



## **The Megachurch: Doing What Needs to Be Done**

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God must love small churches because he made so many of them. But estimates are that a third of today's churches will not see the next century. Alternatives will be required to resolve the financial burdens of small churches trying to support a full-time ministerial package. These alternatives must include the creation of an additional paradigm for ministry, the megachurch.

The concept behind the megachurch has been discussed by several authorities. Leadership Network's Robert Buford believes that the megachurch is the coming successor to both the neighborhood church and the parachurch organization. The megachurch is, as he stated in *Fortune* magazine, "like a shopping mall. It contains all the specialized ministries of parachurch groups under one roof." Lyle Schaller proclaims that the emergence of the megachurch "is one of the four or five most significant developments in contemporary American church history." Bishop Lowell Erdahl of the St. Paul ELCA Synod stated in the *Star Tribune* that "the two kinds of churches that grow are the new ones and the larger ones that provide a whole range of services." Loren Mead concludes in *The Once and Future Church*, "In the final analysis, the issue is one of mission. How do we as Christians...find a community that forms and sustains us in an authentic faith and move out bearing that faith into the structures of our ambiguous society? How do we pass those forms of community on to the next generation?"

According to *The Arizona Republic*, a recently conducted survey reported that 30% of the churches of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America said that they didn't want to grow, 10 to 20% were growing, and 50% said they wanted to grow but didn't know how. The ELCA Division for Outreach has observed that large churches tend to be growing churches. Win Arn has estimated that 80 to 85% of the mainline churches in this country have plateaued or are declining.

The baby-boomer generation was reared in a culture that reflects the megachurch phenomenon. They are familiar with and attracted to large and complex institutions such as large school systems, interstate freeways, shopping malls, enormous medical centers, and large discount stores. This exposure has taught

them to live and thrive in large-scale institutions with their related strengths and weaknesses. We should not be surprised that this mega-institutional generation is attracted to and flourishes in the culture and style of the megachurch. We should also expect that more and larger megachurches are on the way.

The ministry of megachurches is appealing because they know and target their audiences;

advertise extensively; meet felt needs; have a vision for ministry; demand quality; staff and pay the price for growth; equip the laity; respect tradition, yet seek relevance; make disciples; are entrepreneurial; take risks; fret less; pray more; have transformational leadership; provide strong and multiple worship foci; are highly relational and informal; conduct strong weekday programming; present varied music experiences; welcome, anticipate, and plan for change; do shortand long-term strategic planning; have excellent nursery and child care; and provide for the ministry of word and sacrament.

The appeal of these megachurches rests in their discernment of the target culture and their emphasis on needs in order to address the brokenness, struggles, frustrations, and lostness of their audiences. The megachurch is ministry-driven, addressing spiritual and human needs in relevant, effective, and Christ-centered ways without compromising basic Christian theology.

Megachurches are not without their problems. Often they appear too big to care, receive too many new members by transfer, accumulate an enormous debt, or are built around personalities. These problems are not restricted to the megachurch and, with sufficient planning, most of them can be lessened or overcome.

Lutherans encourage, even demand, other cross-cultural ministries to respect of language, culture, musical traditions, heritage, and structure. They embrace these ministries, which use distinctive styles reflecting different cultures, yet retaining “Lutheran theology.” When this philosophy of ministry is advocated for the largest unchurched culture in America, the baby-boomers, it is declared by many to be un-Lutheran, concerned only with a theology of glory, interested only in numbers, and spiritually deficient—even though it uses identical objectives and goals to any other cross-cultural ministry. The criticism is even more intense when this cross-cultural ministry, the megachurch, succeeds and flourishes.

Paul and Luther fought similar battles. They demanded and modeled styles of ministries to reflect the culture of the prospective unchurched. Their opponents insisted upon the maintenance of uniformity and tradition. Paul and Luther today would sing contemporary songs, provide needs-felt programming, and preach relevant, story-filled, and culturally appealing sermons without compromising their theological convictions. The argument that one cannot alter style without altering substance is contrary to the mission-objective strategies developed in this century. Most boomers are not indifferent to the principles of faith but choose to change the practices of faith.

The great commission is the crescendo of the gospel. It declares our primary role, above and beyond any other task or responsibility, as we prepare for the next century. This commission is at the heart of God’s redemptive plan (John 3:16-18). By its directive we are to call all people to faith, repentance, and discipleship.

## **The Megachurch: Who We Are Shapes What We Do**

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Let’s make the case right up front. There is no virtue in being big or small. In any discussion of issues raised by megachurch, church growth, or entertainment evangelism there is a critical standard to be applied: Christians come together to be what they are.

We must therefore applaud the emphasis in megachurch, church growth, and entertainment evangelism to welcome the stranger, to embrace the seeker, to meet the needs of the outsider. Christians are people in mission, and they come together to be a people in mission. Outreach to those outside their community is integral to their mission.

Mission outreach must be a factor shaping what Christians do when they worship. It is only appropriate that the worship of the people be expressed in liturgical and musical forms that derive from the culture of the people. For example, what is Lutheran in worship is not a denominationally approved liturgy or a particular musical form but the centrality of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ offered in word and sacrament. But *lex orandi lex credendi*: what we do in worship determines what we believe. The shape of liturgy, the form of music, the content of hymns are crucially decisive for the faith we confess. You can count on it: banality in worship yields a banal faith.

Christians come together for worship not only to be in mission but to be a *people* in mission. We are a communion in a community created by God through word and sacrament. We are not primarily an audience to be instructed or entertained, a school whose students are to be educated. We certainly ought to "package" the gospel in a way that is palatable to people so that they will "enjoy" being there. Any good proclamation will include education. But worship is primarily for proclamation and communion. Christians worship in response to the grace of God. They come together in community for the communion the Spirit of God makes possible because of Jesus Christ.

And so when Christians come together, they make use of the means to create communion in community—the gospel in word and sacrament. Christians do

many things when they come together: they nurture, they edify, they witness, they practice fellowship. All kinds of things help them to be what they are: small groups, visitation programs, strategic planning. But only the gospel in word and sacrament creates and nurtures communion in community.

Word and sacrament belong together; that is particularly so for the weekly gathering of Christians. Worship without the sacrament blurs the picture of who we are and fails to use the God-given means to be what we are. Worship without the sacrament may be understandable for those Protestants who may not have experienced the sacrament's shaping significance, but it is inexcusable for Lutherans. The discussion of what to do in worship generated by megachurch, church growth, and entertainment evangelism has a marvelous potential for good for that half of Lutheran congregations for whom worship with word and sacrament is not the weekly standard. They may yet discover their true Lutheran identity.

Who we are shapes what we do when we come together. So we are not just in mission; we are God's people in mission. When we come together, we do not just evangelize; we are who we are as we evangelize. So we do what God's people do. We proclaim the gospel to evoke the faith that unites us with God. We baptize to incorporate people into our communion with God. We gather at the table of the Lord to be the holy communion God has called us to be. We respond with praise and thanksgiving to all God has done for us; we offer eucharist. In the process we welcome the stranger, we embrace the seeker, we respond to the needs of the outsider. We show them in action what God wants to give them and we offer it to them. If we

relegate to midweek the worship of the “believers” so that on Sunday we can pay proper attention to the “seekers,” we will in time have a standard service on Sunday morning for the whole community that is shaped and determined by something other than what we Christians are.

Who we are must also shape the outreach aim of what we do in worship. The net of Christian mission has to be embracing enough to include all people. If the wall of separation between Jew and gentile has come down, if there is neither slave nor free, male nor female for those who are one in Christ Jesus, we need to be concerned about any effort that restricts Christian mission. Gathering congregations of baby-boomers may just produce an ethnic church in another form. If we absorb ourselves in baby-boomers, what shall we do about the generation coming after them, who want nothing to do with baby-boomer values? The Christian community is supposed to be the communion in which all barriers that separate people from one another come down. That requires us to pay attention to a wide variety of cultural forms, including those inherited from the past. We exhibit who we are as we affirm our connection with the people of God in every age and treasure the heritage of faith and worship we have received from them.