . ❒1
Mixed residential and commercial area. . . . . ❒2
Commercial or industrial area . . . . . ❒3

5. How would you describe the ***size*** of the following relative to the current needs of your congregation?:

(✓ one each line)	Much More Than We Need	Slightly More Than We Need	Just About Right	Slightly Less Than We Need	Much Less Than We Need
A. Your Worship space	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Educational space	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Fellowship space	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. Space for parking	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

5. What is the total seating capacity of your sanctuary? _____

A. How would you describe the overall physical condition of your congregation's building(s)? (✓ one)

❒1 Excellent ❒2 Good ❒3 Needs improvement ❒4 In serious need of improvements and repairs

7. Do any other congregations use your building space for worship? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

8. Has your church planted any other congregations? ❒*1 Yes* ❒*2 No*
If yes, how many? ❒*1 1 – 5* ❒*2 6 – 10* ❒*3 11 or more*

9. Do you have satellite churches in other locations that are part of your congregation? ❒*1Yes* ❒*2No*
If yes, how may? _____ *Do they have any distinctive styles/missions?* ❒*1Yes* ❒*2No*

III. Congregational Programs

1. Does your congregation have a [Weekend/Sunday] school that meets regularly? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

IF YES: A. What is the typical, total, weekly attendance of **adults (18 and over)**? ➔ ➔ _____

B. What is the typical, total, weekly attendance of ***children and teens (17 and under)***? _____

2. During the past 12 months, did your congregation have any of the following programs or activities in addition to your regular [weekend/Sunday] school?

IF YES: • A one-time, short-term or occasional event?
• On-going during a particular season?
• On-going throughout the year?

Circle all "Yeses" that apply

	No	*Yes* — *One-Time, Short-Term, Occasional*	*Yes* — *On-going During A Season*	*Yes* — *On-going Thru [Church] Year*
A. [Bible/Scripture] study (other than Sunday School)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
B. Theological or doctrinal study	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
C. Prayer or meditation groups	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
D. Spiritual retreats	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
E. Community service	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
F. Parenting or marriage enrichment	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
G. Choir(s)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
H. Other performing arts (e.g., music, dance, drama)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
I. Groups that discuss books or contemporary issues	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
J. Self-help or personal growth groups	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
K. Exercise, fitness or weight loss groups or classes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
L. Sports teams	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
M. [Youth/teen] activities and programs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. [Young adult/singles] activities and programs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
O. Senior Adult activities	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
P. Mens/Womens ministries	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Q. National Programs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

3. How much does your congregation, in its worship and education, *emphasize* the following ***home and personal practices***? (✓ one on each line)

	A Great Deal	*Quite A Bit*	*Some*	*A Little*	*Not At All*
A. Personal [prayer, scripture study, devotions and other spiritual practices]	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Family devotions	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Fasting	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
D. Observing dietary restrictions	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
E. Abstinence from alcohol	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
F. Keeping the Sabbath [or observing restrictions on your holy day]	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
G. *Displaying religious objects, symbols, statuary, icons or pictures in the home	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
H. Abstaining from premarital sex	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
I. Studying the Bible	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

4. Does your congregation have a radio ministry? ❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*

5. Does your congregation have a television ministry? ❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*

6. Does your church have an organized program for keeping up with members' needs and providing ministry at a neighborhood level (shepherding deacon/elder, care group, area pastor)? ❒1*Yes* ❒2*No*

7. Many churches make use of small groups for fellowship, spiritual nurture, etc. (in addition to church school or mission groups, etc.). Which statement best describes the situation in your congregation?

❒1 *Such groups do not exist within our congregation*
❒2 *A few such groups meet, but are not central to our congregations' program*
❒3 *Small groups are central to our strategy for Christian nurture and spiritual formation*

8. Are new members:

Required to take informational class prior to or after becoming a member?	❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*
Assigned a "mentor" (a pastor or lay leader) to incorporate them into the church?	❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*
Strongly encouraged to volunteer in the church's ministries?	❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*

9. Overall, to what extent are your church members involved in recruiting new members?
❒1 *Extensively* ❒2 *Moderately* ❒3 *Minimally* ❒4 *Not at all*

10. Are efforts made to provide special parking or seating for visitors to your church? ❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*

11. Are visitors acknowledged in a demonstrative way (made to stand, raise hand, put on label)?
❒1 *Yes* ❒2 *No*

12. To what extent are the teenage children of church members involved in the religious life of your congregation?
❒1 *Very great extent* ❒2 *Large extent* ❒3 *Some extent*
❒4 *Slight extent* ❒5 *Not at all*

4. In addition to the outreach activities of your denomination, **did your congregation** do any of the following during the past 12 months to reach out to new or inactive participants, or to make your congregation better known in your community? If **No**, is the item: **A)** Something that probably **would not be resisted** by most members if you tried it; or **B)** Something that probably would be resisted by most members.

(✓ One on each line)	*Yes* — *Done in last 12 Months*	*No, But [Members]...* — *Would Support This Activity*	*No, But [Members]...* — *Would Not Support This Activity*
A. Newspaper advertisements and stories	❒1	❒2	❒3
B. Radio or television advertisements and stories	❒1	❒2	❒3
C. Direct mail promotions to area residents	❒1	❒2	❒3
D. [Growth or evangelistic campaign/program]	❒1	❒2	❒3
E. Focused efforts to identify and contact people who have recently moved into your congregation's area	❒1	❒2	❒3
F. Stressing in your congregation's preaching and teaching the importance of [witnessing] to others about one's faith	❒1	❒2	❒3
G. Special worship services intended to attract [the unchurched/non-members], e.g. "Bring a friend" services, seeker services, revivals, etc.	❒1	❒2	❒3
H. Special programs (e.g., parenting classes, young single nights, art festivals, **street ministries**) especially intended to attract [unchurched Persons/non-members] in your community.	❒1	❒2	❒3
I. Phone calls or personal visits by your [clergy leaders]	❒1	❒2	❒3
J. Phone calls or personal visits by [laity]	❒1	❒2	❒3

5. In the past 12 months, did your congregation directly provide, or cooperate in providing, any of the following services for your own members or for people in the community. "Cooperation" includes financial contributions, volunteer time by congregational members, space in your building, material donations, etc.

		No	Yes, circle all that apply	
			Provided Directly By Your Congregation	*Cooperated With Another Congregation, Agency, Or Organization*
A.	Food pantry or soup kitchen	No	Yes	Yes
B.	Cash assistance to families or individuals	No	Yes	Yes
C.	Thrift store or thrift store donations	No	Yes	Yes
G.	*[Temporary or permanent housing]* Elderly, emergency or affordable housing	No	Yes	Yes
D.	Counseling services or "hot line"	No	Yes	Yes
E.	Substance abuse programs	No	Yes	Yes
F.	Day care, pre-school, before/after-school programs	No	Yes	Yes
G.	*Tutoring or literacy] programs for children & teens	No	Yes	Yes
H.	Voter registration or voter education	No	Yes	Yes
I.	Organized social issue advocacy or community organizing	No	Yes	Yes
J.	Employment counseling, placement or training	No	Yes	Yes
K.	Health programs/clinics/health education	No	Yes	Yes
L.	Hospital or nursing home facilities	No	Yes	Yes
M.	Senior citizen programs (other than housing)	No	Yes	Yes
N.	Program for migrants or immigrants	No	Yes	Yes
O.	Prison or jail ministry	No	Yes	Yes

6. In a typical month, about how many people *do you estimate* are served through the services your congregation directly provides? Estimated number of people served _____

IV. Leadership And Organizational Dynamics

1. Which of the following best describes the situation in your congregation? (✓ one)

   ❒1 We do *not* have any problem getting people to accept volunteer leadership roles.
   ❒2 Recruiting volunteer leaders is a continual challenge, but we eventually find enough willing people.
   ❒3 We cannot find enough people who are willing to serve.

2. Please describe the current, [senior/sole] [clergy person or person in charge of the congregation] by checking all of the boxes that apply or filling in the requested information. If you have **co-pastors**, please check here ❒ and answer the following for the older of your co-pastors. If you do not currently have a [clergy person], please check here ❒ and skip to question 3.

   A. Age? ____ Years old

   B. Does this person co-pastor with spouse? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

   *B. ❒1 Paid ❒2 Volunteer

   D. Temporary/interim? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

   C. ❒1 Full time ❒2 Full time, supplemented by outside employment
   ❒3 Part time; IF PART TIME does s/he also: 1) Serve another congregation? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

2) Work a secular job? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

D. ❒1 Male ❒2 Female

*E. ❒1 [Regular call] ❒2 [Temporary/interim]

F. Highest level of education (✓ one):

❒1 High school diploma or less
❒2 Some college or technical
❒3 College bachelors degree
❒4 Masters Degree
❒5 Doctoral Degree

G. Highest level of ministerial education (✓ one):

❒1 None
❒2 Certificate or correspondence program
❒3 Bible college or some seminary
❒4 Seminary Masters degree (e.g., M. Div)
❒5 Post-Masters, Seminary degree (e.g. D.Min)

H. Race/ethnicity (✓ one):

❒1 American Indian/Alaska Native ❒4 Hispanic or Latino
❒2 Asian ❒5 Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
❒3 Black or African American ❒6 White ❒7 Other _____

I. This person became your senior/sole [clergy person] in what year? 19_____

L. Did your church's phenomenal growth occur primarily during this pastor's tenure? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

3. How many [senior/sole clergy persons], including the current one, have served your congregation during the past 10 years? _____

4. How long was the previous senior/sole [clergy person] employed by your congregation? _____ years

5. How many paid, ministerial and program staff does your congregation have?

A. Number Full time, paid _____ B. Number Part time, paid _____

6. How many paid program staff does this congregation have?

A. Number Full time, paid _____ B. Number Part time, paid _____

7. How many volunteer workers (giving 5+ hours a week) does the church have? _____

8. Is your congregation:

Associated with a denomination? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

Independent or nondenominational? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

If yes, has it always been independent? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

Part of a network, fellowship or association? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

If networked, what is the name of the Network, Fellowship, or Association? _____

What is the approximate number of churches in the network? _____

When was the Network, Fellowship, or Association founded? _____

In what city & state is the headquarters or current central leader located? _____

6. During the last 12 months, has your congregation been involved in any of the following types of inter-congregational, ecumenical or interfaith activities?

(Circle all the "yeses" that apply)		*With other congregations or persons:*		
	No	*From our [Denomination]*	*From other [Christian] Denominations*	*From other Faith Traditions*
A. Joint worship services	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
B. Joint celebrations or programs other than worship	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
C. Joint social outreach or service projects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
D. Councils of [churches] or ministerial associations	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

7. *During the last ***five years*** has your congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts in the following areas? (✓ one on each line)

		Yes, and it was:		
	No	*Very Serious*	*Moderately Serious*	*Not Very Serious*
A. Theology	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
B. Money/Finances/Budget	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
C. How worship is conducted	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
D. Program/mission priorities or emphases	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
E. Who should make a decision	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
F. [Pastor's] leadership style	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
G. [Pastor's] personal behavior	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
H. [Member/participant's] personal behavior	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4
I. Other: _____	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4

8. When your congregation purchases worship, educational, stewardship, [evangelism], etc. materials or supplies does it purchase them: (✓ one)

❒1 Exclusively from within your [denomination]
❒2 Primarily from within your [denomination]
❒3 Primarily from outside your [denomination]
❒4 Exclusively from outside your [denomination]
❒5 From a pretty even balance between denominational and non-denominational sources
❒6 *We create all our own material*

9. Does your congregation operate a Christian elementary or secondary school? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

10. Does it have a Bible school or Institute? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

11. Does your church sponsor Pastor's or ministerial conferences? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

12. Does your church regularly use computers? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No
If YES, what is the computer used for?
❒1 Word processing
❒2 Demographic group mailings
❒3 Membership records and data reports
❒4 Email, listserv communications
❒5 Financial records and budget reports
❒6 Web information or church page

13. Does your church have an email address? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

14. Does your church have a web site? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

*9. Which ***one*** of the following three statements best describes your congregation? (✓ one)

❒1 Our congregation has [explicit/definite] expectations for members that are strictly enforced.
❒2 Our congregation has fairly clear expectations for members, but the enforcement of these expectations is not very strict.
❒3 Our congregation has only [implicit/vague] expectations for members that are seldom, if ever, enforced.

V. Participants:

[We know you may have to estimate or guess at the answers to several of the questions in this section and the next section. That is O.K.]

1. Approximately how many persons would you say are associated ***in any way*** with the religious life of your congregation — counting both adults and children, counting both regular and irregular participants, counting both official or registered members and also participating nonmembers.

➔➔ Number _____

2. Approximately how many persons — both adults and children — would you say ***regularly participate*** in the religious life of your congregation — *whether or not* they are officially members of your congregation?

A. Number of **regularly participating** adults (18 and over) ➔➔➔➔➔➔ _____
B. Number of **regularly participating** children and teens (17 and under) ➔➔ _____

3. *Since 1995, has the above number of **regularly participating adults**: (✓ one)

❒1 Increased 10% or more ❒3 Stayed about the same (+/- 4%) ❒4 Decreased 5% to 9%
❒2 Increased 5% to 9% ❒5 Decreased 10% or more
❒6 Our congregation did not exist in 1995

*3. What was (or is) the **average** weekly attendance (including adults and children) for the following years?*
_____ *1980* _____ *1985* _____ *1990* _____ *1995*

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

All	None 0%	Hardly Any 1-10%	Few 11-20%	Some 21-40%	Many 41-60%	Most 61-80%	All Or Nearly 81-100%
A. Female	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
B. Less than high school diploma	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
C. At least college graduates	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
D. Age 35 or younger	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
E. Over 60 years old	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
F. Married	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
G. Life long [denomination name]	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
H. New to your congregation in the last five years	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
I. Living in the immediate area around your church building	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
J. Commuting more than 15 minutes to get to your worship services	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
K. Currently holding ***volunteer leadership roles*** in your congregation, like serving on administrative committees, teaching [Sunday school,] running outreach programs, etc.	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
L. In households with incomes below $20,000	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7

M. With incomes above $75,000	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7
M. In households with children Under 18 present	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5	❒6	❒7

5. Of your total number of **regularly participating adults**, what percent would you estimate are:

• American Indian/Alaska Native	____%	• Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	____%
• Asian	____%	• White	____%
• Black or African American	____%	• Other	____%
• Hispanic or Latino	____%		100%

*Within these racial/ethnic groups, are there any significant national sub-groups (e.g. German , Korean, Irish, Mexican, Caribbean, etc)? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No **IF YES,** please list them _____

_____

6. Which one label below comes closest to describing the theological position of the majority or your regularly participating adults?

❒1 *Fundamentalist* ❒2 *Charismatic* ❒3 *Traditional*
❒4 *Evangelical* ❒5 *Moderate* ❒6 *Seeker*
❒7 *Pentecostal* ❒8 *Liberal* ❒9 *Other*

6. *Of your total number of adult participants, how many would you estimate are involved in:

	Almost All	***Most***	***Some***	***Few***	***None***
A. Recruiting new members	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
B. Activities outside of worship that strengthen their faith	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5
C. Expressing their faith through helping others	❒1	❒2	❒3	❒4	❒5

7. *How many of the high school age children of your adult participants would you estimate are involved in the religious life and activities of your congregation?

❒1 Almost all ❒2 Most ❒3 Some ❒4 Few ❒5 Hardly Any

VI. Finances

A. How would you describe your congregation's financial health currently and 5 years ago (1995)?

A. Currently: ❒1 Excellent ❒2 Good ❒3 Tight, but manageable ❒4 In some difficulty ❒5 In serious difficulty

B. In 1995: ❒1 Excellent ❒2 Good ❒3 Tight, but manageable ❒4 In some difficulty ❒5 In serious difficulty ❒6 *Our congregation did not exist in 1995

2. Approximately how much income did your congregation receive last year from all sources (e.g., tithes, pledges, membership dues, plate offerings, bequests, endowment income, etc)?

TOTAL INCOME $_____

A. *Approximately what percentage of your church's total income last year was from endowments or investments?

_____% or ❒ None

3. What was the approximate total dollar amount of the church's expenditures? _____

4. During the past 12 months, what methods did your congregation use to encourage financial giving among members? (✓ one on each line)

		YES	*NO*
A	*Sermons on stewardship*	❒	❒
I	*Appeals or testimonies from lay participants during worship services*	❒	❒
J	*Special fund raisers (fairs, bake sales, etc)*	❒	❒
K	*Appeals based on specific, concrete and special needs*	❒	❒
L	*Distribution of promotional material (such as a stewardship campaign)*	❒	❒
M	*Canvassing members by phone or in person (e.g., member visitation)*	❒	❒
N	*Pledge or commitment cards*	❒	❒
O	*Member dues*	❒	❒
P	*Teaching that a ten percent tithe belongs to God, is due God and should be given to God*	❒	❒
Q	*Teaching that a proportion of one's income, not tithing per se, is sufficient*	❒	❒

5. Does your congregation have a formal, written annual budget? ❒1 Yes ❒2 No

---

*[**NOTE: A DENOMINATION/FAITH GROUP MAY USE EITHER OF THE FOLLOWING TWO FORMATS FOR QUESTION 3]**

3. Approximately how much money did your congregation spend in the following areas last year?

	All staff salaries and benefits	$_____
A.	Congregation operations (including building, property and grounds, utilities, mortgage, insurance, maintenance, equipment, etc.)	$_____
B.	Capital improvements	$_____
A.	Program support and materials	$_____
B.	[Denominational] mission work (dues/assessments/gifts/contributions)	$_____
C.	Local mission work (other than through [denomination])	$_____
D.	National and international mission work and programs (other than through [denomination])	$_____
H.	Subsidies to school, day care or before/after school program	$_____
I	Money put into reserve/endowments/investments	$_____
J.	Other _____	$_____
	➔ ➔ ***TOTAL EXPENDITURES***	$_____

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3. Approximately how much money did your congregation spend last year?

TOTAL EXPENDITURES ***$_____***

Of your total expenditures, approximately what percent was for each of the following categories?

A.	All staff salaries and benefits	____%
B.	Congregation operations (including building, property and grounds, utilities, mortgage, insurance, maintenance, equipment, etc.)	____%
C.	Capital improvements	____%
E.	Program support and materials	____%
F.	[Denominational] mission work (dues/assessments/gifts/contributions)	____%
G.	Local mission work (other than through [denomination])	____%
H.	National and international mission work and programs (other than through [denomination])	____%
H.	Subsidies to school, day care or before/after school program	____%
I.	Money put into reserve/endowments/investments	____%
Other _____		____%
		100 %

OPTIONAL:

4. During the past 12 months, what methods did your congregation use to encourage financial giving among members? (_ all that apply)

- ❒1 Sermons on stewardship [or, religiously validated appeals]
- ❒2 Appeals or testimonies from lay participants during worship services
- ❒3 Special fund raisers (fairs, bingo, bake sales, etc)
- ❒4 Appeals based on specific, concrete and special needs
- ❒5 Distribution of promotional material (such as ???)
- ❒6 Canvassing members by phone or in person (e.g., member visitation)
- ❒7 Pledge or commitment cards
- ❒8 Member dues
- ❒9 Teaching that a 10% tithe belongs to God, is due God and should be given to God
- ❒10 Teaching that giving a proportion of one's income, not tithing per se, is sufficient

APPENDIX B
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Schedule of Questions
(Interview participants will be those who regularly attend worship services at a megachurch)

1. Please tell me a bit about your initial impressions of the church and general involvement in it.

a. How long have you been attending the church? When you first started, what were some of your first impressions of the church? How did you feel about its large size?

b. What do you like best about the church at present? Why? What do you like least? Why?

c. If you are involved in any areas of the church beyond worship, in which areas are you *most* involved? Why? How did you come to be involved in that area or areas?

d. Have you become involved in any subgroups within the church, such as a Bible study group, prayer group, or Sunday school class? If not, why not? If so, which one(s) and why?

2. If you feel comfortable in doing so, let's talk about whether this church may or may not have assisted you in deepening your relationship with God.

a. Would you say your relationship with God has grown or decreased because of your involvement in this church? How so? Why do you suppose this has happened?

b. Of all the church's ministries, from the worship services to other areas you may have named earlier, which has been most influential in the growth or decrease you just described? How so?

3. Next I'd like to discuss the level of expectation you sense from this church.

a. To what extent do you feel this church has "explicit or definite expectations for members" Why?

b. What are some of the more prominent specific member expectations conveyed around this church? What is the relationship between them and the doctrine or belief structure of this church?

c. Of the expectations conveyed, would you say more have to do with *individual* spiritual practice, such as personal prayer or personal Bible reading, or with *group*

behavior, such as an emphasis on participating in worship services or being part of a church-connected subgroup? Why?

d. To what extent do you feel this church has "explicit or definite expectations for members but the enforcement of these expectations is not very strict?" Could you offer an illustration?

e. Which contributes more to spiritual vitality – strictness of expectation or involvement in subgroups – based on your experience at this particular megachurch?

4. Let me ask you to comment on a few religious expressions.

a. What do you think the term "congregation is spiritually vital and alive" means to people at this church such as yourself? What would an example of it be at this church?

b. Same with: "worship services that are spiritually uplifting and inspirational"

c. Same with: "a congregation that helps members deepen their relationships with God"

d. Same with the phrase: "spiritual growth"

e. Same with the phrase: "a church that makes weak disciples"

f. Same with "participation" – what are the primary areas of participation that are emphasized most? What Biblical mandate, if any, is most often linked to these areas of participation?

5. Let's talk now about your friends and relationships at church.

a. How hard or easy is it to develop personal friends at this church?

b. To what extent have you developed any strong friends at this church?

c. How is your personal spiritual growth affected by the amount and quality of church friends you develop? Why?

d. How do you think the congregation's overall spiritual growth is affected by the amount and quality of church friends you develop? Why?

6. Finally here are a few questions about this church's numerical growth.

a. In your opinion is this a numerically growing church, in terms of its worship attendance?

b. To what extent does numerical growth affect the congregation's spiritual growth? Is it negative or positive? Why?

c. Do you have a preference as to whether you're in a numerically growing or non-growing church? Why?

7. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me in regard to the topics we've been discussing?

Questions added later:

• If you were part of a church previously, why did you leave it?

• If you know of anyone who left this megachurch, do you know why they left?

• Would you do anything if you knew someone attending this church but contributing nothing? If yes, what? If no, why?

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT

REQUEST FOR INTERVIEW – AND INFORMED CONSENT

Please consider this letter as an invitation to participate in an interview about your spiritual growth and in particular about how participating in this church may or may not have assisted you in deepening your relationship with God. The interview will last no more than 30 minutes. After that time mark, you may opt to stay for further discussion, but with no pressure to do so. Our discussion will consist primarily of me asking you questions and taking notes on your replies (audio recording them as well if you so permit). The interview can also take place *without* the audiotape, if you so request. It will be a one-time experience for you.

I will treat our interviews as confidential. The audio recordings (which will *not* be transcribed) will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my office for three years and then I will destroy them. Same with my written notes. If I quote you in the dissertation or in a publication, I will use a pseudonym for your name.

I will be giving you my business card with the following contact information on it in case you wish to contact me further (Warren Bird, 6 Stemmer Lane, Suffern, NY 10901, phone 845-368-4379, WarrenBird@AOL.com). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please call Dr. Lee Badger, Chair of the Institutional Review Board of Fordham University, at 212-636-7946.

By signing below, you acknowledge that your participation is:

- Based on granting your fully informed consent to the conditions and confidentialities outlined above.
- Contributing to the research for my doctoral dissertation on megachurches at Fordham University.
- Voluntary, and you may discontinue participation at any time during our meeting.

_____ _____

YOUR SIGNATURE YOUR PRINTED NAME

OPTIONAL: Your Email _____

OPTIONAL: Your Phone _____

OPTIONAL: City/town in which you live _____

OPTIONAL: Your age _____

If mailing this form, please send to Warren Bird, 6 Stemmer Lane, Suffern, NY 10901

APPENDIX D

Illustration D.1 **Lakewood Church** is currently the largest-attendance church in the United States, with an average of more than 30,000 weekly. It meets in the Compaq Center, former home of the Houston Rockets basketball team. John Osteen, a former Southern Baptist, started it in 1959 in an abandoned feed store with 90 people. He died in 1999 and his son, Joel Osteen, became pastor. The church is charismatic and non-denominational.

Illustration D.2 **In the largest-attendance megachurches,** parking is a much bigger issue than seating capacity. At Lakewood's former campus, in a run-down, low-income section of east Houston, parking was a huge problem. When it moved into the Compaq Center in July 2005, which it refitted with 16,000 seats, the church made arrangements with the nearby Greenway Plaza and several associated garages for 7,000 parking spots to be available each weekend.

Illustration D.3 **Our Lady of the Angels** opened in 2002 on 5.6 acres in downtown Los Angeles. It has the largest seating capacity of any U.S. Catholic church. Fixed seating allows for 1,900 people; moveable seating can add 1,100 more in a facility that is one foot longer than St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. However, there are larger **attendance** Catholic churches such as the 1,500-seat St. Mark the Evangelist, San Antonio, Texas, which draws 5,000 each weekend. St. Mark advertises its 40-plus ministries and small groups on a large sign over the main entrance to the sanctuary, including a Bible study that breaks members into groups of 8 to 10.

Illustration D.4 Megachurches often generate a strong word-of-mouth reputation for the high quality level of their worship services. **Fellowship Church,** just north of Dallas, is a Southern Baptist congregation that started in 1989 with 30 families and in 2006 was drawing 20,000 people each weekend. It spends 42% of its budget on staff and depends on 1,300 volunteers to develop the worship services and support programs needed each weekend.

Illustration D.5 **Ray of Hope Christian Church** in Atlanta typifies the high-energy worship in most megachurches, where a strong majority use such contemporary instruments as percussion and electric guitars. This particular church is unusual in that its senior pastor is female (Cynthia Hale), which occurs in less than 1% of megachurches at present. While this church is strongly evangelical in theology, it is part of a historically mainline denomination, which also is rare.

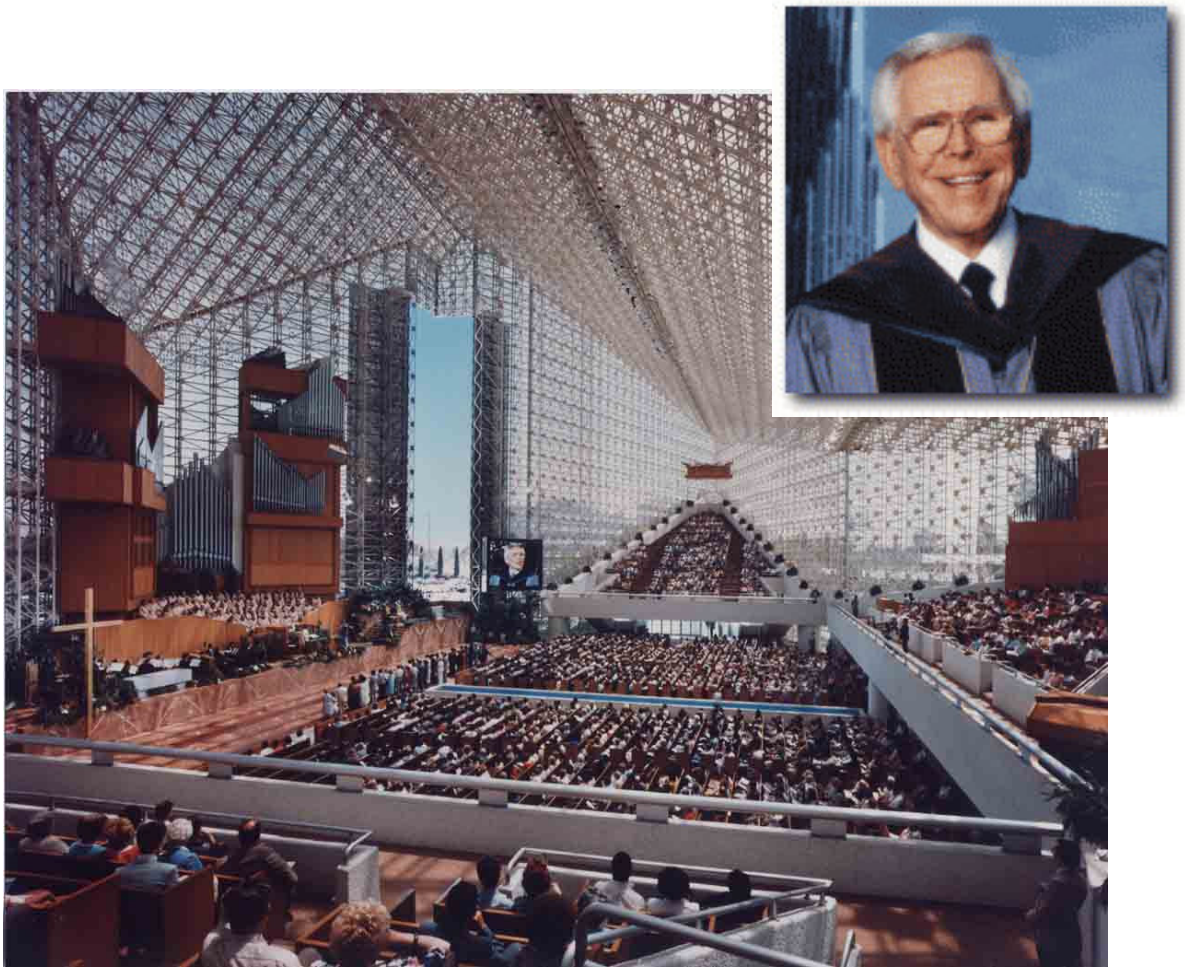

Illustration D.6 **The Crystal Cathedral** in Garden Grove, California, is one of the best-known megachurches largely due to its television ministry (begun in 1970 and with worldwide viewership of 20 million). Robert Schuller founded it in 1955 by preaching from atop a snack stand at an Orange County drive-in theater. The church's innovative methods, from its origins to its architecture, are typical of many megachurches who tend to be pioneers in innovation. It belongs to the Reformed Church in America denomination.

Illustration D.7 Many megachurches use video technology, but most limit it to in-house purposes such as making copies of the service for members who missed, to give away in outreach, and to play live on TV monitors in "cry rooms" for parents with needy infants. A few broadcast on local television, and fewer nationally. As most programs in megachurches, it may be headed by paid staff but volunteers fill the majority of roles.

Illustration D.8 **Northland Distributed Church**, a nondenominational congregation in a suburb of Orlando, is technology-savvy like most megachurches. Their distinctive approach is for their various campuses to worship simultaneously. This means people seen on screen singing together are actually several miles apart. However, most megachurches that follow a multi-site approach have a campus pastor and live music local to each site.

Illustration D.9 **Lake Point Church,** a Southern Baptist congregation in Rockwall, Texas, illustrates how one of four megachurches have spilled over to off-site campuses. It has two "full-service" campuses, housing ministries from children to adults. It also holds several niched worship services weekly, such as a cowboy service at a ranch or this correctional facility service on Sunday afternoons, using live music and a DVD of the morning's sermon.

Illustration D.10 **Willow Creek Community Church**, in a western suburb of Chicago, popularized the "seeker" movement. They try to do church in a way that the message of the Gospel is as clear and relevant as possible. Their vision is "turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ." A Harvard MBA program invited Willow Creek to present its model as a case study. A student concluded, "You want atheists to come and become missionaries!"

Illustration D.11 The average megachurch sanctuary seats 1,709 and uses multiple worship services—and often has conflicts with the local zoning board. **Christ Church of Montclair, NJ,** has 900 seats, runs four weekend services, and is locked in a three-year battle with a nearby township over expansion and relocation efforts (29 public hearings to date). Interestingly, this facility was built by a liberal church, the first parish pastored by Harry Emerson Fosdick who preached the widely circulated sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" At this church facility, they did!

Illustration D.12 **Trinity United Church of Christ** in Chicago is one of the few socially or theologically liberal megachurches. With a weekly attendance of 7,500, it is the largest congregation in the predominantly white United Church of Christ, and at one point was the denomination's fastest-growing congregation. More than 30 years ago, in response to the Black Power movement, Trinity embraced its African heritage in what became known as "Africentric Christianity." It is also one of the few U.S. churches with the role of "associate pastor for social justice." (America's best-known theologically liberal church, **Riverside Church** in Manhattan, seats 2,100 but does not fill it, and is thus not currently a megachurch.)

Illustration D.13 **McLean Bible Church**, a non-denominational church in McLean, Virginia, sponsors a major program for children with mental and physical handicaps. Similar to all other church programs, it is staffed largely by volunteers and funded by donations. Larger churches typically have more ability than smaller churches to offer niche programs that require extensive equipment or a large group of highly specialized volunteers.

Illustration D.14 Almost all growing megachurches have thriving children's and youth ministries. **North Point Community Church,** north of Atlanta, pioneered an approach that helps families grow together spiritually. For example, a very popular weekly small-theater presentation at the church limits attendance to those who come as a parent-child unit. In other programs, a child can participate only if a parent regularly volunteers in it.

Illustration D.15 Megachurches tend to be more multi-ethnic than their smaller counterparts. **New Song Church, Irvine, California**, has senior staff who are of Asian, African, and Caucasian backgrounds, and the congregation is likewise racially mixed—15 different races on a typical weekend. The church meets in a converted warehouse for its original campus and in a rented school for its second campus. It is part of the Covenant Church denomination.

Illustration D.16 Almost every megachurch has an extensive infrastructure of small groups. They typically meet two to four times a month in home or office settings, and typically include times of fellowship, prayer and Bible study. The groups occasionally do service projects together. The main focus is to care for one to another. The group leader is often trained by a church staff member, or by another group leader who in turn, is coached by a church staff member.

Illustration D.17 "Cooking for the King" is a small-group service team at **Church of the Highlands**, Birmingham, Alabama. The church draws 4,000 people to its weekly worship services, but has more than 4,000 people in a wide range of small groups, many of which are designed to represent Jesus as they serve their community.

ABSTRACT

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Megachurches as Spectator Religion: Using Social Network Theory and Free-Rider Theory to Understand the Spiritual Vitality of America's Largest-Attendance Churches

Dissertation directed by James R. Kelly, PhD, and Mark S. Massa, PhD.

Critics of Protestant megachurches in the United States have described megachurches as "religion lite," "undemanding," and as using a "dumbing down" approach that makes the Christian faith "two miles long and one inch deep." Drawing on two different social theories—the "weak ties" aspect of social network analysis and the "free rider" dimension of rational choice theory—the dissertation empirically evaluates megachurch criticisms and grounds them in social theory. Megachurches are defined as having an average weekly worship attendance of 2,000 and higher. Spectator religion is defined as when people attend the worship service but are non-participants in other ways.

The quantitative portion of the research does secondary analysis of the Faith Communities Today 2000 (FACT2000) study, the largest survey to date of congregations in the United States. It was coordinated by Hartford Institute for Religion Research,

www.hartfordinstitute.org. The survey takes a key informant approach. It measures and weights 280 variables for 11,301 Protestant responses. The quantitative analysis is supported by interviews conducted at four megachurches in 2006.

Two hypotheses are tested. According to H1, “weak ties” theory predicts that participation beyond worship attendance will be comparatively higher in megachurches than in non-megachurches. All tests conducted support this hypothesis. According to H2, which involves a three-variable statistical interaction, “free riding” is hypothesized to be higher in megachurches than in non-megachurches when expectations are low, but lower when expectations are higher. Of the four possible tests of this theory only one is consistent with the claims made by the theory. Therefore free rider theory does not satisfactorily explain or predict the relationship between church size and the level of participation in the life of the church.

Controlling for variables of region of the country was not a statistically significant factor in altering the relationship between size and participation. Nor was race or section of town. However controlling for theology does have a positive effect on participation opportunities, but it doesn't eviscerate the effect of size on participation.

The qualitative findings explore how some people who attend megachurch worship services have moved from being a free rider to a status of active participant.

VITA

Warren Bird graduated from Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois (BA, Bible and Ancient Languages; MA, New Testament Theology) and from Alliance Theological Seminary, Nyack, New York (M.Div, Pastoral Studies).

His career has combined both pastoral (parish) ministry and religious journalism.

As an ordained minister of the gospel under The Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, he has served as senior pastor at Suffern Alliance Church, Suffern, New York (1987-1991), senior associate at the Charles E. Fuller Institute for Evangelism and Church Growth, Pasadena, California, and Kelowna, British Columbia (1991-1996), and as associate pastor at Princeton Alliance Church, Plainsboro, New Jersey (1996-present).

He has also served as an adjunct professor of practical theology at Alliance Theological Seminary, Nyack, New York, 1995-present.

He has also published sixteen books as collaborative author, one of which won the prestigious Gold Medallion award from the Evangelical Publishing Association, its highest honor. Published books include: *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Revell, 1991); *How to Break Growth Barriers* (Baker, 1993); *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future* (Revell, 1994); *The Comprehensive Guide to Cassette Ministry* (Kingdom, 1997); *Nine Keys to Effective Small-Group Leadership: How Lay Leaders Can Establish Healthy Cells, Classes and Teams* (Kingdom, 1997);

Real Followers: Beyond Virtual Christianity (Abingdon, 1999); *Into the Future: Turning Today's Church Trends into Tomorrow's Opportunities* (Revell, 2000); *Lost in America: How Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door* (Group Publishing, 2001); *On-Purpose Leadership: Multiplying Your Ministry by Becoming a Leader of Leaders* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2001); *UnLearning Church: Transforming Spiritual Leadership for the Emerging Church* (Group Publishing, 2002); *Starting a New Church: How to Plant a High-Impact Congregation* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2003); *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Zondervan, 2003); *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out* (Jossey-Bass, 2005); *Momentum for Life: Sustaining Personal Health, Integrity, and Strategic Focus as a Leader* (Abingdon, 2005); *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Zondervan, 2006).

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